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Our Man In Belize: A Memoir



Synopsis

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Customer Reviews

After sloshing around in the Great Mercury Spill at Oak Ridge, former U.S. diplomat and current mystery writer Conroy (Mr. Smithson's Bones, St. Martin's, 1993) sought a better career and was appointed vice consul to the tiny, moribund British Central American colony now called Belize. He needed to be a magician to wend his way through the intrigue of dealing with Americans of questionable character and to adjust to a society in which the city manager ran a bordello and the police commissioner drove a stolen American car. Voodoo was also a hazard when Conroy arrived, but not as dangerous as Hurricane Hattie, which he experienced when it devastated the country in 1961. After two years he was reassigned. Conroy's memoir captures the essence of the hilarious and preposterous situations that cross-cultural relationships can bring. Recommended for all collections. ? Louise F. Leonard, Univ. of Florida Libs., Gainesville Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Conroy has redirected his gift for goofy storytelling (The India Expedition, 1992; Old Ways in the New World, 1994) from the fictional accounts of foreign-affairs officer Henry Scruggs to a memoir of his years in what was then British Honduras. Searching for a workplace less toxic than the hydrogen-bomb facility where he was employed, Conroy responded to a newspaper want ad at the

suggestion of his wife, and found himself in the US Foreign Service. After an initial posting in Washington, where he undertook “unimportant, but urgent and high-priority” tasks, Conroy was appointed vice consul to British Honduras. Upon his arrival to what his obnoxious, and ultimately untrustworthy, boss calls “in back of beyond,” Conroy and his young family were temporarily housed in the residence of the local USAID official, who had just committed suicide. The consul introduced Conroy to members of the local diplomatic circle with witty and appallingly rude characterizations, but the new vice consul soon learned there was little cause for discomfort, as no offense was taken. In Honduras his tasks were never urgent or high-priority, but they were extremely important: instructing shippers to mark boxes of needed tires with dog food labels to get them past sticky-fingered customs agents; covering up his accidental opening of mail sent to another nation’s consulate; and killing poisonous snakes. When the devastating hurricane Hattie hit the city in 1961, Conroy survived and restored the consulate to some semblance of working order without any help from his superior, who had fled. After a few run-ins with a comical ex-patriate, who eagerly informed on drug runners in the hopes of receiving reward money, Conroy was reassigned to Vienna, where we are to assume things got much more serious. While Conroy admittedly takes a little license with the facts (which he attributes to poor memory), this is an enjoyable account from the eyes of a colonial-era bureaucrat. -- Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

I love Belize and am always on the lookout for books about people’s experiences there. I came across this one in our local library a few years ago and enjoyed it so much that when I decided to read it again I chose to buy a copy via . This memoir was an interesting perspective from a civil service worker who was in on the ground floor of a country’s conversion from the British colony of the British Honduras to the independent country of Belize. As it happened, the author was there when Hurricane Hattie blew through in 1961 (I was four years old), so you also get to experience that terrible event and the aftermath through his eyes. Told with grace and humor, this book makes a welcome addition to my humble library.

I was disappointed. Hoping for more insight into Belize other than just the foibles of the government. The author works hard to be amusing but it fell flat for me after chapter one.

I thought this was both well written, historically interesting and a clear demonstration of how inefficient big government can be in a very funny way.

Our Man in Belize is the story of Belize before satellite TV, before tourism, and before crack. In 1959, Richard Timothy Conroy, something of a state department misfit, was posted as U.S. vice consul to British Honduras, a lowly job in one of the backwaters of the diplomatic world. Two years later, one of the worst hurricanes of the century would strike an unprepared Belize. Out of this mixture of colonialism and disaster, Conroy builds an entertaining, fanciful memoir of life when the driving was still on the left. Or, as likely as not, in the middle. The just-arrived vice consul recounts a trip into the Belize City of 40 years ago: "The car crunched over the land crabs that had crawled onto the road to enjoy the last heat of the day ... The two-mile drive into Belize along Princess Margaret Drive was a drive into another century. Out at the racetrack, the few houses, for all their bleak shabbiness, had a cheap modern look. A failed subdivision on the edge of an abandoned town in a small country with unsupportable pretensions The old part of Belize presented, as we entered, a certain harmony of man, dog, and environment. Even shabby charm ... But the big difference was the number of inhabitants in the streets. The desolation that had so marked the new settlements was replaced by a town teeming with life, on foot, paw, and bicycle as well as rooted in the salty ground." Conroy quotes U.S. state department reports of the time that the country has "a road going west, and a road going north; both going nowhere." He reports, too, that except for the Fort George Hotel, Government House, and a few houses in the British section which had piped-in water, most of the city collected its water in cisterns "with the occasional rat or cat for body and flavor." He tells of some of Belize's great eccentrics: "Paddy," who would filch the American consulate's copy of The New York Times, and then, after removing all his clothes to wash them in the sea, would sit naked on the public seawall reading The Times while his clothes dried. And of "Bugger," a chess-playing Polish physician who always wanted to go to Africa, so when offered a position in Belize City, he quickly accepted, learning only after he was half-way there that Belize wasn't in Africa. After his British Honduras post, Conroy did a tour in Vienna, then left the state department for the Smithsonian Institution. Happily for us, Conroy's time in government work didn't ruin his knack for a good story. He's published three mystery novels and can tell a tale with the best of them. Witness: The sedate dinner party when giant roaches, attracted by the candlelight, drop from the ceiling into the gazpacho, or the story of a fool-proof method for stopping the cook from stealing your scotch. That these stories have, as the author admits, taken on a life of their own, are perhaps as much fantasy as fact, does not at all detract. Such recasting of reality, however, is likely behind Conroy's irritating and otherwise unexplainable habit of changing the names of nearly everybody, and even of some cities and countries, long after most of these people are gone and the events forgotten. Some

old Belize hands, including those who knew him personally, take exception to Conroy's tales. It is not, after all, always a flattering memoir. He tells of the petty stupidities of the U.S. government and of the bunglings of both the British and the local Creole establishments, albeit disguising the identities of the participants. Conroy revels in juicy and unflattering gossip. He reports, for example, the story of the long-time Belize City department store owner who, after getting a nice settlement from the insurance company on losses from Hurricane Hattie and the looting afterwards, piled his Rover full of cash and drove north to the Mexican border, outrunning a customs inspector on a bicycle and violating British currency exchange regulations then in force. More significantly, Conroy also could be faulted for focusing on the details, however amusing, of personal discomforts and calamities caused by Hurricane Hattie, rather than on the human tragedy the hurricane caused. Hattie struck on the night before Halloween 1961, killing more than 400 Belizeans and destroying much of Belize City. Conroy gives short shrift to the misery of homeless Belizeans in the shacks of Hattieville (which Conroy misidentifies as the site of Belmopan, the new capital) yet lightheartedly claims that after Hurricane Hattie young girls in Belize stopped wearing underwear, in a primordial reproductive reaction to a natural disaster. With an irreverent nod, however, to Graham Greene's *Our Man in Havana* and a wave to the captivating scoundrels of *In the Garden of Good and Evil*, Conroy's is the kind of memoir which, to paraphrase William Powell as Nick Charles in *Shadow of the Thin Man*, we enjoy no other kind than. Conroy says he has not been back to Belize since 1963 and proposes that today's Belize he would not even recognize. He suggests that Hurricane Hattie may have been, as it were, a watershed in Belize's history, the turning point from the old colonial backwater past to self-government and a move to a new order of politics and business on a wider stage. The final laugh of this memorable memoir, this one on Vice Consul Conroy himself, may be that the Belize of the 1950s, with its entertaining eccentrics, bordellos, heavy drinkers, comic politicians, inept diplomats, dope airstrips in the bush, auto-theft rings, and port thieves, is not that much different from the Belize of 1998.

Conroy is funny and the book is very readable, but I didn't give him a higher rating because I didn't think he tried very hard to know the people of Belize, or the country itself. He has a lot to say, all true, about the poverty and the governmental inefficiency when he was there, but didn't notice any of the natural beauty or the native culture(s) in this unique little place. He got really distressingly cold-blooded when he wrote about Hurricane Hattie, a tragedy in which there was great loss of life, and seemed mostly concerned that he wrecked his boots! If you want to know Belize, I would recommend that you read Zee Edgell's fine book *BEKA LAMB*, which is a nice antidote for Conroy's

fin-de-colonialism attitude in this book. Conroy's attitude is reminiscent of Evelyn Waugh in this book, but although he is (almost) as cruel, he is not half so funny.

Nobody would read this book to learn about Belize or the casualties left by Hurricane Hattie. This memoir belongs to the category of Foreign Service Tales -- like Durrell's "Esprit de Corps." Laughter helps you survive almost anything, even working for the consul from Hell. Although I wish Conroy had focused exclusively on his time in Belize -- because that's where the action is -- memoirs do tend to meander, like real life, and anybody who ever worked in a consulate will recognize Conroy's predicament.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book because I read it as a foreign service adventure commentary, NOT as a travel log of Belize. As a daughter of a foreign service officer and as an avid listener of f.s. stories thereof, I chuckled about the various snafus, ridicula, and adventures of this young man and his family on their first post.

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