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Graffiti in Lapa, the popular nightlife destination in Centro, Rio de Janeiro

The beat of the drum

As Colombia anticipates a new government and the prospect of lasting peace, Derek Sambrook finds a complex country can be better understood through literature

"If a man loses pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured, or far away".

Henry David Thoreau, 19th-century American essayist, poet and philosopher, could have been writing about South America, where the Latin drumbeat has a distinct tempo.

If Africa was known as the Dark Continent, still to this day many people remain in the dark about South America.

The former British prime minister, the late Margaret Thatcher, once attended a private dinner party in London's Notting Hill at which distinguished writers and academics were in attendance. The guest list read like the who's who of literary London,

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including Mario Vargas Llosa, who one of the guests described as "some Panamanian novelist". He is, of course, from Peru and is a writer who received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2010.

Tailors from Panama are probably better known outside the region than the 1st Marquis of Vargas Llosa, just as I suspect that Paddington Bear, the fictional character in children's literature, is the world's best known Peruvian.

And if you thought that the situation has changed significantly since that dinner party some 30 years ago you would be wrong. There appears to be no middle ground between those with little knowledge of South America and those with plenty. No wonder the British writer, Michael Reid, has written a book about Latin America entitled *The Forgotten Continent*.

A SELF-ABSORBED CONTINENT

In fairness, Latin America has followed a domestic agenda, showing little enthusiasm for appearing on the world stage. Its own politics and economics have absorbed most of its attention, which is not surprising.

If, however, the United States of America's sway on the world's centre stage changes and is replaced by a more diverse number of influential actors that take up the slack, then perhaps Latin America's voice, which up until now has been practically muted (a situated not discouraged by the US), may well attract more attention.

One Hundred Years of Solitude, the title of the Colombian epic written by Gabriel García Márquez, a Colombian novelist and journalist, could also apply to South America as a whole after the isolation the subcontinent has experienced in the past, like the author's fictional jungle village of Macondo that time had once forgotten.

Colombia, like the novel, is fascinating and complex. Today it is beginning a new phase in its history. If it fears no external threats, it has just emerged from a domestic conflict with the rebel group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (known internationally by its Spanish acronym FARC), which had its genesis in the 1948 assassination of populist leader Jorge Eliecer Gaitán, bringing about political chaos and the turbulent times known as "the violence".

Peasant groups joined with communists to arm themselves and later in 1964, after a military attack on the insurgency's main base, FARC was formed and the longest war in the western hemisphere began, only ending in late 2016 after a peace agreement was signed.

The government believes that full implementation of the agreement, however, could take up to 15 years and even then a ten-year period of consolidation will follow.

Colombia's President Juan Manuel Santos, whose presidency will end in August next year, will need to hope that future presidents can display the patience and perseverance that led to him being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize last year.

The conflict, which involved other left-wing rebels also, left 260,000 people confirmed dead, more than 60,000 missing and 7 million displaced. Land reform is part of the agreement and the National Planning Department expects public expenditure to grow by 4% of GDP to fund all the post-conflict initiatives.

MILTARY FOLLY

The whole of South America sees no external military threats and as a consequence of this, Brazil's army, which is the world's 15th-largest standing army, is taking on more of a policeman's role in areas such as drug smuggling. Not since the alarming incident in 1711 when Rio de Janeiro was briefly captured by a French corsair, has any big Brazilian city suffered a similar fate.

Defence spending, in fact, throughout the region amounts to little over 1% of GDP on average.

It is true that momentary madness took hold in Argentina which led to a ten-week war with the United Kingdom in 1982 over sovereignty of the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic (known in Argentina as Las Malvinas) but this can be considered an aberration.

The Falklands question will be a battle of words rather than between armies in the future with the realisation by the Argentines that "to jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war", as Winston Churchill put it.

Chile at the southernmost tip of South America has experienced, like Colombia, civil unrest in its recent past during the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet who assumed power in 1973, 44 years ago this month, after a bloody coup which toppled the elected government of Salvador Allende, a socialist president, who had pledged to lead the country "down the democratic road to socialism".

> IN COLOMBIA ONE MUST HOPE THAT THE PEACE WON IS REAL AND WILL NOT TURN OUT TO BE AS FANCIFUL AS GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ'S VILLAGE OF MACONDO

And although the number of victims during Pinochet's 17-year rule does not compare at all with the loss of life seen in the Colombian conflict (besides several high-profile murders, the dictatorship is claimed to have killed at least 3,000 people and tortured almost 29,000), it was a traumatic time for the country.

General Pinochet relinquished the presidency in 1990 but still kept the powerful position of head of the army until 1997. Terror, there may have been, but his government brought fiscal discipline which helped to make Chile's economy the region's strongest at the time.

Saving the country from economic problems came at such a high price, however, and the general ensured that he was compensated for his economic achievements, which included 10 tons of gold in his name in a Hong Kong bank, discovered by Chilean investigators.

FROM TERRORISM TO TOURISM

Colombia, meanwhile, is moving from terrorism to tourism, with the emphasis on birds rather than beaches.

The country has over 1,900 different species more than any other country and this avian paradise will attract tourists in greater numbers once remote areas become FARC-free. It is thought that bird tourism alone could produce revenue of over $45 million a year, creating 7,500 new jobs at the very least. Tourism in general has become the second-biggest source of foreign exchange ($4.2 bn last year) after oil, with coffee, bananas and flowers trailing behind.

A presidential election next year will spark its own controversies but at least the economy, despite everything, has been bearing up and between 2017 and 2019 a recovery in economic growth is expected, with the services sector remaining the main contributor.

The vibrant financial, commercial and construction sectors were clearly on display when I visited Bogotá in July.

HARD DAYS AND NIGHTS AHEAD

If Chile has no ongoing concerns about internal armed conflicts, it definitely has uncertainty in large doses over President Michelle Bachelet's replacement when Chileans go to the polls in November.

That is the month school children in the UK light bonfires and fireworks in celebration of the discovery of the treasonous Gunpowder plot of Guy Fawkes and his conspirators in 1605 to blow up the King and Parliament.

In Chile there will be fireworks also, but of a political nature, in a crowded field of candidates, with former President Sebastían Piñera at the moment ahead of the pack.

Although the economy expanded during his previous presidency a number of scandals eventually made him the most unpopular president since the restoration of democracy. Politics aside, economic growth is expected to gradually strengthen to 2.8% in 2018 according to the OECD and although the unemployment rate is projected to stabilise, inflation is likely to increase.

Chileans of a certain age still remember the dictatorship and understand the words of Pablo Neruda, the Chilean poet-diplomat who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1971, when he said that "Love is so short, forgetting is so long."

And in Colombia one must hope that the peace won is real and will not turn out to be as fanciful as Gabriel García Márquez's village of Macondo.

When he was writing *One Hundred Years of Solitude* the author would listen to long playing records, one of them was "A Hard Day's Night" by the Beatles. Whatever lies ahead for Colombia, there will surely be a lot of hard days and, doubtless, hard nights too. ■