

**Evita: The Woman with the Whip**

By Mary Main  
Dodd, Mead & Co., 288pp.  
\$8.95

**The Return of Eva Peron, with the Killings in Trinidad**

By V.S. Naipaul  
Alfred A. Knopf, 228pp., \$10

**Eva Peron: The Myths of a Woman**

By J.M. Taylor  
University of Chicago Press,  
1980, 175pp., \$15

**By Geoffrey Fox**

The success of Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical *Evita* (*In These Times*, April 9) has brought Eva Peron back to our attention, 28 years after her death, and alerted publishers to a potential *Evita* market. In close succession, Mary Main's 1952 polemic has been reissued; V.S. Naipaul's collection of essays on Trinidad, Argentina, Uruguay, Zaire and Joseph Conrad has appeared with Eva in the title; and J.M. Taylor's deadly serious anthropological study has been rushed into print before, one thinks, it was quite ready.

Who was this woman, and why should we care?

Eva Peron held no post in her husband's government. In fact, it was only in the last year of her life—and largely through her efforts—that Argentine women even gained the right to vote. Yet Eva Peron at the height of her glory had enemies bitter as any *caudillo*. Without her, Juan Domingo Peron might have been just another dictator; in fact, he might not even have been that.

Mary Main has shown how she gained effective control over the Ministry of Communications, the Department of Public Health and Sanitation, the Ministry of Education and, most importantly, the Secretariat of Labor and Social Welfare, besides creating and controlling the immensely popular Eva Peron Foundation—a kind of semi-official ministry in itself. Like a character from a Brecht opera, she used men's lust, their greed or their pride, as the situation and her rising status permitted, to gain her own ends. But what makes this character so fascinating is that she sincerely identified her ends with the needs of the working masses.

**Sincere fanaticism.**

When she deliberately humiliated the oligarchy (at one point ordering their daughters incarcerated with prostitutes), flaunted her sumptuous wardrobe, or demanded that employers pay for one of her many social welfare programs, she was avenging her personal humiliations and the humiliations of an entire class—the *descamisados*, the *cabecitas negras*, the humblest women and men of the country. Her methods were arbitrary and paternalistic, and her unreflective rage led her to excesses that often did the workers more harm than good—she did not tolerate reformers whom she could not control—but this was all part and parcel of her sincere fanaticism.

Main, an Argentine citizen writing while Eva still lived, produced a passionate, chaotic and forceful indictment that remains an important testimony of the period. It is valuable for its information and first-hand observations—her visits to Eva's "Children's City," the Home for Transient Women and the

the author's sensitivity to the sexual and class injustices that made Eva both angry and effective.

V.S. Naipaul's book is less about Eva than about the psychology of what Albert Memmi, the Tunisian-Jewish essayist, calls "the colonized"—the person who has lost (or rejected) his own "Third World" culture without fully assimilating the culture of the more developed "colonizer" (North American or European). A Trinidadian whose ancestors had come from India, Naipaul went to England, he tells us, to "make a romantic career for myself as a writer."

**ARGENTINA**

The nearest Naipaul gets to a historical interpretation of Argentina's "inexplicable drift" to underdevelopment is his view that "Argentina is a simple materialist society, a simple colonial society created in the most rapacious and decadent phase of imperialism." New Zealand, he says, has done better because it was "founded at an earlier imperial period and on different principles," which is why "more gifted men and women have come from its population of three million than from the 23 millions of Argentines." Now in fact, the

first European settlement in New Zealand was not established until 1840, 260 years after Buenos Aires, and the final defeat of the Maoris (1870) occurred not long before that of the Argentine Indians (1878-79), so his curious hypothesis is without merit. And by what standard does one presume to compare the "giftedness" of two peoples?

Naipaul is no more reliable on Eva Peron, whom he depicts as a "saint" worshipped by the superstitious descendants of Italian and Spanish peasant immigrants to Argentina. In a few quick paragraphs, he brings together the

best-known themes: "Her comeliness, her beauty, her success: they contribute to her sainthood. And her sexiness." And then the strange peregrinations of her corpse, which indicated that somebody—apparently the army, which ruled after Peron's ouster in 1955—was superstitious about her.

Naipaul writes beautifully. But what is he saying? On the subject of Eva Peron (as on many other things), he simply repeats in his own idiom the prevailing interpretation of the local intelligentsia.

**Memory and myth.**

Unfortunately J.M. Taylor did not write the book she set out to. "Armed with anthropology's literature on myth and its methods of field work," she tells us, she moved in with a Peronist working-class family in 1970 "and waited to participate in its community life and to identify and observe the myth of Eva and its part in this life." She waited in vain; the working-class Peronist family and their friends did not subscribe to the myth that she was supposed to document. Thus she discovered the myth of the myth, that is, the Argentine middle class' misperception that the workers worshipped Eva as a saint.

The Peronist workers "discussed her [Evita] in realistic terms. Almost everyone had received or known someone who had received some personal aid from her—a sewing machine, a bed, some medicine, money on which to marry. She had advocated such-and-such a law," etc., but no miracles. "In fact belief in the mystic content and the working-class locus of the myth of Eva Peron were parts of the myth itself: another social sector had generated this version about the working classes and their mystical attraction to Eva Peron."

Now Taylor did an extraordinary thing. Instead of abandoning her inappropriate intellectual weaponry and finding out how the working class really thinks, she abandoned the working class. She moved out of the proletarian apartment and into a middle-class home, having decided that the middle class (never satisfactorily defined, but they are between the workers and the oligarchy) were the true generators of the myth.

The remainder of the book is a ponderous classification of pro- and anti-Eva myths culled from the press and from conversations with "middle-class" Argentines. Since these myths are generally accessible (after all, it is the middle classes that dominate the press and film industry), few readers will be startled to learn that there are myths of Eva the good, Eva the bad (especially sexually bad, even literally castrating) and Eva the revolutionary; she is a repository for all manner of middle-class male paranoid fantasies.

Taylor's work confirms what Mary Main saw 28 years ago: Eva Peron's assault on class and sex privilege has made it impossible for the society that has not resolved these issues to ignore them, or her. And it is that assault, rather than her authoritarian paternalism toward the *descamisados*, that remains the source of her appeal in Argentina and abroad.

Geoffrey Fox, a sociologist, is the author of *Working-Class Emigres from Cuba* (R&E Research Publications, 1979) and co-author of the *Report of the Chicago Commission of Inquiry into the Status of Human Rights in Chile* (1974).

**The many faces of Eva****INPRINT**

*Eva's assault on class and sex privilege made it impossible for a society that has not resolved these issues to ignore them—or her. So the myths were born: Eva the good, Eva the bad, Eva the revolutionary.*

Hostel for Working Girls are particularly interesting—but also for Nevertheless, he could not "detach" himself from the "half-made societies that seemed doomed to remain half-made." The heathens of these societies, he tells us over and over in different ways, are not to be enlightened. They just graft Western technology and symbols to their native superstitions, and the result is all-around corruption, "the moral degradation of the idea" (Conrad, as quoted by Naipaul).

Great men are hard to find in these lands (Naipaul never inquires for great women). Argentina, he tells us at least four times, has produced none, Trinidadian blacks appear as simple-minded poseurs incapable even of effective rebellion and Zairis are content to be ruled by a ridiculous "king." The elites are bad enough, but if the masses should really take power we would see another Haiti (a recurrent Naipaulian nightmare).

# Short Notice



**Tell the American People: Perspectives on the Iranian Revolution**

Edited by David H. Albert  
 Movement for a New Society  
 (4722 Baltimore Ave., Philadelphia, PA 19143), \$3.80  
 The 16 essays and documents that comprise this collection vary greatly in quality and perspective. In the best of the written contributions, Eqbal Ahmad sets the Iranian revolution in a

long history of colonial and neo-colonial exploitation and Michael Klare clarifies the role of the U.S. in arming the Shah. Randy Goodman's sensitive photographic essay "Mirror of Iran" highlights the volume, which stands as a useful antidote to anti-Iranian reporting in the mass media but which tends to homogenize and idealize the revolutionary forces in Iran.

DRR

**Every Heart Beats True: Christian Perspectives on the Military Service**, a slide show Packard Manse Media Project, Rent: AFSC, 2161 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge, MA 02140, (617)661-6130, \$5-\$15. Buy: PMMP, Box 450, Staughton, MA 02072, (617)344-3259, \$53

This slide show raises the question of conscientious objection to the draft for young Christians. Producer Pat Hughes begins with a brief historical overview of the Christian tradition of conscientious objection. It is emphasized that everyone must make decisions about war and peace. Draft resistance is portrayed as one way of making the decision for peace. Two theological perspectives supportive to draft resistance are presented: The Christian pacifist position and the Just War theory. The slide show argues that the modern nuclear arms race makes the justification traditionally given to support Christians' participation in the military service irrelevant in the 1980s. Finally, resources useful to making a decision about registration for the draft are recommended. This slide show is most appropriate for use in Catholic high schools and Christian youth groups. PS

**Stopping Sexual Harassment: A Handbook**

By Elissa Clarke, Labor Education and Research Project (P.O. Box 20001, Detroit, MI 48220), \$2.50

This concise pamphlet establishes the gravity of the problem of sexual harassment against working women and outlines personal, political and legal strategies



*The debtor-farmers of Shay's rebellion were thinking militants.*

for combatting harassment. Drawing together the experiences of women in a variety of workplaces, in offices, factories, universities and at construction sites, union and non-union, Clarke writes with simplicity, humor and an appreciation of the varied constraints that shape the protests of women workers. Of special value are the table of laws regarding sexual harassment and the repeated advice to organized women that remedies for harassment by fellow workers should be militantly pursued within the union.

DRR

**Shay's Rebellion: The Making of an Agrarian Insurrection**

By David P. Szatmary, University of Massachusetts Press, 184 pp., \$14

This spare and elegant volume deserves to sweep the historical profession's prizes in regional

studies, rural history and early American life. Reevaluating the insurrection of New England debtor-farmers of the mid-1780s, Szatmary places the radicalization and defeat of the insurgents in a context of class and cultural struggle between the "peasant" back country and the emerging urban centers of merchant capitalist power. The Shaysites appear not just as defenders of paper money and their own economic interests, but as thinking militants defending a traditional style of life against the incursions of the world of the market. The text moves gracefully between textured descriptions of New England life and wise reflections on larger issues, including the impact of the Shaysites on the drafting of the United States Constitution. DRR  
 Contributors: David Roediger and Paul Shannon

## RADIATION

# Finally, GI victims of radiation can know the truth

**Atomic Soldiers**

By Howard L. Rosenberg.  
 Introduced by Jack Anderson  
 Beacon Press, \$11.95 cloth

By Harvey Wasserman

Even in the darkest days of the mid-'50s, most Americans knew the military was blowing off atomic bombs in the Nevada desert and the South Pacific. It all seemed a normal part of the Cold War. What most Americans didn't know was that the military not only wanted to see how the bombs worked (though I've never heard a complete explanation for why they thought they had to explode so many), but they also wanted to see how human soldiers would react under nuclear conditions.

To test that little problem, the brass ordered some 30,000 GIs to stand at close range while nuke after nuke showered them with radioactive poison. Even worse, thousands of the soldiers were then ordered to march through the detonation areas—including many a Ground Zero—within hours or even minutes after the blasts. If such insanity can be dignified by a rational theory, it is that the military wanted to see if our soldiers would follow through once a nuke had blasted a hole in enemy lines.

Not surprisingly, the exposure levels were not at all democratic. You didn't catch any generals walking through the hot spots. During one underwater test—Operation Wigwam, which sent radioactive mist soaring into the

atmosphere upwind of San Diego—the officers rode a boat that was bathed in a cleansing shower while the enlisted sailors occupied vessels that were open and unprotected.

*Atomic Soldiers* opens the door on this horrifying scandal. Written by Howard Rosenberg, a top staffer for muckraker Jack Anderson (who provides an introduction), the fast-paced, well-written narrative serves as a good introduction to a story that could prove one of the most explosive of the new decade.

It starts with the story of Russell Jack Dann, a tough, high-spirited GI who, during the Eisenhower years, found himself inhaling a heavy dose of fallout at Camp Desert Rock, Nev. By 1960, Dann—now out of the Army and living in Albert Lea, Minn.—began suffering dizzy spells. His hair and teeth began falling out and in 1962 he discovered he was sterile.

But it wasn't until 15 tortured years later that Dann found other GIs suffering from similar problems, and began to put two and two together. And as Rosenberg's extensive documentation shows, by the time a full investigation comes in, we may well be looking at a toll of death and injuries in the tens of thousands.

**Stonewall.**

Through it all, the government has maintained a stonewall, refusing to release the names of the GIs involved in the tests, and continuing to deny the victims their basic medical benefits. As we're now seeing with the Vietnam victims of Agent Orange

poisoning, this kind of behavior is par for the official course. Indeed in one devastating chapter Rosenberg documents a sickening history of vicious, cynical manipulations of the military and the Atomic Energy Commission in suppressing study after study that proved beyond a reasonable doubt that they were engaging in what Dr. John Gofman now terms "intentional murder."

Why they did it, and how we can stop a continuation of this insanity in nuclear testing, weapons production and atomic power construction, may be the key to our survival over the next few years. In opening the door to the story of thousands of patriotic middle-American GIs who sacrificed their health unnecessarily to official cynicism and malice, Rosenberg has helped light the fuse on some very potent political dynamite. If nothing else, he has made it much more difficult for the government to continue avoiding a question posed in a letter (quoted in *Atomic Soldiers*) from Helen Dodd of Lexington, Ky., to then-President Eisenhower.

"If the men running this experiment say there is no danger," she asked, "then why do they build such elaborate shelters for themselves, farther away from the explosion area than the troops, which have no protection?"

Harvey Wasserman is author of *Energy War: Reports from the Front (Lawrence Hill)* and is currently at work on a new book about radiation victims.

