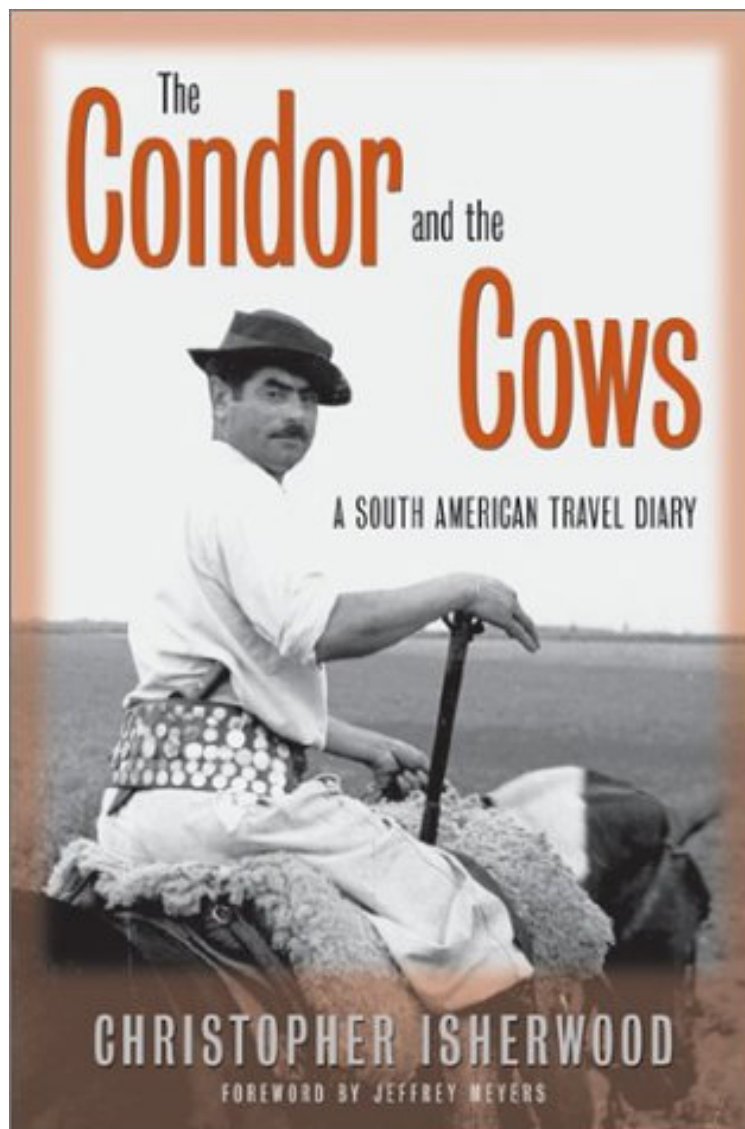


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## Condor And The Cows: A South American Travel Diary

*Christopher Isherwood*

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**Christopher Isherwood : Condor And The Cows: A South American Travel Diary** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Condor And The Cows: A South American Travel Diary:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Great Account of Isherwood's Journey to South AmericaBy RNJWriters dont do this much anymore: take long journeys to foreign countries like those found in South America and pen a single book about it, but thats what Isherwood does in The Condor and the Cows. He writes about his trip taken

with lover-at-the-time and photographer, William Caskey, one that spans six months in 1947-48. The meaning of the title should be evident, but perhaps I had better explain that the Condor is the emblem of the Andes and their mountain republics, while the Cows represent the great cattle-bearing plains, and, more specifically, Argentinano offense intended (3). It is an interesting concept, recording all your impressions from a trip: your conveyances, whether they be ships by which you travel five days from one continent to another, or whether they be the relatively new airplane, which can soar above mountains and shorten days-long trips to a few hours. You record the food you eat. The pillows upon which you lay your head. Trains traveling through a dust storm on the Argentine plain, yielding a gritty experience from one end of your sleeping car to the other. Chauffeurs driving ninety miles per hour across that plain because the road is smooth and there is relatively little traffic and because the matron in charge shows no reason to be concerned. North American schools seem to teach little about geography anymore, the different types of maps that one can study in advance of a trip, during, and after: climate maps, economic, physical, political, road, or topographical maps. Isherwood's partner provides the frontispiece map for *The Condor and the Cows*: an inkling of their half-year journey beginning in Curaao, to Cartagena, to Medellin, to Bogot, to Quito and Guayaquil, to Trujillo and Lima, to Machu Picchu and Cuzco, to Lake Titicaca, to Arequipa, and finally Buenos Aires (not on the map). Isherwood details every morsel of food they eat, every visit they make with friends who live in various cities, the new friends he and Caskey make along the way, every drop of liquor, details of minor illnesses borne on such a long expedition, clothing natives wear, commentary on local and national and continental politics. Little is out of his focus, and he and the publisher include twenty-four pages of Caskey's photographs. I admire the author's due diligence in writing down enough of the bones of his trip to amount to 217 pages of interesting, sometimes titillating, reading that, year by year, may become more so because it also has become a bit of history. A few nuggets derived from Isherwood and Caskey's voyage: We stopped at El Banco just after dark . . . [o]n the narrow gangplank the two streams of human beings collided, surged and mingled; a yelling mob of white-cotton clothes and dark bodies yellow, red, velvet black and plum purple, with an occasional, strangely arresting blond head. Above the confusion the ships band played its lively clattering music, and through the open doors of the church on the hill there was a glimpse of a priest at the altar, a remote quiet candle-lit figure, saying vespers (34-5). A lovely description despite Isherwood's slightly racist point of view. We witness that POV here again as he describes Guambian Indians: The men have short glossy black hair, shocked up into an untidy tuft, and lively impudent black eyes. Some look strikingly Mongolian. Their mouths are a bit apelike. They smile readily and don't in the least mind if you examine their ornaments or their clothes (67). Isherwood's descriptions are not as insulting as perhaps his patronizing and paternalistic tone. Perhaps we can forgive him if, for no other reason, we remember he is a product of the imperialistic British Empire, born in 1904. When caught in a certain badlands between Ecuador and Columbia, a town called Pasto, the author remarks: We were put down at the Hotel Granada, a shabby wooden building with inside balconies around a central dining room. The bedrooms are like stables. Windowless, with great barn-doors closed by padlocks. The combined shower and toilet the only one on the ground floor is unfit for pigs. While we were eating a tepid greasy supper, I strolled the mail-car driver with his girl. On seeing us, he smiled without surprise but didn't offer a word of explanation or excuse [earlier they've had an altercation]. We neither washed nor shaved, brushed our teeth in bottled mineral water, and went sadly and shiveringly to bed at eight-thirty (75). Here the author compensates for his grumpy-tourist temperament with the following account: And at this very moment, like a miracle, the rail-bus appeared. We waved our arms frantically, hardly daring to hope that it would stop. It did stop. We scrambled thankfully on board. That is the irony of travel. You spend your boyhood dreaming of a magic, impossibly distant day when you will cross the Equator, when your eyes will behold Quito. And then, in the slow prosaic process of life, that day undramatically dawns and finds you sleepy, hungry and dull. The Equator is just another valley; you aren't sure which and you don't much care. Quito is just another railroad station, with fuss about baggage and taxis and tips. And the only comforting reality, amidst all this picturesque noisy strangeness, is to find a clean pension run by Czech refugees and sit down in a cozy Central European parlor to a lunch of well-cooked Wiener Schnitzel (80). Isherwood now echoes his title with this anecdote: Mr. Cooper used also to keep a boa-constrictor and two condors. But the boa had to be gotten rid of; it was always trying to get at the other animals, or escaping and terrifying the neighbors. The condors flew away, which is a great pity; perched on the roof, they must have given the house the air of a Charles Addams drawing in the *New Yorker*. He describes how a party of his friends were riding along a narrow trail in the high mountains when they saw three condors and fired at them. The condors disappeared to get help, apparently for they returned a few minutes later with twenty-five others, and all of them swooped down upon the pack-train. In the confusion, two horses fell over the precipice; their riders jumped clear just in time. Condors will peck the eyes out of cows and then drive them with their wings off the edge of a cliff; the cows get killed and the condors eat them (125). Very subtly Isherwood tells what he believes has happened to the indigenous Indians when attacked by the Conquistadors long ago. These people, like the Chinese peasants [referring to another trip, made in 1938 with W. H. Auden, detailed in *Journey to a War*], have an uncanny air of belonging to their landscape of being, in the profoundest sense, its inhabitants. It would hardly surprise you to see them emerging from or disappearing into the bowels of the earth (143). It is not beneath Isherwood's dignity to criticize others: Cuzco is right on the trans-Andean tourist trail. This hotel is full of tourists. The majority are North

American middle-aged women schoolteachers, mostly. Grimly devout, complaining but undaunted, they make their way over the mountains from Lima to Buenos Aires gasping in the high altitudes, vomiting and terrified in planes, rattled like dice in buses, dragged out of bed before dawn to race along precipice roads, poisoned with strange foods, tricked by shopkeepers, appalled by toilets (145). This is an interesting comment, especially in light of the fact that he seems to be echoing some of his own prissy complaints listed above. In Buenos Aires, Isherwood makes arrangements to stay with an acquaintance from his Berlin days of the 1930s: Berthold. The author tells a long story, which I will not cite in full, in which Berthold tells of visiting New York City and running into someone he had known previously, someone whom he had buried in Africa, thinking the man was dead! What a second-hand tale this makes. (186-8). Argentina, like the United States, has practically liquidated its Indian problem. And much the same manner (193). In the same breath that he is criticizing the US for wholesale liquidation, Isherwood is betraying his own racist bent with the words Indian problem, as if the subjects are unwanted vermin that must be disposed of. It is perhaps a warning to all of us in this era: our words of judgment could, in future years, wind up similarly betraying us. Nonetheless, even sixty-eight years after its publication, Isherwood's prose seems fresh, if only because he is able to write down crisp first impressions of lands he has wanted to visit since he was a child, and yet temper his prose with the studied hand of a professional author. 4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Reluctant traveller, good book

By Hatbox Dragon I saw Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy's house featured in *The World of Interiors* magazine, thought their story sounded interesting, and so decided to try one of Isherwood's books. I decided on this one because I wanted something about him rather than a fictional work, it's about South America and it's short. The book covers Isherwood's trip to South America (Columbia, Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, Argentina) in 1948. It is presented in diary format (though there are many days unaccounted for) with photos by William Caskey, who accompanied Isherwood. If you like your travel writing to have a grand narrative, or your travel writers to have an intense connection to their subject, this may not be the book for you. As the helpful introduction points out, Isherwood made the trip and wrote the book because he was commissioned to. He didn't enjoy himself and there are times when it shows. The travel was hard, being at altitude was draining, and he found himself overwhelmed by the landscape. But as a succession of anecdotes and vignettes - of places, people met along the way, and political situations - I really enjoyed the book for its insight, however patchy, into South America at that time and the touches of Isherwood's own personality. The prose is tight, yet impressively evocative and readable. I'm in no position to judge this book in comparison to Isherwood's more famous works, particularly his novels. All I can say is that it has a similar feel to his diaries, which I've since begun, yet is more polished and just as readable. The photos are excellent (black and white only).

One of the few classic works of South American travel, now available in paperback with a new foreword by Jeffrey Meyers and additional photographs by Isherwood's lover, Bill Caskey. Isherwood frankly depicts the squalor and discomforts of his journey--as he wrote he was very skeptical about the book but later came to regard it as one of his best.

"A very entertaining narrative . . . One is immensely grateful to the writer for having suffered the discomforts of dreary journeys by train, dangerous drives along precipices, and repellent accommodations in order to tell us, in pleasantly assimilable prose, what is to be found in these inaccessible places."