

McPherson, Alan (2019) *Ghosts of Sheridan Circle: How a Washington Assassination Brought Pinochet's Terror State to Justice*. The University of North Carolina Press (Chapel Hill), 392 pp. £36.50 hbk.

Chile is undergoing a constitutional transformation. In October 2020, Chileans voted by an overwhelming majority to rewrite the dictator-era constitution, penned by General Augusto Pinochet and his administration. Over three decades after the transition to democracy, a constitutional assembly of 155 Chileans will draw up a new constitution to put to the populace by referendum in 2022. Given these lingering legacies of Pinochet's violent dictatorship, the subtitle of Alan McPherson's book, 'how a Washington assassination brought Pinochet's terror state to justice' feels somewhat overblown. However, this book is a fascinating explanation of how it came to be that Orlando Letelier, the former Chilean ambassador to the United States, and Ronni Moffitt, a colleague of his at the think tank Institute for Policy Studies, were murdered by a car bomb in Washington DC in 1976 and the subsequent long quest for justice. *Ghosts of Sheridan Circle* offers a gripping account of this unique event- the only assassination of a foreign diplomat in the US, and the only state sponsored assassination that has ever taken place in Washington.

The Letelier assassination will be familiar to many scholars of Latin America but what this book does is bring the case alive as it traces the tortuous path to legal and moral victories. It took twenty years to reach a resolution and it proved easier to pin the assassination on Michael Townley, a blundering Chilean-American keen to use his knowledge of explosives to further his anti-communist ideals, and a small group of anti-Castro Cuban-Americans who helped Townley. But as McPherson shows, tracing culpability back to the architects of the murders –Pinochet and Manuel Contreras, head of DINA, the Chilean secret police– proved much harder. The case illustrates that while the US was content to overlook and indeed in some cases support 'anti-communist' activities in Latin America, murders brazenly committed on US soil could not be tolerated.

The book consists of 18 chapters divided into three parts: assassination, investigation, and prosecution, followed by an epilogue that fills the reader in on where the key players are now. The number of people involved, the timespan covered, and the complexities of transnational justice mean that this book could have sprawled well beyond its 392 pages, but McPherson manages to marshal the information concisely even if that means there are some aspects the reader is left wanting to know more about. A strength of the book is the sense of familiarity the reader gains with those involved. McPherson deftly introduces a constellation of actors, skipping along biographical details and gradually stitching their relationships together to lead to the fateful day when Letelier and Moffitt were murdered. The book achieves the delicate balance of humanising characters such as Contreras and Pinochet without being sympathetic. These figures can sometimes be too simply characterised as one-dimensional monsters, but McPherson manages to draw out details of their personalities with Pinochet shown as obsequious and creepy (p. 29) and Contreras as childish (p. 263). Their human errors become clear through the combination of a dictatorship set on silencing those who disagree with the regime with the careless

mistakes made by Townley and the Cuban-Americans. This resulted in a lethal mix that was the undoing of Contreras who spent the last two decades of his life in detention.

*Ghosts of Sheridan Circle* deserves to be read by a wide audience. It is readable and well-paced and does not assume knowledge of Chilean or Latin American history or politics but McPherson's meticulous research will also appeal to a scholarly audience. The endnotes show the rich sources brought together in this book, including primary interviews, legal documents, a range of archival materials, and newspaper articles. For me, the book raised interesting questions about the nature of justice being served. While there were legal repercussions for those found guilty of their involvement in the murders, the question of justice more broadly is a thorny one. Townley served 62 months for the murders of Letelier and Moffitt and remains in witness protection despite his alleged involvement in other assassination attempts while the Cuban-Americans were imprisoned but then 'thrived in their U.S. enclave communities' (p. 286). Meanwhile, Contreras was detained but largely in cushy, hotel-like facilities, and Pinochet died in 2006 without being convicted of any of his crimes and refusing to apologise for any of his crimes 'including the worst state-sponsored assassination in U.S. history' (p. 292). However, McPherson concludes with optimism that the Letelier case set important legal, political, and psychological precedents for the prosecution of human rights violations and so perhaps victories are not always found in the most obvious places.

Dr Cordelia Freeman  
*University of Exeter*