Antoni Kapcia (ed.), *Rethinking Past and Present in Cuba: Essays in Memory of Alistair Hennessy*. London: Institute of Latin American Studies, 2018. xv + 210 pp.
(Paper US\$30.00)

Alistair Hennessy died in 2013, having brought a breadth of scholarship to the study of Cuba that continues to be influential, encompassing not just Cuba, but Spain and the whole of Latin America and the Caribbean. This helped move Cuban studies away from insularity, toward new approaches that see the island in a wider geohistorical context. This edited collection comes out of the 2014 Cuba Research Forum conference held in his memory, and all the contributions demonstrate a broadening of research such as he advocated and practiced throughout his life.

Hennessy's career began in Spain, with a 1962 study entitled *The Federal Republic ... 1868–74*. Two of the essays in this collection edited by Antoni Kapcia connect with this period of Spanish history. Christopher Schmidt-Nowara reflects on the way we have come to understand how interconnected metropolitan society and colonial empire were, reappraising the importance of Spanish republicanism. Catherine Davies explores the role of Rafael María de Labra in furthering the cause in Spain of Cuban and Puerto Rican slave abolition and the later racial divisions that continued to fracture the nascent Cuban polity. She argues that “the impetus for the rapid advancement of African-descended Cubans came as much from Spain as it did from Cuba” (p. 60), and that Labra's contribution to this deserves to be remembered.

Cuban racial politics and identity have not only been about people of non-European descent, but also about what it means to be white, as Margaret Brehony explores in her chapter on Irish immigration to Cuba. While some of the most prominent aristocratic families on the island had their origins in Ireland, poor white Irish immigration was encouraged as part of the attempt to whiten the population. But this was short-lived, quickly giving way to using the Irish as cheap laborers working alongside black slaves, as “economic imperatives superseded racial anxieties” (p. 82).

Fernando Martínez assesses the genesis of a specifically Cuban socialism. He looks at how Julio Antonio Mella in the 1920s, and Antonio Guiteras in the 1930s, established a creole revolutionary praxis that later informed the 1959 Revolution and its subsequent development. Steve Ludlam takes up the exploration of Cuban socialist political economy in more recent decades. After detailing the relationship between the trade unions and the state since 1959, he analyzes more recent changes. With the emergence of a mixed economy, several challenges were being confronted for “updating” labor law and practices “to achieve a new balance between the state and markets” (p. 130).

NEW WEST INDIAN GUIDE

© JONATHAN CURRY-MACHADO, 2019 | DOI:10.1163/22134360-09303016

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the CC-BY-NC 4.0 License.

Downloaded from Brill.com 04/26/2023 02:26:44AM
via free access

The Hennessy Collection was established from the extensive number of Cuban journals and newspapers donated by Hennessy to the Forum for the Study of Cuba in 1994. It is therefore fitting that this volume includes an essay, by Jordi Garrell, that looks at the evolution of Cuban journalism on either side of 1898 independence, through the figure of Justo de Lara, to whom little scholarly attention has previously been given. In contrast, Michael Chanan's contribution comes forward to the present, discussing the latest challenges and developments in Cuban cinema—that medium that has been so defining of international perceptions of revolutionary Cuba. But, with the island confronting so many changes in the twenty-first century, “there will likely be radical transformations in multiple domains and the cultural field ... is likely to suffer hugely from the impact” (p. 119).

Emigration has always played a significant role in Cuban identity, and the way this has changed over the years is reflective of realities on the island. With increasing talk of a “Cuban diaspora,” two of the contributions look at these migrants. Kaptcia discusses the changing way such Cubans are described, from the pejorative terms used in official communiqués to their own sense of identity. A distinction in this can be seen between those who settled in the United States and those who went elsewhere. Jean Stubbs and Catherine Krull report on how a migrant sense of “cubanidad” has become decentered in Western European cities where smaller numbers of Cuban migrants have chosen to live and become acculturated. With them, what it means to be “Cuban” is questioned and evolving.

This is an eclectic collection, but one that gives a glimpse of the growing breadth of Cuban studies. It can perhaps be summed up by the title to Luis A. Pérez's essay: “Rethinking Pathways to the Cuban Past.” Pérez calls for us to look toward “daily life as lived,” in order to gain “a fuller understanding of the complexities” (p. 26) of the island. In his lifetime, Alistair Hennessy played a significant part in this; this volume is a worthy tribute to his memory.

Jonathan Curry-Machado

School of Advanced Studies, University of London

jon.curry-machado@sas.ac.uk