rumours of glory

a memoir

Bruce Cockburn

and Greg King

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Praise for *Rumours of Glory*

“Cockburn proves to be a natural storyteller in this debut. … Writing with intelligence and candor, he tells how other artists—from Bob Dylan and Allen Ginsberg to Doris Lessing and Christian/occult author Charles Williams—influenced his thinking and work and sparked his lifelong activism against war, injustice and exploitation. … This unusually absorbing book will enthrall Cockburn fans.”

Kirkus Reviews (Starred Review)

“Beautifully and thoughtfully written. … The book really takes off when it covers the 1980s, when he put himself in harm's way on visits to war zones and chaotic areas in Nicaragua, Honduras, Chile and East Germany.”

The *Journal Star* (Lincoln, Nebraska)

“An engrossing memoir.”

Boston Globe

“The virtues of Cockburn’s memoir are many. … I have read only two beautifully written and piercing memoirs of this sort: Bob Dylan’s *Chronicles: Volume 1*, and the great Australian rocker Paul Kelly’s *How to Make Gravy*. Bruce Cockburn’s book now joins that august company. …”

Christian Century

“The memoir reads as an encyclopedia of world music, atrocities and activism from the 1960s to 2004. … "Rumours" exposes the folds in his relationships with women, the divine, various causes, music—and marvelously unpacks his songs like origami laid flat.”

San Jose *Mercury News*

“The prose is … very lyrical, I found it was really enjoyable. I was impressed by the amount of research.”

Toronto *Star*

II

In June 2011 the Guatemalan forensic scientist Fredy Peccerelli swabbed a DNA sample from the cheek of a young man named Óscar Ramirez, a Guatemalan national living in Framingham, Massachusetts, a Boston suburb. Óscar had illegally moved to the States in 1999, so when a Guatemalan human rights investigator contacted him in connection with a crime in his homeland, Óscar at first balked. Once he learned the severity of the crime, however, and his intimate if bizarre connection to it, he agreed to cooperate.

Óscar was the son of Óscar Ramirez Ramos, a lieutenant in the Guatemalan military—or so he had always believed. It turned out that on December 6, 1982, when Óscar was three years old, Ramirez Ramos had kidnapped the boy from a small Guatemalan village in the northern highlands called Dos Erres. "Kidnapped" is a euphemism in this case, however: Ramirez Ramos was an architect of the Guatemalan government's massacre of virtually everyone in Dos Erres—more than two hundred people who, one by one, were blindfolded, led to a community well, hit on the head with a sledgehammer, and then dumped into the well, whether or not they were dead. The killing began with a baby who was torn from her mother's arms and dropped, alive, into the well. Most of the women and girls were raped, often in front of their families, before being dumped down the hole.

Only three people who were in Dos Erres that day survived: an eleven-year-old boy who escaped into the bush, and two toddlers who were taken and raised by the killers. Ramirez Ramos kept Óscar for himself and gave the boy to his mother, who had always wanted her son to have children. It wasn't until the late nineties that Guatemalan human rights activists learned from soldiers who had been in Dos Erres that day that two toddlers were taken. More than a decade later, an investigator located Óscar in the United States.

As recounted in 2012 by the nonprofit ProPublica news site and the radio show *This American Life*, the DNA swab proved that Óscar was the son not of Ramos but of Tranquilino Castañeda Valenzuela, a man from the village who, incredibly, survived the massacre because he happened to be away. (Castaneda's pregnant wife and eight other children died in Dos Erres.) In 2012, after thirty years, father and son were reunited.

The Dos Erres massacre occurred around the same time we were mixing *The Trouble with Normal*, and just before the call from Oxfam Canada. Although at the time we couldn't have known specifically about Dos Erres, it was clear to anyone paying attention that Guatemala had become a killing field. Between 1978 and 1983 the Guatemalan military, using weapons, money, and training from the United States and Israel, destroyed 626 Guatemalan villages and murdered more than two hundred thousand villagers, most of them Mayan farmers—campesinos scratching out a meager living on marginal lands that had somehow escaped acquisition by the country's major landowning families. (According to the Land Tenure Center at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, in 1979 Guatemala had the highest concentration of farmland ownership in Central America, with 2.6 percent of the farms controlling 60 percent of the arable land. Those estates mostly produced coffee, sugarcane, and other export crops. In 1984, fully 84 percent of Guatemala's rural population was "landless or near landless.")

One of the most obvious indications of atrocity was the more than one hundred thousand Guatemalans crowded into a number of refugee camps in southern Mexico, along the Río Lacantún, which constitutes about one hundred miles of the border between Mexico and Guatemala. (By 1983 there were more than one million internally displaced Guatemalans as well.) Oxfam proposed sending me and another Canadian songwriter, Nancy White, along with interpreter Rick Arnold, a Canadian who'd grown up in Venezuela, to southern Mexico to visit a couple of the refugee camps, then on to Nicaragua to witness the revolution. The point was to observe, attempt to understand, and then share our findings and impressions with the Canadian public.

In several sessions over a few days the Latin American Working Group, a Toronto-based nonprofit information centre, briefed Nancy, Rick, and me on the history and recent politics of Latin America in general and Central America in particular. From the Monroe Doctrine to the CIA-Contra connection, from the Argentine Dirty War to the selling of Guatemalan children for their body parts, we heard the sorry stories of Latin Americans suffering the lash of wealthy nations seeking cheap labour and natural resources. In February 1983 we departed for Mexico.

Mexico City is shockingly large. Today megacities dot the globe, having metastasized furiously over the past three decades as impoverished rural regions empty out into urban commerce zones. But in the early eighties Mexico City stood out as an anomaly, a single megalopolis containing some twenty million souls, nearly the population of Canada at the time. It was one thing to know a number, quite another to see what it meant on the physical plane. In a commercial jet soaring at whatever rapid rate those things go on approach to airports, we flew over mile after mile of suburbs, single-story buildings the colour of the surrounding dust giving way to larger and more substantial ones and eventually to high-rises, for half an hour before landing.

Modernity surprised me throughout Mexico City. I didn't have any particular expectations, but my mind turned out to be awash in unexamined stereotypes. I was expecting a backwater of sombreros and serapes, which speaks loudly to the educational benefits of travel. When my guitar failed to turn up on the baggage carousel, I shrugged to myself and said, "Of course," but it was delivered to our hotel in the art deco Zona Rosa neighbourhood in a most efficient fashion. Here was a modern, throbbing metropolis of unexpected beauty and concentrated wealth contrasting sharply with limitless poverty. Mexico City is the world's eighth-richest city, with a gross domestic product of around $400 billion. More important to me, then and now, the place is home to diverse and spirited communities of artists, musicians, intellectuals, and dissidents, some of whom I would meet during our brief stay.

One night we attended a party at the apartment of a film director, which featured a screening of his newly completed documentary on the tango. I knew virtually nothing about the music other than cheesy stereotypes, but in the film the tango came alive, rich and sophisticated. Like the earliest jazz, it was an outgrowth of the underclass traditions of the African diaspora, in this case as manifested in Argentina.

I had made it clear to Oxfam, and stressed to people we met along the way, that I wanted to understand what was going on and not be propagandized to. We arranged meetings with Central American political activists who were exiles from various countries, including Guatemala. At one of these, a spokeswoman for the main element of Guatemala's anti-government guerrilla movement provided accounts of government troops committing atrocities against unarmed peasants.

"Forgive my ignorance," I said, "but how do you know it was the army doing this? How do people know it wasn't some guerrilla faction?"

She looked at me blankly for a moment and then answered, without condescension, "They came in helicopters."

It was embarrassing, but it wasn't a totally misplaced question. It's just that the answer was so glaringly obvious, at least to the victims.

Later, in 1999, the Guatemalan Report of the Commission for Historical Clarification found that 93 percent of human rights abuses in Guatemala during the seventies and eighties were committed by the Guatemalan military. The report also disclosed that 83 percent of those killed were Mayan, and that the United States' funding, training, and directing of the Guatemalan military and intelligence units "had significant bearing on human rights violations during the armed confrontation." The units in question did the hands-on work. For the United States, it was just another Indian war.

I made a lot of notes during our three weeks in Mexico and Nicaragua, and they help paint the scene.

The Kinks on the radio driving along Avenue of the Insurgents—"You really got me now." Climb up two flights of stairs in a bare art deco building. Knock, looking for X. X is a Baptist pastor who used to share an office in San Salvador with a Jesuit priest on an ecumenical education project. X was sent to Puerto Rico for a World Council of Churches meeting. On arrival, he called home to tell his wife he was okay. She told him not to come back. Soldiers had taken the priest away. No, they were not in uniform but as they left, one said to the other, "OK, major." So the pastor came to Mexico, eventually to be joined by his family. Three years later they have a life here. But he wants to go back to El Salvador, and I ask him how he can think of going back, meaning where does the courage come from? He misunderstands and talks about planes, false papers, and the underground. I lamely wish him good luck and ask, "By the way, what happened to the priest?" "After some days his body appeared in the dump, burn marks on his eyelids, the mark of the beast."

During our couple of days in Mexico City, Nancy and Rick went out and bought six suitcases, which they filled with medical supplies, including much-needed penicillin and painkillers—you can buy anything over the counter in Mexico—to be distributed at the refugee camps on behalf of Oxfam Canada. We then flew to Oaxaca and rented a car, making our way through the rugged terrain of what would later be the Zapatista stronghold of Chiapas to the old colonial city of San Cristóbal de las Casas. The Catholic archdiocese there had quietly arranged for a pilot to meet us in the nearby hamlet of Las Margaritas, just thirty miles from the Guatemalan border. (The government of Mexico had, for reasons known only to them, chosen to deny that there were any refugees. No outsiders were permitted into the camps, not even representatives of the United Nations. The Church provided the only source of support for the Guatemalans, and even that had to be covert. It wasn't nearly enough.)

Las Margaritas is at the eastern edge of a vast tropical wilderness spread across much of southern Mexico and northern Guatemala. Although logging, ranching, road building, and oil exploration have made a deep impact on this critical island of biodiversity, it remains one of the wildest and most beautiful places in the Western Hemisphere. Surrounding cloud forests still nurture endangered species such as the horned guan and the resplendent quetzal, Guatemala's national bird. It was in the middle of this wilderness, on the western, Mexican side of the Río Lacantún, where we would find the Guatemalan refugees, impressive in their own way for being alive against the odds. They were eager to connect.

The Mexican government's denial of the existence of a refugee problem was odd, as if the longest-running war in the Americas and tens of thousands of desperate camp dwellers sprawled along a major river could be ignored. The Guatemalan civil war had begun in 1960 and would not end until 1996. The genesis of the war was the 1954 coup that ousted the democratically elected president, Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán. The CIA, acting on behalf of the United Fruit Company, armed, funded, and trained coup leaders to reestablish Guatemala as a feudal state in fealty to foreign businesses. At the time United Fruit owned 42 percent of the arable land in Guatemala—the largest single land holding in the country—but the company was slated to lose 40 percent of it to Árbenz's Decree 900, which sought to redistribute farmlands to allow campesinos to grow food and become self-sufficient.

United Fruit had a couple of key allies in the U.S. government—the Dulles brothers, Allen and John Foster, who designed and implemented the coup. At the time, Allen was director of the CIA and also on the board of United Fruit; John Foster was secretary of state and his law firm, Sullivan and Cromwell, represented United Fruit. These guys were, and their modern-day protégés remain, startlingly brazen in their self-serving wars—their greed knowing no bounds, their shame never acknowledged. That a democratically elected government could be overthrown and an entire nation brutalized in the service of just one corporation reveals more about Western economics (and about the mechanics of "democracy") than anything you're likely to find in *The Wall Street Journal.*

In Las Margaritas, Rick located the man who would fly us to the refugee camps. The pilot was a slightly paunchy but fit-looking man of middle age, with longish hair framing a face lined and stubbled, mouth permanently set in a sneer. When he noticed the gold loops in my ear, he started addressing me disdainfully as "Alice Cooper." He flew a battered single-engine Cessna with no passenger seats. Where the seats would have been, he'd piled a number of fifty-pound bags of rice. Our man's livelihood came mainly from supplying the large farms in the area, the *fincas*, with food, fuel, furniture, whatever—if it would fit in his plane, he would fly it in.

Nancy was invited to sit in the copilot's seat. Rick and I climbed onto the rice and piled the medical supplies and our personal things at our feet. I did a double take and chuckled at the dashboard: where you would expect to see navigational gear, there was just a fuel gauge, an altimeter, and a battery-powered transistor radio jangling out ranchero music. Otherwise, the panel was an array of variously shaped holes. The pilot cranked the engine over and taxied us, roaring and bouncing, down the grassy field. As we picked up speed, he looked over his shoulder with a grin and shouted in a perfect Pancho

Villa accent, "You know, I never took a flying lesson. Now I own my own airline. How do you like that, Alice Cooper?"

I asked where he learned to fly. He said, "Well, I used to hang around the pilots and they showed me what to do. Eventually I managed to get hold of an airplane." He learned by apprenticing, the way people in traditional societies do. It was novel to see that applied to a job we think of as so high-tech, but, lessons or not, he got us where we wanted to go. Soon enough, we landed on a dusty, rutted strip at a camp called Puerto Rico, a few miles from the border. Our man would come back and pick us up to fly us to our other destination, a camp called Chanjul, in a couple of days.

> *We carry medical supplies to the Guatemalan refugee camps. Remote. Sad, tired faces. Pathetic smiles of welcome. The airplane the only contact with civilization and its casual gifts of aid on which they almost survive. The little boys along the dirt runway hold toy planes made of scraps of wood. Our medicine is all that they have—six full suitcases for 8,000 people. They feel that we, and those like us, are their only hope. Someone to tell their story to the outside world.*

I had seen refugee camps on TV—Sally Struthers, eyes tearing up like a kind of anti–Tammy Faye Bakker, in front of rows of tents in the sun and babies with flies on their eyes—but face to face it was different. TV has no smell, no feel. This kind of poverty stinks. It smells like too much sweat and not enough soap. It smells like human shit baking in the sun. That said, the camp was laid out in an orderly fashion. There were numerous dwellings and several communal buildings constructed from what the jungle had to offer: rough-hewn lumber, bamboo, palm leaves for thatch. The three thousand inhabitants, mostly women, children, and the elderly, carried themselves with grace and dignity, though they were clearly desperate. That was the most moving part of being there, to see the suffering, and to see the strength in the face of that suffering, of the constant threats, of the immense and brutal theft of life and security. Their response to chaos was organized and cohesive, though they had absolutely nothing, no prospects whatsoever. They were even building a school, never mind that they had nothing to put in it, no books, no teachers. At Chanjul, we would later see, they had constructed a little infirmary, which was staffed by a couple of nuns. There was no medicine, but they would be ready when supplies came. They never did, of course, not in any significant way. Later the Mexican army went in and burned it all down anyway. When I saw the strength and clarity of the people in those camps, combined with the threat of violence and starvation, I experienced intense waves of emotion, alternately dark and light. There was no way for a greenhorn like me to find balance in such conditions. I was in awe, appalled, incensed.

People greeted us warmly and took us to meet the elders of the community. There was some head scratching about us. Why three Canadians? Why musicians? We explained that we had come to bear witness and to bring to the outside world what we saw and heard. They seemed pleased that someone was paying attention. The people we met had survived demonic counterinsurgency tactics, and now they gathered in relative safety but on the brink of starvation and still suffering sporadic acts of violence by the Guatemalan military, even on Mexican soil. Food was rationed: three tortillas a day per person. Parents boiled leaves from trees to feed their hungry children. But it was better than where they had come from.

The Guatemalan military wasn't content to simply torture and slaughter and destroy villages where they were. They continued to harass the survivors, crossing the border into Mexico and attacking the refugee camps, strafing from helicopters, now and then dragging people off into the jungle and hacking them to pieces with machetes. A helicopter assault had occurred at Chanjul, which was only a few hundred metres from the border, the week before our visit. The week after there was another. We were lucky it didn't happen to us, because no one knew we were there.

The first night in camp we stayed in a little guesthouse, sleeping in hammocks. It had a tin roof and cement-block walls with large, paneless windows, and had been on this remote farm before it was a refugee camp. Some young men came in. They were refugees but weren't living in the camp. Some of the young men who had not joined the guerrillas were sneaking back to their farms to keep the crops alive, hoping to save the harvest. It was hard to imagine how they could carry any of their produce back to the camp over thirty miles of mountains, but it was clear that if anyone could do so, it was they. Farming had to be carried on clandestinely because the army was constantly surveilling the villages, and former villages, for activity.

Rick asked them in Spanish, Why did you guys flee? One of them described what happened to his neighbour. The army came and took this man. They tortured him, then cut all the flesh off his forearms from his elbows to his wrists and hung him up on his own gatepost to die slowly. There was another episode: The army went to a house. The wife was pregnant. They beheaded the husband, then slit open the woman, ripped out the fetus, and stuck the husband's head where the fetus would have been. This was a message to the neighbours. These acts were aimed to shock, to prove their dominance. These sorts of atrocities were being committed every day throughout the countryside by the U.S. client state of Guatemala, along with the annihilation of whole villages, using U.S. weapons and training. The strategy was to create what during the Vietnam conflict were called "strategic hamlets," by forcing the people to abandon their traditional villages and cluster in artificially created population centres that could be closely watched.

Mayan people feel a sacred connection to the place where they are born. Few would willingly leave land they understood themselves to be a part of. To this end, the army, not content with massacring the people, also destroyed everything they valued. That's why our hosts were refugees, and why so many others had taken up arms.

I understand now why people want to kill.

According to the venerable British Peace Pledge Union, the stories we heard were commonplace:

> Working methodically across the Mayan region, the army and its paramilitary teams, including "civil patrols" of forcibly conscripted local men, attacked 626 villages. Each community was rounded up, or seized when gathered already for a celebration or a market day. The villagers, if they didn't escape to become hunted refugees, were then brutally murdered; others were forced to watch, and sometimes to take part. Buildings were vandalized and demolished, and a "scorched earth" policy applied: the killers destroyed crops, slaughtered livestock, fouled water supplies, and violated sacred places and cultural symbols. Children were often beaten against walls, or thrown alive into pits where the bodies of adults were later thrown; they were also tortured and raped. Victims of all ages often had their limbs amputated, or were impaled and left to die slowly. Others were doused in petrol and set alight, or disemboweled while still alive. Yet others were shot repeatedly, or tortured and shut up alone to die in pain. The wombs of pregnant women were cut open. Women were routinely raped while being tortured.

In due course our macho pilot appeared and we moved on to Chanjul. Our approach to the camp took us low over the silty brown flow of the Lacantún, between walls of jungle rising from sheer gravel banks. A sudden, steeply banked left turn had us aimed at the runway. This was a strip of cleared land, free of stumps and rocks. The only obstacle was a little gang of half a dozen dogs milling about, wagging their tails and sniffing each other's hindquarters, right where we'd be touching down. Despite the danger I felt a twinge of perverse pleasure as the pilot blanched and started muttering, "*Los perros!*

Get the dogs out of there!" Alice Cooper's (pyrrhic) revenge. At the last possible moment someone in the mob of refugees, which had lined the airstrip when they heard us coming, realized the problem. A small boy ran out and chased them off. It was a bumpy but fair landing.

People went out of their way to be hospitable. They apologized for having so little to offer. They had suffered in the worst of ways, but they were serious, and they wanted us to hear their stories. Those stories were delivered in a near deadpan tone, which made them all the more horrifying. It was as if they were recounting ancient myths, but they weren't. It was what they had very recently lived through. These calm voices. Maybe it was shock. Maybe it was how an oral culture does things. Maybe their sense of connection to that culture gave them unexpected strength.

Strength enough that Chanjul camp threw us a party. We were musicians, so there should be music. A full-sized marimba appeared, as if by magic, in front of one of the houses near the centre of the camp. Some of the refugees had managed to haul it with them in flight from their village, each person carrying a piece of it. They rebuilt it when they reached what passed for safety.

In the Guatemalan folk tradition, the marimba is handled by three players. One stands at the low end and plays bass, another stands in the middle and plays chords, and the third plays the melody in the upper register. Each man donned his one good shirt for the occasion. The rich sound of the instrument brought people flocking around. I was invited to jam with them. Easy enough: the harmonies were simple and the beat was strong. People started to dance, especially the little girls, dolled up in their brightly woven "best" clothes, many with tiny siblings slung on their backs. The party didn't last long, but it was real. The smiles and laughter in that setting were heartbreaking.

As a backdrop to all this was the intermittent throbbing drone of the Guatemalan choppers, hunting wasplike along the border. The *so-nearby* border. After a couple of days in each camp, we returned

to San Cristóbal. I was overwhelmed. To intellectually understand, or at least consider (because who can understand it?), the evil that humans inflict upon one another is one thing; to feel the results through the faces and stories of the survivors was something other. I was intellectually prepared but emotionally wrenched. What makes a government do this to its own people? What allows a human to do this to another person? What could possibly convince the world's most powerful nation, our neighbour the United States, not only to accept but to support, even *design*, such slaughter?

It seems possible to view the genocide against Mayan people as an extension of the historic U.S. policies of extermination at home against Native Americans. The atrocities were not unique. They were part of a pattern of depravity that surfaces again and again all over the globe. In southern Mexico we found raw evidence of the banality of evil. Not only was it horrible, but for the most part it wasn't even creative. Not much has changed in the realm of mass murder since biblical times. Though the tools of the trade have become more sophisticated, when we get down to it, it's somebody bashing someone's head with a hammer or a shovel, or herding folks into a church and setting it ablaze. Same old shit. The difference for me was that this aspect of us had leapt off the page and become flesh and blood.

Asking God how he could allow such brutality seemed like an irrelevant question. Here, splayed before me in ways I had previously only imagined, were the "juicy bits" from the Bible. Here was the horror, Conrad's heart of darkness, Thanatos projected, all too real. I felt the violence pulsing through our DNA. These actions are embedded in our social, religious, and political traditions. A decade later, surveying the mine-strewn beauty of a Mozambican landscape ravaged by the same evils, it struck me that war is the default position of mankind, peace an aberration.

In San Cristóbal I bought a bottle of cheap whiskey and holed up in my bare hotel room. I needed the simple whitewashed walls. I didn't want to see anyone. I kept reliving the terrible stories, trying to breathe them into some comprehensible order. The quiet courage, the fierce determination and dignity of the refugees, the children still being children after all they'd seen—all of it hit me like an ice pick to the heart. When I thought about the perpetrators of those deeds, especially the anonymous airborne ones, I felt all-consuming outrage, a conviction that whoever would do such things had forfeited any claim to humanity. I envisioned myself with an RPG, blowing them out of the sky. In the hotel room, through tears and under dim light driven back from night's rippled windows, I began writing.

Here comes the helicopter—second time today
Everybody scatters and hopes it goes away
How many kids they've murdered only God can say
If I had a rocket launcher
I'd make somebody pay

I don't believe in guarded borders and I don't believe in hate
I don't believe in generals or their stinking torture states
And when I talk with the survivors of things too sickening to relate
If I had a rocket launcher
I would retaliate

On the Río Lacantún, one hundred thousand wait
To fall down from starvation—or some less humane fate
Cry for Guatemala, with a corpse in every gate
If I had a rocket launcher
I would not hesitate

I want to raise every voice—at least I've got to try
Every time I think about it, water rises to my eyes.
Situation desperate, echoes of the victim's cry
If I had a rocket launcher
Some son of a bitch would die

"IF I HAD A ROCKET LAUNCHER," 1983