

## Review Essay

# Colombia's River of Life and Death

**Russell Crandall**

### **Magdalena: River of Dreams**

Wade Davis. London: Bodley Head, 2020. £25.00. 401 pp.

Colombia as a nation is the gift of the river. The Magdalena is the story of Colombia.

Wade Davis, *Magdalena*, p. xxii

The waters of the Magdalena River might be called the lifeblood of Colombia. Extending more than 1,500 kilometres from its source in the south of the country to the Caribbean Sea in the north, the river crosses the entire span of Colombia – not an easy feat in a nation twice the size of Texas. It has long been a critical enabler of the country's wealth and has shaped the fortunes of its people, 80% of whom live within the river's massive drainage area.

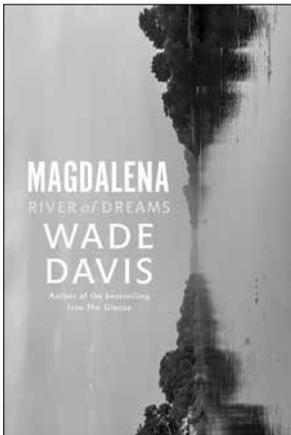
In his latest opus *Magdalena*, the rightfully storied Canadian travel writer Wade Davis traces the geography of this mighty river and its role in Colombia's history. For Davis, the Magdalena is not just the country's central artery but the reason Colombia 'exists as a nation', the 'lifeline' that permitted Colombians to begin to tame this geographically diverse land (p. xxii). Its significance runs deeper than mere geography, however: much

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like the Mississippi River in the United States, the Magdalena is ‘a corridor of commerce and a foundation of culture’, having influenced and fostered Colombia’s ‘music, literature, poetry, and prayer’ (p. xxii).

*Magdalena* is the result of the author’s roughly half-dozen research trips, conducted over five years and in all seasons, in which he explored the river from its mouth on the Atlantic coast to its source way up in the Andes. These trips were not the author’s first experience of Colombia: his lifelong love affair with the country began with a school trip in 1968, when Davis was only 14. ‘For eight weeks,’ he writes, ‘I encountered the warmth and decency of a people charged with a strange intensity, a passion for life, and a quiet acceptance of the frailty of the human spirit. Several of the older Canadian students longed for home. I felt as if I had finally found it’ (p. xiv).



### Best of times, worst of times

In 1974, the adventurer returned to Colombia, this time arriving with a one-way ticket, a tattered backpack and copies of George Lawrence’s *Taxonomy of Vascular Plants* and, inevitably, Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. He would embark on an odyssey that was as soul-enlivening as it was body-wracking:

Both figuratively and literally I drank from every stream, even from tire tracks in the road. Naturally I was constantly sick, but even that seemed part of the process, malaria and dysentery fevers growing through the night before breaking with the dawn. Every adventure led to another. Once on a day’s notice I set out to traverse the Darién Gap. After nearly a month on the trail, I became lost in the forest for a fortnight without food or shelter. When finally I found my way to safety, I stumbled off a small plane in Panama, drenched in vomit from my fellow passengers, with only the ragged clothes on my back and three dollars to my name. I had never felt so alive. (pp. xiv–xv)

In the ensuing years Davis became an acolyte of legendary botanist Richard Evans Schultes, eventually writing his biography, the seminal

*One River*, published in 1996. As Davis explains, the tome was meant not just as a tribute to Schultes but as a 'love letter to a nation scorned by the world' for its association with drugs and the crimes of Pablo Escobar (p. xv). When the Spanish translation, *El río*, hit Colombia in 2002, the nation was at one of its many historical nadirs, buckling under the violent conflict between Marxist guerrillas and rightist paramilitaries.

With an initial print run of 500, Davis did not have much hope that many Colombians would read the book. During a visit to Colombia in 2008, however, he was startled to discover that it had taken off, in large part through word of mouth. Far beyond the expected audience of anthropologists and biologists, the book was embraced by 'old and young, men and women, artists, musicians, corporate executives and priests, politicians from across the political spectrum' (p. xv). In the coastal city of Santa Marta, he saw an adolescent reading a beat-up copy, and in a meeting with former defence minister Rafael Pardo he spotted a copy on a desk. Even the sister of Fabio Ochoa Vásquez, a notorious member of the Medellín Cartel, asked if Davis would visit her brother in prison. 'The book, she said, meant a great deal to him' (p. xvi).

Davis concludes that his book resonated so deeply because it depicted Colombia and Colombians 'completely in defiance of the dark clichés' (p. xvi). *Magdalena* continues this work, but without neglecting the country's many struggles and challenges. Through the centuries, the Magdalena has borne witness to the best and worst of Colombia.

Like so much of the New World, what has become the modern country of Colombia has been scarred not just by the weaponry and deities wielded by Europeans, who started arriving in the sixteenth century, but by the dissemination of the 'concentrated essence of death itself': the microbes of diseases such as smallpox (p. 243). After a century and a half of European rule, the once 70-million-strong indigenous population in the Americas had dwindled to 3.5m – a genocide of unspeakable proportions. In the coastal region where the mighty Magdalena pours into the Atlantic, disease and violence slashed the local indigenous population (*los naturales*) from 70,000 to 800 by 1570.

Jumping forward two centuries, Davis shows that the wars for Latin American independence made for strange bedfellows, uniting secular and scientific revolutionaries with blue-blooded, New World-born aristocrats,

who were anti-Enlightenment but nonetheless wanted to defeat the monarchy for ‘the opportunity to displace the regal regime with themselves, a new privileged class anointed by God and destined to lead a national government faithful always to the clergy, tradition, and the past’ (pp. 60–1).

After independence was consolidated in 1819, the insurmountable differences between these two groups became clear, leading to the creation of rival political parties. In the decades that followed, the Liberals and Conservatives – red and blue – each considered the other an existential threat, especially given their shared assumption that whichever party gained power would monopolise the state’s capacity for violence. According to Davis, ‘the weakness of the federal state, together with a tortuous mountain landscape that hindered transportation and communications, encouraged strong regional identities even as it empowered local strongmen only too willing to exploit this reciprocity of hatred’ (p. 61).

Indeed, the Andean nation experienced eight civil wars and more than a dozen provincial rebellions in its first century of existence. In one fleeting but savage episode, the appointment of Conservatives to a top post at the National Library and as envoy to London resulted in a clash between the government and Liberal radicals that killed around 500 people on both sides. La Batalla de la Humareda, as the episode came to be known, took place on a single day in June 1885. The War of a Thousand Days, which commenced in 1899, involved both sides ‘hacking each other to death’, with 80,000 killed out of a population of only 4m. The conflict pushed the country to the brink of collapse as it destroyed the value of the national currency (the peso), brought about the loss of the province of Panama and caused damages valued at 500% more than the national budget (p. 61). A new era of internecine strife known as La Violencia would begin in 1948, sparked by the assassination of a populist Liberal politician, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, in Bogotá. The ensuing decade of chaos would result in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people.

### **Nation-building, Colombia-style**

While the Magdalena and its communities may have been scarred by colonial-era violence, the river was also the primary means by which the

colonists began building the 'new' nation – and how they began extracting wealth from it too.

Linking the river to the Colombian hinterland called for unorthodox methods, given the country's challenging terrain. For three centuries after the Spanish conquest, Colombia's imports and exports were carried along treacherous *caminos de arriería* (muleteer roads) 'cut through the forests and carved into the sides of mountains ... [that] fell away from the Andean heights to link every town and city to the Río Magdalena' (p. 30). First laid out centuries before the Spanish landed, these roads featured many perils: 'precipitous exposures, mules buried chest-deep in mud, dead oxen along the edge of the trail, often with vultures perched on top' (p. 30). Outsiders wondered how the country could enter the modern era with such an unreliable and primitive transportation system.

Yet it worked. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Bogotá was a bona fide capital city, its museums, universities and bookstores giving it the deserved moniker of the 'Athens of South America'. (Today, Colombian book fairs are some of the largest and most prestigious in the Spanish-speaking world.) In the latter part of the nineteenth century, a huge range of imported items – French champagne and perfume, German construction equipment, English umbrellas – was carried on the backs of mules from Honda (where river navigation commenced) to the fog-shrouded capital city. Any items that were too large or heavy to carry were disassembled and loaded piece by piece. One intrepid *arriero* (muleteer) reportedly delivered a disassembled generator all the way to a remote high-Andean pueblo. 'He was greeted as a hero and toasted upon his arrival with *aguardiente* and cascades of blossoms as the entire community celebrated the arrival of light' (p. 31).

Carried in the other direction were exports destined for the furthest reaches of the globe: tobacco and coffee from the cities of Ambalema and Armenia, gold from the mines of Segovia and almost all of Medellín's industrial output (including the quarter-million Panama hats sent abroad in 1915). 'Everything moved thanks to the strength, skill, and endurance of the *arrieros* and their animals', writes Davis. 'It was a unique culture of the open sky, of men and boys whose home was the ground beneath their feet, and whose moods and passions set them completely apart from ordinary

cowboys, or *vaqueros*' (p. 31). Even today the *arrieros* loathe horses: 'Who would want to work with horses, so often petulant, preening, and precious, when an uncomplaining mule is tougher, lives longer, is cheaper to feed, less vulnerable to disease, capable of carrying far greater loads, and, like the men themselves, as solid as the stones that mark the trails that define their lives?' (p. 31).

### **Love in the time of vapores**

An especially fascinating aspect of Colombia's river-driven trajectory involves the country's storied *vapores* (steamboats). Alonso Restrepo of Cali – a long-standing acquaintance of Davis – started his job with the Naviera Colombia in the early 1940s, and has never forgotten the excitement of a *vapor* arriving at the port city of El Banco. Davis's imagination gives us a rich sense of what this might have looked like:

On board might be an orchestra from Bogotá, a band of *costeños* playing *vallenato*, or jazz musicians riffing off the rhythms of Lucho Bermúdez, whose songs were the sound of romance on every journey along 'our mother river,' the Magdalena. On the jetty, there always stood a lone *zambo*, playing a drum or a flute. In the ravine running away from the shore would be dozens of men and women from the *palenques*, all dancing and singing. As long as a vessel was in port, there was a permanent party, with people gathering at all hours beneath the thatch of a great shelter mounted over the concrete slab at portside. There were no rules. The only constants were the rhythms of *vallenato*, *cumbia*, and *tambura* [domestic musical genres]. Sleep was optional. (p. 257)

Drawing upon this abundance of life and energy, Gabriel García Márquez – the magical-realist author described as the 'greatest Colombian who ever lived' by former president Juan Manuel Santos – gave the Magdalena a starring role in two of his greatest novels, *Love in the Time of Cholera* and *The General in His Labyrinth*. Davis explains the towering significance of the river to this genre-defining author: 'All of the themes that informed his work – forgetfulness and love, violence and hope, progress

and decadence, fertility and death – are to be found in the eddies and back channels and currents of a river that literally carried him, as a boy, to his destiny, allowing him to enter a world of language and literature where he would discover just what words can do' (p. 330).

For García Márquez, riverboat life proved a treasure trove of stories and characters. He would take 11 extended round-trip voyages on the Magdalena from his home on the coast up to Bogotá. His maiden trip, at the age of 16 in 1943, was on the famously opulent *David Arango*. Davis sets the scene:

As an orchestra welcomed the passengers and the ship made ready to sail, García Márquez rushed to the highest deck and watched as the lights of the town of Magangué slowly receded in the darkness. Tears filled his eyes, and he remained, as he later recalled, in a state of ecstasy throughout the entire night and, indeed, the entire journey. It took six days to reach Puerto Salgar, where he caught the train for Bogotá. A boy from the coast who had never stood higher than the hood of a truck found himself climbing into the Andes, whistling and wheezing like a struggling *arriero* gasping for air. (p. 332)

Damp, grey, cold – and, for him, lonely – Bogotá came as a shock to García Márquez. Davis writes that 'he longed for heat and home ... In his yearning, the Magdalena, a river flowing for over three million years, became the antidote to Bogotá, his lifeline to the coast, where everything was awash in color and passion, where flirtations with parrots and sunbirds were the norm and daily life, as he would later write, was but a pretense for poetry' (p. 332).

García Márquez was to witness the re-emergence of violence in Colombia and the destruction of the riverboat life he so passionately loved. As an infant in 1928, he found himself but a stone's throw away from where the United Fruit Company machine-gunned scores of banana-plantation workers, 'leaving the plaza of Ciénaga blanketed with the dead' (p. 333). As a young man in Bogotá in 1948, his lodging was a block or two from the café where Gaitán was assassinated, plunging the capital into a round of Liberal–Conservative violence that would leave 'generations of Colombians looking over their shoulders in fear, waiting for the moment when death would find them' (p. 333).

In 1961, and now living in Mexico City, García Márquez received the bitter news that the *David Arango*, that venerable vessel of his maiden river trip, had been destroyed in a fire. ‘That day’, he later wrote, ‘ended my youth’ (p. 333). The novelist had given up on the Magdalena, which by then had been despoiled by pollution. In his memoir *Living to Tell the Tale*, García Márquez tells the story of two leftist guerrillas on the run from the army who jumped into the river for safety, only to die from its poisons.

### River of death

The story of how the Magdalena became polluted is illustrated by Davis’s account of his visit to the river city of Barrancabermeja, the petroleum capital of Colombia. In ‘Barranca’ (as Colombians call it), Davis found a city where pipelines extended in all directions, refineries defined the skyline and ‘active wellheads seemed to outnumber the cattle’ (p. 223).

Oil had first been discovered locally in 1904, and a refinery was built roughly two decades later. Before that, Barranca’s main purpose had been to serve as a refuelling stop for the *vapores* on the way up or down the river. Things would change dramatically after 1920, when the Tropical Oil Company defeated some foreign competitors in a dubious process to gain dominion over more than 1m acres in and around Barranca.

Much like elsewhere in the world, the riches generated by the region’s natural resources were a mixed blessing. According to Davis, ‘wealth and easy money fomented vice – prostitution, gambling, and drinking – as surely as the concentration and exploitation of labor spun into being a whirlwind of political activism’ (p. 224). The situation would only worsen after the discovery of a massive oilfield in 1983, making Barrancabermeja an ‘irresistible target’ for illicit actors seeking to ‘cripple or destroy the nation-state’ (p. 224). According to Davis:

Paramilitaries stalked union leaders and human rights activists in the back alleys of the city, while in distant fields and forests, cadres of the [pro-Cuban guerrilla group] ELN, utterly unconcerned about the implications for the environment and the land, sought ways to damage or destroy the pipelines, which have always been the focus of their revolutionary

zeal. The only traffic on the river were the barges that carried the refined petroleum products to the sea, and the bodies of the dead. (p. 225)

Davis's experience of Barranca reminded me of my own time in the city. In 1997–98, having just completed a master's programme in international relations, I served as a human-rights worker with Catholic Relief Services, an assignment that took me to Barrancabermeja at the very height of its terror. While I spent less than a week there, I will never forget what I saw – and smelled. Months later, having returned to graduate school in the US, I awoke to the news that there had been yet another massacre in Barrancabermeja. I would go on to write for the *Wall Street Journal* that

such violence has become all too common in Colombia. With over half of the nation's territory believed to be in the hands of either paramilitary groups or left-wing guerrillas, it is no exaggeration to say the country has become ungovernable.

[ ... ]

Over the past year, I worked with a human-rights team in Barrancabermeja and as of today I still do not know if any of my acquaintances were among those killed in last month's massacre. I do, however, remember the words of one local resident when we were visiting a community that had just suffered a paramilitary attack. 'Where is the state? The military? Without them, we live in the wild west and there are many bandits but no sheriff.'<sup>1</sup>

I would later discover that my colleagues had not been killed in the massacre, news which brought only a limited form of relief given that this did not mean any fewer people had been killed. My stay in Barranca may have been brief, but my admiration for the courage of the local activists I met there has lasted a lifetime.

### **Dealing with drugs**

Since the mid-1960s, Colombia's internal war has claimed the lives of 220,000 soldiers, guerrillas and non-combatants, with another 100,000 having simply disappeared. The carnage has only been compounded by Colombia's long

association with one of its most famous exports: drugs. From 1996 to 2000, eight Colombians were kidnapped each day; upwards of 5m fled their native land; and 7m people were internally displaced – numbers that have rarely been equalled.

Davis acknowledges that Colombia's drug cartels are a home-grown phenomenon, but writes in *Magdalena's* preface that the blame for the country's drug violence ultimately rests with 'every person who has ever bought street cocaine and every foreign nation that has made possible the illicit market by prohibiting the drug without curbing its use in any serious way' (p. xvii):

Imagine how differently the people of the United States would feel about their War on Drugs, not to mention their casual consumption of cocaine in bars and board rooms across the nation, if they knew that as a consequence of both obsessions, no fewer than eighty million fellow Americans would be driven from their homes or forced into exile. (p. xvi)

For Davis, there is no question that insatiable global demand for cocaine fanned the flames of war in Colombia. 'Without the black money, readily taxed, stolen, or siphoned away, the struggle of the leftist guerrillas would have fizzled out decades ago, and the blood-soaked paramilitary forces might never have come into being' (p. xvii).

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After 2000, Colombia's military (with US assistance) managed to gain some control, and security improved. The 2016 peace deal between the left-wing Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and Bogotá represented a major step towards bringing the internal conflict to an end, although the smaller ELN did not sign the deal, and there have still been episodes of violence.

Nevertheless, many are optimistic about Colombia's future. Davis is especially excited about the legions of well-educated and industrious Colombians once resident in New York, Charlotte, Miami and Madrid who

are returning to *la patria* to help rebuild. Colombian exiles aren't the only ones fired up: in 2016, upwards of half the Colombian population took an internal trip – something that had been unimaginable just a few years before. And if Colombia's violent history might be said to have had a silver lining, it could be the way it helped ensure that the country's vast virgin territories were not marred by development, as was the case in Ecuador's Amazon basin, which was 'utterly transformed by oil and gas exploration, colonization, and deforestation', according to Davis (p. xix). He suggests that this accidental conservation may prove to be the country's 'real peace dividend, the opportunity for the nation to consciously and deliberately decide the fate of its greatest asset: the land itself, along with the forests, rivers, lakes, mountains, and streams' (p. xix). Given that the author describes Colombia as 'the repository of fully 10 percent of the terrestrial biological wealth of the entire planet', this is no small asset (p. 227).

At the heart of it all flows the Magdalena, about which Davis is also optimistic. While the river may have experienced some dark times, 'through all the years of the worst of the violence, the Magdalena never abandoned the people. It always flowed. Perhaps ... it may finally be time to give back to the river, allowing the Magdalena to be cleansed of all that has soiled its waters' (p. xxii). Colombia's river of life may yet be reborn.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Russell Crandall, 'Colombia Needs a Stronger Military', *Wall Street Journal*, 12 June 1998.

