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# The Gringo President

ELIZABETH HANLY

THE NATION THIEF. By Robert Houston. Pantheon. 241 pp. \$13.95.

A little over a century ago, William Walker, a multitalented Tennessean adventurer barely five feet tall, loosed his dreams on Nicaragua. Invited down by one Nicaraguan faction to join in fighting another, Walker soon became the country's Commander in Chief and then its President. Under his brief administration, slavery was introduced and huge tracts of land were used as collateral for international loans to finance more fighting. Legend has it that at least 12,000 died in Nicaragua thanks to Walker and the American Phalanx of Immortals, as the fifty-seven merce-

naries who sailed with him to Central America called themselves.

Robert Houston's novel *The Nation Thief* stays close to history. Houston introduces Walker as he's recruiting his Immortals and tracks him through one military victory/slaughter after another until, midway through the novel, Walker's luck begins to turn. His marches and sieges become more and more desperate; his all-night planning sessions more crazed; finally, with an apocalyptic flick of the wrist, he orders the burning of the capital. With his few surviving followers, he manages to slip out of the country, only to be executed when he returns to Central America to take one more stab at his destiny.

*The Nation Thief* is structured as a patchwork of diarylike musings from a variety of characters: Talmedge Warner, a Southern backwoods farm boy; Guy Sartain, a solitary black physician; Brian Holdich, a gentlemanly officer who paints; Rachael Bingham

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a beautiful, forlorn young actress; Chélon, an old Nicaraguan Indian colonel. Each tries to pin down the exact nature of Walker's magnetism and his or her relationship with it. Houston thus sets the stage to explore the question, so often used in praise of soldiering: Where do such men come from? Talmedge Warner feels transformed by Walker:

Whatever we done, Uncle Billy could make it sound like we was going straight into heaven or the history books because of it. It was hard to walk away from something like that. It made us somebody we hadn't never thought we could be.

But for Rachael Bingham he is a calculating butcher:

They simply can't see past him. Or they're terrified of him. When they're wounded they call out first for their mothers, then for Uncle Billy. Do they worship him because he's so cold? Is that the kind of god they need?

The most enticing and complex character should have been Walker, but he remains flimsy, at best the enigmatic mumblor of vague visions. Chélon steals the show. He stands as a bridge between his dispossessed people, who see in Walker the gray-eyed savior foretold in ancient tales, and the "shit-sausage politicians," with their backroom double-dealings. Only Chélon's sensibility is lush enough to convey the reality of war. It is he who tells us how the conscript corpses stink of the brandy poured down their throats before the battle.

The rest of the cast might more naturally turn up in a toy chest or a *commedia dell'arte*. They are engaging, even likable—how can one not feel for Sartain, for instance, when Walker tells him his plans to introduce slavery to Nicaragua—but the incessant ruminations Houston foists on them bury them. Perhaps that's why for all its slaughter, its flaming cities and heaped-up corpses, *The Nation Thief* seems curiously bloodless.

In the darkest of Freudian slips, the Reagan Administration recently selected the Honduran town where Walker was shot as the location for a permanent U.S. military training base, which now operates at full capacity. A more probing book would have better served this history. □