

BOOKS

THE VOICES OF THE DEAD

by **Autran Dourado**

(Taplinger Publishing Co.; 248 pp.; \$10.95)

Lorrin Philipson

Voices of the Dead (first published in Brazil in 1967) invites contemplation of twin tragedies—explicitly that of Latin America and, indirectly, that of our own country. The questions Dourado addresses are: What does a people do with its past and how does civilization emerge from a frontier society? Our own approach and ensuing malaise are all too apparent: We sever connections, break with family, jettison tradition, and move on, suffering the pains of rootlessness, ravaged landscapes, bulldozed cities. This strip-mining of our souls looms large after one reads a book like *Voices* precisely because it explores the opposite condition, prevalent in much of Latin America—the relentless, crushing weight of the past, the sins of the fathers visited upon the sons in a web of destiny as inexorable as that enveloping the doomed houses of Atreus and Priam.

Unfortunately, John M. Parker's translation at times mars the tone and tempo of the novel. "Bloke" and "nipper" and other slang words are too far removed from Dourado's primordial world, too culture-specific for his deliberate evocation of timelessness.

Dourado's world is set in the early 1900s in the Minas Gerais region of Brazil with its eighteenth-century baroque heritage. *Voices of the Dead* focuses on the Honório Cota family and the other inhabitants of a small town, who wrestle with the dark legacy of the powerful and demonic figure, Lucas Procópio, "half legend, half real...the Southerner come back from the fields of Minas Gerais when the gold dried up, disastrously...and they had to...forget...the impossible wealth they'd dreamt of, these cattle breeders... Now all landowners, lecherous, incestuous, nigger owners, land snatchers, paving this empty land with their children and slaves...they went planting farms...scattering towns...seeking the good growing lands, the red soil and other soils coloured by blood and

tears—on this land, Lucas Procópio's, donated by him...they built Carmo Church and the town square." He is a familiar figure of Latin fiction—monstrous, tyrannical, charismatic, a destroyer who builds.

The task of civilization falls to his son, Colonel Joao Capistrano Honório Cota. He is the other archetype of Hispanic literature, a Quixote, a man of marble-like rectitude, whose morality is itself a form of madness. To counteract the brutishness of his father, the chaos of an inchoate culture, and nature in all its rawness, Honório Cota achieves a kind of impeccable dignity, enjoying the admiration of the town and a brief period of glory.

Deciding to enhance the manor house built by his father, he is scrupulous about leaving the original structure intact, ordering the mason to graft on appropriate refinements. The construction reflects the colonel's state of mind. He does not renounce his lineage but seeks to modify the stigma of it. Having established his domain, he opens the manor to the townspeople, entertaining them graciously. His other main concern is to produce heirs, but this dream is thwarted, as if in punishment for the evils of Lucas Procópio. The colonel's wife gives birth to a succession of stillborn infants. Finally one of the children survives. This is Rosalina, who inherits the violently passionate nature of her grandfather and the moral obsession of her father.

Through the character of Honório Cota, Dourado swiftly and subtly provides a capsule summary of the nightmare of Latin American politics. Beset by a longing for power and a simultaneous desire for a better social order based on propriety and progress, Honório Cota runs for mayor. Once again the voices of the dead take hold. Alone in his room, the colonel rummages through old books and papers, envisioning himself as the embodiment of former Brazilian leaders. The colonel

wins the election by a majority. But then in an offhand way Dourado informs us that the votes are credited to the opponent and the records sent to the notary's office disappear "to the back of beyond, we never knew where." The colonel's appeals to the law, to the courts, yield no redress. The townspeople abandon him and the two parties divide the spoils. Thereafter Honório Cota withdraws completely from society, shunning the town as "riff-raff."

Rosalina adopts her father's attitude, shutting herself in the house, refusing to marry even the one acceptable suitor, the son of her father's close friend. Upon the death of Rosalina's mother, and later that of her father, two of the clocks in the manor house are ceremoniously stopped. Dourado elaborates at length, even to excess, on these rituals, thereby emphasizing another quality of life distinctly alien to our culture. If we are a compulsively time-ridden society, Dourado's characters dwell in a world where time stands still. Time is mythical, not historical; cyclical, not linear. The past recurs in memories and eternally repeated patterns of behavior. Mirrors are redolent with faces and scenes of the past; silent watches seem to tick like beating hearts; stairways creak with the tread of ghosts. Time, then, is not a streamlined current toward progress and novelty but a continual turning backward and, ultimately, downward into the waiting, devouring earth.

The land dominates as surely as the past. Although there is mention of the "mania for tearing down the forest land and burning it to plant coffee," it is not the conquest of nature that directs the course of their lives. Instead, suffocating heat, terrifying craters at the edge of the town, a sudden dust storm, the sensuous fragrance of mango trees, the air cracklingly alive with birds and insects mold the character and destiny of these people. Indeed, at times they take on the quality of animals. By day Rosalina is the distinguished châtelaine of the manor house, fabricating cloth flowers sold in the town. But at night with her lover, José Feliciano, an itinerant handy man from parts unknown, she becomes an unpredictable, "coyote-like" creature. José, known as Joey Bird, is, as his name implies, bird-like, flitting from town to town and job to job, driven by the desire to be free. The old black woman, Quiquina, who guards

Rosalina from the town, is likened to a watchdog, forbidding Cerberus. These attributes are repeated like Greek epithets, reinforcing the notion that people on the brink of a wilderness are in perpetual struggle with primitive forces, which they come to personify.

The characters are indelibly marked by nature in other ways: Joey Bird with one white, blind eye; Quiquina with muteness; Rosalina with the mingled blood and conflicting desires of her forebears. Thus Rosalina feels bound both to perpetuate her father's vendetta and to reenact the lusts of her grandfather. Joey Bird believes it his lot to be a wanderer, although at times he yearns for his childhood on the ranch of his godfather, the imposing Major Lindolfo. To each comes the recurrent thought that what befalls him is God's ineluctable will. Questioning it is both futile and blasphemous.

Dourado's intricate interweaving of memory and action, past and present in a stream-of-consciousness narration that shifts from one character to another is reminiscent of Faulkner's style. The divided soul of Rosalina recalls Joanna Burden of *Light in August*, another woman split between daytime sobriety and nocturnal sensuality. Greatly to Dourado's credit is his compassionate portrayal of women. Unlike so many other contemporary Latin American writers, Dourado does not deal in the usual stereotypes of woman as *puta* (of the Magdalene or innocent-beauty variety), madonna, earth mother, or dubious intellectual. And his interior monologues express the women themselves rather than serving, as they often do in Latin fiction, as depictions of surrounding events, historical epochs, place, atmosphere.

In *The Voices of the Dead*, Autran Dourado has created a work of charged prose and electrifying tension, effectively conjuring up a dense, erotic, foreboding world. [WV]

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THE PRISONER'S WIFE

by Jack Holland

(Dodd, Mead; 177 pp.; \$9.95)

Alfred McCreary

At first glance this looks like another Irish-American cliché about Mother Ireland. Michael Boyd, a New York reporter born in Belfast, returns to cover

the old story. He rekindles and consummates a relationship with Nora Costello, who had sublimated her earlier hopes of an artistic career to marry Johnny, a Provisional IRA leader now behind bars. Holland could have written the same, tired tale of Catholic Irishmen fighting to free themselves from the British yoke in Northern Ireland—even though their Protestant fellow-Ulstermen wish fervently to remain British. For not a few reporters this latter has been an awkward detail; why let the facts spoil a good story!

Fortunately Jack Holland has also tramped the reporter's beat in Belfast. He has noticed the sulphur in the air, and he appears too experienced to write a familiar story that could have every Irish-American crying in his beer. Instead he has drawn a finely sketched portrait of people trapped by history and by their own blindness and bloody-mindedness in a quarrel that has its own odd integrity. Sadly, the Catholics and the Protestants of Northern Ireland both have a case, though the Protestant one is understated in this novel.

Everyone in this book, indeed in this province, is trapped. Johnny Costello is in jail. His wife suffers the enforced chastity and crushing loneliness that is the fate of those women whose men have fallen in love with Mother Ireland. The IRA is trapped by its sectarian view of the past and the present, by its internal feuds, and by the illusion that "one more push" is necessary to get the British out. The Ulster Protestants are trapped in their homeland. They are fearful and suspicious of the British, and even more suspicious and fearful of the Republican Irish. And the British are trapped. They would like to leave, but they have to do the decent thing and protect a million citizens who want to remain British and some of the half-million who also want to be Irish. The complexities of the Falkland Islands seem crudely simple by comparison.

The one person in the novel with the key to freedom is Michael Boyd; and he is free precisely because he opted out of the quarrel physically, if not emotionally, long ago. He can offer Nora a new life, but if she takes it, she will betray her husband at the deepest core of misplaced patriotism—by letting down the man prepared to give his life for his country. Nora can leave, but all the others, including the British and the Protestants, cannot do so without

agonizing about duty in the one case and about roots in the other.

There are major flaws in Holland's idea. Any visiting reporter who behaved like Michael Boyd, by getting involved with the wife of a Provisional leader and then acting as a go-between in an internal terrorist feud, would need his head examined, if it had not already been rearranged by an IRA bullet. Mr. Holland might also have used his experience to sketch in the strong flavor of Protestant frustration and fear. In simple terms he might have pointed out that the Protestant Shankill Road in Belfast has its slums as well as the Catholic Falls Road. Catholic Irishmen have been maiming largely Protestant Ulstermen, and women and children too, but outsiders seem hardly to care.

Jack Holland is at his best in his cameos of Belfast people. He knows the double standard of the Catholic hard man who thinks about sex but is embarrassed by the reality. He senses the frustration and the strength of the Catholic woman who, like Mother Ireland, is expected to live with the suffering but who must battle with the frailties of the flesh and with the despair that blessed Mother Ireland in her abstraction never has had to bear. Holland also has a keen eye for detail: It is only when you actually pass through a New York subway barrier and a Belfast security gate that you realize they are much the same. Sadly, however, Holland seems to have few if any pleasant memories of Belfast. If it were as bad as some people believe, most Ulstermen would have left long ago. Holland is at his most telling when he notes—and accurately so in my own experience—that Americans do not really want a complex Irish story. "They tend to be impatient with explanations, especially as regards anything to do with Europe. After all, that's what most of them left behind and they don't want to waste too much time worrying about it." More of them should read this novel and worry yet more about a strange land where nothing is black and white or even simply orange and green, and where the people are warm, kind, and passionate to the degree that they kill one another to prove a point. They are trapped even more than poor Nora Costello. People who are their own worst enemies are doomed to live with themselves and each other as prisoners all. [WV]