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## BOOKS

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# Ferlinghetti Visits A 'Free' Nicaragua

REVIEWED BY TOM CLARKE

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In January 1984, two San Francisco artists—poet-publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti and photographer Chris Felver—spent a week visiting Nicaragua as guests of the Nicaraguan poet and minister of culture, Father Ernesto Cardenal. “Seven Days in Nicaragua Libre” collates Ferlinghetti’s day-by-day journal of their stay, with Felver’s on-the-spot commentary photos.

Ferlinghetti, a self-styled “civil libertarian tourist of revolution,” has also made politically conceived junkets to Mexico, Chile, Peru, Bolivia, Haiti, and Cuba. Here he sympathizes with the goats of the Nicaraguan revolution, though he admits to feeling wary of “Soviet-style authoritarianism” that other revolutions have produced. “Everyone dreams their ideal of a perfect society—and are disappointed or disillusioned,” he writes.

Conceding the impossibility of utopia, Ferlinghetti nonetheless observes in Nicaragua a commendable, humanitarian struggle, “not so much a revolution as...a crisis of decolonization in a poor country the size of the San Francisco Bay Area in population, devastated by U.S. financed war, desperately short of supplies, attempting to set up some sort of “democratic government.” The establishment of democratic conditions, Ferlinghetti suggests, is occurring “in the teeth of a U.S. policy evidently designed to force Nicaragua into the Soviet camp and thus give the U.S. justification to move in and ‘control’ the situation.”

No one could argue that the poet’s support of the beleaguered Nicaraguan government is anything but well-meaning. When, however, he takes to task the “dormant poets” of America—“Too well-fed, by government grants of university writing

programs” to be as politically active as himself—his chronicle risks turning into an ax grinding polemic. And there’s a certain irony in Ferlinghetti’s implied self-congratulation on this point. We see him on these pages not as a fellow soldier, Lincoln Brigade style, or as someone who helps the field workers bring in the coffee crop, but as a celebrity guest, hanging out in the old Somocista mansion with houseboy and swimming pools.

When not hobnobbing with local literati or taking excursions to beach resorts, the norteamericano poet inspects a new sugar cane plant and an open prison farm, reviews troops at the Costa Rican border, meets with the coordinator of the National Directorate, addresses the Association of Sandinista Cultural Workers and delivers an open-air poetry reading.

At the latter event, Ferlinghetti presents to Cardenal a seed taken from Boris Pasternak’s grave. The seed had been presented to Ferlinghetti by Andrei Voznesensky in Paris, he explains. The completion of this revolutionary daisy chain takes place before a sparse crowd, a photo reveals. “The Revolution wanted to bring poetry to the masses; but the masses did not come to the poetry,” he comments.

Of more value are Felver’s photographs of, say, the minister of culture arm-in-arm with Somoza’s ex-chauffeur; a beaming and well-fed inmate at the La Granja prison, where supporters of the old regime are held. Looking at these two men, you get the impression that whatever’s going down in their country ought to be none of Caspar Weinberger’s business. Readers can see for themselves what’s happening in Nicaragua through these photos, even if the accompanying text doesn’t disclose that much.