

Book Reviews...

McAteer, W. (2022). *Another Story: The History of Seychelles 1976-2020*. Mahé: Pristine Press, pp.367
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For forty-three years, the same political party held the ring in the small island state of Seychelles, first through single-party rule and then a result of ostensibly democratic elections. It is this level of control that sets the context for the latest (and final) volume in William McAteer's remarkable quartet, which traces the history of the Seychelles archipelago from its first permanent settlement in 1770 to the present day.

Another Story is not just another story. It can be read in different ways. At face value, it offers a history of what has happened since the flag of the new nation replaced that of the previous colonial rulers. This, in itself, is enough to hold one's attention and to answer many questions about the recent past. But, at another level, it might well be a work of fiction, the story of a tropical island where the founding president was ousted after just one year, where his successor (surrounded by a large team of North Korean bodyguards) then ruled with the recurring threat of counter-coups, and where the sordid residue of financial mis-dealings is all these years later the subject of legal investigation.

But it would be a mistake to allow the most colourful episodes to distract from an undisputed record of a poverty-stricken colony transformed into a high-income country, with social and economic indicators that compare well in the region and beyond. Unlike the past, when imports were heavily restricted because of a shortage of hard currency, the shops are now well stocked; solidly-built homes have largely replaced the earlier, corrugated-iron structures in which several generations of a family were crowded; and, in the present century, car ownership has soared. Seychelles, in the eyes of most people, is doing rather well.

All of which invites a nagging question: do the ends justify the means? France Albert René was the country's president for twenty-seven years and it was during that period that the new nation saw the introduction of education for all, a free health service and social insurance so that no-one was left without a source of income. But the time in office when he ruled without democratic elections was not just about beneficence; it was also, unquestionably, a brutal regime. Indeed, the full tally of unresolved disappearances and proven murders, coupled with forced land acquisitions, is still being accounted for. Not least of all, René showed an almost complete disregard for responsible fiscal management, relying during the Cold War on generous handouts from his Soviet Bloc allies. When he finally stepped down, in 1974, it was left to his successors to draw the country back from the abyss and replace profligacy with a more measured approach. To write about all this in a single volume is a challenging task but

the author, with his three earlier books already between covers, was certainly not intimidated. At the grand age of ninety-one, with the support and involvement of his son, Ian, he set about bringing the story up-to date.

As an accomplished writer, his style is relaxed and always highly readable. His research takes him deep into his subject but he does not allow the numerous references to obscure the storyline. Like all good journalists, he questions the reliability of sources through personal contacts and interviews. The thirty pages of sources and notes towards the end of the book are exemplary and themselves provide a treasure trove of valuable insights.

Given the enormity of the challenge, it might seem churlish to point to some obvious shortcomings but it would be remiss of a reviewer not to do so. For a start, there are some important omissions. James Michel, for instance, was president for twelve years but his contribution is skimmed over. There is no mention, for instance, of how he responded to the incidence of piracy off the coast of Somalia, nor of his promotion of the Blue Economy on the international stage. It was during his presidency that Seychelles transitioned from a command to a market economy and this is dealt with in an excellent analysis in an appendix by the author's son. But why 'relegate' this to an appendix rather than integrate it in the main body of the text?

One is also left wondering about the continuing influence of René after he stood down, and his apparent resistance to the economic changes that were by then inevitable. By all accounts, it was Danny Faure who was René's protégé, and he made no secret of his preference. In 2016, of course, Michel resigned in favour of Faure but the four years when the latter was in State House receive barely a mention. Nor is there any reference to the falling-out of Michel and Faure after the handover of power, and how this might have impacted on the country. A much smaller point is that the final chapter, on 'a miscellany of writers', might have nestled better as an appendix as it has no obvious influence on the bigger story; and it should, in any case, include the profiles of two very talented writers, Glynn Burrige and Bernard Georges.

These issues apart, McAteer has undoubtedly presented the reader with more than enough to reflect on the tumultuous years since independence. Although there are some episodes missing, it is helpful that a late chapter is devoted to the landmark change ushered in by the victory in the presidential election in 2020 of Wavel Ramkalawan. Not only that, but the change was marked by a peaceful transition, something that might not have been possible even five years earlier.

It is time to look ahead, but the past can hardly be ignored. The burning question is still whether the criminal actions of René should be condoned because of the improvements that resulted in the years when he was in power. One way to answer is this is to ask, had he not forced his way into State House, whether the same might have been achieved by more peaceable means. If James Mancham had remained in power, there is little to suggest he would have focused sharply enough on what needed to be done. But his presence would have

prevented the ‘brain drain’ of ten thousand or more talented individuals and their families, and who knows what difference they could have made? In proportion to the size of the population at the time, it was a hefty loss that Seychelles could ill afford.

Even without this calculus, there is a moral question to answer. Can the combined effects of murder, corruption and fear ever be justified, whatever the material benefits that might result? To some extent, one would hope that answers will be found in the awaited-report of the Truth, Reconciliation and National Unity Commission. There have been numerous submissions but, with many seeking compensation first and foremost, one wonders how much actual truth and a genuine desire for reconciliation will drive the outcomes.

Contemporary history is always a tricky subject to write about; it is easier to account for the actions of people and events in the distant past, rather than the moving pageant of the present. William McAteer is a brave man for attempting this volume, probably the most difficult of all four of his books in this series. And his son, Ian, must be thanked for helping to see it across the line. Their joint work will help us all to understand what will be behind the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, and also the legal arguments that will shortly face those accused of stealing money from the people of Seychelles and holding a large cache of arms, allegedly to interfere with the democratic process. It is surely in everyone’s interest that the book is now published. It could not be more timely, but, as McAteer concludes, it will be the last by him:

I have now told that story. I hand over the baton to some future historian to record the next chapter in the story of the Seychelles. My work is done.

Congratulations and gratitude should be accorded in equal measure. We now know a little more about the recent history of our small island state. And that in itself is no mean legacy.

Dennis Hardy