

Bird of Paradise

The Last Flight of the Scarlet Macaw: One Woman's Fight to Save the World's Most Beautiful Bird, by Bruce Barcott (Published by Random House, 2008, 336 pages, ISBN: 978-1-400-06293-5).

Bruce Barcott's first book was a tribute to Mount Rainier (*Measure of a Mountain*, 1998). His next one will be about the rivers of the Pacific Northwest. In between, Barcott, a Seattle-based environmental journalist, takes his readers south, to a curious corner of the continent below the Yucatán. In *Macaw*, Barcott travels to Belize, a moist strip of a country squeezed against the sea by the Guatemalan Petén wilderness. There, he watches as the extraordinary story of the Chalillo dam unfolds.

I met Barcott four years ago in San Ignacio, the principal town in Belize's Cayo region, not far from the border with Guatemala and just downstream from the Chalillo dam site. We drank coffee after watching the start of La Ruta Maya River Challenge, one of the longest canoe races in the world; paddlers put in at the Hawksworth Bridge then sprint toward the coast for four days, finishing in Belize City. This was not long after Barcott had discovered that Chalillo (pronounced Cha-LEE-yo) was worthy of a book, not just a magazine article; each new thread of the saga was drawing him deeper into the story.

"Mennonites on bulldozers!" I remember him exclaiming during our conversation. This was the latest side-story he'd come across. Mennonites make up three percent of Belize's population, living in both non-mechanized horse-and-buggy villages and modern hamlets of the country's most industrious farmers and heavy machine operators. The latter group, Barcott told me, had been illegally sub-subcontracted to build a road to the dam — which had not yet been approved.

In *Macaw*, Barcott puts all the pieces in order, frequently taking a few generous steps back to give the reader an ample, global context for each chapter. Brief, sharp histories of hydroelectric power, Belizean demographics, endangered species lists, environmental law and post-colonial politics pepper the storyline. Between these contextual tangents, the author strings a narrative of dramatic episodes and dialogue, resulting in a sweeping snapshot of a country as it makes its awkward debut in the new global economy.

Chalillo is no cut-and-dry environmental issue. It is as much about a 150-foot cement wall on the upper Macal River as it is a perfect storm of the domestic and foreign forces that challenge modern Belize. One of the youngest, smallest, least populated countries on the planet, Barcott grapples with Belize's uniqueness in the world right off the bat: "It's difficult to overstate the smallness of the place," he writes. "Imagine a country the size of Massachusetts with the population of Corpus Christi, Texas. Give it an army of seven hundred soldiers and a seat in the United Nations and you start to get an idea of Belize. Centuries ago more than one million Maya populated this part of Central America. Today fewer than three hundred thousand Belizeans spread themselves among the country's river towns and tin-shack villages. Two-thirds of the country is covered by jungle."

Belize, he goes on, though firmly attached to the mainland, "considers itself a Caribbean island, like a chicken that thinks it's a duck."

It is, in a word, an apt setting for the events surrounding the battle against and construction of the Chalillo dam. After his sweeping, gritty overview of the country, Barcott begins his story with American expat and former lion tamer Sharon Matola, known throughout Belize as "The Zoo Lady" for her one-of-a-kind collection of hurt and orphaned animals. When Matola blows the whistle about the potentially disastrous dam proposal in

one of Central America's most pristine tracts of wilderness, Barcott swoops in for a front-row seat and takes his readers with him. For six years, he watches a mad gaggle of Belizean politicians, environmentalists, and reporters, Canadian corporations, British judges, and American eco-lawyers and celebrities battle it out over this land-of-the-lost, wildlife-choked reach of the upper Macal River — where, we learn, the last surviving population of Belize's scarlet macaws are nesting.

The Zoo Lady plays a particularly passionate part in the narrative, and Barcott follows her as she swings wildly between her roles as battle-hardened enviro-leader and beleaguered de-

feartist — "I'm so tired of reading about the destruction of this forest, the loss of that species, trawlers ripping up a coral reef," she says at one particularly low point between battles, voicing a refrain familiar to anyone who has ever fought the powers that be.

Barcott as narrator is an unobtrusive fly on the wall throughout most of this page-turning eco-thriller, a quiet note taker who makes an occasional appearance to speak to Matola, tour the dam site or climb an ancient temple above the forest canopy. He uses such moments wisely, like when he is standing atop the "Sky Palace," as the indigenous inhabitants referred their tallest structure, the Canaa temple. There, he reflects, "The Maya built something astounding and permanent. Look on our works, ye mighty, and revere. The ancient Maya speak to the twenty-first century through those temples and say: We did something amazing here." No doubt about that — Canaa, rising out of the thick jungle canopy in the middle of nowhere, remains the tallest manmade structure in Belize.

Barcott goes on: "What will our descendants think when they come upon the ruins of Chalillo ... What will they make of the skeletons and fossils of birds long gone?"

—Joshua Berman

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