

In the Village

Photographs from Nicaragua

by Jonathan Leaning
Steel Rail Publishing, Ottawa, 1986

Review by Lois Corbett

I first saw this collection of black and white photographs from Nicaragua while sitting in a friend's kitchen in the north end of Halifax. But Leaning wouldn't let me stay there, sipping hot black tea and nodding to idle gossip.

He had to take me into a small village called La Virgen Morena, near the Costa Rican border. And he had to introduce me to Dona Rosaura Lopez, the beautiful, laughing woman on the cover of his new book.

He had me walk through the women's vegetable co-operative, and through Dona Rosaura's neighbour's kitchens — meeting the children, the women and the men: people who live in the small Latin American country fighting to improve their standard of living, worrying whether one of the few border zones not yet affected by the war would become the next target of American-backed counter-revolutionary forces.

Leaning's photographs are a welcome break from the images of war torn and disaster stricken countries we usually are subjected to with little or no analysis, every night on the evening news. His subjects are ordinary people, living through an anything-but-ordinary experience, but struggling, nonetheless, to live their lives one day at a time, with as much order and as much peace as they can create.

The author explains his photographs and his intentions as he pieces together life in a small village in Nicaragua.

"I told him (an organizer of vegetable co-operatives) about my interest in rural life in Nicaragua since the revolution and my hope to learn by living and working in a small village. He brought me to La Virgen Morena," says Leaning.

Learning about Nicaraguans and their way of life was important to Leaning, but he does not remove this experience from his own as a Canadian.

"By their stark contrast to our lives in Canada, these experiences taught me as much about Canada as about Nicaragua. I began to realize what Canadians have and how we built it. We have inherited the results of several centuries of accumulated wealth, stability, technology, security. When the Nicaraguans cast aside fifty years of dictatorship, they inherited something quite different: a country in shambles."

Leaning says his pictures of the village are examples of what Nicaraguans are doing with their inheritance of disorder and chaos: the inhabitants of La Virgen Morena are planting vegetables, building outhouses and schools, and waiting away the heat of the afternoon in their living rooms.

Watering a garden and tending carrots, tomatoes, cabbages and turnips don't seem

— to Canadians — like revolutionary activities. But Leaning explains that these vegetables were "food of the wealthy", before the revolution, available only in city markets. Poor people, like those in La Virgen Morena, survived mostly on rice, beans and tortillas. They had no schools before the revolution, and little or no health care. Now these people eat fresh food and send their children to learn what they can: "one man told Leaning education was important. 'I don't want my children to be like me.' He tapped his head as if it were a hollowed gourd. 'Nothing.'"

Nicaragua is not a perfect country, where life is idyllic and people are always happy. Leaning adds an explanation of the country beside his photos — an explanation that includes a discussion of political, social and economic change that will come about slowly. He emphasizes one significant social change brought about by the victory of 1979: the liberation of women in that country.

Leaning doesn't pretend the revolution freed Nicaraguan women: he says their emancipation will be a much longer process than the reform of education and health. "Whereas, in 1981, the entire nation could be inoculated against polio in the space of a few weeks, no such mirac-

ulous inoculation exists to eradicate machismo."

But Nicaraguans are working to provide equality for women. The involvement of women in education, health programmes and community organizations, including the vegetable co-operative in La Virgen Morena, will have an incredible impact on roles of people in the country, formerly defined by class and sex.

The government has taken some steps to provide, through legislation, equal pay for work of equal value for women, freedom from depiction of women as sex objects in advertising, and joint ownership and equal property rights for married women, as well as instituting social security for widows and pregnant women.

Leaning says the difficulties in eradicating sexism from a society that has it well-entrenched are many, but the revolution has, at least, brought the realization among both women and men that things must change.

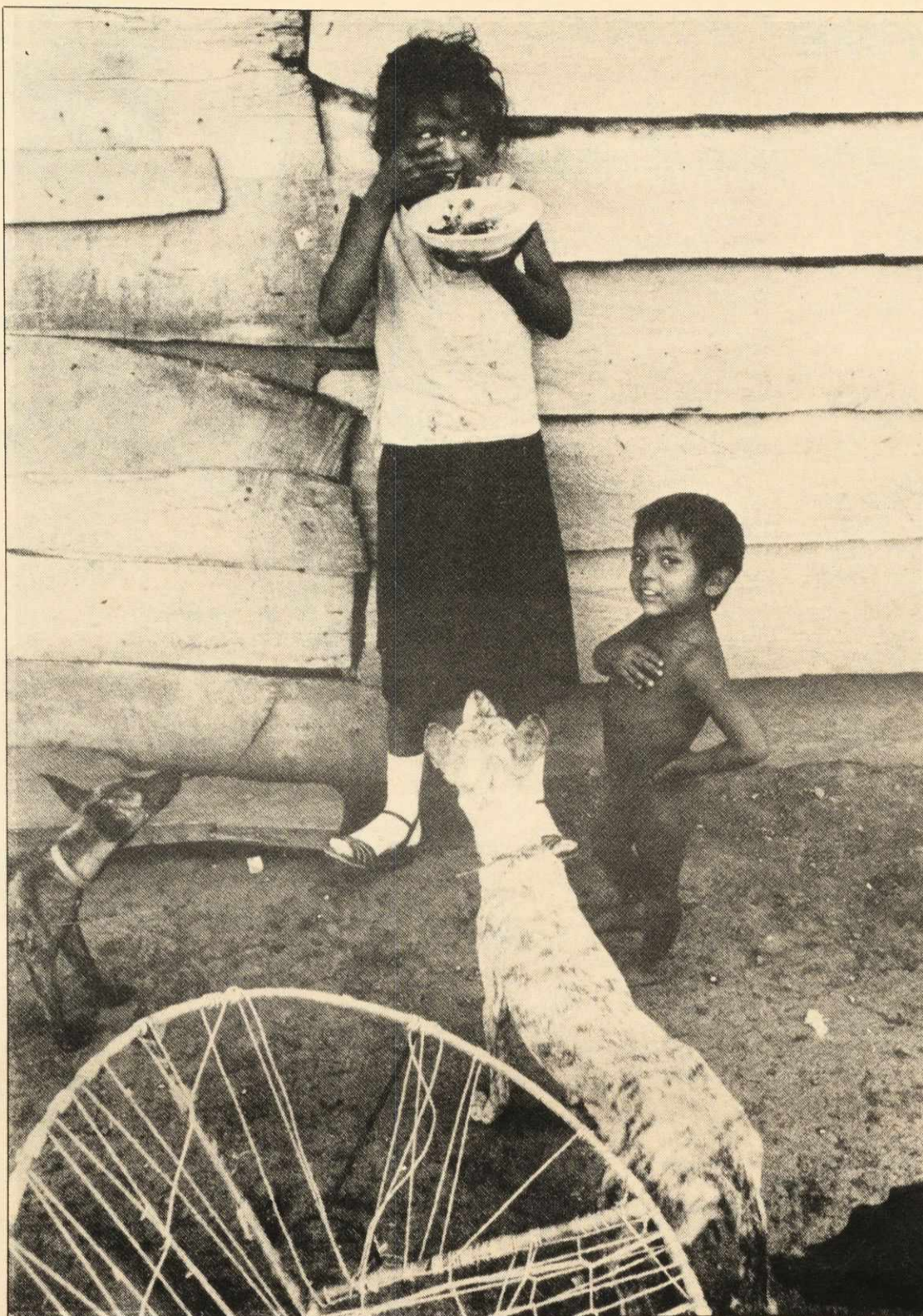
Change is a necessary element of Leaning's portrayal of village life in rural Nicaragua. The failures of the contras to overthrow the revolutionary government of the country have instilled, he says, determination and confidence in Nicaraguans. "For most, the question is not 'How will it

end?' but 'How long will it take?'"

For some of the residents of La Virgen Morena, the change has already taken much too long. Dona Rosaura's youngest son was blown up in 1979 while fighting for the revolution. Pedro Acevedo, the "prodigal son" of a neighbour, was killed in action while defending his country against the contras while Leaning lived in the village. And Dona Rosaura died on June 26, 1985 while attending an evangelical gathering.

"She was tired. She told me on more than one occasion that she hoped death would come quickly when it came. . . In a way I was relieved. At least she died singing. Her's was a death encountered in celebration of God, and not a death brought about by a 'humanitarian' bullet donated by the U.S. government. The family she leaves behind may not be so lucky."

"In the Village" is based on a photo display by Leaning. The display can be borrowed from Nicaraguan Exhibit, 107 Villeneuve W., Montreal, P.Q. H2T 2R6. The book is on order at Red Herring Co-operative Bookstore, and will soon be available there for \$9.95. Royalties from the sale of the book will be donated to OXFAM Canada to support development projects in Nicaragua.



"The incomparable Fernando Ruiz with his sister Ana-Julia, considered by any in the co-operative to have been accomplices in the theft of our twenty watermelons." Photo by Jonathan Leaning