

1993

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Marcus McLaughlin
Denison University

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Recommended Citation

McLaughlin, Marcus (1993) "Excerpt from *Revolutions*, a novel," *Exile*: Vol. 40 : No. 1 , Article 14.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol40/iss1/14>

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Excerpt from *Revolutions*, a novel

I got my first taste of America on a cane road in Nancahuazu, a small cluster of farms in the south of Bolivia. There between the rows, brand-new and shining like it would never shine again, was a 1966 Willys Jeep. I strode up to it slowly, like a hunter stalking his prey. I slipped my finger between the grille teeth and found the hood release. I lifted the hood and the big springs at the back held it up with need for a prop-rod. Underneath was the cleanest, most purposeful-looking engine I had ever seen in my life. The little four almost looked lost in the cavernous engine bay, but everything was easy to see and to work on. The valve cover was painted the same olive green as the jeep, and the paint was so new it looked waxed. The air cleaner was painted jet black and in the shade under the hood I could see my reflection in it. I unscrewed the wingnut that held the cover in place and removed the paper filter. I held it up in the sun to look at it. The paper was spotless and so white it hurt to look at it. The creases were evenly spaced and perfectly formed. The rubber seals around top and bottom were black and shiny and they squeaked against my thumbs. I replaced the filter and cover. The exhaust manifold had yet to acquire the thick coat of rust that would protect it from the elements. It still had the rough grey lustre of new cast iron. I pulled the dipstick from the block and wiped it on the rag from my belt. I pushed it back into the big half-inch hole where it locked solidly into place and pulled it again to check the level. It was slightly over-filled and as clear and gold as clover honey. This engine had less than a hundred kilometers on it. I pulled the cap off the radiator and looked at the coolant. It was slightly over-filled as well. The coolant was bright green and smelled sweet. I twisted the cap back on and closed the hood. It had a heavy, solid feel and the big springs made it close smartly. "I almost hate to start it," I said.

"Here." The major tossed me the keys.

I slid behind the wheel and put the key in the dash. I gave the throttle two quick stabs to prime the carburetor and turned the key. The little four barked to life and settled to a mellow throb I could just feel with my foot against the firewall. I kicked the engine off fast idle and looked over the instrument cluster. The tach was sitting right under a thousand. The engine was carrying 15 pounds—about 76 cm—of oil pressure on slow idle. The speedometer only went to 100, but was calibrated in miles per hour. It was hard to get used to the big American units.

I killed the ignition and removed the key. "Put a set of 22-48s under her and she'd float." I said. I didn't need to know the curb weight or axle loading; I could tell just by looking at it that with the right tires this jeep could go anywhere. She was currently sitting on a set of 17-40s—"groundhogs"—which gave her the perfect stance and traction for cutting through brush.

Looking back at that jeep with its matte black bumpers and brush guard, its conspicuous lack of chrome, it seems utilitarian, underpowered, and about as sexy as a shoebox. But it was the straight-forward, sturdy design of that Willys jeep which made everything we did possible.

Not that the major saw it that way. He detested what he called "yankee

imperialism” and was more than a little upset that the advance team had purchased an American jeep. Never mind the fact that they had purchased it on the cheap from a Bolivian colonel who was always eager to turn government surplus into personal profit; never mind the fact that it was the best vehicle for the job; he had given them orders to purchase a Toyota Landcruiser and they had disobeyed him. He saw it as a bad omen—both the blatant disregard for his instructions and the fact that he had to conduct his campaign from the driver’s seat of an American jeep. He had dreams of antagonizing the Bolivian army, of turning Bolivia into a staging area for continent-wide revolution, and of bogging the Americans down in another Vietnam. Me, I couldn’t have cared less. I was in it for the money and the chance to get out of the government garage—my own ticket to America. I was the best and the major knew it. He was willing to pay for the best; giving me \$2500 U.S. up front with another \$2500 to be paid at the end of our year in Bolivia. He hated handling American currency but it was the most stable we could carry—more highly esteemed among the peasants than any Bolivian currency—and I had insisted upon it.

The plan was to follow the Nanchahuau River northward from our camp in Nanchahuazu to the fork of the Masicuri; from there it would be only a short distance to the Bolivian barracks. It was to be a reconnaissance/training mission, a sort of break-in period for the jeep and the men. Of course it wasn’t long before we ran into trouble—mechanical and otherwise.

“Tuma, Rolando, Ricardo,” the major called the others to the jeep. Let’s go.” He finished lashing down the supplies in back and the three men boarded the jeep. There were special footpegs that had been fitted to the frame by Tuma and Rolando. There was one set of pegs on the rear of the jeep and one on either side, each with corresponding handles. They were the only custom pieces on the truck.

I started the jeep and put it in gear. She went down the cane road just as smooth as silk, and as we came up to speed watched the oil pressure climb steadily to a good, strong 35 pounds. I remember thinking at the time that a man couldn’t ask for anymore than that.

– Marcus McLaughlin '94