

FLESH AND FANTASY:  
The Many Faces of Evita (and Juan Perón)\*

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- EVITA: THE WOMAN WITH THE WHIP.* By MARY MAIN. Revised Edition. (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1980. Pp. 288.)
- EVA PERÓN: THE MYTHS OF A WOMAN.* By JULIE M. TAYLOR. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979. Pp. 176.)
- EVA, EVITA: THE LIFE AND DEATH OF EVA PERÓN.* By PAUL L. MONTGOMERY. (New York: Pocket Books, 1979. Pp. 240.)
- THE RETURN OF EVA PERÓN; WITH THE KILLINGS IN TRINIDAD.* By v. s. NAIPAUL. (New York: Knopf, 1980. Pp. 228.)
- LLAMADME EVITA: UN DESTINO ÚNICO DE MUJER.* By CARMEN LLORCA. (Barcelona: Planeta, 1980. Pp. 303.)
- EVA PERÓN.* By NICHOLAS FRASER AND MARYSA NAVARRO. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1981 Pp. 304.)
- JUAN DOMINGO PERÓN: A HISTORY.* By ROBERT J. ALEXANDER. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1979. Pp. 177.)
- CONVERSACIONES CON JUAN DOMINGO PERÓN.* By ENRIQUE PAVÓN PEREYRA. (Buenos Aires: Colihue/Hachette, 1978. Pp. 222.)
- ASÍ HABLABA JUAN PERÓN.* By EUGENIO P. ROM. (Buenos Aires: A. Peña Lillo Editor, 1980. Pp. 160.)

The life histories of Juan Domingo Perón (1895–1974) and his second wife, María Eva Duarte de Perón (1919–52), are still in need of serious scholarship and critical analysis, not only at the biographical level but also regarding the relationship between their lives and Argentina's contemporary history. The case of Evita (as she will be called throughout this review) is the most obvious and fascinating of the two partly for extra-academic reasons that should be dealt with summarily.

Since the early seventies, some radical Marxist observers, especially in the United States, have attempted to characterize Evita as the frustrated case of a "feminist" leader who almost overshadowed her husband's political role until 1952. This interpretation was paralleled by the emergence in Argentina during the late sixties of Evita-the-Revolu-

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tionary, posthumously proclaimed as such in a remarkable exercise of necropolitics by left-oriented Peronists.<sup>1</sup>

In general terms, however, the starting point of the most recent revival of media interest in Evita can be traced to the success of the rock musical *Evita*, by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice. Their two-record album entitled "Don't Cry for Me, Argentina" was issued in 1976. The show opened in London in 1978 and in New York in 1979, and won the Tony Award for best musical of the season in 1980.

This review is neither the time nor the place for a detailed analysis of this musical's image of Evita. This image contains elements of the Cinderella story, but it really derives from the ruthless, domineering, power-hungry female depicted by Argentine-born Mary Main in her original work, *The Woman with the Whip: Eva Perón* (New York: Doubleday, 1952) and by Fleur Cowles in the forgettable *Bloody Precedent* (New York: Random House, 1952). This version acquired caricature and self-parody in later incarnations such as Faye Dunaway's portrayal in the four-hour television movie, *Evita Perón*, which premiered in North America in February 1981.<sup>2</sup>

A widespread public image of Evita exists that pops in and out of printed and electronic media. One variation of this image envisions an Evita who is hypocritical, oversexed, ambitious, and mainly concerned with luxurious clothing and expensive jewelry. For example, readers of popular magazines have been told that Evita had affairs with Errol Flynn and Aristotle Onassis, without any shadow of documented or reasonable evidence. Party guests in Washington jokingly used to refer to former President Carter and his wife as "Jimmy and Evita." Fictional works are still being inspired by Evita's life, old anecdotes are recalled by persons who briefly met her, and filmographies of the small-time actress are reproduced in specialized publications. In Mexico City, Paris, and Buenos Aires, Evita is still in the news.<sup>3</sup>

When reviewing a series of books on such a durable persona, it is necessary to evaluate the influences of past work in the development or typecasting of the Evita of the seventies and concurrently to indicate how such media focus on the woman has occasioned a derivative string of hastily concocted literary, nonscholarly products. This review will not deal with such works, but with "classical" sources, rehashings, popular bios, two serious tracts (Fraser and Navarro; Taylor), and an idiosyncratic discourse (Naipaul).

The second edition of *Evita: The Woman with the Whip* (1980) remains the 1952 standard with the addition of an epilogue and a sincere dedication to today's Argentine *desaparecidos*. Mary Main's book essentially formulated many of the themes surrounding the seventies' Evita, which corresponds closely to the fifties' "woman with the whip" image presented as fact by anti-Peronist sources and rumors, many of which

were utilized by this biographer. For instance, Evita's illegitimate birth in a poor rural family is shown as establishing her twin ruling motivations behind her resentment (*resentimiento*) and eventual "lust for revenge" against the upper classes, the hated Argentine *oligarquía* (p. 103). Another of Main's concerns is the reversal of traditional sex roles in the Perón-Evita relationship. At the peak of the post-1955 anti-Peronist wave, writer Ezequiel Martínez Estrada expressed this view baldly: "In reality, he was the woman and she was the man."<sup>4</sup> In recent extreme versions, such as the TV movie *Evita Perón*, Juan Perón is reduced to a henpecked husband, childishly asking the German ambassador for an autographed photograph of Mussolini. Some features of this caricature also can be traced to Main (pp. 54–55, 58, 86–87).

Main generalized excessively about the land and its people and thus unwittingly set the stage for later simplistic explanations of the Argentine enigma. Examples of her generalizations include such statements as: "Neither the Argentine character nor the Argentine landscape lend themselves to underground or guerrilla warfare" (p. 155); "The Argentine worker is naïve and friendly, socially irresponsible, often ready to become devoted to any master who will show him a decent kindness and almost as ready to stick a knife between someone's ribs for any small offense" (p. 210); ". . . the Argentine woman's voice is the shrillest in the world" (p. 20). Her view of Peronism as being a mere carbon copy of Fascism in the pampas can no longer be considered intellectually respectable.<sup>5</sup>

After a standard description of Evita's early years in the province of Buenos Aires, Main inaugurated her theme of the road to promiscuity, riches, power, sickness, and early death, a path that almost all future biographers would similarly tread. In Main's version, a young tango singer took Evita to the city of Buenos Aires in the mid-thirties, where she lived the life of a bit-player in theatre and movies, manipulating and changing sugar daddies and lovers. She had better luck as an actress in radio soap operas, while establishing a liaison with the emerging Colonel Perón. She participated decisively in the October 1945 crisis that helped Perón to launch his successful bid for power. After marriage the new First Lady became increasingly obsessed with power and commanded an all-encompassing influence in her husband's regime. She became an unofficial, but very active, minister of labor, dismissed cabinet members at will, and transformed a former superintendent in her apartment building, José G. Espejo, into a labor boss. In 1947 she traveled to Europe in royal style, and by that time, she was in control of most newspapers and radio stations in Argentina. In the process, she became fabulously wealthy and so did Perón.<sup>6</sup>

Evita is described as vindictive toward former allies and particularly toward society ladies. Perhaps to compensate for a childhood with-

out toys, Main conjectured, she developed spectacular toys for adults, such as her Social Aid Foundation. Despite Main's conjecturing, one of the most interesting aspects of her book is its contemporary first-hand descriptions of key welfare institutions, such as the Children's City, Transit Homes, a downtown home for women workers, and a showcase hospital in Avellaneda.

Main also included comments on torture and repression during the first Peronist government, but stopped short of turning Evita into the main culprit, as pulp versions still insist. The author duly notes the changes that Evita underwent in metamorphosing from *la Señora María Eva Duarte de Perón* to *la compañera Evita*, changes even in voice and speech patterns; Main underscores the mediating role she played as a bridge between Perón and the people, her beloved *descamisados*.<sup>7</sup> At the peak of her power, Evita was stricken by cancer and experienced agonizing pain while endeavoring to keep up the usual frantic pace of her political activities. She died on 26 July 1952, at the age of thirty-three, but her legend lives on.

The epilogue of the second edition briefly recounts the rest of Evita's story and the way in which her name has been kept in the limelight. First came the massive, spectacular funeral and emotional mourning, and the complicated embalming procedures that have been so vividly detailed by the specialist in attendance.<sup>8</sup> But when a military coup overthrew Perón in 1955, preparations for a pharaonic mausoleum were nipped in the bud, the monument's foundations were blown to pieces, and even Evita's preserved body vanished from public view. Rumors, speculation, and a popular cult grew during the next fifteen years. As part of an incredibly complex secret game of negotiations between the exiled Perón and a new military government, Evita's corpse (still practically intact) was raised from an Italian grave and delivered to her widower in Madrid in 1971. Perón died in July 1974 and in November, a plane carried Evita's body back to Argentina to be displayed beside his coffin (he had made it clear that he did not want to be embalmed). Perón's third wife, Isabel, became president until she was deposed in March 1976. Finally, in October 1976, Evita's body was reburied in the family crypt at Recoleta cemetery (Perón's was laid to rest at Chacarita, a more popular, middle-class graveyard).

John Barnes, a foreign correspondent and professional journalist, ritually follows the story along Main's lines, conveniently modernizing it with morsels of fashionable trivia, in his *Eva Perón* (1978). In the process, more gossip is presented as unverifiable truth. According to Barnes, machismo and the dullness of village life made an everlasting imprint on the teenage Evita, who escaped Junín through Agustín Magaldi, a real-life tango singer. A succession of lovers punctuated her existence in the big city. Barnes claims that she played a major role in the

events of October 1945 and remarks, "Her man was back in power. And she had put him there" (p. 49). He describes Evita's political and social philosophy as love for the poor and hatred of the rich, hardly a surprising or enlightening view, and repeats a number of Mary Main's anecdotes or tales (as usually told by critics or enemies of Peronism): Espejo is still a superintendent, Evita harasses high society matriarchs, and so on. He even reproduces some of Main's small errors, such as her misstatement that Justo Lucas Alvarez Rodríguez, brother-in-law and protégé, was governor of the province of Buenos Aires.

Paul L. Montgomery, reporter and sometime Latin American correspondent for the *New York Times*, has carried stereotyping to the absurd in *Eva, Evita* (1979). In spite of his bibliographical note pointing out Main's heavy reliance on "rumor and supposition" (p. 239), Montgomery himself indulges in sensationalism, contributes lurid details, and, where possible, reinforces Evita's "evil" image, while reducing Perón to "a blustering weakling whom Eva propped up during their joint period of power" (p. 11). Despite Montgomery's statements, senility and pedophilia simply are not satisfactory explanations for Perón's fate after the death of Evita. Vintage vignettes are provided: José Armani is now the tango singer and Espejo still the former doorman in the saga; Evita not only carried a hand grenade in her purse on 17 October 1945, but also brought Perón the "popular base he needed for political success" (p. 45), and she *probably* accumulated a huge fortune (p. 155).

Carmen Llorca is a widely published Spanish academic historian and lecturer. Her *Llamadme Evita* (1980), a bestseller in both Spain and Argentina, is a good example of a more positive, sympathetic approach to the subject. Irrespective of the author's claims, however, the work contains little evidence of original research. Llorca's major sources are tape-recorded conversations with Perón lent by Torcuato Luca de Tena, and personal recollections of a former Spanish ambassador to Argentina. The main problem is that these and other sources, such as Evita's *La razón de mi vida* (Buenos Aires: Peuser, 1951), tend to be taken at face value without critical appraisal, a problem that constantly plagues serious students of Perón, Evita, and Peronism.<sup>9</sup>

The book's structure follows the accepted route; however, the appraisal of Evita differs stunningly from that of Main et al. Llorca essays a more personal view of her subject, emphasizing objective tasks and the important role she filled during the Perón era. Instead of an anti-Peronist slandering of "that woman," *Llamadme Evita* represents to some degree the Left-Peronist version best identified with the late historian-activist Rodolfo Puiggrós, who is often quoted in the text. Llorca is critical of the Argentine oligarquía and more sympathetic than her predecessors about Evita's adolescent years. She suggests that Evita met Perón several months earlier than the currently accepted date (early

1944). In addition, she infers that Evita might even have developed a certain social and political sense prior to their encounter, but uses this flimsiest of evidence to claim a larger individual contribution by Evita in the formative years of the Peronist movement. One cannot take seriously references to the undated writings of one mysterious John Lack [sic], allegedly Evita's astrologer (pp. 29, 66, 109).

In Llorca's version, the tango singer Magaldi only writes letters of recommendation for Evita's trip to Buenos Aires and does not travel with her. Like other biographers, Llorca claims that Evita organized the resistance in October 1945. But her book is remarkably free of sexual innuendo, even suggesting that Perón and Evita had a "marriage by reason of State" (p. 102). This author acknowledges the fact that Evita became Perón's invaluable tool for social reform and also intimates that Evita developed a power of her own. Llorca speculates that Perón really did not want Evita to become vice-president and does not attribute her *renunciamento* to military pressures, as the usual version has implied. The rest of the work is concerned with Evita's self-sacrifice and the immortal legacy brought about by the trying months of her physical agony. Sentimental, warm Argentiniens, says Llorca, are naturally prepared to clasp to their bosom Evita's "primary scheme of Christian socialism" (p. 286). Llorca credits this sentimentalism as the main reason for the durability of the woman and the resilience of her myth.<sup>10</sup>

Journalist Nicholas Fraser's and historian Marysa Navarro's *Eva Perón* (1981) presents a marked contrast to the previous books. Navarro is well-known for her standard reference source on Argentine right-wing nationalism, *Los nacionalistas* (Buenos Aires: Jorge Alvarez, 1968), which has not yet been translated into English. Fieldwork for *Eva Perón* included some one hundred interviews (although not all produce new or challenging results), a sifting of many tracts for and against Evita, a review of the secondary literature on the Peróns, Peronism, and Argentine history, and a generally critical scrutiny of both the respondents' memories and Juan Perón's multifaceted, contradictory recollections from afar during his years in exile.

The book's format is still the Main "canon." Fraser and Navarro, however, have attempted to differentiate between what happened and what did not, between the probable and the improbable. Their refreshing intentions could not be fully implemented because of obvious and disheartening difficulties in conducting fieldwork in this still sensitive area. But this *Eva Perón* offers the student of Argentina some welcome relief from the hollow Evitania of the late seventies in the Northern Hemisphere.

The text disposes of several major misconceptions, beginning chronologically with the tango-singer anecdote for lack of documented evidence. The book severely questions the credibility of *ex post facto*

rumor and gossip in accounting for Evita's life as a semi-prostitute or kept woman in the late thirties and early forties. Briefly discussing several liaisons from those struggling years, the authors verify that by 1943, Eva Duarte was a fairly well-known and well-paid radio actress. On relatively minor issues, such as their attempt to disassociate Evita and her mother from alleged intimate relationships with an Army officer and a civilian bureaucrat, the best they can come up with is a hypothetical, but honestly labeled, probability (p. 31).

One substantial issue addressed in this book is a plausible explanation for Evita's lack of direct participation, much less decisive action, during the October 1945 crisis, and the contradictory legend that developed after the facts. Fraser and Navarro move beyond Félix Luna's timely analysis in his *El 45: Crónica de un año decisivo* (Buenos Aires: Jorge Alvarez, 1969) to show how and why an official and semiofficial rewriting of history was taking place during the Peronist years.<sup>11</sup> The book also takes pains to de-emphasize one oversimplification that has colored most of the Argentine and foreign anti-Evita literature, namely, the interpretation of her life as "a simple cycle of wound and revenge, envy turned to vindictiveness" (p. 86). This work stresses instead the elementary fact that Evita worked within the context of what Perón wanted to accomplish, at least between 1947 and 1950. It offers judicious evaluations of Evita as a "permanent source of propaganda" (p. 84) for the regime through both her own newspaper *Democracia* and many informal channels, and it also provides brief analyses of the content and delivery of her speeches (pp. 111–13). Fraser and Navarro rightly point out that despite her influential participation in passing a 1947 law enfranchising Argentine women and her absolute control over the feminine branch of the Peronist party, Evita can hardly be considered a protofeminist when one considers her subordination to Perón's strategy and the hierarchical features of the women's organization.

The work's balanced treatment of key issues in Evita's activities is best exemplified in the chapter that deals with the Social Aid Foundation, entitled "The Gift of Giving." This section squarely addresses the creation and development of a unique personalistic welfare institution, born as a response to very real needs. Particularly insightful are the authors' observations on the distinctions between charity and social aid, the coincidence of the foundation's expansion with the fat years of Peronism, the problems of official, voluntary, and not-so-voluntary contributions, and the place of human contact in the ritual of visits (including Evita's high-handed treatment of social "superiors" vis-à-vis her warmth toward the poor and the infirm). Evita's so-called compensatory delight in monumental, luxurious surroundings for her social welfare agencies (to erase the deep wounds of a poor, unhappy childhood) is seen more perceptively by these biographers, who describe a recently

inaugurated foundation hospital as a “showcase of public care, as a propaganda statement . . . that the poor should have the same as rich people” (p. 129).

The sections on Evita’s sickness, agony, and death are useful, but become too speculative at times, such as when Fraser and Navarro theorize that Evita’s “ruthlessness [was] mainly directed against herself” (p. 137). No major new facts are unearthed here, but I must welcome a sound narrative and some common-sense reasoning in their statement that Evita’s vice-presidential ambitions soon became irrelevant due to the gravity of her condition. The authors speculate that the “romantic extremism of Evita’s last year, her rhetoric of sacrifice and blood” would, in due course, influence radical Peronist guerrilla groups of the sixties and seventies in their efforts to construct the image of Evita-the-Militant (p. 186). The last chapter, “The Body and the Myth,” is a tentative epilogue, an open-ended discussion where facts, myths, scholarly and popular perceptions are still interacting vigorously.<sup>12</sup>

Julie M. Taylor’s *Eva Perón: The Myths of a Woman* (1979) is essentially an anthropological study that deals in a preliminary way with the mythic images created around Evita. (The third chapter is nevertheless a good synthesis of the basic biographical data.) In trying to explore what she calls “the myth of the myth” in Evita, Taylor advances the interesting, although tentative, hypothesis, that middle-class propagandists actually created her image(s), and in the process these images reflected their own middle-class values on male-female relationships, the place of women in society, and so on. Especially perceptive are Taylor’s comments on Francisco Muñoz Azpiri, one of Evita’s radio scriptwriters and a state propaganda bureaucrat until 1947, and Raúl A. Apold, one of the regime’s chief information-propaganda architects. References to the kind of news and feature stories published regularly about Evita in her daily *Democracia* reveal the same process, but unfortunately, the analysis is not systematically conducted.

Taylor begins by discussing feminine power in general and in other societies and then proceeds to a cursory reading of Argentine history in terms of *civilización* versus *barbarie* à la Sarmiento—opposition between the littoral and the interior provinces, and so on. This approach inevitably seems dated and lacks demonstrable relevance to the central topic of the book, to say the least. Another theme that comes and goes is a three-way parallel between Juan Manuel de Rosas, Hipólito Yrigoyen, and Juan Perón, their respective followers, and the similar ways in which those leaders and movements have been perceived by their respective adversaries—the *unitarios*, *conservadores*, and *liberales*.

The chapter on the Evita myths is a good résumé for nonspecialists of the first two myths historically associated with Evita: the Lady of Hope and the Woman of the Black Myth, as this author calls them. The



first myth stresses Evita as mother of the poor, good fairy, and benefactor of the dispossessed. The black myth includes some variations within a general pattern, but envisions Evita as irredeemably perverse or an “innocent tool of evil” cleverly manipulated by Perón during her life, agony, and even after her death (p. 83). (This variation appears as diametrically opposed to the standard media image of Evita in the seventies.) The preliminary analysis of chapter 5 is quite interesting. Its main point holds that “orthodox Peronism lauded Eva Perón as the incarnation of a feminine ideal; anti-Peronism denounced her as the negation of that very ideal. . . . From the panegyric of one myth and the contumely of the other emerge the same underlying values” (p. 86). Although it may be possible to agree with Taylor that both myths about Evita—the good fairy or the evil witch/bitch—are deeply rooted in similar values and assumptions about the nature of women and their role in society and politics, the scope of the analysis is not totally convincing. It does not explain how the first of these two middle-class myths has so profoundly permeated the popular classes in Argentina, and it fails to explore systematically the characteristics of such a mystique. Isolated responses in the observer-participant method used by anthropologist Taylor are simply not enough.

In my view, the book and particularly the chapter on Evita’s posthumous incarnation as “the Revolutionary” lack sufficient analysis of the *reperonization* of the country in the sixties and early seventies, which should include not only the revolutionary image of Evita but also a series of reevaluations of Perón’s roles before and after 1955, particularly during the long years of exile. It seems obvious to students of such a striking situation that one of the major reasons why Evita-the-Revolutionary came into being was the need to confront Perón and his followers among the variegated tendencies under the Peronist umbrella organization with the only other figure in the movement whom they could not easily dismiss. Consequently, Evita’s radical leanings (as selectively interpreted by her young champions) could become at times a convenient counterweight to Perón’s more conciliatory, reformist inclinations. By that time, Evita had been conveniently dead for years, and the mystery surrounding her remains only added fuel to this posthumous myth. By then it was clear to partisans and foes alike that Peronism, like old Saturn, had devoured its own progeny—from Domingo A. Mercante to Augusto Vandor—whatever leaders threatened or were perceived as challenging the dominant role of Perón himself. Only Evita (and better a dead Evita) could become Perón’s ideological rival, and she only up to a point.

The last paragraph of the book synthesizes Taylor’s research, but does not close the topic. For instance, more emphasis should have been placed on widespread cults of the dead, local shamans, even great popu-

lar artists such as Pancho Sierra, Madre María, and Carlos Gardel. All of these topics could have provided valuable context for discussing Evita's cult and veneration. Taylor's observations nevertheless show by contrast how simplistically the instant bios have been dealing with their subject. Consider, for example, this comment:

Eva Perón exercised a power seen by friends and enemies alike as spiritual or mystical, uninstitutionalized and irrational—a power exhibiting characteristics that coincide with the definition of her feminine nature. To some extent her continuing importance and popularity may be attributed not only to her power as a woman but also to the power of the dead. . . . Women and the dead—death and womanhood—stand in similar relation to structured social forms: outside public institutions, unlimited by official rules, and beyond formal categories. As a female corpse reiterating a symbolic theme as both woman and martyr, Eva Perón perhaps lays a double claim to spiritual leadership. (P. 148.)

V. S. Naipaul's *The Return of Eva Perón* (1980) has to be mentioned briefly when discussing the impact of Evita as an easily identifiable persona or a ready-made icon. This necessity is due to the fact of Naipaul's recognized expertise on "Half-Made Societies."<sup>13</sup> His native Trinidad, Zaire, and Argentina (together with a piece on Joseph Conrad) are the subjects of this book.

In articles originally written for the *New York Review of Books*, Naipaul discusses Argentina's "inexplicable drifts" (p. 96) as crises without meanings. According to Naipaul, Argentina lacks history and therefore can only be comprehended as a "magic, debilitating world" (p. 116). His sources in Buenos Aires include Jorge Luis Borges (a critics' writer who is an erratic political analyst), Borges's translator, an ambassador's wife, guests at an elegant dinner party in Barrio Norte, and political journalist Mariano Grondona. Errors of information abound: for example, not all domestic guerrilla movements drew their inspiration "from Paris of 1968" (p. 99).<sup>14</sup> Nor can Evita's objectives be described as a "child's vision of power, justice and revenge" (p. 106). Naipaul accepts at face value the black myth that is more accurately analyzed by Taylor.

The author keeps rehashing the most superficial explanations about Argentina that have been perpetuated by journalists in a hurry. The male Argentine character is a mixture of machismo, anal fixation (p. 155) and brothel culture. The brothel-fixation in Naipaul's prose goes on and on.<sup>15</sup> For him, Argentina is a "brutish land of *estancias* and polo and brothels and very cheap servants" (p. 141). He says of Perón, ". . . by imposing his women on Argentina, first Evita and then Isabelita, one an actress, the other a cabaret dancer, both provincials, by turning women branded as the macho's easy victims into the rulers, he did the roughest kind of justice on a society still ruled by a degenerate machismo, which decrees that a woman's place is essentially in the brothel" (p. 147).<sup>16</sup>

At times Naipaul indulges in unsubstantiated comparisons that confuse rather than clarify the issues at stake: "New Zealand, equally

colonial, also with a past of native dispossession, but founded at an earlier imperial period and on different principles, has had a different history. It has made some contribution to the world: more gifted men and women have come from its population of three million than from the twenty-three millions of Argentines" (p. 153). Shall we compare lists of famous persons, or Nobel Prize winners?<sup>17</sup> Naipaul, in short, habitually reduces complex realities to trite explanations and does the same in commenting on Evita's appeal: "She is her own cult; she offers protection to those who believe in her. Where there are no reliable institutions or codes of law, no secular assurances, people need faith and magic" (p. 168). This kind of assessment has contributed heavily and erroneously to the popularization of a certain image of Evita in the seventies. In the process, Perón's role has been misrepresented, caricatured, or simply misunderstood.<sup>18</sup>

As I observed at the beginning of this review, we still lack definitive, critical works that can do justice to Perón's powerful presence in Argentine life for the past thirty-five years. This situation constitutes a major gap in studies on Peronism. Within these limitations, and since the time of Perón's death in 1974, a few books on Juan Perón have appeared that merit cursory examination. The first two were published in Argentina and, strictly speaking, do not belong in the biographical genre.

Enrique Pavón Pereyra, the writer closest to being the official *peronólogo*,<sup>19</sup> has put together another series of *Conversaciones con Juan Domingo Perón* (1978) to recapture one of the many images of Perón: the sage father-grandfather, the master of popular rhetoric, the conversationalist *en pantoufles*, the man "before and beyond the myth" (p. 11). In chats spanning a decade, Perón shows both "the very relative originality" (p. 12) of his political and social ideas and his command of everyday language. His skill at communicating with audiences of various levels and sizes—the individual interviewer, the small group, the mass rally—are evident in these dialogues. Glimpses of this lively Perón can be enjoyed in the section on "Sketches, Portraits, and Favorite Phrases." Obscure allegations about a deadly conspiracy among the President's entourage during his last days in office point to the fact that future biographers will still have to amass hard data about basic episodes of Perón's lengthy existence.<sup>20</sup>

In a similar vein, Eugenio P. Rom's *Así hablaba Juan Perón* (1980) records the taped conversations between editor Rom and Perón in Madrid during 1967–70. This work attempts to show Perón as a people's historian, a prophet-incarnate of *revisiónismo histórico*, the polemical school that has stressed the roles of Rosas, nineteenth century provincial *caudillos*, and federalist traditions. Practically all the commonplaces of this partisan view of Argentine history are reiterated in this thin

volume. Perón is at his most evasive when explaining why revisionismo was not enthroned as official ideology during 1946–55; the idea of opening a “second cultural front” was not appropriate at a time when more pressing battles were being fought (p. 25), and so on. Perón duly evokes the early caudillos, criticizes Rivadavia and Lavalle, praises Rosas for his nationalistic stand, and lays the blame for most of the country’s ills at Urquiza’s and Mitre’s doors, blaming the latter especially for unifying the nation by force of arms. The rest is more predictable: the emerging oligarquía places itself at Great Britain’s service, as the landowning class had placed the whole country at the service of the port city, Buenos Aires. Perón praises Yrigoyen to a point, is critical of Marcelo T. de Alvear, and condemns the 1930–43 conservative restoration. As expected, he is extremely positive on the changes brought about during his first administration; however, he admits that the hated oligarquía was only wounded during the 1946–55 period and that it has managed to survive in modified forms up to the present. Again, specificity vis-à-vis substantive issues never having been Perón’s forte, the problem is stated, but hardly addressed.

Perón refers to Colonel Mercante’s major contribution to the October 1945 victory, even implying that the role of his then-trusted friend and aide was more decisive than Evita’s (p. 115). Perón also squeezes into the fluid dialogue a few general remarks of this sort: “I was never an inflexible doctrinaire. I have always been a man of reflection. Therefore, our government never subjected itself to any fixed rule. We always did what was more convenient for our people at the time” (p. 122). Does this statement imply that he was a pragmatist bordering on opportunism?

Perón’s comments in the last pages of the book are merely standard and do not enlighten us about the last Perón of the sixties and seventies.<sup>21</sup> It seems as if the editor preferred to leave the reader with a timeless image of Perón as the easy-to-follow historian, the wise but earthy teacher. Both Pavón Pereyra and Rom display a generally uncritical awe of their subject. These “conversations” may be useful to students of language and politics, sociolinguistics and communications theory, but they simply do not fill the scholarship gaps in Perón’s biography.

The last of the three books on Perón considered here is Robert J. Alexander’s *Juan Domingo Perón: A History* (1978), including an “interpretive essay” on the life and influence of the man. The prolific Alexander has reassembled most of his materials from previous works on Peronist Argentina and its aftermath since publication of *The Perón Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), perhaps his best. Based on a standard bibliography, many field trips to the country since 1946, and some notes taken after a personal conversation with Perón in 1960 (pp. 157–65), the book reads with ease, but contains too much hearsay and too little documentation on several key issues to function as a good

reference source. Some objectionable examples include these statements: Perón "was reported" (by whom?) to have taken part in the events of the 1919 *Semana Trágica* (p. 19). "He is said to have commanded" a contingent of troops seizing the presidential palace on 6 September 1930 (p. 21).<sup>22</sup> Perón chose to be dictatorial once elected in 1945 (pp. 53–54). *Justicialismo* was a "confused (or nonexistent) political philosophy" and its only consistent theme was "Argentine nationalism" (p. 62).<sup>23</sup>

Alexander's sections on Evita are more interesting as general evaluations, if one skips the usual quota of rumors about her fortune and some comparisons between the foundation and Tammany Hall, and between Evita and Eleanor Roosevelt that reveal the author's ethnocentrism (pp. 84, 82). He correctly explains Evita's lack of real participation in the October 1945 events and some of the reasons why a contrary legend grew after the facts: to "replace" the actual participation of labor leaders Cipriano Reyes and Luis F. Gay, who were soon forgotten in Peronism's official history (p. 46). Also, Alexander is realistic in judging the respective roles of the Peróns, a welcome relief from Evita stereotypes of the seventies. The book closes with a chapter on Perón's impact that essays an overall appraisal of the man's legacy (pp. 145–53).

As indicated above, there is not much to recommend in the area of books about Perón. As for books on Evita, Fraser and Navarro's *Eva Perón* has become the best English-language introduction to this subject, all things considered.<sup>24</sup>

Notwithstanding the pages of ill-founded rumor and speculation, Evita's functions in the Peronist system until her death have been clarified and widely accepted by specialists of differing ethical or political views on her influence. Basically, her functions were: (a) *social aid*, through the foundation; (b) *politics*, through Evita's efforts to obtain the vote for women and her development of the feminine branch of the Peronist Party (its purpose being to unify female support politically behind Perón); and (c) *intermediary leadership* between Perón and the masses, which included Evita's developing a personality cult of her own and her contributing to the bureaucratization of the workers' confederation, the *Confederación General del Trabajo*.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, studies are still needed to deal with Evita's transformations: the popular images in North America, Europe, even Spanish-speaking nations other than Argentina, as well as her several post-1952 incarnations in Argentina, for which Taylor's book will be required preliminary reading. The problem here is to link Evita's metamorphoses in a systematic way to Argentina's political history during the last three decades. Such a study must include a thorough reexamination of the roles played by Perón, both in and out of power. As of this writing, no political biography of Perón exists that can become a standard point of

departure.<sup>26</sup> Such a reassessment obviously would be related to the larger issue of the unfinished account and tentative balance of the movement that Perón helped to channel and lead until 1974.

But that, as Kipling liked to say, is another story.

## NOTES

1. See Nancy Caro Hollander, "Si Evita viviera . . ." *Latin American Perspectives* 1, no. 3 (Fall 1974): 42–57.
2. Tim Rice, *Evita's* lyricist, stated that he did not have access to Mary Main's biography when he was at work on the musical; however, he calls *The Woman with the Whip* "the definitive biography of Eva Perón" in *Evita: The Legend of Eva Perón (1919–1952)*, co-authored with the musical's composer, Andrew Lloyd Webber (New York: Avon Books, 1978), p. 9. For a discussion of the "operatic" *Evita* and its Che Guevara narrator as "alienation effect," see this composer's views in "Don't Cry for Andrew Lloyd Webber," *Opera News* 45, no. 17 (April 4, 1981): 12–14, 27. [*Evita's* box-office success has been extraordinary; as of mid-1982, there were three North American companies, a London company, and productions in New Zealand, Madrid, Mexico City, Tokyo, Vienna, and Australia.] The credits for the TV movie *Evita Perón* indicated that it was based on works by John Barnes and Nicholas Fraser and not on the Broadway musical *Evita*. See Faye Dunaway's discussion of parallels between her personal life and *Evita's* in Dwight Whitney, "I Always Thought TV Was a Free Concert," *TV Guide* 5, no. 8 (February 21, 1981): 2–4. This type of commentary undoubtedly contributes to reinforcing *Evita's* persona as a (posthumous) show-biz celebrity and transforms similar attempts to portray her in cinema or TV into instant pop-biography. A good analysis of the mythical and real *Evitas* is Joseph A. Page, "The True Life and Strange Cult of the Long-Running Legend," *Washington Post*, September 20, 1981, pp. K1–3. On some glaring distortions of historical facts at the anecdotal level, see Argentine reactions in "Evita-manía: Distorsiones de una serie norteamericana," *Salimos* 69 (May 1981): 46–49 (Buenos Aires).
3. In the order of the text, the references are: on *Evita* and Errol Flynn, Charles Higham, *Errol Flynn: The Untold Story* (New York: Dell, 1981), p. 352; on *Evita* and Onassis, Irving Wallace and others, *The Intimate Sex Lives of Famous People* (New York: Delacorte, 1981), pp. 355–56; on the Washington nickname, Johanne Leach, "Gunning and Gunning Down," *The Vancouver Sun*, June 24, 1981, p. C3. Lois Gold's *La Presidenta* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981) is a fictional rendering of the story of Perón, *Evita*, and Isabel Perón. Recollections of brief encounters with *Evita*, in Fleur Cowles, *Friends & Memories* (New York: Reynal, 1978), pp. 176–80, 256–58. The filmography is reproduced and annotated by Daniel López, "Evita," *Films in Review*, 21, no. 6 (June–July 1980): 349–51. The political power of famous women, including *Evita*, is summarily dealt with in Margarita Michelena, "Manos blancas sí ofenden," *Siempre!* no. 1439 (January 21, 1981): 20–21 (Mexico City). Basile Tesselin has published another standard appraisal of *Evita's* and Isabel's careers, *Evita et Isabelita Perón—Deux femmes pour un dictateur* (Paris: Editions France-Empire, 1980). The widely circulated weekly *Tal Cual* (Buenos Aires) started a series of scissors-and-paste articles on the untold story of *Evita*. See Mercedes Guirado, "Nació un día lluvioso y sin padre," *Tal Cual* 4, no. 73 (May 8, 1981): 20–21.
4. "En realidad, él era la mujer y ella el hombre," Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, *¿Qué es esto?: Catilinaria* (Buenos Aires: Lautaro, 1956), p. 245.
5. See Alberto Ciria, *Perón y el justicialismo* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1971), pp. 85–98; and Eldon Kenworthy, "The Function of the Little-Known Case in Theory Formation or What Peronism Wasn't," *Comparative Politics* 6, no. 1 (October 1973): 17–45.
6. "It was said that they [Perón and *Evita*] had fortunes accumulating in Switzerland, Uruguay, and the United States and large properties in Brazil." Main, *Evita: The Woman with the Whip*, p. 138; my emphasis. This example shows the way most sources

- still treat the topic. For a sensible appraisal of the issue of the Peróns' personal wealth, see Nicholas Fraser and Marysa Navarro, *Eva Perón*, pp. 201–3.
7. For later developments, see Juan José Sebreli, *Eva Perón, ¿aventurera o militante?* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veinte, 1966).
  8. Spanish physician Pedro Ara's memoirs are useful, too, for first-hand observations on Perón the public speaker: *El caso Eva Perón: apuntes para la historia* (Madrid: CUS Ediciones, 1974).
  9. José María de Areilza's printed recollections of his long diplomatic career under Franco can be found in *Así los he visto* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1970). *La razón de mi vida* was Evita's "spiritual autobiography" that was ghostwritten by Spanish journalist Manuel Penella de Silva. It was compulsory reading in Argentine schools up to 1955. For details on how and why it was conceived and published, see Penella de Silva's own words in "La razón de mi vida," and "El hijo que no tuve," *Primera Plana* no. 212 (January 17, 1967): 36–38, and no. 213 (January 24, 1967): 36–38 (Buenos Aires). For an English translation of the work, see *Evita by Evita: Eva Duarte Perón Tells Her Own Story* (London: Proteus Books, 1978).
  10. Beyond my objections to *Llamadme Evita*, Llorca's handling of the colloquial language spoken in Argentina is inaccurate. See, for instance, an alleged anecdote in which young Evita cries like a character out of a nineteenth-century Spanish drama (p. 20).
  11. Too late for inclusion in this review essay, I have come across Navarro's *Evita* (published by Corregidor in 1981 in Buenos Aires, but printed in Spain). It should be considered this author's definitive contribution to the topic. Navarro's co-authored *Eva Perón* conforms too much to the popular bio genre. It would be a fascinating commentary on marketing and editorial decisions both in Buenos Aires and New York to do an in-depth comparison of *Eva Perón* and *Evita*, as commodities as well as texts. For the moment, the interested reader should look at the following articles by Navarro that represent her best scholarly level: "The Case of Eva Perón," *Signs* 3, no. 1 (Autumn 1977): 229–40; "Evita and the Crisis of 17 October 1945: A Case Study of Peronist and Anti-Peronist Mythology," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 12, no. 1 (May 1980): 127–38; and "Evita's Charismatic Leadership," pp. 47–66 in *Latin American Populism in Comparative Perspective*, ed. by Michael L. Conniff (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982).
  12. Fraser and Navarro's *Eva Perón* offers down-to-earth corrections to the alleged Evita-Onassis affair (p. 98; see also note 3, above). They also set the record straight that José G. Espejo's real occupation before he became a labor boss was as a truck-driver, not as the superintendent where Evita lived (104).
  13. The title of an enthusiastic review by Walter Clemons of Naipaul's collection of essays, *Newsweek* (March 31, 1980): 73. See also Naipaul's *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* (New York: Knopf, 1981).
  14. See Daniel James, "The Peronist Left, 1955–1975," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 8, no. 2 (November 1976): 273–96.
  15. See "The Brothels behind the Graveyard," originally written in May–July 1974, pp. 140–57, where the leitmotif is carried to excess. I am sorry to report that the metaphor Naipaul reiterates is simply incorrect: there are no brothels on Azcuénaga Street by the Recoleta cemetery where Evita's remains have rested since 1976. The "gigantic brothel industry" of the Pan-American Highway is also a misleading reference (154). Reality is less symbolical: Naipaul's "brothels" are merely *albergues transitorios*, municipally-licensed hotels where couples can go for a few hours, even a night, with no questions asked or identification needed. Houses of prostitution were legally banned in the thirties: the question of clandestine prostitution is a different story and, of course, prostitutes and their customers frequent some of these hotels, too. All knowledgeable *porteños* could have briefed Naipaul on anecdotes from this sort of establishment, which is by no means typical of Buenos Aires.
  16. For complementary references to machismo as a major psychosexual cause for Argentina's fate, see pp. 153–54, 168.
  17. The irrational sexual metaphors employed predominantly by Naipaul are carried to new heights when dealing with repression in Argentina. See "The Terror," originally written in March 1977, *The Return of Eva Perón*, pp. 157–70. According to Naipaul, tor-

- ture is simply a way of life, Argentina is similar to Haiti, all excesses are deterministic consequences from the malformed Argentine psyche. It would be impossible to even mention in a footnote some of the *structural* aspects of Argentine reality that are needed to obtain a correct perspective on the sixties, the seventies, and their violent heritage. (This observation also includes the conflict and war over the Malvinas/Falklands between 2 April and 14 June 1982, which tended to be perceived in some cases *à la* Naipaul as merely an irrational outburst.) Particularly insightful are the analyses by Guillermo O'Donnell, Alain Rouquié, Juan E. Corradi, and others. A particularly good antidote to Naipaul's vision is found in Juan Carlos Marín, "La guerra civil en Argentina," *Cuadernos Políticos* 22 (Oct.–Dec. 1979): 46–76 (Mexico City).
18. In this, as in other aspects, Fraser and Navarro's *Eva Perón* is the best balanced appraisal of Perón's role in relation to Evita, although I do not fully share all of the authors' interpretations.
  19. See his *Perón (1895–1942): preparación de una vida para el mando* (Buenos Aires: Espiño, 1953), the first in Pavón Pereyra's long list of publications on the subject. These include the general editorship of *Perón: el hombre del destino*, a sixty-issue weekly collection in the popular "Great Men" category (Buenos Aires: Editorial Abril, 1973–74). An illustrated coffee-table book, full of minutiae but not really illuminating, has been written by another Peronist intellectual, Fermín Chávez, *Perón y el peronismo en la historia contemporánea* (Vol. I, Buenos Aires: Editorial Oriente, 1975).
  20. See also Pavón Pereyra, "¿Fue asesinado Perón?," *Magazine* 2, no. 23 (August 1980): 151–92, an abridgement of his book on *Los últimos días de Perón* (Buenos Aires: La Campana, 1981).
  21. See *Yo, Juan Domingo Perón: relato autobiográfico* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1976). Like most of what Perón said and wrote as a public figure, this work cannot be accepted uncritically as historical truth and must be handled with care.
  22. On this point, see Perón's memoir, "Lo que yo ví de la preparación y realización de la revolución del 6 de septiembre de 1930," appended to José María Sarobe's *Memorias sobre la revolución del 6 de septiembre de 1930* (Buenos Aires: Gure, 1957), pp. 281–310. Students of the period have reached a consensus about the general accuracy of *this particular text* by Perón.
  23. For a comprehensive discussion, see Juan E. Corradi, "Between Corporatism and Insurgency: The Sources of Ambivalence in Peronist Ideology," in *Terms of Conflict: Ideology in Latin American Politics*, ed. by Morris J. Blachman and Ronald G. Hellman (Philadelphia: ISHI, 1977), pp. 97–127.
  24. Otelo Borrioni and Roberto Vacca, *La vida de Eva Perón* (Vol. I, Buenos Aires: Editorial Galerna, 1970) is still a useful source of personal recollections and anecdotes on Evita's life.
  25. Based on my own synthesis in *Perón y el justicialismo*, pp. 109–21. The "parallels with differences" that I was suggesting in 1971 with Janet Jagan in Guyana or Madame Nhu in South Vietnam could now include Imelda Marcos in the Philippines.
  26. One suitable model could be Isaac Deutscher's three-volume biography of Leon Trotsky, *The Prophet Armed*, *The Prophet Unarmed*, and *The Prophet Outcast* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954, 1959, and 1963).