Cuba’s Wild East: A Literary Geography of Oriente. Peter Hulme. Liverpool, U.K.: Liverpool University Press, 2011. xii + 455 pp. (Cloth £70.00)

In Cuba’s Wild East, Peter Hulme persuasively demonstrates that a substantial portion of the English-language fiction and non-fiction written about Cuba has focused on the old Cuban province of Oriente. Given the proliferation of Havana-centered writing during the last two decades, this idea seems counter-intuitive; however, Hulme leaves no doubt that the images of Cuba sustained by English readers have been shaped in many ways by travelers, visitors, and writers for whom Oriente province became representative of the whole of the island.

In Cuba it is well known that wars and revolutions always begin at the eastern end of the island, in Oriente. The first major uprising against Spain, the Ten Year War (1868–78), began in Oriente; so did the 1895 Cuban War of Independence, though it was soon truncated by U.S. intervention. The “splendid little war” of 1898, famously involving Theodore Roosevelt among others, took place also in Oriente, primarily around the port cities of Santiago and Guantánamo. More recently, the guerrilla war led by Fidel Castro against the dictator Fulgencio Batista also developed in the Sierra Maestra and nearby mountains of Oriente.

Oriente province’s ruggedness, isolation, and socio-historical differences from Havana and other economic and political centers in Cuba’s west, made the area well-fitted for the foment of revolution, thus converting it into an exciting destination for writers from other parts of the island. Cuban poet and patriot José Martí detailed the few weeks he spent in Oriente in a touching campaign diary that doubles as a fascinating prose poem. Writer and activist Pablo de la Torriente Brau also reported in epic tones on Cuban peasant uprisings in Oriente in the 1930s.

Hulme details how prominent U.S. correspondents and writers flocked to Oriente to cover the insurgenies and/or to meet with Cuban military leaders during the Ten Year War, the Cuban War of Independence, the Spanish-American intervention of 1898, and the 1950s Sierra Maestra guerrilla war led by Fidel Castro. Correspondents and writers like James J. O’Kelly, Richard Harding Davis, Stephen Crane, and Herbert Matthews each traveled to this remote corner of the world in order to report on wars, military leaders, and other significant local individuals. Others like Josephine Herbst and...
Graham Greene used Oriente as a source for their prose fiction or as a backdrop, the latter famously in *Our Man in Havana*.

Though all eight chapters of this book are fascinating, the essays on the rural region known as the Realengo 18 (Chapter 6) and Cuba’s highest mountain, the Pico Turquino (Chapter 7), are especially compelling. Both shed much light on the social conditions of the eastern Cuban peasantry and their struggles against dispossession, circumstances that made rural Oriente the perfect context for the armed struggle launched by Fidel Castro in 1956.

Chapter 2 offers an innovative discussion of how Oriente became an eye-opener for Cuban independence leader José Martí. Martí had spent two decades on a pilgrimage across the Americas, reading, writing, and struggling on behalf of the indigenous peoples of the hemisphere. But, as Hulme convincingly demonstrates, it was in his own Wild East of Oriente—a region that Martí was unfamiliar with—that he found himself at peace in a land of indigenous people. The text ends, quite appropriately, with an essay on the contemporary events that have once again made eastern Cuba the focus of much writing around the world: the imprisonment of suspected terrorists at the U.S. Guantánamo Naval Base in Oriente.

Throughout all eight essays Hulme’s prose skillfully integrates close textual analysis with detailed historical and geographical contexts, making the book very accessible to readers (like this reviewer) who are allergic to pure disquisitions on texts. Reading *Cuba’s Wild East* feels like taking an actual trip through the region. The book constitutes a truly exceptional, readable, informative, and significant contribution to the study of Cuban history, culture, and politics.

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