

Hoosier Author as Diplomat

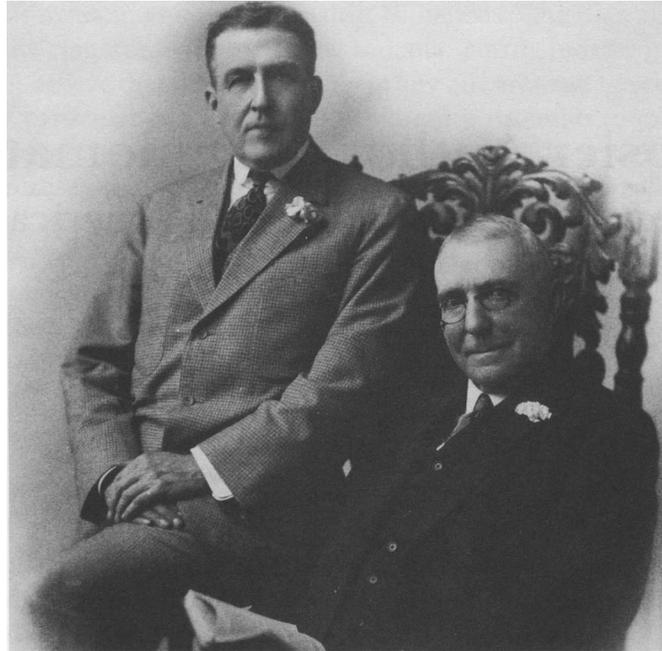
Meredith Nicholson in Latin America, 1933-1941

RALPH D. GRAY

Meredith Nicholson (1866-1947) was an important figure in Indiana's "Golden Age" of literature, which extended roughly from 1880 to 1920. One of the "Big Four" writers—with James Whitcomb Riley, George Ade, and Booth Tarkington—Nicholson authored twenty-eight books, all but two of which were published between 1903 and 1929, a period in which he wrote full time. Most of these works were best-selling novels, but he also produced a history, a book of short stories, four collections of essays, two books of poetry, and a co-authored play. His third novel, *The House of a Thousand Candles* (1905), a thrilling adventure/mystery story set in northern Indiana, was by far his most popular and most successful book. Translated into five languages and still in print today, it has sold more than half a million copies.¹

Ralph D. Gray is emeritus professor of history at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. This paper is based upon a portion of the author's forthcoming book, *Meredith Nicholson: A Writing Life*, scheduled for publication by the Indiana Historical Society Press in 2007.

¹Brief biographical information and a list of Nicholson's books can be found in R. E. Banta, comp., *Indiana Authors and Their Books, 1816-1916* (Crawfordsville, Ind., 1949), 237-39. See also Arthur W. Shumaker, *A History of Indiana Literature, With Emphasis on the Authors of Imaginative Works who Commenced Writing prior to World War II* (*Indiana Historical Collections*,



Meredith Nicholson and James Whitcomb Riley, 1914
Popular writers Nicholson and Riley, with George Ade and Booth
Tarkington, made up the group known as Indiana's "Big Four" authors.
Courtesy Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library Riley Collection

In 1929, however, Nicholson's writing stopped, apparently as a result of the financial devastation experienced by the family in the stock market collapse. Soon afterwards, Nicholson suffered an even greater loss in the death of his beautiful and talented wife, Eugenie, who had been his inspiration and helpmeet throughout his writing years.² Jobless,

Vol. 42; Indianapolis, 1962), 325-37; and Ralph D. Gray, "The Most Rabid of Hoosiers': Meredith Nicholson," *Traces of Indiana and Midwestern History*, 9 (Spring 1997), 14-27.

²Eugenie Kountze, who had married Nicholson in June 1896, was raised in Omaha, Nebraska, and earned a Phi Beta Kappa key en route to graduation from Vassar College in 1889. Although frequently ill, she regularly assisted her not-formally-educated husband in plotting his novels and in selecting quotations—particularly from Shakespeare—for use in them. In an autobiographical essay published in *Collier's* magazine in 1926, Nicholson credited her for making "it possible for me to accomplish what anyone with the slightest discernment would have said . . . I could never do." Nicholson, "Without Benefit of College," reprinted in *Old Familiar Faces*

nearly destitute, and forced in 1931 to give up his home on North Meridian Street, Nicholson's prospects at the outset of the Great Depression seemed dim indeed.

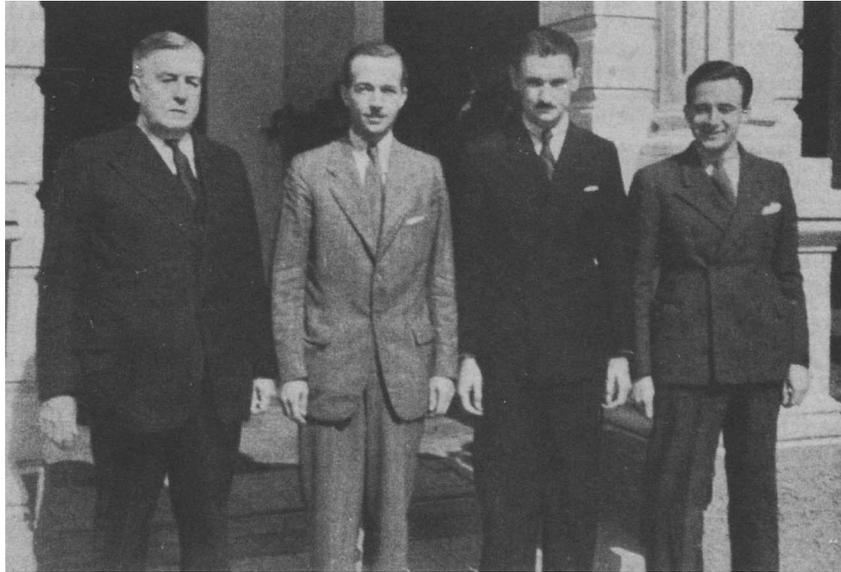
A lifelong Democrat who had been active behind the scenes in the campaigns of others, Nicholson turned for help to his political friends who came into power at that time. Nicholson's longtime friend and personal physician, Dr. Carleton B. McCulloch—who was also a former gubernatorial candidate and current chairman of the Democratic state committee—became his chief promoter. McCulloch enlisted the help of their mutual friend, future governor Paul V. McNutt. In 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who knew Nicholson only by reputation, responded to their entreaties with the offer of a diplomatic appointment to Paraguay.³ As a result, at the age of 66, Nicholson began a new career as a diplomat. Although surprisingly successful, his years abroad would prove star-crossed. After a transfer to a more favorable post in Venezuela in 1935, Nicholson found the rising path of his new career suddenly veering downward under mysterious circumstances in 1938 with his demotion to Nicaragua. It was there, in 1941, that he decided to end his service abroad.

Nicholson's nearly eight years as an American diplomat began in October 1933. No known record explains his selection for the Paraguayan mission: he seemed to be both a deserving and qualified candidate for this remote and low-profile position. A month of "instruction" at the State Department provided the new diplomat with general details of the situation in Paraguay and taught him the basic protocols for a minister of his rank. Then, literally on the eve of his departure, Nicholson married his secretary, Dorothy Wolfe Lannon, of Marion, Indiana. This action proved fateful, both in terms of Nicholson's initial success in dealing with Latin Americans and, more ominously, in terms of his subsequent demotion.

Following a long cruise from New York City to Buenos Aires aboard the S. S. *Southern Cross*, a four-day steamboat ride up the Paraná

(Indianapolis, 1929), 115. See also Roberta West Nicholson, interviews by F. Gerald Handfield, Jr., March 11, 16, 1977 (Indiana State Library, Manuscripts Division, Indianapolis).

³See Nicholson to McCulloch, September 29, 1933, in which he thanked the Democratic leader for getting him started on his diplomatic adventures. Frequent references to Paul and Kathleen McNutt also appear in this correspondence. Carleton B. McCulloch Collection, A249 (Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis).



Nicholson and his legation staff in Paraguay, c. 1934
(l-r) Nicholson, third secretary George H. Butler, and clerks Philip Raine and Donald S. Kent
The American Foreign Service Journal, 11 (October 1934), 519

and the Paraguay rivers brought the Nicholsons to the Paraguayan capital of Asunción. There, the couple quickly settled into their new life, thanks in large measure to Spanish-speaking Dorothy's ability to help with the social requirements of entertaining guests and to communicate with the local staff, merchants, and (frequently needed) repairmen.⁴ Soon after arriving, the new minister presented his credentials to President Eusebio Ayala (1875-1942), with whom he struck an immediate rapport. A writer like Nicholson, Ayala welcomed the North American novelist with sincere warmth.⁵ As the weeks wore on,

⁴Nicholson admitted to a friend back home that "frankly, I shouldn't have been able to stay here if I had come alone. Dorothy takes excellent care of me and she has been doing heroic tasks fixing up this old palace. If painters and carpenters are difficult in Indiana, they are forty times worse in these parts." Nicholson to Margaret [Shipp], January 27, 1934, Meredith Nicholson Collection, A 285 (Indiana Historical Society).

⁵This rapport between authors was serendipitous rather than planned. Ayala is remembered in his native country as both a "Victory President" in the Chaco War and as a literary man. Justo

Nicholson dined alone with Ayala almost every Sunday evening, often learning about Paraguayan military or peacekeeping plans long before the representatives from other countries. This inside information, which he promptly passed on to his superiors in Washington, D.C., put Nicholson, as he boasted to his friend and confidant McCulloch, “about ten laps ahead of the other dips.”⁶

Nicholson’s position grew increasingly more significant as events unfolded around him. No existing records suggest that he received any special instructions about the post, but since 1928 Paraguay and Bolivia had battled over the territory known as the Gran Chaco. The area was large—some 150,000 square miles, roughly the size of Montana (or four times the size of Indiana)—low-lying, swampy, virtually uninhabited, and economically marginal, “without vegetable or mineral wealth.” Unproven rumors persisted, however, that the region contained valuable petroleum deposits. Additionally, the quest for access to the Atlantic via a port on the Paraguay River motivated land-locked Bolivia’s attempted military takeover of the region. State department official Sumner Welles called the Chaco War the “most bitter inter-American dispute” of the century. Nicholson’s diplomatic role was complicated by the popular Paraguayan suspicion that American “dollar diplomacy” or “petroleum imperialism”—specifically the Standard Oil Company—supported the Bolivian effort.⁷

Repeatedly, with Nicholson’s support, League of Nations commissioners tried to mediate the Chaco War but those efforts, apart from an unpopular armistice foolishly suggested by President Ayala in late

Prieto, *Eusebio Ayala, presidente de la victoria* (Buenos Aires, 1950); Ayala, *Aspectos americanos de la personalidad de Sarmiento*, Museo Histórico Sarmiento, serie 2, no. 4 (Buenos Aires, 1939). An interesting way to learn about Paraguay and its people, geography, and early history is through a heavily factual novel by Edward Lucas White, *El Supremo: A Romance of the Great Dictator of Paraguay* (New York, 1916).

⁶Nicholson to McCulloch, October 13, 1933, McCulloch Collection. The collection is the best source of information regarding Nicholson’s years in Latin America generally. In particular, Nicholson describes his reception in Asunción and his quickly developing relationship with Ayala.

⁷*The Chaco Peace Conference: Report of the Delegation of the United States of America to the Peace Conference Held at Buenos Aires July 1, 1935-January 23, 1939* (Washington, D.C., 1940), 3. Considerable literature treats the Chaco War, a major event in Paraguay’s history. David H. Zook, *The Conduct of the Chaco War* (New York, 1960); Hubert Herring, *A History of Latin America, from the Beginning to the Present*, 3d ed. (New York, 1972); Robert Craig Johnson, “The Gran Chaco War: Fighting for Mirages in the Foothills of the Andes” (1996), <http://worldat-war.net/chandelle/v1/v1n3/chaco.html>.

December 1933, came to nothing. The armistice actually gave Bolivia welcome respite and a chance to increase the size of its fighting force. Despite their numbers, the Bolivian foot soldiers, usually Indians from the *altiplano* of La Paz with an elevation of some 12,000 to 14,000 feet, found conditions in the low-lying, snake-infested swamplands of the Chaco most unpleasant and dispiriting. Fighting resumed in January 1934 when the truce expired, but eventually an agreement in June 1935 ended the hostilities and a peace treaty followed in 1938, giving the victorious Paraguayans clear title to the disputed region while also opening up a small corridor through it to give Bolivia its desired river port.

Nicholson played an important role in reporting on conditions in Asunción and Paraguay during his fifteen months on duty there, and his personal popularity helped overcome resentment against the Americans for their oil company's alleged support of Bolivia. His monthly reports to the State Department on the "General Conditions Prevailing in Paraguay," demonstrate a flair for interesting writing and astute political insights that perhaps drew as much on his twelve years as a reporter and editor for the *Indianapolis News* as it did on his experience as a novelist and essayist.

From his earliest reports, Nicholson displayed a confidence in his information and an understanding of the complexities of the war and of Paraguayan life and society. These messages supplemented his frequent telegraphic dispatches to the State Department, and included pertinent extracts from the Asunción newspapers, each clearly identified as to its political leanings. Nicholson's characterizations of the people whom he encountered in his work were candid and pointed. He wrote, for example, that he considered Ayala's appointment to the negotiating table of one of his leading critics to be "good politics" but probably not "such good diplomacy." "[He is] notoriously intransigent," wrote Nicholson of Dr. Gerónimo Zubizarreta, "a lawyer with a medieval reverence for form and precedent, a forceful advocate but an unpleasant negotiator whom the Commission has not found easy to deal with." In another letter, he described Dr. Justo Pastor Benitez, the principal Paraguayan delegate at the Seventh Pan-American Conference in Montevideo in 1933, as being ineffective because of "his intoxication with his own eloquence."⁸

⁸"General Conditions Prevailing in Paraguay," January 15, 1934, State Department Files, Latin America, RG56 (National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.). Nicholson's regular reports (usually monthly) bore the same title with different dates of preparation.

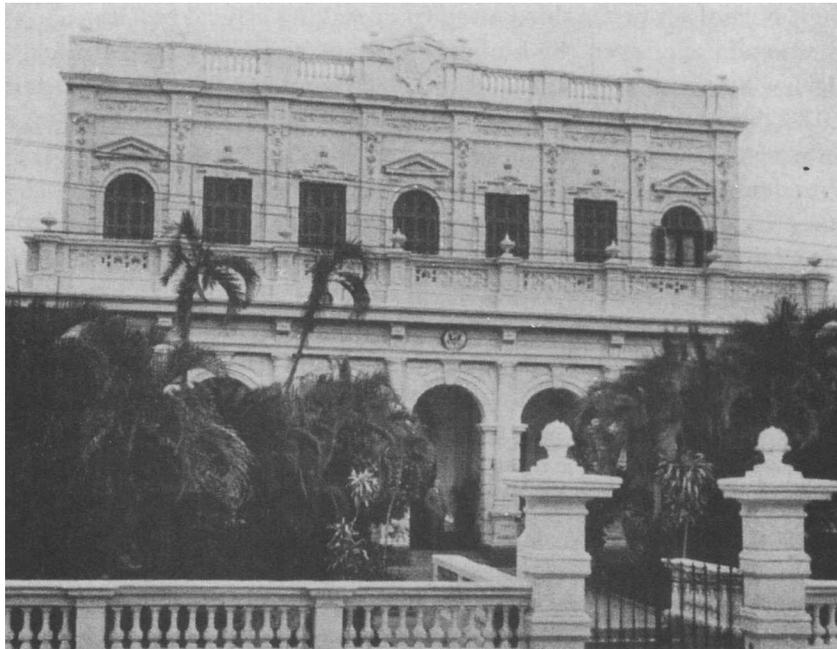
Nicholson never shied away from making critical remarks about the members of even the highest circles of Paraguayan government. Reviewing the country's succession of officeholders between 1912 and 1928, he noted that in a period "which should have covered four administrations of four years, there were 8 Presidents, 4 Vice-Presidents, and 59 Cabinet Ministers. These 71 offices were held by the same 28 men, who shifted about from one post to another. Very probably a few new leaders will emerge as a result of the war, but the tendency in Paraguay is for the Government to have the nature of a monopoly held by a few families." Later, in a "confidential" analysis of President Ayala's administration, he pointed to "some differences" within the cabinet which had led to the appointment of a new minister for foreign affairs and to the dismissal of "several army officers" for "alleged failures in the Chaco." "It is obvious," Nicholson continued, "that popular unrest is growing" and that "the internal political situation has distinctly disturbing features."⁹

These letters also regularly featured the ambassador's remarks on various aspects of life and society in the capital city. Although Nicholson praised Asunción, in a published essay, for its "old world charm" and its "beautiful and picturesque" countryside, his private letters and internal reports reveal another city altogether. He noted the city's "alarming health conditions" exacerbated by the lack of a sewer system and the "flies and skeeters" that gathered everywhere. Most of the homes lacked fireplaces or furnaces, he added, even though temperatures dipped to near-freezing levels at times. The exceptions, according to Nicholson, were a few homes with tiny electric heaters "about the size of a pocket watch."¹⁰

Despite his achievements in Paraguay, Nicholson eagerly desired reassignment to a place nearer home with less primitive conditions. In his private correspondence with McCulloch he regularly noted vacancies in places that he considered attractive—including Albania, Chile, and the Irish Free State—and he expressed his hope that McCulloch, through Governor McNutt, would keep Nicholson's availability and

⁹"General Conditions Prevailing in Paraguay," May 4, July 6, 1934.

¹⁰Nicholson, "The Land of the Tall Poinsettia," *The American Foreign Service Journal*, 11 (October 1934), 517-19, 554-55; Nicholson to McCulloch, January 12, 1935, McCulloch Collection.



The American Legation building, Asunción, Paraguay, c. 1934

Nicholson arrived to find the building in great need of repairs, commenting to a friend, "If painters and carpenters are difficult in Indiana, they are forty times worse in these parts."

The American Foreign Service Journal, 11 (October 1934), 519

interest in relocating before the president. His friends at home were aware of this and did all they could. As McCulloch reported back to Nicholson in December 1934,

Paul [McNutt] was in Washington . . . and had a long interview with the President, in the course of which he brought up the matter of your transfer. The President told him he already had definitely in mind the question of transferring you to some more attractive post and went further and intimated that an ambassadorship for you was in his mind when a suitable vacancy occurred. He went on to tell Paul that you have been doing an outstanding job and he is very much pleased with what you have accomplished. He did say, though, that with Paraguayan-Bolivian conditions being what they are just now you have really made

yourself too valuable to justify a transfer until matters have cleared up somewhat down there.¹¹

In February 1935, once a military decision in Paraguay's favor seemed likely, Roosevelt finally authorized Nicholson's transfer to Caracas, Venezuela. Described by McCulloch as the "Paris of South America," the new post proved to be a delightful contrast to Asunción, and its relative nearness to the United States kept Nicholson more in touch with domestic affairs and happily allowed for more frequent meetings with travelers from home. Yet Nicholson found Caracas's living expenses—reputedly the highest in the continent—"altitudinous," and he struggled to make ends meet while fulfilling both the social and official duties of his position. The most burdensome requirement involved hosting endless parties—"feedings and cocktails," as he termed it—usually at the minister's personal expense.¹²

Again, Nicholson represented his country well and befriended Venezuelan leaders, including the aged dictator, General Juan Vicente Gómez, the unmarried but proud father of perhaps one hundred children, most of whom carried the Gómez name and in time held high offices in the government. Gómez's death in December 1935 prevented Nicholson's planned return home for Christmas because the nearly 70-year-old diplomat stayed on and, while dressed in formal evening wear, marched "those three awful miles" in the funeral procession.¹³

In 1938, Nicholson's diplomatic life underwent an abrupt change. Without warning, President Roosevelt ordered Nicholson's immediate transfer from Venezuela to Nicaragua, in effect demoting him to a much less desirable post. Not only was Nicaragua officially labeled as a "hardship" post—which meant, among other things, that embassy personnel could vacation outside, rather than within, the country—but the accom-

¹¹McCulloch to Nicholson, December 26, 1934, McCulloch Collection.

¹²McCulloch to Nicholson, May 9, July 31, 1935, Nicholson to McCulloch, July 20, December 3, 1935, McCulloch Collection. For an overview of life in Venezuela about the time of Nicholson's residence there, see John Gunther, *Inside Latin America* (New York, 1941), 176-86; for analysis of U.S.-Venezuelan relations see Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy Toward Latin America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998).

¹³Nicholson to McCulloch, January 28, 1936, McCulloch Collection.

modations for the diplomatic staff were substandard. Nicholson rarely complained about his accommodations, but in his initial report to McCulloch he described the new legation building (which replaced the former house destroyed by an earthquake six years earlier) as “full of leaks, to say nothing of the ceiling in the master’s bedroom which may fall according to Newton’s law without waiting for an earthquake.” He then added that it was “sad that our government hasn’t provided a decent house for its representative.” Reporter Ernie Pyle, visiting Nicaragua in 1940, echoed the observation, noting that a “strong tropical wind whips through the [ambassador’s] house continually. There are no glass windows, and the doors don’t fit.” Pyle also described the primitive conditions in the capital city of Managua: one “sky-scraper”—a four-story office building—featuring the city’s only elevator, public transportation by horse-drawn carriages, an unreliable water supply, and a telephone service that was “100 per cent mystic.”¹⁴

Neither state department files, personal correspondence, nor the press yield any reason for Nicholson’s transfer to Nicaragua. Family tradition, apparently based on information personally delivered by a state department official behind closed doors to Nicholson’s children, holds that Mrs. Nicholson’s “flagrant indiscretions” with some United States naval officers prompted the change. Nicholson, blithely unaware of these developments, believed simply that “politics” were to blame. In his place, the Venezuelan appointment went to a friend of James A. Farley, Roosevelt’s political confidant, campaign manager, and the postmaster general.¹⁵ Nicholson accepted the change and remained loyal and supportive of his wife throughout.¹⁶

¹⁴Nicholson to McCulloch, June 15, 1938, McCulloch Collection; Ernie Pyle, “Hoosier Vagabond,” *Indianapolis Times*, February 24, 26, 1940.

¹⁵The new appointee was Antonio C. Gonzalez, a native New Yorker, who, like Nicholson, had entered the foreign service in 1933, being posted first in Panama and then Ecuador. The early arrival of Gonzalez’s baggage in Caracas was Nicholson’s first indication that he was to be replaced.

¹⁶The family, however, continues to hold an extremely low opinion of Dorothy Lannon. When asked where the second Mrs. Nicholson had come from, Nicholson’s daughter-in-law replied bitterly “from under a rock.” Roberta West Nicholson, interviews by Handfield. The fullest account of Nicholson’s demotion, based on interviews with family members, can be found in the unpublished manuscript by Allegra Stewart, “Meredith Nicholson Revisited” (Special Collections Department, Irwin Library, Butler University, Indianapolis).

In Nicaragua, Nicholson again made the best of his new situation. He arrived just prior to the official installation of President Anastasio Somoza, a man of ability and courage as well as a ruthless dictator who had seized power the previous year (1937). Nicholson got along well with the likable rogue, who spoke fluent English and shared with Nicholson a deep admiration for Franklin D. Roosevelt. Nicholson worked to further good relations with the Nicaraguan government and people and helped in making Nicaragua a strong ally of the United States, a basic policy of the U.S. in its dealings with all five Central American nations.¹⁷

Still the astute commentator, Nicholson made some of his most significant observations in April 1939, when he wrote at length about President Somoza. Although Nicholson had quickly established and maintained good personal relations with the self-installed dictator, his description of Somoza was penetrating and nuanced. Nicholson cautioned Washington not to assume that the recent extension of Somoza's presidency by the constituent assembly represented "public confidence" or a "sincere admiration on the part of the great body of the people." Instead, "the failure of any real opposition" to him was attributable to "suppression" and intimidation "by the *Guardia*" (national guard). Nicholson called Somoza's strong-arm methods "Hitleresque," compared his greed and cruelty to that of former Venezuelan dictator Gómez, and detailed corruption and dishonesty that extended even to Somoza's dealings with the American legation. Personally, however, Nicholson noted that Somoza was "unfailingly affable, ingratiating, and persuasive." Overall, while Nicholson considered Somoza untrustworthy and insincere, he appreciated the man's consistent pro-American stance; the dictator's personal shortcomings did nothing to derail the administration's policy of friendship with all governments south of the border.¹⁸

Two highlights of Nicholson's difficult years in Nicaragua deserve mention. Although bureaucratic duties prevented Nicholson from going along, the Nicaraguan president made an official visit in May 1939 to the

¹⁷Walter F. LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*, 2d ed. (New York, 1993).

¹⁸Nicholson to Secretary of State Cordell Hull, April 11, 1939, as quoted in Paul Coe Clark, Jr., *The United States and Somoza, 1933-1956: A Revisionist Look* (Westport, Conn., 1992), 56-57. Clark's account relies heavily on Nicholson's observations of Somoza.

United States, where he had been educated. Roosevelt welcomed him, approved a \$2.1 million line of credit for infrastructure work in Nicaragua, and then joined the Somoza party the next day on their visit to Mount Vernon. Somoza also addressed both houses of Congress and professed his loyalty to the United States and to democratic values. Then, as a token of his affection for the American minister, Somoza arranged for his California-bound entourage to stop in Indianapolis. There, as a surprise, he was reunited with some American marines who had helped to train Nicaraguan soldiers under his command. He visited the Indiana State House, the War Memorial, and, finally, the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, where preparations for the 500-mile race were underway. The irrepressible Nicaraguan president, reportedly once a used-car salesman in Philadelphia, jumped into the pace car—a Buick—and drove it and three uneasy passengers (including Governor M. Clifford Townsend and three-time race winner Louie Meyer) rapidly around the track, squealing the tires loudly as he returned to the pits.¹⁹

Ernie Pyle's 1940 visit to Managua marked a second highlight. Pyle, then in his days as a "vagabond reporter," toured Central America shortly after war had broken out in Europe. He devoted five columns to Nicaragua, including one describing his dinner with fellow Hoosier Nicholson and a few others. Pyle greatly admired the famed novelist, and he enjoyed the camaraderie, good humor, and hospitality of the American minister. He also expressed concern about Nicholson's well-being, suggesting that the diplomat owed his country nothing more and could honorably come home and rest on his laurels. Perhaps these comments were a factor in Nicholson's decision to return home the next year.²⁰

In summary, Nicholson's diplomatic career imitated his writing career in its string of unlikely successes. A high school dropout in his freshman year, he had unexpectedly and improbably become a best-selling novelist. Likewise, without any training and without ever holding an elected or appointed public office higher than a seat on the Indianapolis City Council, he became a surprisingly effective and successful repre-

¹⁹The account of Somoza's visit to Indianapolis can best be followed in the city's newspapers. See especially the *Indianapolis News*, May 25, 1939. For a full account of the Washington portion of the trip see Clark, *The United States and Somoza*, 69-71.

²⁰Pyle, *Indianapolis Times*, February 26, 1940.

sentative of the American people in three Latin American countries. Indeed, one Nicaraguan journalist suggested that his country should establish and then bestow a special Rubén Darío Medal, named in honor of the country's leading poet and novelist, upon Meredith Nicholson in recognition of his distinguished diplomatic service.²¹ Unexpectedly sent to a remote, uncomfortable legation in Paraguay, Nicholson found himself in a position that had become perhaps the most sensitive on the continent. As Secretary of State Cordell Hull suggests in his memoirs, the Chaco War occupied a primary place of concern in the administration's Latin America policy. This conflict, unusually bitter and bloody, also dominated the proceedings at high-level Pan-American conferences in Montevideo in 1933 and Buenos Aires in 1935, the latter of which both Hull and Roosevelt (briefly) attended.²²

In broad perspective, Nicholson appeared on the scene precisely at the moment of a "historic shift" in American foreign policy. Although the U.S.'s "Good Neighbor" policy had been anticipated by President Herbert Hoover (who coined the phrase), his was a policy mainly of non-intervention and of American troop withdrawal; Roosevelt offered friendship and trade in addition to pledging not to interfere in the internal affairs of America's sister states.²³

Nicholson's role in implementing the new policy in all three of his postings caught the attention of his superiors. "Secretary Hull has often praised my work," Nicholson told his American confidant in September 1934, but he saw the irony in the situation too. By doing good work in Paraguay, which he later termed "the most undesirable place" in all of South America, he jeopardized his chances for a transfer to a more desirable post.²⁴

Back in the United States, Nicholson's final years included both small triumphs and tragedies. When he and the still new (to former Indianapolis friends) Mrs. Nicholson failed to find full acceptance in the

²¹Gabry Rivas, "If There Existed An Order of Ruben Dario," *La Nueva Prensa*, as translated and published in the *Indianapolis Star*, March 4, 1941.

²²Cordell Hull, *The Memoirs of Cordell Hull*, 2 vols. (New York, 1948), esp. chapters 23-25 in the first volume.

²³Max Paul Friedman, *Nazis and Good Neighbors: The United States Campaign Against the Germans of Latin America in World War II* (New York, 2003), 76-77.

²⁴Nicholson to McCulloch, September 15, October 30, 1934, McCulloch Collection.

old hometown, the couple moved to a lovely home near both the waterfront and the old City Gate in St. Augustine, Florida. Nicholson continued to follow world developments closely, gave occasional talks to civic and church groups, and enjoyed the companionship of his neighbor and fellow author, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings. But life in Florida failed to meet all of the Hoosier's expectations, and the couple returned to Indianapolis in 1943. Soon thereafter, Nicholson began to write a twice-weekly column for the *Indianapolis Star*. These columns, which appeared on Mondays and Thursdays and carried individual titles but ran under the general heading of "Without Prejudice," continued, with only one brief interruption caused by an illness, from April 1943 into September 1944, when they were unceremoniously and inexplicably ended by the newspaper's new publisher, Eugene C. Pulliam.

On December 24, 1943, the Nicholsons divorced. No explanation for this action has been found, other than Nicholson's statement to the judge that "my wife says she no longer loves me." It appears that Mrs. Nicholson, an unknown number of years (perhaps as many as twenty-eight) younger than her husband, wanted to move on. The former Mrs. Nicholson disappeared from public record and she remains a shadowy figure to this day, for no one has yet been able to discover the basic details of her life.²⁵ Nicholson, now single again, returned to the place he had lived following the death of his first wife, the Indianapolis Athletic Club, and there he spent the final four years of his life.

His daughter-in-law, the accomplished Roberta West Nicholson, served as the author-diplomat's last chief caregiver, calling on him regularly (often with a favorite delicacy, oyster soup) and keeping him in touch with the outside world.²⁶ Nicholson outlived all of his fellow "Big

²⁵Neither professional genealogists in Fort Wayne nor librarians and historians in Marion and Grant County have been able to establish the place and date of birth or the place and date of death for Dorothy. It is possible that the Dorothy G. Lannon listed in the census returns for 1930 is the lady in question, but doubt remains. This Mrs. Lannon, a stenographer living on the Indianapolis east side, was born in 1894 in Indiana; her husband, Carl T. Lannon, fifty-one years older and also a native Hoosier, was born in 1843, so she could have been widowed and "available" by 1933. Yet, a newspaper photograph of Mr. and Mrs. Nicholson in the latter 1930s suggests that she could be closer to the age of her husband, but perhaps not. Nevertheless, I am grateful to Mary Ann Bradley and Martin Lake, Indiana Historical Society trustees, for finding the census report and for their interest and assistance in the search.

²⁶Roberta West Nicholson served in the Indiana House, 1935-37 (the only female at the time), and became nationally famous for her "anti-heart balm" bill. She later became an outstanding leader in the area of public health. Laura S. Gaus, "Roberta West Nicholson," in David J.

Four” authors: Riley had died in 1916, Ade in 1944, and Tarkington in 1946. In early December 1947, Nicholson slipped into a diabetic coma and was rushed to Methodist Hospital, where he remained for a few days. He revived on his birthday, December 9, to enjoy a dish of ice cream, but then lapsed again. Ironically, his death, on December 21, 1947, occurred exactly sixteen years after the death of his first wife Eugenie. Perhaps the *New York Times* notice said it best: Nicholson was “the last leaf on a famous literary tree that grew in Indiana. It was a sturdy tree, pleasant and shady, watered in the American tradition with its roots deep in the soil of the state. In its day, it was one of the outstanding features of our literary landscape.”²⁷ Nicholson’s reputation remains primarily that of an Indiana author, not of a late-blooming diplomat. Nevertheless, he proved successful in both endeavors.



Bodenhamer and Robert G. Barrows, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Indianapolis* (Bloomington, Ind., 1994), 1053.

²⁷“Meredith Nicholson,” *New York Times*, December 22, 1947.