

A Civilized Greed

A bibliographer's shopping sprees require a certain forbearance for ferocious dogs, officious inspectors and Sputnik-era transportation.

By PAULA COVINGTON, MLS'71, MA'94

A COLLEAGUE OF MINE ONCE said that if the acquisition of books for a university research library were compared to military maneuvers, the acquisition of Latin American materials could be likened to guerrilla warfare. There have been many times when I thought that analogy was too close for comfort.

I've been collecting books for Vanderbilt since 1976. As Latin American and Iberian bibliographer for the Heard Library, my quest for books has taken me to Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Cuba, and other Latin American countries. My colleagues are quick to say, "Never travel with Paula." It *does* seem my buying trips should be less eventful. In Guatemala I once boarded a plane that was a reject from 1950s Russia. In Nicaragua my plane ticket was stolen. In Costa Rica there was an earthquake and a bomb in front of my hotel. In Bogotá there was a riot while I was in the bookshop.

Then there was the time in the Yucatán when I wasn't allowed to board the ship because I had stupidly mailed my visa home with the books. My husband had already boarded and was in the ship's dining room enjoying salad for the first time in weeks, oblivious to my predicament. After pleading with intransigent local police, I was taken aside by one official who agreed to look the other way if I could persuade the Norwegian purser to take my name off the ship's passenger list. No problem, she said, and whipped

out her White-Out to blot out my name.

So, technically, I'm still in Mexico. Ah, well, it's a beautiful country, the people are so friendly, and the books can be such bargains.

VANDERBILT HAS A LONG HISTORY of collecting Latin Americana and a highly regarded program in Latin American Studies. At Chancellor Harvie Branscomb's behest, Vanderbilt in 1947 developed the first Brazilian center in the United States.

Trips to Latin America help us locate older materials not listed by any booksellers and identify potential library collections for sale. We also lay the groundwork for regular exchanges of publications between Vanderbilt and local research institutions, universities, banks, and government agencies and non-governmental organizations that publish materials not for sale. Discounts available on the spot (the result of low in-country costs of publication) often save us enough to offset most of the cost of the trip.

The Latin American book market is not geared for export. An average print run for some Latin American countries might be 125 copies. In the U.S., publishers supply the Library of Congress with copies of almost all new books; in many Latin American countries, books never make it into the national library and are often unavailable in any public library. In some fields, a university library in the U.S. has a more extensive collection than can be found in Latin America.

Buying trips are important in countries



where recent revolution has occurred. Once the dancing in the streets has ended, poetry, fiction, treatises, political propaganda, memoirs, and a profusion of other literature about the revolution emerge. And these are hard to get when publishing is erratic.

My first venture to an immediately post-revolutionary society was to Nicaragua after the Sandinista revolution. A group of U.S. librarians was invited to meet with the first professional librarians in the country, along with poets, writers and other notables. Little did we know one of the notables would be Comandante Tomás Borge, the only surviving founder of the FSLN (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional), leader of the Sandinista Revolution and head of internal security forces. Borge materialized one night from a grove of trees, complete with armed entourage, as we were about to return to our Managua hotel. He kept our group of 10 up half the night to discuss our impressions of Sandinista Nicaragua, U.S.-Nicaragua relations, and his concerns for Nicaragua's security. Talk of invasions and bomb plots created

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issue [p. 52]. It captured the difficulties as well as the innovative approaches used in the struggle against the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Uganda. Regrettably, however, the article gives the erroneous impression of slow delivery of anti-retroviral medicines to Uganda through President Bush's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief.

In fact, the U.S. Mission team is quite proud that within five weeks of the appropriation passing Congress, we were delivering anti-retroviral medications (ARVs) to some of Uganda's poorest and sickest residents in March 2004.

Since then we have built on our speedy response—really an unprecedented performance—to accelerate the delivery of drugs and expand the number of recipients. Over the past year the number of Ugandans receiving anti-retroviral therapy (ART) has tripled, with more than 35,000 Ugandans receiving

ART. Among these, more than 26,000 are direct beneficiaries of the president's Emergency Plan. By October 2005, we estimate that our efforts will result in more than 43,000 Ugandans treated. These medications are not only reaching the urban minority, but are being delivered through more than 50 health facilities throughout the country. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has pioneered a home-based AIDS-care strategy [that is] delivering ARVs to rural homes, now adopted as a model by other organizations to reach Africans most in need.

The struggle to address AIDS in Uganda remains massive, but efforts are in full swing and expanding constantly. We are proud of our efforts and will work to build upon them in the future to help Uganda turn back the tide against this killer disease.

MICHAEL C. GONZALES
*Deputy Public Affairs Officer
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she says. "I've always wanted to work with kids, so that's a big part of it." She volunteers two hours a week rocking premature infants in Vanderbilt Children's Hospital's neonatal unit.

Hahn's success has translated into success for the University's overall athletics standing as well. Thanks in large measure to her performances on the national stage, Vanderbilt's

overall sports program ranked 28th in the nation out of 278 institutions, a rise from 54th place the year before. "If anything we do as athletes helps promote the school in general, I think it's great," Hahn says. "I love being here, and I want everyone else to enjoy this as much as I do."

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tense undercurrents, but Vanderbilt now has a sampling of books, political pamphlets, papers and posters from that early Sandinista era. Our students and scholars can glean a sense of those turbulent times.

Some of my best finds have been on personal trips. A bookseller in a remote Vermont farmhouse sold me one of the best early Latin American travel accounts we have in Special Collections. A driving trip to the village of bookshops in Hay-on-Wye in the Welsh countryside yielded a collection of 19th-century Mexican materials belonging to a Benedictine monk. Not yet thoroughly unboxed or priced, it was a steal. Several small public library book sales in New England have turned up other early travel accounts. These lucky finds, however, are no substitute for trips to Latin American countries.

Archaeological discoveries at Maya sites in Guatemala and digs by members of Vanderbilt's anthropology faculty have inspired us to work toward becoming a national resource in Mesoamerican anthropology and archaeology. Stretching the library budget to aim for such strength has required creativity and resourcefulness. I was in Guatemala when a noted archaeologist was selling his private library, and the Friends of the Library (Vanderbilt's donor society that supports the University library system) gave us funds to buy a portion of it. Over tea in his lovely colonial

mansion in Antigua, the man regaled me with stories of his explorations. When I returned that evening to make my final selections, I was greeted by a male servant holding a lunging Doberman. Books were spread around a patio, and the servant chained the growling dog to a post. I spent a nerve-wracking evening selecting books and praying the chain wouldn't break.

Last year, when a frustrated Ph.D. student from Spain said she was going to Cuba to find the books and journals she needed since Vanderbilt and other U.S. libraries did not have a number of recent writers' works, I realized I had put off too long the problem of obtaining Cuban materials. A profusion of new Cuban writers has generated research by students and faculty in the Spanish department at Vanderbilt. An NEH-funded international collaborative project to digitize decaying colonial documents in Cuban archives is being directed by Vanderbilt historian Jane Landers, and the library is supporting this effort.

As I headed to Cuba last May, I reflected on parallels between that trip and the one to Nicaragua. From the plane the long, thin island I had peered at with curiosity so many times en route to Latin America came into view. As we prepared to land, most passengers made the sign of the cross followed by thunderous applause and cheering. It was 9 p.m. when I arrived at the Havana airport with \$4,000 in cash in a money belt. U.S. banks cannot do business with Cuba, and U.S. credit cards are not accepted. The Cuban crime rate is reportedly very low, but such a sum must be a powerful temptation in a country where the average monthly income hovers around \$20. The night before my arrival, the student from Spain had sent me a cryptic e-mail from Cuba warning me to "take care—all is in upheaval."

After a lengthy search of my baggage, I was relieved to find an official had come to meet me, and I was taken through a crowd to a locked van and driven to the city. We passed the dwindling crowds of a May Day protest—more than a million people organized by Castro to protest President Bush's announcement of a nearly \$60-million appropriation for anti-Castro efforts to liberate Cuba. Tension continued during my trip with the rhetoric

escalating. Several Cubans expressed concern that Bush might invade their homeland.

Newly announced restrictions on travel to Cuba and on dollars sent to families caused hardship for many Cubans. Several times people asked me to buy milk for their babies. Food was scarce, and the people were experiencing the worst drought in 40 years. Economic hardships mean private libraries are being broken up for resale, and stolen books are not uncommon.

Hardships notwithstanding, the government promotes a profusion of publishing and cultural events. UNEAC, the writers' and artists' union, is a busy and exciting spot filled with authors, students and lecturers. The government subsidizes publishing, so books can be amazingly cheap (three to five books per dollar). Bargaining and buying of antiquarian books in the plazas and from other places can be the opposite, however, and one must obtain a *comprobante* to be able to take pre-1940 imprints out of Cuba.

Despite the lack of resources, Cubans are upbeat and vibrant. When I arrived at the national library to visit librarians I had met at a conference in Cartagena last year, the electricity was out, so I was unable to see their duplicate exchange collections. They closed the national library that afternoon because they could not serve employees a meal. On a return visit, I noted computers were so old they lacked virtually any memory—only after three tries were they able to type a letter giving me permission to take a duplicate collection of a Cuban literary journal. The box of floppies and pens I brought them were carefully parceled out to staff. Despite their problems the librarians took the time to help an American research library fill in journals and books we lacked. The Vanderbilt graduate student from Spain put me in touch with a professor of Cuban literature who spent several days helping me locate new writers' works. People in the plazas wanted to give directions and talk about the U.S. Despite protests in the square, they were friendly, separating U.S. politics from individual North Americans.

I acquired so many books and journals that I began to worry about getting them out of the country. I had considered parceling them out to Vanderbilt students in Cuba for

a Maymester course, but now there were too many for their 70-pound limit. I located a cargo company that would ship to Canada and spent half a day in a high-security area of the airport making the arrangements. The office walls were covered with photographs of El Presidente Castro and reverent quotations. The agent sported a Tommy Hilfiger shirt, a new fax machine, and a computer the likes of which no one else owned in Havana. After endless paperwork I was taken to a loading dock with my many bags of books. A young but intimidating customs official looked at every book and pored over the pages. We were accompanied by the desperate squawks of thousands of tiny parakeets stuffed into open pallets bound for Spain. The promised boxes to pack my books were nowhere to be found. When the severe customs official finished, he smiled and pitched in as agents scoured the airport for gunny sacks and boxes and packed.

I left Cuba knowing the new acquisitions would help students and faculty at Vanderbilt and from other parts of the world with their research, whether they were looking for a single fact or for a range of sources on a theme. Acquiring the right resources is vital to good research, and it's rewarding to see students become independent researchers and learn something they can put to use in their careers.

Two students wrote recently to thank my co-teacher in Latin American research methods and me and to say they are using these research skills from the class. Let's hope they truly learned them since one is in the White House and both are working on counterterrorism.

I'm not sure where my next opportunity to strengthen the collection may take me. So many other great finds are waiting to be discovered ... and in so little time ... but what wonderful places and people to get to know along the way.

In addition to her work as Latin American and Iberian bibliographer for the Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Paula Covington also co-teaches an interdisciplinary course in Latin American research methods and helps students and faculty with research.