

IMAGES AND IMAGINATIONS MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY TRAVELERS IN CUBA

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This essay comments on narratives published by ten English-speaking travelers who visited Cuba between 1845 and 1885. The choice of this set of works was not originally a considered one on my part. I chanced to find all these books in the University of Oregon Library in the pre-Internet days when I was a graduate student (and it was not as easy as it is now to identify esoteric sources). At the time, I was more interested in what they had to say about Cuba than in the writers themselves and their narratives, but they and their stories have continued to intrigue me. And, although I did not create this collection in an intentional way, it eventually occurred to me that someone had. The presence of those books in the closed-stack nineteenth-century building, around which the “new” library was constructed in the 1930s (and repeatedly enlarged since then), meant that the librarians who ordered and accessioned those volumes were of the same generation as the authors and were purchasing what to them were contemporary works. The creation of these travelogues and their presence in the library were all of a piece.

History has been described as “a controlled act of the imagination,” virtually a response-theory concept that defines history as a mental activity by means of which we create meaning. It reminds us that the act of history always has two components: the past and us. In my imagination, then, I brought together these ten travelers, almost like participants in a seminar, and I constructed a narrative that sought to allow them to speak—individually and as a group—on the subjects they chose. As it turned out, there were some topics that drew the attention of every one of them, as different as they were in background and personality. On some of these there was wide agreement, but on others they disagreed strongly.

Three of these writers—Fredrika Bremer, Richard Henry Dana and Anthony Trollope—were already widely-published authors before they went to Cuba. Bremer took time out of an American tour, partly to escape for a while from the suffocating attention of her fans. (Benson xvii) They all brought their experienced eyes and pens to the project of composing accounts of their travel. Others traveled for business, pleasure or their health, and perhaps had no plans to write about the island, except in letters back home or private journals. But almost inevitably their stories burst forth. As one of them remarked: “Who, in these days of easy adventure, does not make a voyage, . . . swell with wonder at the largeness of his comprehension—and return, if haply he may, to his native land to pour into the listening ears of friends and countrymen the tale of his ups and downs?” (Norman 21). The step from parlor talk to book-in-print was also quickly taken. Contemporary lives could often be summed up, according to the same traveler: “He lived, traveled, wrote a book, and died” (22).

Those comments reveal a refreshing willingness to treat themselves and their sometimes perfervid pronouncements with considerable irony. Dana, for instance, having arrived at the Robinson Street Pier in New York, observed that the embarking crowd included

Shivering Cubans, exotics that have taken slight root in the hot-houses of Fifth Avenue, [and] are to brave a few days of sleet and cold at sea, for the palm-trees and mangoes. . . . There are Yankee shipmasters going out to join their "cotton wagons" at New Orleans and Mobile, merchants pursuing a commerce that knows no rest and no locality; confirmed invalids advised to go to Cuba to die under mosquito nets and be buried in a Potter's-Field; and other invalids wisely enough avoiding our March winds; and here and there a mere vacation-maker, like myself (10-11).

Hardly a “mere vacation-maker,” Dana composed one of the more consistently perceptive accounts of a place that was drawing increased attention and tourism. At mid-century, Cuba, its society still aristocratic, its agriculture not yet mechanized, and its charm still undisturbed by the turmoil of insurrection, attracted a steady flow of visitors from the United States, Britain, and other places. It would be an exaggeration, of course, to call Cuba a popular vacation spot. It was rather difficult to get there and, once on the island, the traveler had a limited choice of accommodations and found that travel was awkward and unreliable.

A trip there was also an expensive undertaking. "Visitors to Cuba," one guidebook recommended, "should provide themselves with something extra in their financial calculations (which should be very liberal), for extras will be found a heavy item even with the utmost watchfulness" (Gibbes 213).

Like Dana, most had something to say about their shipmates. Sick persons were common aboard ship because physicians often prescribed a voyage to the West Indies in cases of pulmonary illness or stress (A. Murray 240). One doctor, R.W. Gibbes, even published a guide entitled *Cuba for Invalids*. The success of the treatment varied and so, accordingly, did the comments of writers. M.M. Ballou first visited Cuba with a "beloved companion" in "the hope that its genial and kindly influence might revive her physical powers; nor were these hopes disappointed; for, transplanted from the rough climate of our own New England, immediate and permanent improvement was visible." He claimed, therefore, that "for those laboring under pulmonary affections, the soft, soothing power of the climate [had] a singularly healing influence, as exercised in the balmy trade winds" (68). On the other hand, George Williams, whose reaction may have been formed by his annoyance at finding Havana "crowded with *Americanos*," whose "hectic flush, quick breathing, hacking cough, and emaciated appearance indicate that many of these persons have delayed too long their visit," thought that Cuba was "not the place for one far gone in consumption. The wet northers that frequently sweep down the coast, are quite too severe for a delicate constitution to bear" (10).

The voyage itself could be a test of endurance, especially if one began it in ill health. Although Dana, who knew the sea well enough from the experiences he had published as *Two Years Before the Mast*, reported a comfortable journey to Cuba aboard a mail steamer, "an excellent sea boat, and under the best of discipline," many other travelers made the trip under sail and found that contrary winds kept them long at sea (8). Charles Murray's ship required "three or four days of tedious tacking" to make port after the Cuban coast had been sighted (2: 201). It was even worse when the winds failed completely. Anthony Trollope found himself becalmed many days, "lying under the lee of the land, in a dirty, hot motionless tub, expiating my folly" (6).

Travelers rarely entered Spanish Cuba at any other place than Havana, where geography, architecture and custom combined to make the arrival an unvarying ritual. First, the ship passed through the narrow entrance to the harbor, dominated by fortifications on each shore. Because entry was permitted only during the daylight hours, passengers were always able to enjoy the scene. It figured frequently in their narratives, and most agreed with B.M. Norman that

the view of the harbor, as you approach it from without, with its forest of masts, and antique looking buildings and towers of the city, contrasting powerfully with the luxuriant verdure of the hills in the background, is scarcely second to any in the world, in panoramic beauty and effect; while the view seaward, after you enter the sheltered bay, the waters of the Gulf Stream lashing the very posts of the narrow gateway by which you came in, presents one of those bold and striking contrasts, which the eye can take in, and the mind appreciate, but which no pencil can portray, no pen describe (26-27).

After threading a path through scores of ships to a berth, the voyagers encountered imperial officialdom. Among the swarms of boats, many of them laden with wares offered for sale to the arriving tourists,

comes one, from the stern of which floats the red and yellow flag with the crown in its field, and under whose awning reclines a man in a full suit of white linen, with straw hat and red cockade and cigar. This is the Health Officer. Until he is satisfied, no one can come on board or leave the vessel. . . . Then comes another boat of similar style, another man reclining under the awning with cigar, who comes on board, is closeted with the purser, compares the passenger list with the passports, and we are declared fully passed, and general leave is given to land with our luggage at the custom-house wharf (Dana 31).

If nothing were amiss, travelers usually passed through customs inspection quickly; small difficulties were easily covered with a little cash. After the filibustering expedition of Narciso Lopez in 1850, however, the authorities increased their vigilance (Ballou 46). In February of that year, passengers arriving on the *Philadelphia* were kept waiting in the harbor for six hours because one of their number was suspected of being a comrade of Lopez (which, in fact, he was). When a military contingent finally boarded the ship to caution the man, who was bound for Panama, not to disembark in Cuba, Fredrika Bremer, who was on board, noticed that "several of the officers (handsome men with refined features) cast such glances at the robber leader! There were Spanish daggers in them!" (2: 258)

When the visitors had cleared customs, the city lay before them "with its low houses of all colors, blue, yellow, green, orange, like an immense mass of showy articles of porcelain and glass on a stall of fancy-wares; and no smoke, not the slightest column of smoke to give any intimation of the atmosphere of a city with its cooking and manufacturing life" (Bremer 2: 257) Havana's narrow streets; its quaint shops with imposing and unpronounceable names; the air of antiquity given by the heavy masonry architecture; and the *volantes*, Havana's unique carriages, captivated nearly all new arrivals. Some liked the city at once; others merely marveled at it, and a few were displeased. Anthony Trollope, with the sneering condescension that was *de rigueur* for British visitors to the Western Hemisphere and in character for a son of Frances Trollope, thought that "there is nothing attractive about the town of Havana; nothing whatsoever to my mind, if we except the harbor. The streets are narrow, dirty, and foul" (146). But he had had a particularly uncomfortable voyage and was understandably out of sorts when he arrived.

The most popular hotels were Madame Almy's, the Hotel Cubano, Le Grand's, the Queen's Hotel, the Teniente Rey, the Buena Vista House and the Both World Hotel which advertised charmingly but ungrammatically: "in this establishment set as the European style receives lodgers which find an splendid assistance so in eating as in habitation, therefore the master count with the elements necessary" (Gibbes, 208-09). Regardless of the touted comforts, Dana, who stayed at Le Grand's, expressed a common sentiment: "I know of nothing more discouraging than the arrival at the inn or hotel. It is nobody's business to attend to you. The landlord is strangely indifferent, and if you have not learned it there is no one to teach you" (39). Nor were weary travelers any happier when they finally received some service. "My hostess showed me a chamber," George Williams wrote to his family, "but it required only a cursory view to convince me that I could not occupy it. Immediately under the dining-room was a stable filled with horses and cattle. This I might have stood; but in front of me was--the kitchen!" (7). Another lodger who complained to a friend of being obliged to share his dirty room with another occupant received the reply: "One companion! ... Why, I have three; one walks about all night in a dressing gown, the second snores, and the other is dying!" (Trollope, 145).

When they ventured from their rooms to explore Havana and, if they stayed long enough, to travel to other parts of the island, the tourists recorded a variety of colorful scenes and reactions; one must read the travelogues themselves to appreciate the full palette. Despite individual differences, nearly all shared the powerful impression of being removed to an exotic, foreign land. To Richard Henry Dana even the plants seemed "to have strayed from Nubia or Mesopotamia" (269) while B.M. Norman exulted that "the gorgeous tints of many of the forest flowers, and the yet more gorgeous plumage of the birds, that fill the groves with melody delightful to the ear, ... fill the eye with a continual sense of wonder and delight." What, he asked, "can exceed the fairy splendor of such a scene!" (53). Their unfamiliarity with such a tropical setting even caused many northerners to exaggerate the island's southerliness. Thus, Fredrika Bremer, whose Scandinavian birth perhaps excused her error of thousands of miles, wondered "what constellations of the southern hemisphere may be seen here" (2: 272). But even a native of so near a city as New Orleans, apparently thinking that the equator ran somewhere between Louisiana and Cuba, remarked that "the traveller from the north is also at liberty to gaze, as it were, upon an unknown firmament, contemplating stars that he has never before been permitted to see" until he "crossed the line" (Norman 57).

Maturin M. Ballou, with somewhat clearer geographic understanding, observed, "It is but a long cannon-shot, as it were, off our southern coast, yet once upon its soil the visitor seems to have been transported into another quarter of the globe" (*Due South* 300). In such a fantasy-land, vacationers often felt themselves completely transformed. Amelia Murray discovered that "all this, added to unknown tongues and a splendid southern sky, mystified me, and made me feel dreamy, as I had never felt before" (243). Spending the night in a coastal cottage, with the tropical breeze blowing through, Fredrika Bremer found that she "did not sleep much, yet enjoyed an unspeakable pleasure, as if borne upward by the wings of the wind, and by the fresh, gentle spirit of the sea. I did not seem to be conscious of my physical being; I felt, as it were, changed into spirit" (2: 396). The modern reader tempted to dismiss these reveries as the kind of hyperbole found in Bremer's and other popular novels of the day, must still account for the testimony of George Williams, a skeptical, staid man of firm religion: "I wandered through the private and public gardens, in groves of beautiful trees, flowers and fruit, inhaling the sweet, balmy pure air. It has awakened new life, love and joy in my soul: my heart was filled with devout gratitude to God for permitting me to enjoy so much" (10).

Even the old Cuba hand M.M. Ballou claimed that "there seems to be, at times, a strange narcotic influence in the atmosphere of the island.... So potent has the writer felt this influence, that at first it was supposed to be the effect of some powerful plant that might abound on the plantations; but careful inquiry satisfied him that this dreamy somnolence ... was solely attributable to the natural effect of the soft climate of Cuba" (121-22).

The people who lived in so strange a place must also be peculiar. Visitors were intrigued by the Cubans, and they all would probably have agreed with Norman's bewildered assessment that "society in Havana—and it is the same throughout the island—is a singular anomaly to the stranger" (30). Beyond that, their impressions diverged. George Williams thought that "in the lower classes, the men and women are both ignorant and indolent" (12). But he was not well pleased by the higher classes either: "I have looked in vain for the beautiful Spanish and Creole women, of whom we hear and read so much. ...You may see a few elegantly dressed ladies walking in the Plaza de Armas. [But] there is no grace or elasticity in their movements; they drag themselves along very clumsily, not unlike the Chinese" (33). Anthony Trollope was of much the same mind, asserting that "the ladies do not walk like Spanish women" who, in his estimation, surpassed all others in elegance of stride, "while the Cuban lady is not graceful in her gait" (149) What, then, is the modern reader to make of M.M. Ballou's strikingly contrasting statement that he had found "a striking and endearing charm about the Cuban ladies, their very motion being replete with native grace; every limb elastic and supple" (*History* 78)?

Ballou, however, was no uncritical admirer of the Cubans, for he found their very grace to be something of an anachronism. It would require, he thought, "the infusion of a sterner, more self-denying race to fully test [Cuba's] capabilities and to astonish the world with its productiveness" (*History* 128-29). In fact, at mid-century such an infusion was already under way. In addition to Germans, Englishmen and Americans residing in Cuba and mostly involved in commerce, there were new social links. Both at Matanzas and on the St. Amelia Plantation, Frederika Bremer found that her hosts had married American women; some of their children lived in the United States, while others remained in Cuba (2:268, 294, 331). The administrator of La Ariadne, a sugar plantation often visited by travelers and frequently mentioned in their writings, was actually a U.S. citizen, born in South Carolina, though Cuban in culture and occupation. Even as early as the 1830s, visitors noticed that the commerce between Cuba and the United States was substantial and increasing (C. Murray, 2:255-56).

Because Cuba was a paradox to Americans—its climate unfamiliar and its people alien while its commercial ties to their own country were natural and increasing—they tended to construe what they saw according to their own experiences. Their preconceptions became especially obvious if they had enough time to travel outside the environs of Havana, to see Cuba at work, and to meet other people than hotel proprietors and opera goers. Before the building of railroad lines in Cuba, a trip into the countryside was difficult and uncomfortable. When Charles Murray visited a plantation only a short distance west of Havana in 1835, he traveled by *volante* over very bad roads often obstructed by "stones of half a yard high, and the ruts of half a yard deep, through which the mules and the wheels were scrambling" (2:216). Because land owners were required by law either to maintain a road through their properties or to permit travelers to traverse their fields as they saw best, portions of the trip had to be made through breaches in fences or across farmland (218).

By the 1850s, tourists could range farther and travel more conveniently in railroad cars made by Americans. Even at the speed of Cuban trains—six to ten miles per hour, and hardly ever more than fifteen—it was only a day's trip from Havana to Matanzas. Most did not want to travel faster, anyway, because they were fascinated by sights not available to those who remained in the capital city. Tropical jungles and exotic scenes of human habitation vied for their attention. "I cannot weary of gazing upon these new and strange scenes," wrote Richard Henry Dana. "The stations, with groups of peasants and negroes and fruit-sellers that gather about them, and the stores of sugar and molasses collected there; the ingenios, glimmering in the heat of the sun with their tall, furnace chimneys; the cane fields, acre upon acre; the slow ox-carts carrying the cane to the mill" (168).

Excursions into the country were popular because they offered a temporary escape from the oppressive heat, the glare of bright surfaces, and the omnipresent dust of Havana, and also provided the opportunity to visit plantations. Nearly everyone wanted to see a plantation during a visit to Cuba, some no doubt inspired by curiosity about the source of tropical staples, sugar and coffee, and others, especially northerners, drawn perhaps by a half-understood desire to sample the forbidden fruits of life in a slave-holding society. Travelers from free soil admitted no such intention, of course.

Yet it was obvious from the imagery of their descriptions that they often felt themselves, like characters in a Joseph Conrad story, to be travelling into the heart of darkness in the hinterland. Their keenness to observe the barbaric effects of life in the jungle and the ownership of human beings informed their vision. As Frederika Bremer, for instance, ventured into the backwoods, she remarked that "the landscape became wilder, and parasite plants showed themselves on tree and meadow." But her thoughts were really of human wildness and parasitism, of civilization and slavery. "This death-struggle," she wrote, "between the ceiba tree and the female parasite which grows and nourishes itself with its life, and finally destroys it, is a frequent sight in Cuba, and it is a very remarkable and really unpleasant spectacle. There is a complete tragedy in the picture, which reminds one of Hercules and Dejanira" (2:292). An accomplished writer, Miss Bremer did not use metaphor carelessly.

For his part, Richard Henry Dana was clearly surprised, when he reached the plantation home of his hosts, that "there seems to be no letting down, where letting down would be so natural and excusable." He thought it necessary to offer the supposition that the advantages of wealth, which allowed the planters to travel within and outside Cuba, enabled them to retain the "habits and tone and etiquette, which otherwise would die out" in the wild (113-14). Nevertheless, he found his suspicions of the downward pull justified; the planter was indeed hedged about by savagery. "His revolver and rifle are always loaded. He has his dogs, his trackers and seizers, that lie at his gate, trained to give alarm when a strange step comes near the house" (155). Bremer also thought that the ladies seemed "to suffer from the condition of the plantation, which is never free from danger" (2:351).

Mid-century visitors found Cuban plantations in the midst of substantial change. Coffee was in decline and sugar production, increasingly powered by steam, surged ahead. The change was neither pleasant nor picturesque. When Charles Murray visited the sugar plantation (or *ingenio*) of Don Dionysio Mantilla in 1835, the sugar cane was crushed between mill stones turned by six pair of oxen. But already, he pointed out, "this portion of the operation is frequently, and more advantageously performed by steam" (2:219). Nearby was the Cafetal Ponton, one of the finest coffee estates on the island. Because coffee plants grew best in a shady and well laid-out setting, a *cafetal* was a beautiful creation, entered "by a magnificent avenue of palms from fifty to a hundred yards wide, on each side of which are two narrower parallel avenues, like those of the long walk at Windsor, through the intervals of these palms, you see a boundless range of verdure: below are the coffee plants" (2:225-26). The exquisite setting and the relatively peaceful pace of work made a *cafetal* more than merely a business. It was often the treasured home and lifelong project of its owner. Evidently Murray received from his hosts an optimistic view of the compatibility of coffee and sugar production, for he speculated that the continued planting of trees under which the coffee plants would grow, would soon make the district even lovelier. But this was not to be.

Most of the *cafetales* were damaged by hurricanes in the 1840s, and many of them were not rebuilt because colonial tax policy and the ongoing mechanization of the sugar mills made conversion to sugar production more profitable. Two travelogues by Maturin M. Ballou demonstrate the ubiquity of the trend. Visiting Cuba in the early 1850s, he noticed that "some of [the mills] still employ ox-power for grinding the cane, but American steam engines are fast taking the place of animal power, and more or less are monthly exported for this purpose from New York, Philadelphia and Boston" (*History* 145). When, after thirty years and several further visits to Cuba he published an enlarged and revised book, he changed that comment to read: "There are a few of the small estates which still employ ox-power for grinding the cane, but American steam engines have almost entirely taken the place of animal power; indeed ... it will no longer pay to produce sugar by the primitive process" (*Due South* 237).

When R.H. Dana visited the famous La Ariadne *ingenio* in 1859, he found change well-advanced. A quarter-century earlier Charles Murray had been impressed by the human labor in sugar making there: "The black urchins who sit upon the arms of the machine to drive [the oxen] keep... up an endless clamor; ...two or three negroes supply them constantly with cane; ...other men or boys remove the torn and broken remains of the cane" and "the scum and refuse rising to the top is removed by negroes armed with large flat ladles" (C. Murray 2:219-20). Dana found the slaves still there, but by the time of his observation they were the mere subordinates of the mechanical operation. A trough made of slats, he reported, was "moved by the power of the endless chain, connected with the engine. In this trough [the cane] is carried between heavy, horizontal, cylindrical rollers, where it is crushed, its juice falling into receivers below, and the crushed cane passing off and falling into a pile on the other side" (124). The *ingenio* had become a place of "steam, fire, smoke, and a drive of labor," punctuated by "the clank of the engine, the steady grind of the machines, and the high, wild cry of the negroes at the caldrons" (119, 237).

Mechanization also brought an even greater influx of Americans to Cuba to tend the equipment since, according to one of them, "A Spaniard or Creole would as soon attempt to fly as he would endeavor to learn how properly to run a steam engine" (Ballou, *History* 146). The *ingenio* was thus a place of business, untempered by domestic considerations. It was not a desirable home nor was it, like a *cafetal*, valuable as real property. Its value was found in effective management and intensive labor. The mill's appetite for cane, increased by the efficiency of steam power, required both more land and more laborers. The verdant *cafetales*, instead of spreading as George Williams had predicted, were leveled and planted to cane. Even La Ariadne had once been a *cafetal*. Nearby, the Santa Catalina *cafetal* remained as late as Dana's visit, but it was a rarity. The owner, wealthy enough not to desire a greater income and emotionally attached to his creation, could not "find the heart to lay it waste for the monotonous cane field, the natural growth of fruit and berry, and the simple processes of gathering, drying, and storing give place to the steam and smoke and drive and life-consuming toil of the *ingenio*!" (157-58).

Cuban slavery produced more varied reactions among visitors than perhaps anything else. Travelers from the American South, either because they thought slavery unremarkable or because they anticipated book sales outside the South and did not wish to raise a troublesome subject, had little to say on it. B.M. Norman, a resident of New Orleans who was in Cuba during the 1844 election year, when candidate James K. Polk sought to use territorial expansion—including, potentially into Cuba—to dampen sectional tensions, wrote his travelogue without mentioning slavery at all. In 1860, Dr. R.W. Gibbs of Columbia, South Carolina, where a secession convention would shortly convene, included only two mild references in his account. In one he pointed out that Spanish law, unlike that in most of the U.S. slave States, permitted slaves to purchase their freedom. In the other, he remarked in an almost veterinary tone that the "negroes" he observed were "well looking and well cared for. ...A large number of little ones is the evidence of good treatment, and a general healthiness seems characteristic of them" (93, 155). Neither was George Williams, another South Carolinian, who stayed on the Flor de Cuba and other large *ingenios* in 1855, interested in the Blacks except to opine that "I do not like to see the [racial] amalgamation that is going on here. It is lawful for a Cuban to have a colored wife and mongrel children" (37).

English visitors, though less sanguine about slavery than the Southerners, were often legalistic in their approach and seldom expressed disapproval of the existence of slavery in Cuba. Charles Murray was most concerned that the importation of Africans continued despite Spain's treaty obligations to end the slave trade (2:203-04). With something less than passion, Anthony Trollope wrote, "When all has been said that can be said in favor of the slave-owner in Cuba, it comes to this—that he treats his slaves as beasts of burden, and so treating them, does it skillfully and with prudence. The point which most shocks an Englishman is the absence of all religion, the ignoring of the black man's soul" (134). But even this did not appear to shock Amelia Murray, who actively opposed emancipation and thought that "the free blacks here are profligate and irreligious; and they look far less happy than their brethren in servitude" (243).

Travelers from the Northern States, if Richard Henry Dana and M.M. Ballou were typical, attempted to analyze Cuban slavery. Both included in their accounts extensive descriptions of the laws pertaining to the institution, the economic of slavery, and the appearance and treatment of those slaves they encountered. Lest anyone conclude that the existence of fair laws and forbearing owners changed his opinion, however, Ballou cautioned: "Let no ingenious person distort these remarks into a pro-slavery argument. God forbid!" (*History* 184). Dana recognized the inability of visitors to probe the system in a short time. "If persons coming from the North, "he wrote, "are credulous enough to suppose that they will see chains and stripes and tracks of blood; and if, taking letters to the best class of slaveholders [and] seeing their way of life ... they find no outward signs of violence or corruption, they will probably also be credulous enough to suppose they have seen the whole of slavery" (255).

But, after his own efforts to come to grips with the system, he decided that "the reflecting mind soon tires of the anecdotes of injustice, cruelty, and licentiousness on the one hand, and of justice, kindness and mutual attachment on the other. You know that all coexist; but in what proportion you can only conjecture. You know what slavery must be, in its effects on both the partners to it" (257). Fredrika Bremer may have observed slavery at closer range than most visitors. Her portrait was certainly the most sympathetic to the Blacks. She sought them out both in town and on the plantation and penetrated to precincts hardly ever seen by outsiders. She attended dances, where she thought that "no one can imagine a more natural, perfect, lively precision in that irregular regular time" (2:275). The Southerner George Williams, in contrast, having witnessed a Negro ball, condemned it as little more than a "hideous, wild, yelling scene of confusion" (16).

Bremer's acquaintance with slaves made their servitude almost a personal affront to her. From La Ariadne plantation she wrote to her sister, "I have now been here for more than a week in the very lap of slavery, and during the first few days of my visit I was so depressed that I was not able to do much" (2:311). She later overcame this ennui and called on both slaves and free Negroes at their quarters, forging friendships and conversing to the extent permitted by her (and their) command of Spanish. Their housekeeping and hospitality agreed with her, and most of them assured her that they were better off in Cuba than they would have been in Africa. But she only half believed them, commenting that "Cuba is at once the hell and the paradise of the negroes" (321). Her judgment of the source of this system was unequivocal: "Ah! That this earthly paradise should be so poisoned by the old serpent!" (271).

Visitors to Cuba expected to find a corrupt, incompetent regime and they easily convinced themselves that this was the case. Some were at first surprised by the show of military strength the government could put on. It was, Charles Murray remarked, "greater than I could have imagined, considering the state of its mother country; indeed I very much doubt whether the Queen could bring into the field as large a body of troops in Spain as her powerful deputy commanded in Cuba" (2:203). Richard Henry Dana found enough guards present at the Teatro de Tacon when the governor was in attendance "to put down a small insurrection on the spot" (72-73). That was the point, of course; such a regime could remain in control only if it demonstrated its power. It was, B.M. Norman said, "a military despotism whose edicts are enforced by an armed body of more than twelve thousand soldiers" (66). But if such appearances could impress the island's inhabitants, some Americans thought they saw through them. Moro Castle and the Cabañas were, George Williams asserted, "in the hands of the Americans, impregnable; but in the hands of the flat-headed Spanish soldiers it could be taken in forty-eight hours" (48). Of course, many individual officers and soldiers were engaging and helpful to the tourists. But, Anthony Trollope lamented, "if only they could possess honesty and energy as well as courtesy" (152).

The Cuban infatuation with gambling via the national lottery, added to the impression of indolence, and religious conditions confirmed it. Even as friendly an observer as Fredrika Bremer, who frequented churches during her sojourn, not merely out of curiosity but for opportunities to pray, reported that according to her fellow worshippers "the clergy are said to be quite unclerical, the greater number living in open defiance of their vows: and religion here, I am told—dead" (2:271). George Williams, always less tactful, declared: "The more I see of Spanish Romanism, the greater dread I have of its cursing, blighting, and contaminating influence" (43-44). These images formed a pattern to visitors, one that contrasted sharply with what they believed *ought* to be. About this, Bremer and Williams agreed, despite their differences on nearly everything else; and they displayed their conclusions as vividly as they could. "Here in this land of flowers and sunshine," Williams wrote, "you see the withering, cursing blight of Spanish Romanism; and it is the policy of that government to keep the people in ignorance and midnight darkness" (33). For Bremer too, malfeasance in religion and government combined to condemn Spanish rule:

Cuba is also at the present moment, a field of combat for the powers of light and darkness, and seldom, indeed, are they seen on earth to stand so close to each other, or in stronger contrast.

On the dark side stand the church and the state; the state with its rule of violence and despotism . . . ; the Church, which exists merely in pompous ceremonial, and is deficient in all spiritual life. On the night-side lies predominantly slavery, which exists in Cuba in its worst form (2:436-37).

If their Spanish overlords were corrupt and incompetent, the Cubans themselves were incapable of improving the situation, for they had no acquaintance, Dana asserted, with "science, arts, letters, arms, manufactures, and the learning and discussion of opinions that move the minds of the thinking world." These virtues flowed past them "as the Gulf Stream drifts by their shores. Nor is there, no has there been in Cuba . . . debate, or vote, or juries, or one of the least and rudimental processes of self-government" (170). With such attitudes as these, it is not surprising that nearly all the Americans who visited Cuba in the mid-nineteenth century—and some non-Americans as well—agreed with George Williams that "we cannot hope for a change until the star-spangled banner waves triumphantly over Moro Castle" (33). They did not require the manipulations of the "yellow press" or a fervent "martial spirit," both often cited as causes of the U.S. intervention that turned into the Spanish-American War of 1898. They had long believed it was inevitable; and on no other subject were they so united. As early as 1844, B.M. Norman exulted: "And then, as to these United States—how conveniently might Cuba be annexed! How nicely it would hook on to the spoon-bill of Florida, and protect the passage to our southern metropolis, and the trade of the gulf.

We can claim it by an excellent logic” (60). Of course, Williams and Norman were both southerners and unquestionably had sectional goals in mind. But this was not, as often thought, merely an objective of ante-bellum southern slaveocrats. In 1854, M.M. Ballou, a New Englander, opined: “Naturally belonging to this country by every rule that can be applied, . . . Cuba will ere long be politically ours.” In terms that should have appealed to both North and South, he proclaimed that

once part of this great confederacy, Cuba would immediately catch the national spirit and genius of our institutions and the old Castilian state of dormancy would give way to Yankee enterprise, her length and breadth would be made to smile like a New England landscape. Her sons and daughters would be fully awakened to a true sense of their own responsibility, intelligence would be sown broadcast, and the wealth of wisdom would shine down among the cottages of the poor (199).

Hardly put off by such ethnocentrism and despite his not always charitable judgments about Americans, the Briton Trollope agreed that annexation to the U.S. was his “best wish for the island” (153). The Swede, Fredrika Bremer, also confided her hope “that Cuba may one day by peaceful means, belong to the United States” (2:459). Her optimism for the blessings this would bring the Cubans was balanced, however, by the telling aspiration that the best features of Cuba’s slave code would find their way into American law and moderate the cruelty she had deplored in the American South.

Richard Henry Dana was more cautious than most in his observations and conclusions, but even he did not stray far from the norm when he admitted that he found it difficult to believe that

With their complication of difficulties, and causes of disorder and weakness,--with their half million or more of slaves and quarter million or less of free blacks, with their Coolies and their divided and hostile races of whites,--their Spanish blood, and their utter want of experiences in the discharge of any public duties, the Cubans will work out successfully the problem of self-government. You cannot reason from Massachusetts to Cuba (268).

Forty years before the Platt Amendment made Cuba a virtual protectorate of the United states, Dana showed himself to be prophetic as well as astute by remarking that “if the connection with Spain is dissolved in any way, she will probably be substantially under the protection of some other power,” and he concluded that “whoever takes her is more than likely to find in her a key to Pandora’s box” (269). These nineteenth century visitors experienced Cuba as spectacle, almost as though the island were a vast stage on which a drama was performed for their viewing. And, like theater or cinemagoers, they created meaning as a result of who they were as well as what they saw. When they wrote, they engaged in controlled acts of the imagination, providing varied contexts for the same realities and expressing their conclusions in almost self-fulfilling prophecies.

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