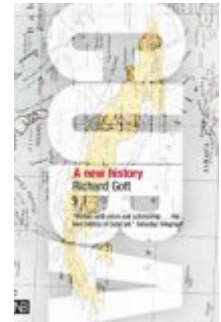


Richard Gott. *Cuba: A New History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. ix + 384 pp. \$18.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-300-11114-9.



Reviewed by Luis Martínez-Fernández

Published on H-LatAm (August, 2005)

Richard Gott's *Cuba: A New History* is one of the latest in a long string of books on Cuba, its revolution and its revolutionary leaders. This unending torrent of publications--of varying quality--will continue as long as readers throughout the world maintain a fascination with Cuba's tormented and deviant history. Gott is not a professional historian nor does he profess to be one; he is a distinguished British journalist with many years of experience covering Latin America and Cuba. While historians should not have a monopoly over writing about the past, non-historians, like Gott, are not bound by the practices of the historical profession such as the mastery over the secondary literature and the critical use of primary sources. These shortcomings are evident throughout the book.

Roughly a quarter of the book is dedicated to pre-1953 Cuba. These early chapters are mostly narrative and episodic, providing basic information about Cuba's history. Throughout this part of the book, Gott devotes special attention to key episodes in the island's history such as the British capture of Havana (1762) and the conspiracy and

repression surrounding the La Escalera revolt. The author displays an excellent command over the narrative mode and makes the reading interesting by interjecting very appropriate quotes by eyewitnesses to the historical moments being narrated. The ability to write this way, I believe, is one of the reasons why historians--often less mindful of the aesthetics of writing--should not have a monopoly over historical writing.

One of the salient assets of the book is the global perspective that Gott brings to the table. He looks at Cuba's history within a broad international context, neither in isolation nor as an appendix to U.S. history. He also traces developments over time with attention to recurrent themes such as rebellion, contraband, militarism, and caudilloism. For example, he makes connections between the reconcentration of Cuban rural dwellers during the War of Independence and during Fulgenio Batista's war against the guerrillas. By the way, Fidel Castro's forces employed the same techniques against civilians in the Escambray region, where counterrevolutionary forces operated for a few years.

Coverage of the first half of the twentieth century is unbalanced in terms of pages devoted to various themes. Batista's first period of rule, for example, receives only one page of coverage. Gott dismisses President Prio Socarras with a simple quote from an author who is not an authority on Prio or his times. The quote is baseless: Prio's government (1948-1952) was "the most polarized, corrupt, violent, and undemocratic, since Cuban independence" (p. 145, quoting Julia Sewig, *Inside the Cuban Revolution*, p. 5). Similarly unfounded assertions appear later; on page 147, Gott states that Castro was "the outstanding figure of his generation." Two pages later, he writes: "He [Castro] gave back their history to the Cuban people, enabling them to see the name of their island stamped favorably on the twentieth-century global story" (p.149).

Despite such unfortunate assertions, Gott should be commended for presenting a generally balanced picture of the Cuban Revolution, recounting and interpreting both the achievements and failures of the Revolution. He is also careful to point out that before 1959, Cuba was one of the most modern and prosperous nations in Latin America. This recognition is essential for a fair evaluation of the Revolution. The most important contributions of this book relate to coverage on Cuba's links with various African nations and with revolutionary groups in Latin America and elsewhere. These are the topics in which Gott presents insightful information and interpretations stemming from many years of study and first-hand research.

In closing, Gott's book is a good source for a general readership interested in a sweep of Cuba's history. The later chapters covering the Revolution are more insightful and include original information, perspectives and conclusions.

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Citation: Luis Martínez-Fernández. Review of Gott, Richard. *Cuba: A New History*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. August, 2005.

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