

Most Scandalous Woman: Magda Portal and the Dream of Revolution in Peru

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A poet, journalist, and key leader in Peru's American Popular Revolutionary Alliance, Magda Portal was nicknamed by her opponents as a "Most Scandalous Woman." Myrna Ivonne Wallace Fuentes looks at both Portal's life and her work in a well-researched and comprehensive biography of the same name.

In her twenties, Portal came to prominence on both poetry and revolutionary fronts simultaneously, winning a prestigious award for her writing and then publicly refusing it at the ceremony as a way of taking a stand against the Peruvian government. Living in exile in Mexico, she joined the APRA and helped spread revolutionary ideas throughout Latin America.

Most Scandalous Woman does a strong job of examining Portal's role as the most prominent woman's voice in the movement, as a target of the Peruvian government's crackdown on the ARPA who spent time in prison, and as the editor of the party's news operation. Through her efforts, ARPA became one of the most important political movements on the noncommunist left, until Portal and others broke with the party in the 1950s.

Fuentes makes regular use of Portal's own poetry to convey her thoughts on current affairs, underscoring both Portal's gift with language and her bravery in expressing revolutionary ideas. Portal's journalistic work also features prominently, and Fuentes consistently underscores the added degree of difficulty Portal overcame as a prominent woman in a male-dominated movement, whether with the challenge of protecting her daughter while on the run, or with the social mores that made her an iconoclast for using her voice.

Fuentes also examines Portal's sex life, her relationship with her mother, and the sexism she experienced even within her own party. The result is a thorough portrait of a strong woman who was a giant in her era and whose legacy remains important.

JEFF FLEISCHER (November/December 2017)

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