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Hemingway, Cuba, and the Cuban Works

Larry Grimes

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Hemingway, Cuba, and the Cuban Works

Edited by
Larry Grimes
and
Bickford Sylvester

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Introduction

LARRY GRIMES

More than thirty years ago on a small “island in the stream” Hemingway scholars gathered to celebrate the opening of the Hemingway Collection at the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library in Boston. There Michael Reynolds challenged the assembled with an essay, “Unexplored Territory: The Next Ten Years of Hemingway Studies,” that has informed and shaped Hemingway research across the years. The agenda Reynolds set was ambitious and has served Hemingway scholars well. However, it had one serious omission—Hemingway’s life and work during the Cuban years. Reynolds’s references to Cuba are slight and perfunctory; he mentions the Brasch and Sigman inventory of books Hemingway collected during his Cuban years and notes that Hemingway brought copies of T. S. Eliot’s poems and essays to Cuba. As for Hemingway’s relations with other nations and cultures, Reynolds writes, “another obvious necessary study is Hemingway and Africa. As with Spain, his fascination and his study go beyond the obvious.” Reynolds does not call, however, for scholars to carefully investigate the “unexplored territory” that was Hemingway’s life and work in Cuba. That was not deemed necessary. Hemingway studies have been slow to correct this omission from their agenda. To date, no scholarly book or collection of essays has been devoted to filling this gap. These essays are offered as a first expedition into that “unexplored territory.”

This book includes essays by scholars and journalists from both the United States and Cuba. In the first part, the emphasis is on Hemingway’s place in Cuban history and culture, Cuban evaluations of the man and his work, and moments in Hemingway’s life as an American in Cuba. These essays look directly at
Hemingway’s Cuban experience from perspectives ranging from the academic to the journalistic, allowing different voices to speak and different tones to be heard. In the second part of the collection, scholars analyze specific works by Hemingway from a variety of literary critical perspectives. Their essays provide close and careful readings of certain of Hemingway’s longer fictional works, specifically those sharing an explicit Cuban setting. For this reason, much of his posthumously published work from the Cuban years is excluded. The whole collection reminds us that for most of his life Hemingway’s primary residence was on Cuban soil, where, as scholars have shown with regard to his European works, he absorbed and wrote from the culture, the place, around him. Taken together, therefore, these essays serve as prolegomena to serious scholarly work that lies ahead.

It is fitting to begin this collection with reflections from Gladys Rodriguez Ferrero, long-time director of the Hemingway Museum (1980–97) and point-person for all things Hemingway in Cuba. Her words capture nicely the deep affection Cubans hold for Hemingway. He is an iconic figure in Cuba, with a status no writer holds in the United States. Her exuberant comments may lean toward hagiography, but for those who have had an opportunity to walk the streets of Havana and Cojimar, they ring true. While she admits that Hemingway has his detractors (see, for example, the essay by Jorge Santos Caballero), she is quick to address the charges against him. She also thoughtfully considers why literary scholars in the United States have neglected Hemingway’s Cuban years. She ends with a call to which there has been a positive response in recent years, a call for the Cuban people and the people of the United States to “join forces to preserve this patrimony for future generations.”

As noted above, Caballero’s essay exemplifies the approach of those Cuban literary-journalists with reservations about Hemingway’s work. As Ned Quevedo Arnaiz demonstrates in his bibliography of critical response to Hemingway in Cuba, much of what is written about Hemingway there incorporates political and cultural evaluation into the assessment of Hemingway’s literary merit. Caballero’s essay is harsh in its criticism of Hemingway’s presentation of the Cuban people and their revolutionary heritage. He charges Hemingway with misrepresenting revolutionary characters and with advocating an individualistic stance that denies the social solidarity of the Cuban people.

The essay by Yuri Paporov (with an introduction and comments by me) provides the Russian diplomat’s view of Hemingway’s relation to and appraisal of Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution. My remarks connect the Paporov selection with pertinent materials in the Hemingway Collection at the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library. In short, Paporov paints a picture of Hemingway
as a sympathetic supporter of the revolution. Reporting conversations and interviews with several Cubans who knew and were close to Hemingway during those years, Paporov suggests that Hemingway approved of Castro’s movement and provided some funds and arms to Castro followers. He notes that Hemingway wanted to interview Castro and give him advice, and asserts that eventually Hemingway did meet with Castro advisers, proffering advice to them with regard to Castro’s visit to the United Nations. He also records Hemingway’s sympathetic comments about Cuba and its revolution when he returned from Spain to Havana in May 1959.

David Martens’s interview with the now-elderly members of Las Estrellas de Gigi (Gigi’s Stars, also known as Gigi’s All-Stars) provides solid evidence that Hemingway was deeply involved in the community in which he lived, San Francisco de Paulo in Havana. The memories of these men are fresh, sharp, and affectionate some fifty years after the baseball games were played. Their attitude toward Hemingway does not seem to be that of peasants toward the lord of the manor but rather that of men recalling a patron from their youth. As one sees in Rene Villarreal’s memoir, Hemingway’s Cuban Son, these ball players found in Hemingway a mentor who gave them hope and opportunities that have lasted a lifetime.

Much yet needs to be learned and written about Hemingway and the women in his life during his Cuban years. We have included two essays on the topic: one looks at the turbulent relationship between Hemingway and his fourth wife, Mary Hemingway, as revealed in a series of letters; the other explores fact and myth surrounding his relationship with Jane Mason.

Al DeFazio’s essay is woven around letters written by Mary Welsh Hemingway to Ernest from early in their marriage through that “dangerous summer” of 1959. The letters present the marriage in microcosm. Particularly telling is a long letter written in 1959. DeFazio contends that the letters help us understand failures in communication between Mary and Ernest that prevented her from acknowledging his serious health problems. Unable to understand the causes of his erratic behavior, Mary failed to recognize her husband’s desperate condition. The letters, and DeFazio’s commentary on them, help us to see a tragedy in the making.

William Deibler’s essay on Hemingway and Jane Mason challenges the emphatic claim by Cuban writer Enrique Cirules that the two had “an intense and scandalous love affair” in 1934. Deibler presents information suggesting that Cirules’s dates and biographical data cannot be trusted, and consequently he questions Cirules’s assertions that Cubans saw Hemingway and Mason together everywhere. Deibler suggests, instead, that Cirules’s thesis derives from a growing Hemingway myth in Cuba. To quote Deibler, “His legendary reputation as
a lover, adventurer, sailor, fisherman, and hunter continued to grow and today, four decades after his death, it pervades the urban landscape.” Deibler asserts that Cirules has based his claims on oral history rather than traditional academic research. To prove his point, Deibler cross-checks available facts against Cirules's claims about Hemingway’s travel with Jane Mason in the Romano Archipelago. He also researches claims about Hemingway’s submarine hunting, as reported by Cirules. His conclusion is that “Cuba is still largely an undiscovered country for Hemingway scholars.”

The second part of the collection is composed of scholarly essays examining works from Hemingway’s Cuban years that have specific Cuban settings. The first fiction to grow from Hemingway’s Cuban experience are the short stories, “One Trip Across” and “The Tradesman’s Return,” first published in Cosmopolitan, and the novel that grew from them, To Have and Have Not (1936). The negative reviews of that novel have, perhaps, contributed to the devaluation of Hemingway’s work from the Cuban years. The letter and essays included in the To Have and Have Not section will, we hope, renew scholarly interest in the novel and in those tumultuous Cuban years that produced it.

To ensure accuracy in his portrayal of recent revolutionary activities in To Have and Have Not—activities he was not on the ground in Havana to observe—Hemingway asked journalist Richard Armstrong to provide him with a summary of detailed newspaper accounts of the uprising. Hemingway had known Armstrong at least since 1933, when Armstrong had served as photographer for the Cadwalader marlin expedition. On August 27, 1936, Armstrong sent him a photograph (front plate to our section on To Have and Have Not) and a thirteen-page letter full of information. The Armstrong letter was subsumed into the text of the novel, sometimes almost verbatim, in the manner of Hemingway’s earlier work with newspaper materials in A Farewell to Arms.

The long excerpt from Cuba y Hemingway en el gran río azul (Cuba and Hemingway on the Great Blue River), a book by Cuban scholar Mary Cruz (here translated by her daughter, Mary Delpino), provides ample evidence that a detailed knowledge of Cuban social, political, and economic history (a knowledge Hemingway certainly had) gives To Have and Have Not depth and resonance that U.S. critics have not seen. Cruz’s approach to the work is that of critical realism (Marx), an approach most adept at foregrounding Hemingway’s nuanced and insightful political analysis of “haves” and “have-nots.” Cruz’s book in its entirety makes important contributions to the study of Hemingway during the Cuban years. It is my hope that this selection will encourage the publication of an English translation of her book in the near future.

Scott McClintock's essay serves as a fine extension of the work of Mary Cruz. He acknowledges the importance of her Cuban perspective on Hemingway's
novel, but suggests that “interculturalism studies” provide an integrative corrective to both American and Cuban national perspectives. McClintock places *To Have and Have Not* in the context of Cuban national literature (particularly Enrique Serpa’s novel, *Contrabando*) and the interaction of American and Cuban history. The result of his careful scholarship is an intriguing look at literary influences on Hemingway and a fresh reading of the novel which shows that “the wrong kind of cross-cultural relationships lead equally to perfidy and disaster.” McClintock concludes his essay with this important observation: “At home in two countries in the Americas, Hemingway is a vital figure for inter-American literary study, and, I would argue, one must adopt an inter-American framework to read his Cuban fiction well. He is a writer who, more than has generally been appreciated, teaches us that national literatures cannot be studied outside the context of their relationships with other national literatures.”

Charlene Murphy’s essay cautions us against a simple realist reading of Hemingway’s fiction. He explored the Gulf Stream with a naturalist’s eyes, but he also knew that truth came through the arrangement of facts by an artist’s eye. Murphy demonstrates the profound effect of Winslow Homer’s eye on Hemingway’s perception of the Gulf Stream through a close reading of the text of *To Have and Have Not* and a careful, detailed comparison of that novel with Homer’s “The Gulf Stream.” Her essay also offers perceptive commentary on Homer’s influence on *Islands in the Stream* and on the thematic concerns of Hemingway’s fiction.

In the section devoted to *The Old Man and the Sea*, Alma DeRojas provides a history of the Virgin of Cobre and her place in Cuban culture. Readers of the essays by Grimes and Stoneback will find much useful background in DeRojas’s essay.

Two essays on *The Old Man and the Sea* explore religious issues in the novel through specific Cuban ethnic lenses. In my essay, I examine Hemingway’s deployment of characters with Afro-Cuban religious markers in two works, *To Have and Have Not* and “Nobody Ever Dies,” to establish a baseline from which to read Afro-Cuban religious themes, images, and symbols in *The Old Man and the Sea*. Special attention is paid to the Lukumi orisha Oshun, who is also the Virgin of Cobre, the patron saint of Cuba. H. R. Stoneback takes Santiago’s name (St. James) and this panethnicity (Cuban-Spanish Canary Islander) seriously. He establishes links between Santiago and the ancient religious tradition of the Islands of the Blessed, between Santiago and St. James, and between the Spanish mysteries of St. James and the Virgin of Cobre, finally placing the novel firmly in the company of pilgrimage narrative and concluding that *The Old Man and the Sea* is “a complex study of saintliness, not only in the way that it connects with the history and legend of a particular saint, but in its deconstruction (for want of a better word) of Santiago de Compostela, not for purposes of
debunking and dismissal, but in order to reconstruct a version of the original, historical saint—anchored in time, immersed in nature, rooted in the bright particularity and dailiness of lived saintliness. That is to say, the old fisherman Santiago is Hemingway’s version of Saint James the Fisherman grown old as a fisherman, not as an Apostle.”

Yoichiro Miyamoto argues that the text of *The Old Man and the Sea* “functions as a semiotic site where exchanges occur between the colonizer and the colonized.” His reading is political in nature, examining cold war tensions as they play out in the text and, more importantly, in the reading of the text. He presents us with a good introduction to Cuban readings of the novel as he contrasts those readings with U.S. commentary. He argues that for U.S. readers, Santiago is a mythological hero, while for Cuban readers he is a national hero. Miyamoto argues that the text both supports and undermines both sets of readings, ultimately providing “transactional space in which different social realities are negotiated.”

Through a close reading of “The Undefeated,” first published in 1925, Ann Putnam demonstrates that significant continuities of form and vision connect Hemingway’s early writing with his later Cuban works, *The Old Man and the Sea* in particular. The close and careful reading she provides in support of her claim does much to counter notions that Hemingway’s fiction during the Cuban years is inferior to that created in Paris during the twenties. A sense of tragedy, she argues, pervades these two works: “both Manuel and Santiago have stepped outside the clean, well-lighted place which marks the landscape of mastery and control, and in essence, have entered the ‘terrain of the bull.’”

Kim Moreland and Lawrence Broer offer two markedly different readings of *Islands in the Stream*. For Moreland, *Islands* is a “depressing and enervating experience not redeemed by sympathy.” Broer, on the other hand, thinks that Hudson (and also Santiago, whom he discusses at length) moves beyond despair and, nourished by an explicitly Cuban landscape, ends his life with a sense of fullness. Read together, these essays confirm Hemingway’s capacity, even in his later unfinished, posthumous works, to write powerful, polysemous works. Moreland provides a post-Freudian reading of trauma issues in *Islands*. Informed by current trauma theory, especially the work of Cathy Caruth and Judith Hermon, Moreland provides a close reading of the various “drowning incidents” in *Islands*. The result is deep insight into Hudson’s complex psychology as artist and person, insights that Moreland extends at the end of her essay into the life of Hemingway as writer and man.

While Moreland focuses on constriction and numbing in *Islands*, Broer explores themes and figures of plenitude. Like Moreland, Broer is attentive to the
text and reads it closely. His patient teasing out of these themes and tropes lends
great credence to his claim that “central to Hudson’s ironic and life-affirming
approach to plentitude is not just his knowledge that for every ‘bad’ there is an
off-setting ‘good,’ but that the good sometimes requires the bad as a regenerat-
ing force, and that the existence of the bad may sharpen sensitivity to the good
in a way that intensifies one’s appetite for experience, and certainly one’s ability
to make art.” After reading these two essays, it would seem that Hemingway’s
*Islands in the Stream* is a two-hearted text.

Like Charlene Murphy’s essay on *To Have and Have Not*, James Nagel’s essay
reminds us that Hemingway relied on art (aesthetics) and not just naturalistic
description to present to the reader the “real thing.” Nagel carefully rehearses
the aesthetic of impressionism, its impact on imagism and polyphonic prose,
and Hemingway’s assimilation of that aesthetic. This complex aesthetic, Na-
gel maintains, remained part of Hemingway’s artistic creed throughout his life,
even in the “loose and baggy” posthumous work, *Islands in the Stream*. Nagel
then presents several closely read passages in *Islands* that demonstrate clearly
Hemingway’s use of impressionist images and polyphonic prose in that novel.
The result of this aesthetic, he asserts, is that “the ultimate tragedy at the end is
the impending death of a man who so adores being alive, who has such a rich
involvement in the simple things around him, things forever lost in Heming-
way’s impressionistic *Islands.*”

Joseph DeFalco’s essay, like Ann Putnam’s and James Nagel’s, argues that
Hemingway’s later works are a continuation of the aesthetic and thematic con-
cerns begun in the twenties. His essay argues that *Islands* is another of Heming-
way’s attempts to enter the ring with the great authors of literature. This time he
takes on Homer’s *Odyssey* (and, by extension, Joyce’s *Ulysses*). DeFalco makes
a very important point early in his essay. Unlike Joyce, who foregrounded
Homer’s work in *Ulysses*, Hemingway backgrounded it in *Islands*. Hemingway,
I think, employed this backgrounding technique in many of his works, and per-
haps more scholars should join DeFalco in searching out such backgrounded
material in his work. DeFalco then reads the text of *Islands* with careful atten-
tion to parallels with *The Odyssey* and makes a strong case for a direct, though
backgrounded, connection between these works.

To round out this exploration of Hemingway’s life and work in Cuba, the
book ends with two bibliographies that give an overview of the lively interest in
and response to Hemingway and his works within Cuba itself. Kelli Larson pro-
vides a comprehensive annotated list of scholarly treatments of Hemingway’s
Cuban fiction. In his bibliography, Ned Quevedo Arnaiz broadens the focus to
include not only Cuban publications about Hemingway’s Cuban works but also
ones examining Hemingway’s life in Cuba, and also includes a list of Hemingway’s works that have been published there—which is not yet all of them, “a fact,” comments Quevedo, “to be regretted.” Both bibliographies should be useful to scholars planning further forays into the neglected territory of Hemingway’s Cuban fiction.

I end with special thanks to those who organized and participated in the First Hemingway International Colloquium held in Havana, Cuba, in July 1995. They opened the eyes of fans, scholars, and preservationists alike to the “undiscovered country” that is Hemingway’s life and work during the Cuban years.

Notes
