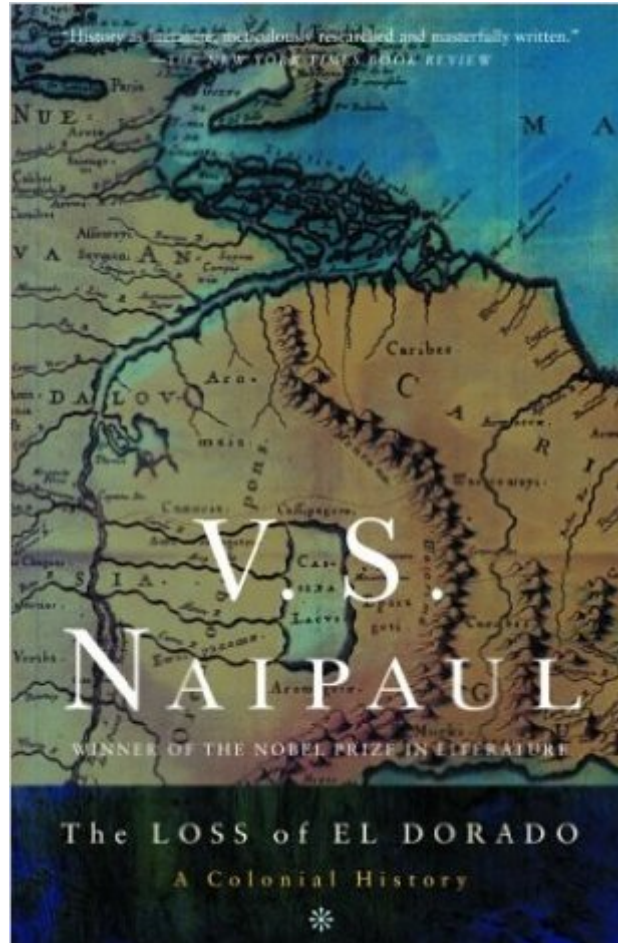


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The Loss Of El Dorado: A Colonial History



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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The Spanish were sure that there was a "Third Marquisate" out there somewhere. The first two Marquisates were Mexico and Peru, two fabulously wealthy ancient Native American civilizations looted and conquered by Spain. Spain was sure that another one- El Dorado- was out there begging to be plundered, just beyond what is now Columbia and Venezuela. Not wanting to miss out on yet another one, England gets into the act. The island of Trinidad is the perfect place from which to launch expeditions into the South American interior looking for El Dorado. Thousands of

men march into the jungle, never to be heard from again. Yet rumors persist...Eventually everyone tires of looking for El Dorado, and Trinidad is forgotten. Spanish colonists on Trinidad might as well be shipwrecked, as decades go by without a visit from a Spanish ship. Three Spanish nobles are given the Governorship, but none want it. Spanish people are encouraged to migrate to Trinidad, but few go. Spain invites French landowners from elsewhere in the Caribbean (displaced by the French Revolution) to settle in Trinidad, and some come to set up plantations on the island. In 1797 the British send eighteen ships to take Trinidad from Spain. Outnumbered, the Spanish capitulate with barely a fight. The Spanish on the island aren't that unhappy about the British takeover anyway. Spain has ignored Trinidad, and at least the British aren't the revolutionary French. Now there are settlers from three European countries trying to live together in Trinidad- the Spanish, the French planters, and the English. Which countries laws to follow? Some traditions are kept by French and Spanish planters in Trinidad, notably cruelty to slaves. These practices offend some British.

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.

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