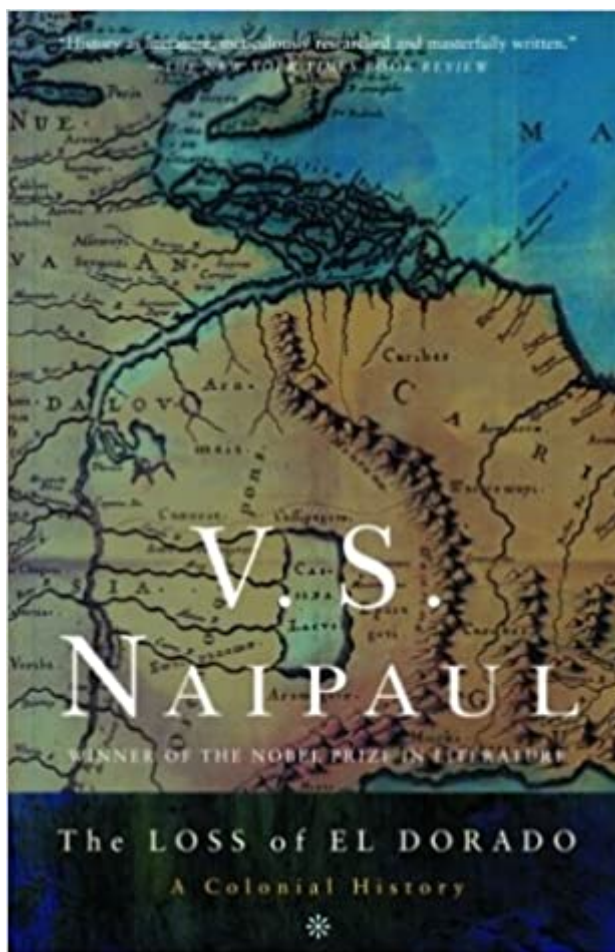


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The Loss Of El Dorado: A Colonial History



Synopsis

The history of Trinidad begins with a delusion: the belief that somewhere nearby on the South American mainland lay El Dorado, the mythical kingdom of gold. In this extraordinary and often gripping book, V. S. Naipaul—himself a native of Trinidad—shows how that delusion drew a small island into the vortex of world events, making it the object of Spanish and English colonial designs and a mecca for treasure-seekers, slave-traders, and revolutionaries. Amid massacres and poisonings, plunder and multinational intrigue, two themes emerge: the grinding down of the Aborigines during the long rivalries of the El Dorado quest and, two hundred years later, the man-made horror of slavery. An accumulation of casual, awful detail takes us as close as we can get to day-to-day life in the slave colony, where, in spite of various titles of nobility, only an opportunistic, near-lawless community exists, always fearful of slave suicide or poison, of African sorcery and revolt. Naipaul tells this labyrinthine story with assurance, withering irony, and lively sympathy. The result is historical writing at its highest level.

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The history of Trinidad begins with a delusion: the belief that somewhere nearby on the South American mainland lay El Dorado, the mythical kingdom of gold. In this extraordinary and often gripping book, V. S. Naipaul—himself a native of Trinidad—shows how that delusion drew a small island into the vortex of world events, making it the object of Spanish and English colonial designs and a mecca for treasure-seekers, slave-traders, and revolutionaries. Amid massacres and poisonings, plunder and multinational intrigue, two themes emerge: the grinding down of the Aborigines during the long rivalries of the El Dorado quest and, two hundred years later, the man-made horror of slavery. An accumulation of casual, awful detail takes us as close as we can get to day-to-day life in the slave colony, where, in spite of various titles of nobility, only an opportunistic, near-lawless community exists, always fearful of slave suicide or poison, of African sorcery and revolt. Naipaul tells this labyrinthine story with assurance, withering irony, and lively sympathy. The result is historical writing at its highest level.

This was the first book by Naipaul that I read, decades ago, and I fell in love with it. A beautiful book about a truly terrible subject. Nothing else by Naipaul quite lives up to this amazing book.

Surprisingly bad book, boring,

Not up to Naipaul's standard.

Product and delivery exactly as promised!

I think it's fair to say V.S. Naipaul is one of the finer writers of our time. Here his compressed, simple sentence structure, matched with fascinating details and copious research, works nearly as well for history as it does for his works of fiction. Turning his attention to his homeland, Trinidad, Naipaul reveals a lost history of Spanish, French and English colonialism, all fueled by the frantic, bloody search for El Dorado. Naipaul's three-part structure makes sense and is filled with remarkable anecdotes of greed, folly, slavery, barbarity, and one or two glimpses of decency and humanity. I had trouble putting this one down.

V.S. Naipaul has always attracted me because he is a Trinidadian, like I am. I've read quite a few of his books, and he is undoubtedly one of the best. The Loss of El Dorado, I am pleased to say,

shows off his skills. The book is original because it dwells on Trinidadian history preceding the arrival of indentured servants from India. Specifically, Naipaul explores two events in which this small island attracted national headlines: the first recounts the frantic but fruitless quest for the mythical city of El Dorado by Raleigh, Berrio, and others; the second story relates the illegal torture of a young girl named Luisa Calderon and the accompanying scandal surrounding the culprit General Thomas Picton. Neither of these are mainstream stories. In Trinidad schools today, they are not even taught or included in textbooks. Thus, I give Naipaul credit. The research and care that went into this book's development was substantial and undoubtedly exhausting. He says in the Foreword that this story "ends in 1813. Indians from India began to arrive in 1845; but the colony was created long before that." This quote is, essentially, the thesis of the book. Most Trinidadian historians focus on the arrival of indentured servants from India, but Naipaul here says that the colony was created before that. In Naipaul's thinking, the stories played a bigger role in the development of Trinidad than the Indians from India did. Naipaul's book is then mandatory reading for all Trinidadians interested in their history. The story tellingly contains some depressing lines or occurrences to shape the perception of Trinidad. Antonio de Berrio pursued El Dorado with zest, but by age 75, he was insane and lonely after his failure to achieve the goal. He would die in obscurity, as the tale of El Dorado became Raleigh's. At the end of the first section, the book declares that the El Dorado propaganda had died and that consequently, "No one would look at Trinidad ... with the eye of Raleigh, Dudley, or Wyatt ever again." In other words, no one placed value on the island ever again. Indeed, later on the book relates the difficulties of trying to place a governor of Trinidad -- no one wanted the job. The final section, the Epilogue, states outright: "Port of Spain dropped out of history." As a Trinidadian, such statements made me a little sad. The country comes off as unimportant, negligible, and expendable. To overcome these depressing sentiments, just remember the Foreword, which explains the importance, relevance, and worth of these people and their deeds. The second section, the Luisa Calderon portion, goes heavily into law. People get arrested every few pages, and trials are given utmost attention. At times, I felt like I was studying for law school, which I enjoyed! Naipaul, indeed, got the material here by investigating court records, as he says in appendix. The writing is quality, as all of Naipaul's prose is, but know that at times he will get deeply poetical or ornate. Some passages (ie. - the one about Robinson Crusoe in the first chapters) will puzzle you and force you to think hard just to understand it. Basically, you get good writing that is also hard writing. Overall, I recommend this book, especially for Trinidadians but also for anyone who loves good, provocative writing.

In *The Loss of El Dorado* (1969), V.S. Naipaul traces the history of his homeland of Trinidad from its days under the Spanish to its takeover by the British in the 18th century and the years immediately following. It is a history dominated by a succession of dominant personalities and reads best as a kind of short story cycle. The island, located at the mouth of the Orinoco River off the coast of Venezuela, was perfectly positioned as a landing stage for expeditions to the interior of South America, especially for those seeking the legendary city of gold, El Dorado. Trinidad itself, however, was basically seen as a backwater in this period, a dead-end assignment for governors unfortunate enough to be assigned there by the Spanish and then English monarchies.

This is the historical counterpart to Naipaul's *"A Way in the World"*, even though it was written more than two decades earlier - these books should ideally be read back-to-back. It provides a history of Trinidad from the original discovery by the Spaniards until the early nineteenth century. The canvas covered is vast - the early Spanish attempts at colonisation, Raleigh's poorly-organised and squalid search for an El Dorado on the Orinoco, the arrival of French refugees escaping from the slave-uprisings on Haiti and the establishment of British control, with a leading but hardly-creditable role being played by Sir Thomas Picton, later a hero of the Peninsula and Waterloo, and the use of the island as a springboard for fomenting revolution in Latin America. It is from beginning to end a ghastly story, dominated by greed, cowardice and cruelty. There is hardly a single character who emerges with credit and at times the reader is all but overwhelmed by the catalogue of mean-minded exploitation, atrocities and treachery. As always in his non-fiction writing, Naipaul uses a novelist's eye to bring colour and life to the narrative - adding not just to the immediacy but also to the horror of much of the material. This work goes beyond historical narrative however and presents simultaneously an extended meditation on the nature of power at its most basic level. It is a terrible and disturbing work - but a great one.

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