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The Island of Cuba: A Political Essay (review)

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Alexander von Humboldt. *The Island of Cuba: A Political Essay*. Translated and edited by Luis Martínez-Fernández. Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2001. 280 pp.

Alexander von Humboldt, whom José de la Luz y Caballero referred to as “the second discoverer of Cuba,” was the first and most important of many nineteenth-century traveler writers and scientists to rediscover Cuba. Humboldt visited the island as part of a five-year trip, in which he and the French physician and naturalist Aimé Bonpland visited Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Chile, Mexico, and the United States.

Arriving in Havana from Cumaná in December 1800, the German scientist and the French naturalist spent three months in Cuba, mingling with the island’s leading citizens and scientists and gathering data on the island. Humboldt and Bonpland largely confined their travels to Havana and its environs, venturing only to Batabanó on the southern coast, the Isle of Pines, Cayo Bonito, and the city of Trinidad. Departing Cuba for Cartagena in March 1801, Humboldt and Bonpland returned to Cuba for only a brief stay in the Spring of 1804, visiting the Cerro of Guanabacoa.

For the next two decades Humboldt continued to collect data on Cuba before publishing his findings and observations on the island colony in 1826. His *Political Essay* appeared in French in 1826, in Spanish in 1827, and in English in 1829. Decades later, in 1856, John S. Thrasher, an American expansionist and proponent of the annexation of Cuba, translated and abridged Humboldt’s work, adding notes throughout the text, updating statistics, fronting Humboldt’s essay with one of his own, and deleting Humboldt’s chapter on the Nature of Slavery.

This 2001 edition of Humboldt’s *Political Essay* is Thrasher’s 1856 translation, with some valuable additions. Although unauthorized and abridged, the 1856 translation is considered far superior to the 1829 effort, which is virtually unreadable. This latest edition includes an excellent introduction by Luis Martínez Fernández; the original chapter on the Nature of Slavery, translated by Shelley L. Frisch; letters from Humboldt and Thrasher that appeared in the *New York Times* concerning the controversial 1856 translation; and a brief essay by Frank Argote-Freyre on the relationship between Humboldt and the Cuban economist and statesman Francisco de Arango y Pareño.

The greatest value of Humboldt’s *Political Essay* and Thrasher’s Preliminary Essay and extensive notes are as historical documents written for nineteenth-century European and American audiences. A contemporary Cuban, such as Arango y Pareño, could find fault in Humboldt’s facts. A modern student of Cuba will find frustrating the lack of specificity in Humboldt’s analyses. Is he describing Cuban society as it existed in 1800, when he visited the island, or in 1825 when his data gathering came to a close? A reader may find Humboldt’s

scientific writing — “veins twelve or fourteen inches thick, filled with fibrous quartz, amethyst, and rich mammilated stalactiform chalcedony” (96) — less than appealing. There is, however, much to savor in this edition.

This 2001 edition of Humboldt’s *Political Essay* that includes Thrasher’s essay and notes to the 1856 edition, an excellent introduction, the chapter on the nature of slavery that had been missing from the earlier edition, letters from the German scientist and the American expansionist and annexationist published in 1856, and an analysis of the Humboldt and Arango y Pareño dialogue is a good primary reader on nineteenth-century Cuba. This book is appropriate for upper-level undergraduate and graduate courses on Cuba and Cuban-American relations in the nineteenth century.

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Jorge Ibarra. *Prologue to Revolution: Cuba, 1898–1958*. Translated by Marjorie Moore. Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998. 229 pp.

Jorge Ibarra Cuesta has approached Cuban history from many different vantage points in a series of articles and books. He has published comparative work on the formation of nations in the nineteenth-century Antilles, and has studied the political history of the dependent Cuban republic and the long-term development of Cuban mentalities as seen in the popular idiom, such as fiction and pictorial art. He is known for his influential writings on the ideology and politics of the antislavery independence movement, sustaining the continuities with the 1959 revolution (*Ideología mambisa*, 1967).

The present volume is a groundbreaking, systematic study of the development of Cuban economic and social structures between the installation of U.S. control in 1898 and the beginning of revolutionary change in 1959. It incorporates the contributions of many scholars to important aspects of the question, contests some, and explores a number of new areas in order to complete the coverage.

Long in the making, the book reflects several factors in the author’s personal development: the influence of the revolutionary conjuncture of the 1950s, which marked him as it did the leaders of the 1959 revolution; his early polemics with Marxist historians of an older generation, which led him by 1970 to a careful examination of Lenin’s methodology for researching capitalism; the rejection of wishful historiography; and the choice of a structural approach for this economic and social history of the dependent republic, complementary to his work on mentalities. It will challenge students of Cuban history for many years to come.