THE EMPEROR: DOWNFALL OF AN AUTOCRAT
by Ryszard Kapuscinski
(Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; 164 pp.; $12.95)

ETHIOPIA, GREAT BRITAIN, AND THE UNITED STATES 1941-1974
by Harold G. Marcus
(University of California Press; xii + 205 pp.; $26.00)

Sterrett Pope

Ethiopia occupies a peculiar place in contemporary African history. During the nineteenth century it was the only African state to survive the onslaught of European conquest and colonization that swept the rest of the continent. Sheltered by its rugged and remote terrain, Ethiopia decisively repulsed an Italian invasion in 1895, and its kings were left free to develop an African feudal kingdom reminiscent of the absolutist monarchies of preindustrial Europe. Although the country eventually succumbed to Italian conquest in 1936, Haile Selassie returned from exile to recover his throne during the Second World War. Sequestered for so long beyond the reach of foreign rule and international market forces, Africa’s most independent country became its most archaic and impoverished society. Only recently was the kingdom torn asunder by revolution—the continent’s most violent and far-reaching to date.

This dialectic is fully reflected in the rule of Haile Selassie I, a king who exercised such an enduring and thoroughly personal influence over his subjects that his career encapsulates the political history of the country he ruled for almost sixty years. An amalgam of charisma and inscrutable raison d’État, the King of Kings was a virtuoso at the traditional art of statecraft, a master of force and fraud who ruled by tireless manipulation of corruption and conspiracy. This, in any case, is the portrait Ryszard Kapuscinski offers in The Emperor, an oriental tale as exotic and universal as any by Voltaire or Montesquieu. Published in Poland in 1978, The Emperor was greeted by that country’s dissident intellectuals as a political allegory depicting the decay of Poland’s Communist regime and the embryonic growth of the Solidarity movement. Though it is difficult to cite two political economies less congruent than those of imperial Ethiopia and socialist Poland, Kapuscinski speaks to both settings by evoking an almost millenarian sense of decadent tyranny and the wayward path of history seeking its own justice.

Kapuscinski’s book is rapportage pieced together from interviews with former members of the imperial court whom he sought out in hiding in 1974 amidst the terror and chaos of revolutionary Addis Ababa. To these witnesses Haile Selassie was a superhuman figure around which their lives, and the life of their nation, had turned; and they describe his fall from power in hushed tones of awed incredulity. Although the book is ostensibly a collection of personal accounts, it is certain that the author has taken some liberties with his material to fashion a coherent tale that combines the terse irony of Camus with the folk surrealism of Gabriel García Márquez. Translators William R. Brand and Katarzyna Mroczkowska are to be commended for making Mr. Kapuscinski’s debut in English a literary as well as a journalistic event.

The Emperor begins with an account of the Negus’s daily routine. Perturbed that for even a few hours his vigilance has succumbed to the insensibility of sleep, the indefatigable monarch rises before dawn to review the oral reports of his several spymasters, whose competing networks of informers had spent the night cataloguing the gossip and intrigue of the capital. At nine o’clock the King of Kings attends the Hour of the Assignments, when he personally sees to all promotions and dismissals of government officials, however unimportant. The Chosen One of God maintains absolute authority by constantly juggling appointments, setting arrogant nobles against plodding bureaucrats, and checking both with his “personal men”—royal clients without rank and title whose only distinction is blind loyalty to the emperor.

At ten the King of Kings attends the Hour of the Purse, when he audits and approves all royal disbursements, however inconsequential. At eleven comes the Hour of the Ministers, when the emperor receives each minister separately so that “a dignitary would then denounce his colleagues more boldly, giving the monarch a better insight into the operation of the Imperial apparatus. It is true that the minister being received at an audience preferred to talk about the disorders reigning in other departments rather than about those in his own; but precisely by talking to all the dignitaries, he could put together an overall view.”

From the first years of his reign Haile Selassie had sought to modernize his kingdom. He abolished slavery, founded a postal system, and introduced electricity and automobiles. He projected the establishment of a modern army and civil service and sent students abroad to get the best university educations. This was the first step on the path to ruin. Returning from abroad, graduates were appalled at the ignorance and corruption of their government and soon began to nourish secret plans for reform. One of these, Germane Neway, a young man of high birth and great promise appointed governor of a remote district, shocked the palace by using the bribes he received from local magnates to build schools and hospitals. Then Germane went further, suddenly revealing Communist sympathies by giving away abandoned wasteland to impoverished peasants. He was summoned forthwith to Addis and transferred to another province, whose only inhabitants were nomads. But Germane found allies in the highest circles; he and his brother, the chief of the Imperial Guard, finished by plotting a military coup that seized the palace and almost dethroned Haile Selassie while he was abroad in December, 1960.

The coup was defeated, the conspirators executed, and thousands of suspects imprisoned, but the Negus’s rule was badly shaken. He purged whole ministries and had his favorite lions shot “because instead of defending the Palace, they had admitted the traitors.” To keep control the monarch was obliged to redouble his duties of state; after the coup he added new “hours” to his schedule: the Development Hour, the International Hour, and the Army-Police Hour. It was this latter hour that increasingly claimed his attention as peasant uprisings and student demonstrations became more and more frequent. The great failure of the emperor’s old age was his inability to reverse the great success of his youth—the creation of a purely personal system of power. Proclaiming a new age of welfare and enlightenment for his subjects, he could not deliver them from his own “whims of power, labyrinths of Palace politics, ambiguity, darkness that no one could penetrate.”

Through the solemn testimonies of the
emperor's servants, Kapuscinski has preserved an unforgettable portrait of tradition skeptically confronting the mysterious menaces of modernity. Describing the prevailing atmosphere in the palace after the 1960 coup, one courtier muses: "A kind of mania seized this mad and unpredictable world, my friend: a mania for development. Everybody thought about developing himself, and not according to God's law that a man is born, develops and dies. No, each one wanted to develop himself extraordinarily, dynamically and powerfully.... Yet our Empire had existed for hundreds, even thousands, of years without any noticeable development, and all the while its leaders were respected, revered, worshiped." And once started, the madness of development was irreversible. "That's where the mistake was," another courtier concludes, "no movement should have been permitted, since we could only exist in immobility. The more immobile immobility is, the longer and surer its duration."

Harold Marcus’s Ethiopia, Great Britain, and the United States is a scholarly account of the emperor’s postwar foreign policy. Like the late shah of Iran, Haile Selassie’s mastery of palace intrigue and factional maneuver served him well in the rough-and-tumble world of international realpolitik. Swept back into power on the heels of the British invasion of Ethiopia in 1943, the emperor used great-power patronage to consolidate his rule and extend his kingdom. The gradual dismantling of Britain’s overseas empire allowed the Negus to annex the former Italian colony of Eritrea, which later used Eritrea as a key listening post on its anti-Soviet defense perimeter. During the ‘50s and ‘60s, Ethiopia claimed the lion’s share of U.S. aid dollars in Africa, although American diplomats could not restrain the emperor from diverting to military projects the aid that was earmarked for social and economic development.

Marcus devotes his longest chapter to an hour-by-hour account of Germaine’s failed military coup. Confirming the particulars of Kapuscinski’s prose-poem, Marcus portrays Ethiopia’s “Decemberists” as naive idealists without doctrine or program, bungling revolutionaries who understood neither the art of mass politics nor the workings of palace intrigue. Prior to his departure for Brazil in December, 1960, Haile Selassie had become aware of disension within the military; but instead of moving against the malcontents directly, he chose to juggle several strategic posts in the Ministry of Defense. Marcus’s study indicates that this one act of imperial finesse effectively foiled the coup. As the conspirators fled the capital and the emperor returned to Addis to review his loyal troops in front of jubilant crowds, “the hysteria of the mobs had almost gotten out of control”—here Marcus is quoting the American consul’s report—and the Emperor was soon surrounded by innumerable screaming people. Had anyone wished to assassinate him, it would have been very easy.

Drawing extensively on American diplomatic archives and Ethiopian documents and interviews, Marcus shows an American mission finely attuned to political developments in the host country as well as to the interests of the U.S. Although the American embassy threw in its lot with the emperor as soon as it became clear that his loyalists would prevail, the U.S. mission realized the full implications of the abortive coup. Indeed, numerous diplomatic reports during the ’60s analyzed the impossible contradictions of the emperor’s rule, and in some cases uncannily anticipated some of the complex developments of the military coup and the ensuing Ethiopian revolution. But because of the perceived inevitability of violent revolution and the dispensability of American installments in Eritrea, U.S. diplomats never seriously confronted the intractable dilemmas of reform and revolution in Ethiopia—as was also the case later in Iran and Central America.

When the deluge did finally come in 1974, advances in satellite technology and favorable developments in the Middle East had marginalized Ethiopia’s strategic importance for the U.S.; and American diplomats graciously conceded the triumph of Soviet influence in Addis. Marcus’s conclusion will surprise few State Department professionals: “U.S. policy towards Addis Ababa remained essentially unprincipled, even immoral, in its pragmatic opportunism. Survival of an important [but nonessential] American facility was the priority.”

ONE DAY OF LIFE
by Manlio Argueta
(Vintage Press; 215 pp.; $6.95 [paper])

Holly Myers

This is among the first works of the new Aventura series from Vintage. Originally published in El Salvador in 1980, Argueta’s fine novel accomplishes what endless reams of journalism about the continuing tragedy in that country would never do. Through an intense evocation of character, Argueta's work vividly exposes the reader to the urgent life-and-death drama that, though an everyday matter in El Salvador, remains essentially beyond the comprehension of a secure American public. This story of a peasant family whose existence is inescapably transformed by a repressive government within an unjust society renders immediate the abstract issues the American public (or some small percentage of it) now associates with Central America. The actions and aspirations of the members of a single family, as they struggle through one faitful day, forcefully depict the need for the reform of a feudal society, the total disregard for human rights under a military government’s rule by terror, and the increasing leadership offered by a church opposed to unending repression.

One Day of Life opens as Lupe Fuentes Guardado awakens in her rancho on the outskirts of Chalate in Chalatenango Province. As she watches the sun rise and birds flit through the sky, the reader senses Lupe’s dignity, her communion with her environment, and the traditional order of her world. Lupe recalls an incident in which she was spared being harmed by a snake: “The voice of conscience illuminated my way...the voice of conscience belongs to one and doesn’t belong to one. It comes from only God knows where.” Lupe is stating the principal theme of One Day of Life: the role of conscience in the ongoing struggle of the Salvadoran people. The novel highlights the growing awareness of the Salvadoran poor about the injustice of their plight. “After a congress was held I don’t know where...religion was no longer the same.” Instead of preaching resignation, the Church began to advocate involvement and the promotion of community. Simultaneously, Lupe notes, “the Guard started appearing in our neighborhood...they began telling us that the priest had made us insolent, had filled our heads with strange ideas.”

It is soon clear that the Fuentes Guardado family is facing catastrophe. Lupe’s son Justinó has recently been murdered by the Guard, his head chopped off and stuck on a roadmarker for all to see. The husband of her daughter Maria Pia has been “made to disappear” by the Guard; and now Maria Pia, beaten repeatedly herself, must go with her youngest children up to the hills at night in order to escape abduction by the Guard. Lupe’s husband, José—known as Chepe—has also been forced into hiding, returning home only at dawn to eat his breakfast and then slip away again. On this particular day, Lupe’s fifteen-year-old granddaughter, Adolina—Maria Pia’s daughter—is coming to visit her. When the Guard show up