Jonathan M. Hansen, *Young Castro: The Making of a Revolutionary*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019. xx + 484 pp. (Cloth US\$35.00)

There is a saying among some historians about research: “The deader the better.” This is apt when writing about a controversial figure like Fidel Castro who inspired great passions during his lifetime.

Jonathan Hansen benefits from a newfound willingness by some to share, for the first time, documents about Castro’s early life and career. Armed with these new sources, he paints an intimate portrait of the first 32 years of Castro’s life, from his childhood at the family ranch in Biran, to his tumultuous school years, to the attack on the Moncada Army barracks in July 1953, and finally the triumph of the Revolution on January 1, 1959. The 38 photos (except for one of a corpse at Moncada) resemble a family scrapbook.

Critical to Hansen’s analysis was the access he gained to Castro’s personal papers—a benefit rarely granted to researchers by the Cuban government. They illuminate many aspects of his personality, including his tendency to exaggerate. For example, while studying for a law degree from the University of Havana, Castro rarely attended classes, instead taking a series of exams to satisfy the degree requirements, but claimed to have received “outstanding” marks in the majority of his classes; Castro’s school record showed that he achieved that in only half of his classes. Castro’s tendency toward micro-management is revealed in accounts of the Sierra Maestra guerrilla campaign, when he expressed concern over everything from ammunition stores to the distribution of milk and meat among the villagers.

The love letters between Castro and socialite Natty Revuelta were another key source. Each was already married when, as Hansen puts it, they began an “epistolary courtship” during the 20 months Castro was imprisoned after the Moncada attack. The correspondence is so intimate that readers are virtually transported into Castro’s mind. The ideas swirling there are variously dynamic, troubled, halting, and decisive, as he grapples to develop a world view. In one instance, Castro expressed his disdain for the charitable causes to which Revuelta devoted her time, arguing that many charitable works were motivated by the vanity of the benefactors and that charity threatened “to aggravate or put off a long-term solution” to serious social problems (p. 230). The solution lay in state intervention, he assured her. In another letter, he professed his admiration for the lead character in Somerset Maugham’s *The Razor’s Edge* for his refusal to conform to society’s norms; Castro admired the fictional character because he forsook “conventional happiness for authentic experience” (p. 228).

This biography also benefits from two works that Castro sanctioned and co-authored in the final decade of his life: *My Life: A Spoken Biography* (writ-

ten with Ignacio Ramonet) and *Fidel Castro Ruz, guerrillero del tiempo* (written with Katiuska Blanco Castiñeira). Hansen mixes in the works of Castro's estranged relatives, including his sister, Juanita Castro, and the daughter he had with Revuelta, along with over 30 oral history interviews.

Almost as interesting as the sources Hansen relies on are those that he chooses to omit. Earlier biographies by Robert E. Quirk and Peter G. Bourne are not mentioned. There is only one footnote reference to Lionel Martin's *The Early Fidel*. The biographical work by the late *New York Times* reporter Tad Szulc is also missing although his personal papers are cited as a source. The omissions are puzzling, and might lead casual readers to think that Hansen's book is the first effort at a biography of Castro. The book would have been enriched by intellectual engagement with these prior works.

Simon and Schuster touts *Young Castro* as "revisionist," but a better word would be "revealing." Hansen does not stake out any new ground, but rather does a wonderful job of further enriching the contours of Castro's life. He takes a strong stand on the long-running debate about his ideological convictions prior to the Revolution. For years, some people argued that Castro had been a committed Communist since his school years, but concealed those views because of anticipated U.S. resistance. Others argued that he was primarily a nationalist concerned about maintaining Cuba's sovereignty, and that he turned to an alliance with the Soviet Union only to preserve the Revolution and his hold on power. Hansen sides with those holding the latter position: "When fairness toward Cuba collided with U.S. interests and Cold War realities, the imagined alignment between sovereignty, liberty and justice disintegrated and Castro responded like a caged animal. With sovereignty in danger, liberty would have to take a backseat" (p. 414).

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