

Book Review:
Cubans in America: A Vibrant History of a People in Exile
Alex Antón and Roger E. Hernández
by
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The history of the Cuban presence in the United States is adeptly explored in this excellent book. This tome proves without question that Cubans have lived in “America” much longer than any English-speaking settlers. In 1565, forty-two years before Jamestown and Plymouth Rock, natives of Cuba began settling in San Agustín (St. Augustine), Florida, the oldest permanent European settlement in what is now the United States of America.

Cubans in America consists of ten chapters divided into three time periods. The first three chapters deal with “Beginnings to Republic” from 1492 to 1902. The second section covers “Republic to Revolution” from 1902-1958. The last segment “Revolution to Exile” contains five chapters, illustrating the period from 1959 to the present. Many never-before-published, rare historical paintings and photographs are also included in this new reference book.

The information in the last section will be, perhaps, the most familiar to most readers, since it deals with the most recent past: the second half of the twentieth century with Fidel Castro as the central figure. Castro’s peaceful takeover of the government of Cuba after the departure of Fulgencio Batista on the first day of the year 1959, is followed by “dissent among the revolutionaries.” The disagreement between the rebels occurs because of fear and concern that Castro, the new leader of the nation, may have possible communist ties. By 1960, Castro’s communist ties are evident, leading to the exile of 60,000 Cuban refugees. The troublesome diplomatic relationship between Cuba and the United States is described next: including the U.S. embargo, the Bay of Pigs invasion, and the Missile Crisis. Antón and Hernández depict “Cuban Miami in the early 1960’s,” as the time when many Cubans start making plans to try to succeed financially in the United States, since Castro’s overthrow is apparently going to take much longer than expected. Southwest Miami becomes an economic enclave where many small Cuban businesses are started with the help of every available family member. “The Golden Worms” as this new wave is called include mostly professional exiles. The most spectacular group of “Golden Worms” is the Peter Pan children—14,000 unescorted children who leave the island by themselves with the help of the American Catholic Church.

By 1965, the refugees are coming from every economic and educational background on the island. Many refugees come by the Freedom Flights or the first boatlift allowed by Castro from the port of Camarioca in Cuba. In Miami, “by 1979, over 60 percent of Cuban families own their own homes, more than one-third of Miami’s businesses are owned or operated by Cubans, ...” (185). The extraordinary economic success of Cuban Miami is even more amazing when one realizes that Cuban Refugees were not able to bring any money with them and any property left in Cuba was confiscated by the Castro regime.

In 1980, the most successful aliens in the history of immigration in the United States

suffer a reversal of fortune. Castro allows Cuban-Americans to pick up their relatives at the port of Mariel, Cuba, and bring them to the United States. Castro includes mental patients, murderers, and common prisoners along with family members of the Cuban-Americans on the ships. The authors include many “Marielito” success stories, as well as the sensational negative news stories. The book ends with another disaster from the perspective of the Cuban-American community—the Elián crisis.

Moving back chronologically, the middle segment of *Cubans in America* encompasses the fifty-six years of the Cuban Republic. Independence from Spain brings a period where Cuba remains linked to the United States government. When the American forces leave Cuba in 1902, after the (Cuban) Spanish-American War, the United States keeps one foot in Cuban territory, not only with the naval base in Guantanamo, but also politically. The Platt Amendment, which allows the United States to intervene in Cuban affairs, is seen by many of those who fought for independence from Spain as a hollow victory; as if one master has just been exchanged for another.

As indicated at the beginning of this book review, it is the first part of this volume that is groundbreaking. Several authors have successfully explored the Cuban-American community recently (Levine & Asís: *Cuban Miami*, González-Pando: *The Cuban Americans Greater Miami: Spirit of Cuban Enterprise*, Boswell & Curtis: *The Cuban-American Experience*), the period of the Cuban Republic has been studied much longer with a high degree of competence (Thomas: *Cuba or The Pursuit of Freedom*). It is the period from September 8, 1565, in San Agustín, Florida, to the American Civil War where this book shines with completely new material. There are several brilliant studies in this book that have been either forgotten or not researched in detail previously. The first event has to do with the relationship between St. Augustine and Havana, “St. Augustine was almost completely dependent on Havana for goods, government services, religious leadership, and financial support” (8). The second event not mentioned in most history books is the Cuban involvement during the American Revolution; Antón and Hernández, give specific examples of the Cuban involvement during the American Revolution: “It was a force which included Cuban troops under General Bernardo de Gálvez that drove the Redcoats out of West Florida and the Gulf, opening a second front while Washington’s Continental Army prepared the final blow at Yorktown. And it was money raised by Havana residents that helped finance the Yorktown campaign itself” (18). Juan Miralles’ friendship with Washington is also chronicled. Another pioneering event is the information put together by Antón and Hernández on the Cuban participants on both sides of the American Civil War. Lieutenant Colonel Julius P. Garesché, Adolfo Fernández Cavada and Federico Fernández Cavada, Ambrosio Gónzales, and Loreta Janeta Velásquez are names that are not mentioned in most history books when talking about the American Civil War. The first part of this volume ends with Cuba’s War of Independence and how exiles in the United States financially helped the cause of Cuban independence from Ybor City in Tampa.

Biography

Henry Pérez, Professor of Foreign Languages, is a native of Cuba. He graduated from the University of Massachusetts at Boston with a double major in English and Spanish. He received his Ph. D. in Spanish and Latin American Literature from the University of Massachusetts at

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