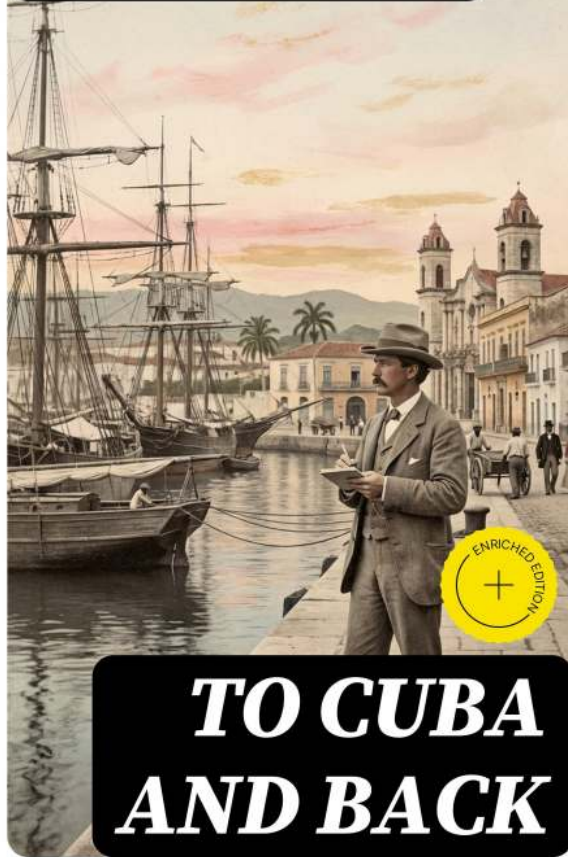


***RICHARD HENRY DANA***



***TO CUBA  
AND BACK***

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**TO CUBA  
AND BACK**

**Richard Henry Dana**

# **To Cuba and Back**

**Enriched edition.**

*Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Jared Black*

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# Introduction

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A vacation voyage becomes an ethical inquiry into a colonial island where beauty and bondage coexist. *To Cuba and Back* by Richard Henry Dana Jr. is a travel narrative from the late 1850s that transforms a brief trip into sustained observation of Cuban society under Spanish rule. Without theatrical flourish, Dana records what he sees from ship to shore, moving through streets, estates, and public spaces with steady, analytic attention. The result is an account that keeps returning to questions of power, labor, and law. His journey remains modest in scope, yet the gaze is exacting, and the island's landscapes, commerce, and hierarchies emerge with a clarity that invites reflection.

Composed as a travelogue, the book follows an American visitor in Cuba during the final decade before the U.S. Civil War, when the island was a Spanish colony shaped by plantation wealth and transatlantic trade. Dana writes from ports and roads, from interiors and public promenades, keeping his focus on how institutions organize daily life. The setting is vivid but never ornamental; the descriptive aim is to make conditions legible. Because the work appeared in the late 1850s, its pages register tensions shared across the hemisphere, and its comparative perspective—U.S. reader looking at Spanish rule—gives the narrative a sharp, clarifying angle.

The premise is straightforward: a short voyage south, a period ashore in and around major urban centers, and a

return, with each stage providing a vantage on work, leisure, governance, and belief. The voice is first-person but restrained, favoring precise description over flourish. Dana's training shapes a style that values clarity, proportion, and documentary facts, while the tone remains measured even when the subject is grave. He observes social interactions, economic routines, and landscapes with equal care, building meaning cumulatively. Readers encounter a rhythm of movement and pause—arrival, scrutiny, departure—that keeps the narrative brisk without sacrificing depth of reflection.

At its center is a sustained attention to systems of unfree labor and the colonial structures that sustain them. Dana repeatedly situates individual scenes within wider networks of law, commerce, and administration, asking what arrangements of power lie behind the visible surfaces of prosperity. Empire and economy intersect with religion, language, and custom, but the book resists exoticism; it treats cultural difference as context rather than spectacle. The island's natural allure is recorded alongside the costs borne by workers, so that beauty and burden remain inseparable. The result is a travel narrative that doubles as moral reportage without abandoning nuance.

For contemporary readers, the book's value lies in how it models attentive travel that refuses to separate pleasure from responsibility. In an era when the Caribbean is often framed as a leisure destination, Dana's account shows how scrutiny of infrastructure, labor, and policy can deepen rather than diminish appreciation. The questions it raises about the ethics of looking, the complicity of consumption,

and the afterlives of empire remain urgent. It also demonstrates how careful firsthand observation can complement broader debates, offering grounded insight without presuming mastery. The narrative's balance of curiosity and conscience speaks directly to twenty-first-century travel and reading.

Stylistically, Dana favors clarity over flourish, building arguments from small, verifiable particulars and letting patterns emerge from accumulation. The prose moves efficiently, but it pauses when needed to weigh evidence and consider alternate explanations, a habit that keeps judgment from hardening into slogan. The narrator's self-positioning—as a temporary guest who nevertheless belongs to a neighboring power—adds productive friction to his observations, illuminating how perspective shapes truth claims. Readers encounter a voice that trusts careful seeing more than rhetoric, and the effect is quietly persuasive: a record that asks to be tested against other sources while remaining compelling on its own.

*To Cuba and Back* endures because it captures a pivotal Atlantic world in compressed, lucid form while refusing to let scenery eclipse structure. As a document of travel, it offers movement and novelty; as a work of social observation, it offers method and ethical focus. Readers today can approach it as both a historical source and a model of inquiry, learning how to attend to place without losing sight of power. The book invites steady, open-eyed reading, rewarding patience with layered understanding, and it keeps asking a simple, demanding question: what does it mean to witness and return responsibly?

# Synopsis

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Richard Henry Dana Jr.'s travel narrative records a brief winter voyage from the United States to Spanish Cuba and back. The purpose is not adventure but observation; he uses a lawyer's clarity to note institutions, economy, and manners. He frames Cuba as a close yet distinct neighbor and seeks to correct myths by comparing its practices with American life. The organizing thread is movement: shipboard routines, harbor procedures, city tours, countryside visits, and the homeward leg. Along the way, reflections on law, labor, faith, and empire stitch episodes together, making a continuous inquiry out of discrete scenes and conversations.

Southbound by steamer, the approach sets the tone: currents and weather give way to strict port entry and health inspection as Havana's fortress and lighthouse frame the harbor. He sketches the cityscape—low buildings with inner courts, balconies, and arcades—its narrow streets, intense light and shade, and the midday heat that dictates a different schedule. The blend of Spanish ceremony and Caribbean climate shapes manners. Commercial bustle on the quays introduces currency, customs, and guides, while the first errands teach the etiquette expected of foreigners under attentive authorities whose presence is felt in checkpoints, uniforms, and the keeping of papers.

Within Havana, he attends to public spaces and routines: plazas with music and evening promenades, theatres and

cafés as social stages, and the circulation of distinctive carriages that signal rank and gender norms. Religious architecture and observances mark the week, while markets display abundance shaped by sea-borne supply. He tracks how official surveillance coexists with lively street life, and how class and color are legible in dress, work, and mobility. The description balances attraction and reserve, acknowledging amenities that cater to visitors while consistently situating them within a regulated urban fabric and within a hierarchy visible to any attentive passerby.

Seeking a fuller picture, Dana takes rail excursions beyond the capital into plantation districts. The speed and reach of early railways impress him as instruments that bind port and interior, mirroring the island's export orientation. On estates he observes the physical plant of sugar production—fields, mills, boilers, and housing—framed as an industrial enterprise dependent on global prices and seasonal rhythms. He gives attention to landscape as well as mechanism, juxtaposing cultivated cane with surrounding valleys and limestone hills, and he traces how transportation, finance, and foreign trade knit countryside and city into one operating system.

Labor stands at the center of his inquiry. He describes work gangs, overseers, and the schedule that drives planting, grinding, and shipping, making clear that slavery underwrites the island's wealth. Without sensational detail, he notes the legal and ecclesiastical structures that define status, punishment, and manumission, and the visible distinctions between enslaved, free people of color, and whites. Comparisons with the United States are explicit but

measured, inviting readers to consider similarities and differences in law, discipline, and domestic life. He also records how visitors' access is curated, urging cautious inference from what hosts allow them to see.

The book widens to institutions and politics. Dana outlines the machinery of Spanish colonial governance—captain-general, police, censors, and courts—showing how authority pervades print, assembly, and travel through passports and permits. He notes the Church's presence in education and charity alongside the barracks and customs house, and charts the island's reliance on maritime commerce. Turning to international questions, he registers American debates over annexation and private military schemes, weighing them against Cuban realities as he observed them. Health and quarantine regulations, seasonal disease, and the economics of shipping enter the account as practical constraints on trade and tourism alike.

The return leg prompts synthesis rather than revelation. Dana closes by balancing the island's aesthetic appeal and social vitality with the coercive foundations of its economy and regime. The narrative leaves readers with problems rather than prescriptions: how to understand prosperity built on bondage, how travelers should write about what is staged for them, and how near neighbors misperceive one another. As a compact, contemporary portrait, the book endures for its steadiness of observation and for the snapshot it provides of Cuba at a formative moment, before later wars and upheavals altered the terms of its life and its image abroad.

# Historical Context

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To Cuba and Back: A Vacation Voyage is an 1859 travel narrative by Boston lawyer and author Richard Henry Dana Jr. Written after a short voyage from the northeastern United States to Havana and nearby districts, it records an American observer's encounter with mid-nineteenth-century Cuba. At the time, the island was a Spanish colony administered by a captain-general from Havana, and the Roman Catholic Church was the established faith. Cuba's principal port functioned as a commercial hub linking sugar plantations to Atlantic markets. Dana's narrative draws on his legal training and prior maritime experience to portray institutions, commerce, and everyday life he found ashore and afloat.

In the late 1850s, Cuba's colonial government centralized authority in the captain-general, who commanded the army, controlled the courts and press, and supervised local officials. In 1859 Francisco Serrano y Domínguez assumed the post, continuing a regime of close surveillance shaped by earlier conspiracies and repression. Travel required passports, and censors monitored publications and theaters. Havana's harbor defenses—Castillo del Morro and the vast Fortaleza de la Cabaña—symbolized Spain's military presence. This administrative and military structure frames how visitors moved, what they could see, and what residents could publicly say, shaping the texture of Dana's access to information and his tone of cautious precision.

Cuba's economy revolved around sugar production, centered on large ingenios powered increasingly by steam. By mid-century the island had one of Latin America's earliest railways, linking plantations to ports to speed cane and supplies. Enslaved Africans and their descendants provided most field labor, while a sizable free population of color worked in towns and on estates. Colonial law recognized practices like *coartación*, allowing some to purchase freedom in installments, yet plantation discipline remained harsh and profit-driven. Dana's visits to mills and estates took place in this industrializing, coerced labor regime, where the rhythms of grinding season and export schedules governed social life and hierarchy.

Although Spain had outlawed the transatlantic slave trade by treaty, clandestine importations into Cuba continued well into the 1850s, feeding the sugar frontier. The British Royal Navy patrolled Atlantic routes and, under bilateral agreements, a Mixed Commission Court sat in Havana to adjudicate captured slavers. Smugglers adapted with faster vessels, remote landing sites, and forged papers, producing periodic scandals and diplomatic friction. This ongoing, illegal traffic haunted official claims of reform and lent an undercurrent of secrecy to plantation districts. Dana's scrutiny of ports, ships, and legal institutions reflects an awareness of this contested maritime environment and the dissonance between law and practice.

As abolitionist pressure mounted globally, Cuban planters also turned to the transoceanic "coolie" trade. Beginning in 1847, thousands of Chinese laborers arrived under eight-year contracts that promised wages but often delivered

coercion, debt, and high mortality. Recruiters, brokers, and shipping agents created a labor pipeline whose abuses drew sustained criticism from missionaries, diplomats, and reformers. By the late 1850s, Chinese workers were visible on estates and in urban trades, supplementing enslaved labor without fundamentally altering plantation hierarchy. Dana's comparisons of enslaved Africans and contracted Asians illuminate how colonial Cuba reconfigured unfree labor to sustain sugar profits despite international campaigns against the slave trade.

Cuba also occupied a volatile place in United States diplomacy and politics. American merchants traded heavily in sugar, molasses, and shipping services linking Havana to New England and Gulf ports. The 1854 Black Warrior Affair—when Cuban authorities seized an American steamer over customs papers—provoked talk of war. That same year, the Ostend Manifesto urged the United States to acquire Cuba, alarming antislavery Northerners. Earlier, U.S.-based filibusters led by Narciso López attempted invasions and were crushed; López was executed in Havana in 1851. Dana's account appears against this backdrop of commerce, annexation debates, and neutrality law, sharpening his attention to flags, consuls, and jurisdiction.

Dana wrote as a prominent antislavery lawyer and maritime expert. He had achieved fame with *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840) and authored *The Seaman's Friend* (1841), a practical legal manual. In 1854 he served as counsel for Anthony Burns, a fugitive slave seized in Boston under the Fugitive Slave Act, and endured mob violence for his role. The Dred Scott decision in 1857 further inflamed

sectional conflict by denying Congress power to restrict slavery's expansion. Traveling in 1859, Dana brought this legal and moral framework to his observations of Cuban society, evaluating slavery, policing, and contract labor through comparative law and lived detail.

Mid-nineteenth-century Havana offered a dense urban stage: a busy harbor ringed by customs houses and batteries, plazas anchored by churches, theaters under censorship, and promenades hosting colonial elites. Seasonal yellow fever and strict quarantine regimes shaped travel, while steamships shortened passages and expanded tourism. Railways pushed inland toward Matanzas and the sugar districts, enabling short excursions that revealed the countryside's industrial discipline. Within this landscape, Dana's narrative balances curiosity and critique: he catalogs architecture, agriculture, and ceremony, yet continually measures them against legal norms and humanitarian concerns. The book thus mirrors and questions its era's imperial order, racial hierarchy, and Atlantic commercial modernity.

# **To CUBA AND BACK**

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# FROM MANHATTAN TO EL MORRO

The steamer is to sail at one P.M.; and, by half-past twelve, her decks are full, and the mud and snow of the pier are well trodden by men and horses. Coaches drive down furiously, and nervous passengers put their heads out to see if the steamer is off before her time; and on the decks, and in the gangways, inexperienced passengers run against everybody, and mistake the engineer for the steward, and come up the same stairs they go down, without knowing it. In the dreary snow, the newspaper vendors cry the papers, and the book vendors thrust yellow covers into your face—"Reading for the voyage, sir—five hundred pages, close print!" And that being rejected, they reverse the process of the Sibyl—with "Here's another, sir, one thousand pages, double columns." The great beam of the engine moves slowly up and down, and the black hull sways at its fasts. A motley group are the passengers. Shivering Cubans, exotics that have taken slight root in the hothouses of the Fifth Avenue, are to brave a few days of sleet and cold at sea, for the palm trees and mangoes, the cocoas and orange trees, they will be sitting under in six days, at farthest. There are Yankee shipmasters going out to join their "cotton wagons" at New Orleans and Mobile, merchants pursuing a commerce that knows no rest and no locality; confirmed invalids advised to go to Cuba to die under mosquito nets and be buried in a Potter's Field<sup>[2]</sup>; and other invalids

wisely enough avoiding our March winds; and here and there a mere vacationmaker, like myself.

Captain Bullock is sure to sail at the hour; and at the hour he is on the paddle-box, the fasts are loosed, the warp run out, the crew pull in on the warp on the port quarter, and the head swings off. No word is spoken, but all is done by signs; or, if a word is necessary, a low clear tone carries it to the listener. There is no tearing and rending escape of steam, deafening and distracting all, and giving a kind of terror to a peaceful scene; but our ship swings off, gathers way, and enters upon her voyage, in a quiet like that of a bank or counting-room, almost under a spell of silence.

The state-rooms of the "Cahawba," like those of most American sea-going steamers, are built so high above the water that the windows may be open in all but the worst of weather, and good ventilation be ensured. I have a very nice fellow for my room-mate, in the berth under me; but, in a state-room, no room-mate is better than the best; so I change my quarters to a state-room further forward, nearer "the eyes of her," which the passengers generally shun, and get one to myself, free from the rattle of the steering gear, while the delightful rise and fall of the bows, and leisurely weather roll and lee roll, cradle and nurse one to sleep.

The routine of the ship, as regards passengers, is this: a cup of coffee, if you desire it, when you turn out; breakfast at eight, lunch at twelve, dinner at three, tea at seven, and lights put out at ten.

Throughout the day, sailing down the outer edge of the Gulf Stream, we see vessels of all forms and sizes, coming in sight and passing away, as in a dioramic show. There is a

heavy cotton droger from the Gulf, of 1200 tons burden, under a cloud of sail, pressing on to the northern seas of New England or Old England. Here comes a saucy little Baltimore brig, close-hauled and leaning over to it; and there, half down in the horizon, is a pile of white canvas, which the experienced eyes of my two friends, the passenger shipmasters, pronounce to be a bark, outward bound. Every passenger says to every other, how beautiful! how exquisite! That pale thin girl who is going to Cuba for her health, her brother travelling with her, sits on the settee, propped by a pillow, and tries to smile and to think she feels stronger in this air. She says she shall stay in Cuba until she gets well!

After dinner, Capt. Bullock tells us that we shall soon see the high lands of Cuba, off Matanzas, the first and highest being the Pan of Matanzas<sup>[1]</sup>. It is clear over head, but a mist lies along the southern horizon, in the latter part of the day. The sharpest eyes detect the land, about 4 P.M., and soon it is visible to all. It is an undulating country on the coast, with high hills and mountains in the interior, and has a rich and fertile look. That height is the Pan, though we see no special resemblance, in its outline, to a loaf of bread. We are still sixty miles from Havana. We cannot reach it before dark, and no vessels are allowed to pass the Morro after the signals are dropped at sunset.

We coast the northern shore of Cuba, from Matanzas westward. There is no waste of sand and low flats, as in most of our southern states; but the fertile, undulating land comes to the sea, and rises into high hills as it recedes. "There is the Morro! and right ahead<sup>[1q]</sup>!" "Why, there is