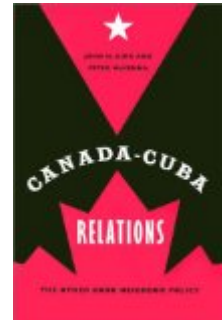


John M. Kirk, Peter McKenna. *Canada-Cuba Relations: The Other Good Neighbor Policy*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997. xiv + 207 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-1520-0.



Reviewed by Brian Tennyson

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This book examines Canadian relations with Cuba since Fidel Castro came to power, and argues that a special relationship evolved because of Canadian defiance of the United States' determination to crush or at least isolate the revolutionary state. Canadians are fond of claiming that they have a special relationship with other countries. There was, of course, the long-standing relationship with Britain that really was special because it began within an imperial context and evolved into the equal and independent Commonwealth relationship. There was, and is, the special relationship with the United States, the behemoth with which Canada shares the North American continent and which is its primary trading partner. Many Canadians, especially those in the Atlantic provinces, often refer to their special relationship with the islands of the Caribbean, with which they enjoy a certain geographical proximity and with which they once carried on a significant trade. The myth of that relationship has long since been exploded, but now Professors Kirk and McKenna suggest that Cuba fits into this category because Canada has pursued a "good neighbour" policy since Fidel Castro came to power in defi-

ance of U.S. efforts to isolate Cuba and ultimately reverse the revolution.

This is a valuable contribution to the growing literature on the history of Canadian foreign policy, not only because it is the first major study of Canadian relations with Cuba, but also because it offers a case study of a relationship in which Canada has adopted a somewhat independent stance in relation to U.S. policy with respect to a government that arouses strong feelings among American policy-makers. The authors trace the evolution of Canadian policy since Fidel Castro came to power, noting quite rightly that the Canadian-Cuban relationship can only be addressed within the context of U.S. attitudes and policy, both political and economic. They have had extensive access to both Canadian government records and, perhaps more importantly, to Cuban records, which add a very interesting and valuable dimension to the study.

Unfortunately, however, the authors do not provide the essential historical background on Canadian relations with the Caribbean region generally, or with Cuba specifically, to enable the

reader to understand recent policy properly. Thus, there is nothing on Canada's longstanding historical commercial and political relationship with the Caribbean region, which focused on the Commonwealth islands but included Cuba as well, prior to 1959. This omits a good deal, as there were trade agreements, shipping subsidies, substantial investments beyond the operations of the Royal Bank to which they do refer, and even occasional talk of political union. None of this is mentioned.

When Kirk and McKenna do make brief historical allusions, they are simplistic, misleading, or simply wrong. Thus, for example, their sarcastic claim that Cuba's proposal in 1927 to establish diplomatic relations was not well received in Ottawa, long accustomed to the cool proprieties of British formal diplomacy and to the prominent place of the British Empire, on which the "sun never set" (p. 24) is extraordinarily uninformed. The Canadian government in the 1920s was only beginning tentatively to establish its own diplomatic representation at a time of budgetary restraints. Accordingly, the only offices established at that time were in London, Washington, Paris, and Tokyo. There did not seem any justification for the expense of having an office in Havana, however much that thought may offend Professors Kirk and McKenna. Their uncertain grasp of the background to their study is further revealed in their statement that "In 1945 ... it was apparent that Canada should no longer maintain its status as a 'Dominion' of Great Britain, and that as a result it should become a nation fully competent to direct its own foreign policy" (p. 23). Canada had been fully responsible for its own foreign policy since at least 1931 and most historians would say 1923, if not 1919. Again, when discussing the establishment of diplomatic relations with Cuba in 1945, it would have been helpful if the authors had recognized that this was happening not only in the context of expanding diplomatic appoint-

ments in Latin America but expanding representation globally.

Clearly, the authors believe that the Castro revolution has generally been a good thing for Cuba, a view widely shared by Canadians, and they seek to show how Canadian policy towards Cuba since 1959 has been more constructive than U.S. policy. Not surprisingly, they quote Castro as saying in 1994 that Canadian-Cuban are "an example to follow. What a pity that, instead of having the United States so close by, and Canada so far away, it wasn't the other way around" (np). The problem, of course, is that isn't the other way around. The United States is the dominant power in the world and during most of the period under consideration in this book it was engaged in the so-called cold war with the Soviet Union. Thus, despite all the undeniably good things which Castro has done over the years for his people, once it became clear that he was a communist, confrontation with the United States became inevitable because, in the cold war context, Washington clearly was not going to accept the existence of a communist state aligned with the Soviet Union so close to its own shores. Unfortunately, the authors do not discuss this reality and its context, nor do they discuss the process of Castro's emergence as a communist and growing dependence on the Soviet Union in the face of U.S. hostility, and the dilemma thereby created for Canada. This was a unique situation which might usefully have been explored in some detail.

Their treatment of the important Diefenbaker years is marred throughout. They begin badly by describing John Diefenbaker when he became prime minister in 1957 as "elderly" (p. 32). He was 61. The discussion of the testy Diefenbaker-Kennedy relationship, which takes up as much space as the important 1962 missile crisis, is very superficial, focusing on personalities rather than the important issue of Diefenbaker's determination to claim Canada's right to pursue an independent foreign policy. Again there is a need for con-

text explaining that Diefenbaker was elected in 1957 and 1958 on a nationalistic wave reflecting growing concern about US economic and political domination of Canada and the Liberal government's obvious acquiescence in the process. There had been widespread criticism of Pearson's foreign policy as being excessively pro-American.

Kirk and McKenna ignore the fact that the Diefenbaker government took a strong stand against the apartheid regime in South Africa and insisted on the right of Canadian subsidiaries of U.S. corporations to do business not only in Cuba but, more importantly, in China and the Soviet Union. One may well question the wisdom or efficacy of such policies and it is certainly fair enough to suggest that Diefenbaker's position at the time of the 1962 missile crisis reflected indecision more than a principled insistence on independence of action, but a balanced discussion placing Canada's Cuban policy in this broader context would have made a more useful contribution to our understanding of the period than what is provided in this book.

The book is also weakened by the regrettably large number of grammatical errors which should not have got past the University Press of Florida's editors. For example, the authors use the phrase "has showed" (p. 5), then get it right further down on the same page by saying "has shown." On page 42 they invent the word "reoccur," though they later use the proper word. There is also some plain bad writing, such as when they state that Diefenbaker "went to great pains to show ..." (p. 44) and where they have trade "rising precipitously" (p. 86).

Despite these weaknesses and the missed opportunities described above, this is an important book that students of Canadian foreign policy will find helpful, not only in understanding Canadian relations with Cuba in recent years but also as a case study in how Canadian foreign policy is inevitably influenced by Canada's special relationship with the United States.

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