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Nicaragua’s Conservative Republic, 1858–93

Arturo J. Cruz, Jr
Professor, INCAE (Central American Institute of Business Administration)
Nicaragua
For my father
For my daughter
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Acknowledgments

I grew up steeped in Nicaraguan politics, listening to dispiriting stories about the vainglory of the Somoza family and the servility of their sycophants; the unabashed corruption of public bureaucrats and the discreet complicity of the private sector; and about the resilience of a sultanistic regime that, through the years, seemed to grow stronger while armed uprisings and opposition rallies came and went, leaving in their wake little more than the corpses of forgotten heroes.

Now, many years later, after having experienced revolution and Counterrevolution first hand, I find myself indebted to three men who taught me as a child that the key to the door out of our dark world was buried in our own national past. The first in this trio is my maternal grandfather, Julio Sequeira Arellano, who at the dinner table spoke repeatedly of an extraordinary period in our history when men in authority were also men of probity. The second is my father, Arturo J. Cruz, Sr., who argued that as the Conservative Republic had only begun to show, political democracy was possible in Nicaragua. The third is Pedro Joaquin Chamorro Cardenal, my father’s friend and ideological confederate, who always believed in the central lesson of the Regime of the Thirty Years: the conduct of individuals can be as important to the welfare of a nation as the great socio-economic forces highlighted by grand theories.

Throughout the collective effort that a book entails, we are accompanied and helped by people to whom we owe a special debt of gratitude. For me the list begins with Malcolm Deas, an exemplary tutor whose intellectual leadership, integrity of character, and emotional maturity guided me to the very end. I had three other spiritual companions and intellectual collaborators. My mother, who through the years impressed upon me that perseverance boils down to a simple resolution: ‘never give up’. Rogelio Pardo-Maurer, whose formidable talent and generous spirit are indelibly inscribed in these pages and Consuelo Cruz Sequeira, a fellow investigator of things lost.

This is also the place to declare in public the gratitude I have already expressed in private to the friends and mentors who added to the joy and lessened the burden of this enterprise. Adolfo Altamirano Lacayo, Bruce Cameron, Carlos Fernando Chamorro, Mario de Franco, Leonel Gómez, Robert Kagan, Edgardo Krebs, Manuel Ignacio Lacayo, Alfonso Sandino, Gene Stone, and Carlos Ulvert, I thank for their loyal friend-
ship and intellectual inspiration. I am equally grateful to Anna Seleny for her penetrating comments and moral support; and to Xavier Zavala Cuadra for encouraging me to write about the themes that run through this work. To José Coronel Urtecho I am profoundly indebted for not only letting me into his personal library – that is, his prodigious mind and rare documents – but also teaching me to trust my intuitions. I also thank his son, Carlos Coronel Kautz, for showing me how to spot the ghosts of history both in the dull routines and in the momentous upheavals of the present.

Here, too, I wish to express my deep appreciation to Jorge Eduardo Arellano, Franco Cerutti, Napoleón Chow, Germán Romero Vargas, and José Luis Velasquez, each a first-rate social scientist and astute critic of this work. Of course, I am also grateful to my colleagues at the Central American Business Institute (INCAE) who were discerning and constructive readers: Emesto Ayala, Ligia Castro, Forrest Colburn, José Exprua, Crist Inman, Nicolás Marín, Eduardo Montiel, Clare Sammells, Carlos Sequeira, Carlos Sevilla, Jonathan Smith, and Gabriel Quijandría.

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Arturo J. Cruz, Jr
Note on Sources and Methods

This study is based mostly on the interpretation and analysis of primary documents collected through archival research. It also draws on a variety of secondary sources, including the published works of men who played important roles in the country's history. To a lesser extent, interviews with historians conducted between 1991–95 contributed to the study, helping shape its approach and line of inquiry. The approach is eclectic in the sense that it incorporates socio-economic, cultural, and political factors. The perspective, however, is historical: the work's analytical and interpretative thrust aim at an improved understanding of the internal dynamics of nineteenth century Nicaragua. All too often, the country's affairs have been considered from the vantage point of great foreign powers and their geopolitical and commercial interests in the isthmus. Interpretations of this sort have tended to be underpinned by collections such as William Manning's *Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States: Interamerican Affairs, 1831–1860* (1933). This study, by contrast, relies heavily on national sources which though more dispersed, provide far richer detail of the political life of the Conservative Republic and more rewarding insight into how the social and political elites in nineteenth century Nicaragua were inextricably entwined, and remained virtually unrestrained by the subordinate classes. All the while commanding the bulk of power resources and monopolizing the political stage.

Solving the main puzzle of the work – the origins, workings, and collapse of the Conservative Republic – entailed three research tasks. First, to attain a kind of 'compressed' familiarity with the colonial regime, whose legacy shaped the early national period throughout Central America. Second, to disentangle the intricate web of jealousies, ambitions, and struggles that, prior to the Republic, ensnared Nicaragua both as an emerging nation and as a member state of the Central American Federation. And third, to excavate from the depths of historiographic obscurity the fragments of the Republic's normative-institutional body, the whole of which had to be reconstructed one piece at a time.

Individually, each of these tasks was challenging; collectively, they were daunting. A coherent view of nineteenth century Nicaragua simply is not available. E. Bradford Bums, in *Patriarch and Folk: The Emergence of*
Nicaragua 1798–1858 (1991), provides the most ambitious effort to outline the main social forces that emerged from the collapse of royal authority in the first half of the century. However, his effort at synthesis remains the exception in a field whose rule is the episodic and partial treatment of events. Authors of various partisan affiliations have written about the salient moments, and above all, the individual protagonists of the century’s first 50 years. Yet missing from all these efforts is any attempt to make sense of those five decades in a systematic fashion. The state of the literature for the second half of the century is even more fragmentary. The Conservative Republic has failed to attract serious scholarly attention; in any event, the intellectuals and notables of the time who might have left us a historiographic map, were too involved in the life of the regime to devote the energy necessary to make any significant contribution.

I eventually found my way through Nicaragua’s nineteenth-century labyrinth via the halls and chambers of the following libraries, archives, and collections (public, institutional, and private): Library of Congress (Washington, DC); US Archives (Washington, DC); Underground of the Radcliffe Camera of the Bodleian Library at Oxford University (Oxford); Widener Library at Harvard University (Cambridge); Biblioteca del Banco Central de Nicaragua (Managua); Archivo Histórico Municipal de la Ciudad de Granada (Granada); Biblioteca de la Academia de Geografía e Historia de Guatemala (Ciudad Guatemala); Archivo General de Centro América (Ciudad Guatemala); Archivo Familiar de Xavier Zavala Cuadra (San José de Costa Rica); Archivo Personal de Jorge Eduardo Arellano (Managua); Biblioteca Personal de don José Coronel Urtecho (Río San Juan and Chiles); Archivo Familia Montiel Argüello (San José de Costa Rica); and Archivo Familia Pérez-Alonso (Ciudad México). I also collected material through collaborative research with Consuelo Cruz Sequeira at the following sources: Sterling Library at Yale University (New Haven); Bancroft Collection (Berkeley); and the Biblioteca Nacional (Madrid).

At these various archives, collections, and libraries, I was able to obtain a wide range of extremely useful primary documents pertaining to nineteenth century Central America in general and to Nicaragua in particular. These include: the private diaries and missives of leading political actors; government reports and ministerial records (1867–1909); presidential addresses and proclamations (1857–1909); broadsheets (both anonymous and signed); journals of opinion and partisan magazines; a multiplicity of newspapers, both official and from the opposition (particularly from 1861 to 1889); and diplomatic correspondence (pertaining to the Zelaya period).
The following compilations and journals proved particularly valuable sources of primary documents relating to the colonial regime and the early post-colonial period: Revista de Indias (Madrid); Documentos para la historia de Nicaragua: Colección Somoza, 17 volumes (Madrid); Documentos relativos a la independencia (San José de Costa Rica); Recopilación de documentos oficiales (San José de Costa Rica), Hispanic-American Historical Review (Duke University); Revista de la Academia de Geografía e Historia de Nicaragua (Managua), Boletín del Archivo General de Gobierno (Ciudad Guatemala); Anales de Geografía e Historia de Guatemala (Ciudad Guatemala); Contribución a la historia de Centroamérica, Monografías Documentales (Managua); Album del centenario 1811–1911 (San Salvador), and Colección Cultural del Banco de América (Managua).

For material pertaining to the Conservative Republic, one journal deserves special mention: the Nicaraguan monthly Revista Conservadora, which was founded in 1960 by don Joaquín Zavala Urtecho, and later became Revista Conservadora del Pensamiento Centroamericano, before finally calling itself simply Revista del Pensamiento Centroamericano under the leadership of Xavier Zavala Cuadra. This journal is a most valuable collection of primary documents and essays relating to the period of The Thirty Years. Thanks to the Revista, Nicaraguans have gained access to such rare books as Paul Levy’s Notas Geográficas y Económicas sobre la República de Nicaragua (a rich source of socio-economic data which, commissioned by the Nicaraguan Government of the time, was first published in Paris in 1873).

In collecting this data and documentation, I took special care to strike a balance among sources associated with competing regional centers and localities, partisan camps, inter-camp factions, and rival caudillos. In interpreting the material, I considered many different possible connections among economic conditions, political ideas, and the passions and interests of personalities and groups, before settling on what I came to regard as the most plausible account of the Republic’s origins, development, and demise.

I have tried to remain alert to the hybrid nature of some sources which, however unintentionally, blur the line between primary and secondary documentation – most particularly the memoirs, essays, reflections, and testimonies of notables and intellectuals who were either actual participants or witnesses to the events. These texts, because of their biases, cannot always be taken at face value. However, placed in their socio-political context, and interpreted in relation to one another, they can help us determine the proper weight of the forces that came into play at the time and illuminate the underlying logic of seemingly
irrational practices, such as cut-throat competition. The following is an illustrative list of authors whose works of this type were used in this book: José Cecilio del Valle (1825), José Arce (1830), Montúfar y Coronado (1832), Alejandro Marure (1836 and 1844), Tomás Ayón (1878), Lorenzo Montúfar (1887), José Dolores Gámez (1889 and 1913), Francisco Ortega de Arancibia (1894 and 1912), Jerónimo Pérez (whose writings first appeared in contemporary newspapers during the 1860s and 1870s, but whose works were published posthumously as a collection in 1928, and Anselmo Rivas (who wrote in the latter part of the nineteenth century but was published in a single volume in 1936).

Naturally, in reconstructing the past, we are inevitably indebted to scholars and others who have come before us. I owe much to the works of Jorge Eduardo Arellano, E. Bradford Burns, Victor Bulmer-Thomas, Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Zelaya, José Coronel Urtecho, James Dunkerley, Murdo McLeod, Germán Romero Vargas, Sofonías Salvatierra, Edelberto Torres-Rivas, Jaime Wheelock R., and Ralph Lee Woodward. Each in his own way was a pioneer opening up paths for other scholars. I can only hope to follow in their footsteps.