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British Diplomacy and US Hegemony in Cuba, 1898–1964

Christopher Hull

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List of Abbreviations

BT	Board of Trade
CAB	Cabinet Office
CoCom	Coordinating Committee on Export Controls
CO	Colonial Office
ECGD	Export Credits Guarantee Department
EEC	European Economic Community
FO	Foreign Office
HMG	Her/His Majesty's Government
m-fn	Most-favoured nation
PRO	Public Record Office
RAF	Royal Air Force
SIS	Secret Intelligence Service
T	Treasury
TNA	The National Archives of the UK

Introduction

In February 1898, a mysterious explosion in Havana's harbour killed 266 sailors on board the USS *Maine*, a battleship undertaking a peaceful mission to Cuba. In the United States much newspaper and public opinion held Spain responsible for the large loss of life. Three years after the start of a second war of independence between Cuba and Spain, the alleged act of treachery contributed to Washington's decision to intervene militarily in the island. Within weeks both the conflict and Spanish colonial rule in Cuba were over.

In late October 1964, an inbound Japanese boat collided with a chartered East German freighter on the River Thames, just minutes into its voyage from London to Havana. The outgoing vessel partially capsized, ruining its cargo of 42 British-built Leyland buses. But was the collision accidental or an act of sabotage, sanctioned by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)? The British government's decision to provide credit-backing for the bus exports, breaching Washington's economic blockade of the communist-ruled island, had already provoked a serious rift between the transatlantic allies.

The years 1898 and 1964 demarcate the following historical narrative. It investigates the relations of two insular countries, dependent on trade for their economic prosperity. The mysterious sinking of two ships in Havana and London, in very different circumstances, provides the start and end point for this study of British diplomacy and US hegemony in Cuba. The *Maine* disaster hastened the end of Spanish rule in Cuba and the beginning of close US–Cuban relations, and the later incident, whatever its causes, was emblematic of the Cold War.

Renowned twentieth-century figure Winston Churchill (1874–1965) exemplifies British contacts with Cuba. He was born into an aristocratic

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family, the son of a prominent Tory politician father and an American-born mother. At 20 years old he first visited the island in 1895 as a war correspondent, contracted by the *Daily Graphic* in London to report from the battlefront of a renewed insurrection in Cuba against Spanish rule. He ended his final despatch by lamenting Cuba's predicament, and imagining how the island might have been had the British not exchanged Havana for Florida in 1763 following their 11-month occupation:

> It may be that as the pages of history are turned brighter fortunes and better times will come to Cuba. It may be that future years will see the island as it would be now, had England never lost it – a Cuba free and prosperous, under just laws and a patriotic administration, throwing open her ports to the commerce of the world, sending her ponies to Hurlingham and her Cricketers to Lords, exchanging the cigars of Havana for the cottons of Lancashire, and the sugars of Matanzas for the cutlery of Sheffield. At least let us hope so.[1]

Churchill's correspondence highlighted the unrealized commercial potential of Cuba under Spanish rule and its possible development in the future.

Eight months before Churchill's first visit to Cuba, founder of the Cuban Revolutionary Party José Martí had written to the British Foreign Secretary from Guantánamo in April 1895. He explained to him the circumstances in which a British subject had died during the landing of independence rebels in eastern Cuba. In a similar vein to Churchill, Martí appealed to Britain's commercial outlook and implored its government not to intervene in a renewed rebellion against Spanish rule in the island. His letter concentrated not on lost opportunities in the past, but on new commercial openings in the future, if only Britain would stay out of the conflict:

> The Cuban nation, fully prepared, from well seasoned culture and habits of creative work, to take its natural place in the labors of modern development and due harmony between the powers of the Earth, has reentered the path of sacrifice and war to give birth, at the very entrance of the fast opening new ways of commerce and human intercourse, to an independent, self-suffering and impartial Republic ready to open its abundant opportunities to the energy and industry of the world.[2]

Three weeks after writing this letter, 42-year-old Martí, a literary man and the apostle of Cuban independence, died in his first-ever armed conflict. His description of 'fast opening new ways of commerce' reflected the Cuban dream of independence from Spanish colonial rule, and complete freedom to trade abroad without metropolis-imposed restrictions.

In a similar vein, the young Churchill visualized Cuba 'throwing open her ports'. His statement reflected the success of his country's industrial revolution, and the pervasive – but not uncontested – Victorian conviction that international trade should be free of protectionist tariffs. The issue of 'free trade' versus 'tariff reform' split British opinion in the early 1900s. 'Tariff reformers' argued for duties to be levied on foreign imports, alongside a system of Imperial Preference for goods traded between Britain and its colonies. Strict adherence to 'free trade', they argued, was leading to the dumping of foreign goods in Britain, a weakening of its industrial base and a subsequent loss of jobs. The issue divided Churchill's own Conservative Party. The young politician, a vociferous supporter of 'free trade', crossed the floor of the House of Commons in May 1904 to sit as an opposition Liberal MP, only returning to the Conservative fold 20 years later.

Following US military intervention the Spanish empire lost its Cuban colony in 1898, three years after Martí's and Churchill's correspondence. After nearly four years of US military occupation the island finally achieved its independence, at least nominally. The increasingly assertive United States exerted indirect political and economic control over the island during the first three decades of the Cuban republic, making it a virtual US protectorate.

Half a century after first visiting Cuba as a war correspondent, Churchill travelled there again following the Allied victory against the Axis powers in the Second World War and his shock general election defeat in 1945. The ex-prime minister returned to the island on holiday in February 1946, to swim and to paint. Locals showered him with gifts of the Cuban cigars he so habitually smoked, and he judiciously batted away questions on political matters.[3] Churchill then toured the United States, where at Fulton in Missouri he made a speech that described an 'iron curtain' descending across Eastern Europe.[4] His comments presaged the impending Cold War between the capitalist Western world and the nascent communist camp in the east. In the same speech, he celebrated his country's close cooperation with the United States in the Second World War by coining the phrase the 'special relationship'.[5]

Anglo–American affinity derived from a shared language, joint military endeavours and a similar outlook on the world. Britain and the United States continued to exchange vital military intelligence during the ensuing Cold War.

One of Britain's strongest cultural connections with Cuba is the spy-fiction novel *Our Man in Havana*, written by peripatetic British author Graham Greene, and published just 12 weeks before the triumph of the Cuban Revolution on 1 January 1959.[6] The novel's main protagonist is Jim Wormold, an expatriate vacuum cleaner salesman. The Caribbean network of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) recruits him as its British agent in Havana, but he invents his sub-agents and intelligence in order to finance his daughter's expensive tastes. Production of a film version commenced within five months of the novel's publication. Released later in 1959, it starts with the disclaimer, 'This film is set in Cuba before the recent revolution'. In an early scene, SIS Caribbean station chief Henry Hawthorne, played in the film's outstanding performance by Noël Coward, first encounters Wormold (Alec Guinness) in his shop and enquires about his business:

> *HAWTHORNE* Do you do pretty well?
> *WORMOLD* Yes, but there's not much electric power since the troubles began.
> *HAWTHORNE* When was that?
> *WORMOLD* Oh, about the time Queen Victoria died.[7]

The last is a throwaway line, but replete with historical significance. Considering the two Castro-led rebel actions in July 1953 at Moncada and the *Granma* landing in December 1956, a common link between recent Cuban and British history would have been Elizabeth II's Coronation (June 1953) or the Suez Crisis (July to November 1956) respectively; but instead, the historically and politically astute Greene refers us back to 1901, to the period of US military intervention and occupation (1898 to 1902).

Cuba's 'Republic'

It is the period in Cuba's history from 1898, when 'the troubles began', that is the main focus of this study. Throughout the years 1898 to 1964, covering the whole life of what many Cubans define as their 'república mediatizada' (US-supervised republic: 1902–58), the most important factor in British policy towards Cuba was the US dimension. The closeness of the US–Cuban and Anglo–American relationships compromised the operation of Anglo–Cuban relations, as both Cuba and Britain prioritized their overriding diplomatic and economic contacts with the United States. Within this triangular set of relations, the nexus between London and Havana suffered markedly.

The various ministers, ambassadors and other diplomats posted to His/Her Majesty's Government's mission in Havana fully appreciated this fact. In 1921 the British chargé d'affaires in Havana described the composition of a forthcoming Cuban mission to London, headed by the recently deposed president Mario Menocal (1913–21). The long-delayed visit reciprocated a British mission to Cuba three years earlier. Godfrey Haggard emphasized that the Cuban government had made a real effort to include personnel 'de lo mejor'.[8] Met with heavy fog on its arrival in London, the mission's short stay included a banquet at the House of Commons where the Conservative leader of the House and former Chancellor of the Exchequer Austen Chamberlain made light of his decision to impose a war-time duty on Cuban cigar imports.[9] Luncheons were taken with King George V at Buckingham Palace and the Lord Mayor of London at Mansion House. They visited the Cenotaph, the Tower of London, a chocolate factory in Bristol, an arms factory in Birmingham and the city's Chamber of Commerce. From Windsor Castle they paid a visit to Eton College, described as 'one of the most venerable curiosities of England. Through the corridors of this college the young men who later were to form the British Empire have played [*sic*]'. Their last call was upon foreign secretary the Marquis Curzon of Kedleston, for tea.[10]

Ahead of the mission, Haggard qualified his advice to colleagues in London that they explore rich openings for British exports in the island: 'Our interests in Cuba are purely commercial. On the other hand, politically, the country is an annex of the United States.'[11] Two years later, chargé d'affaires Donald St Clair Gainer wrote that Cuba was 'too important economically to the United States of America to be allowed full freedom of action, and Cuban politicians must either entirely acquiesce in American domination or face direct action from their northern neighbour'.[12] In his 1931 annual report, British minister Joyce Broderick, an Irishman, described the predicament of both the island and British interests: 'The aspirations of the Cubans to complete independence are doomed to permanent disappointment, and the representatives in Havana of European countries must make the best of the situation as it stands.'[13] In the security-conscious era of the Cold War, and just weeks before the 1956 *Granma* landing of Castro's rebels from Mexico, an official British overview stated, ‘Both because of her geographical position and because of the part played by the United States in her struggle for independence, Cuba must be regarded as lying almost entirely within the United States zone of influence.’[14]

In this way US preponderance constricted not only the Cuban goal of true independence, but also Britain’s willingness to defend its interests in the island. From the point that the United States intervened in Cuba’s drawn-out struggle for independence in 1898, Britain’s long-standing commercial and financial interest in the island became practically its sole focus, as Washington assumed strategic responsibility for the Caribbean.

The principal aim of this book is to judge the extent to which British policy in Cuba acted within the margins of US acquiescence. With one notable exception, during the final period under study, Britain pragmatically yielded to US wishes. But US supremacy, even before 1959, did not always prejudice British freedom of action. In an exceptional case in the mid- to late 1930s, for example, a change in Washington’s hemispheric policy inadvertently aided Britain’s efforts to defend its interests in Cuba.

Diplomats and Diplomacy

For many years the Foreign Office was an elitist department of government overseen by aristocrats. The long list of Old Etonians who have held important positions within its hierarchical structure went a long way to confirming this impression.[15] In the case of His/Her Majesty’s mission in Havana, several British diplomats posted there had also attended Eton School (see Table 1). The Foreign Office had a reputation as a very conservative policymaking institution, one prominent official in 1900 referring to it as a ‘very slumberous lion [. . .] so very deferential and polite to all the other lions’.[16] Generations later, Conservative politician Edward du Cann, economic secretary to the Treasury (1962–63) during the Leyland bus sales controversy, levelled similar criticisms against the department: ‘Many Conservatives have a low opinion of the FO in general. They regard it as a rather woolly-minded organisation, too self-contained, too often self-satisfied, and not as zealous as it should be in promoting Britain’s interests.’[17]

The American Department of the Foreign Office was responsible for most decisions concerning Cuba, its head generally acting as the arbiter of British foreign policy towards the island.[18] For important decisions touching on Anglo–American relations such as the Anglo–Cuban Treaty

Table 1 British diplomats in Havana, 1898–1964[a]

Name	Service in Havana	Diplomatic rank	University/School (and/or military service)	Previous two postings
Adam Watson	1963–(66)	Ambassador	King's College, Cambridge Rugby	Nuffield College, Oxford Dakar
Herbert Marchant	1960–63	Ambassador	St John's College, Cambridge Perse	Düsseldorf San Francisco
Stanley Fordham	1956–60	Ambassador	Trinity College, Cambridge Eton	Buenos Aires Stockholm
Wilfred Gallienne	1954–56	Ambassador	Royal Field Artillery, First World War[b]	Guatemala City Chicago
Adrian Holman	1950–54 1949–50	Ambassador Minister	New College, Oxford[c] Harrow	Bucharest Paris
James Dodds	1944–49	Minister	Wadham College, Oxford[d] Marlborough	La Paz Tokyo
Sir George Ogilvie-Forbes	1940–44	Minister	New College, Oxford[e] Beaumont	Berlin[f] Madrid > Valencia
Herbert Grant Watson	1937–40	Minister	*see below*	Helsingfors (Helsinki) Havana
Thomas Snow	1935–37	Minister	New College, Oxford Winchester	Madrid Tokyo
Herbert Grant Watson	1933–35	Minister	Trinity College, Cambridge Eton	Guatemala City Lisbon
Sir John Joyce Broderick	1931–33	Minister/consul general	Royal University of Ireland Blackrock College, Dublin	Washington DC New York

Table 1 (Continued)

Name	Service in Havana	Diplomatic rank	University/School (and/or military service)	Previous two postings
Thomas Morris	1925–31 1924–25	Minister Chargé d'affaires/ consul general	Imperial Yeomanry, Boer War	Caracas Canary Islands
Godfrey Haggard[g]	1921–24	Chargé d'affaires/ consul general	Honiton Grammar School	La Paz Guatemala City
William Erskine	1919–21	Minister	Magdalen College, Oxford Eton	Rome Athens
Stephen Leech	1909–19	Minister[h]	Magdalen College, Oxford Eton	Peking Christiana
Arthur Grant-Duff	1906–09	Minister	Balliol College, Oxford Clifton	Darmstadt and Carlsruhe[i] Mexico City
Lionel Carden	1902–06 1899–	Minister Consul general	Eton	Guatemala City Mexico City

[a] Most information taken from *Who Was Who*: www.ukwhoswho.com.

[b] Served from 1915. Seriously wounded in 1917. Seconded for service with Royal Engineers at War Office, 1918.

[c] Served in First World War (1915–18). Awarded Military Cross, mentioned in despatches. Two brothers died in same war.

[d] Served in First World War (1915–19).

[e] Served in First World War: Gallipoli (1915), Egypt and Mesopotamia (twice mentioned in despatches). War Office General Staff, 1918.

[f] Discounting short period in Norway (1939–40).

[g] Information found in Christopher Hassall, *The Timeless Quest: Stephen Haggard* (London: Arthur Barker, 1946), pp. 24–33.

[h] Also accredited to Hayti and Santo Domingo from 1913.

[i] Ignoring subsequent temporary postings.

(1901–06), recognition of a radical government (1933–34), British arms sales (1958–59) and the Leyland bus deal (1963–64), files containing incoming and outgoing letters and telegrams, internal memoranda and so forth filtered their way through the Foreign Office hierarchy accumulating written minutes and marginalia. A few privileged documents even acquired the scratchy red annotations of a hurried foreign secretary or a laconic prime minister.

Havana proved a difficult posting for foreign diplomats. British minister Joyce Broderick (1931–33) pointed to the seasonal character of political and social disturbances in the island. Winter months, he wrote, saw a fall in the atmospheric and political temperature, a season when the rural population devoted their energies to cutting and grinding the sugar crop. The hot summer months, meanwhile, witnessed a minimum of manual work in the sugar industry, leading to idleness and discontent.[19] The weather often mimicked political and social turbulence, with tropical cyclones of dangerously high winds and heavy rains regularly afflicting the island. Soon after his arrival, Broderick made light of Cuba's extremes when inviting an ex-colleague from the Department of Overseas Trade and his wife to Havana: 'Lady Crowe and you should come out and pay us a visit. We shall insure you against cyclones and revolutions.'[20]

Havana, like other diplomatic postings in Latin America, was not considered a destination for high-fliers. And Cuba proved a challenging environment in which to practise diplomacy, not least because foreign envoys outside the US diplomatic circle were considered, or considered themselves, as minor actors in a much larger drama. Ahead of his 1935 posting on promotion as His Majesty's minister to Havana, Tom Snow wrote to the head of the American Department to ask for 'guidance [...] in connection with the degree of liaison advisable with the U.S. Ambassador'. Robert Craigie replied:

> Both in practice and in theory we like to keep in close touch with the Americans in dealing with South and Central American countries [...] [However,] there is undoubtedly a tendency on the part of the American Embassy in Havana to regard themselves as being in a category quite distinct from the other representatives and, consequently, to play a lone hand. In so far as this tendency is displayed we must, of course, avoid the appearance of being a suppliant for American advice and must play an independent part, or rather try to act in cooperation with the representatives of the other principal powers.[21]

During a period of heightened political unrest in the mid-1930s, Herbert Grant Watson pointed to the skewed view of foreign representatives held by some elements in the island:

> There is, unfortunately, among the people of Cuba a false notion of the position of the Diplomatic Corps. Whether it is on account of the Platt Amendment or from some other reason, the Cubans feel that they can involve foreign representatives in their internal quarrels and intrigues and attempt to do so.[22]

From its inception in 1902, the most notorious of the Platt Amendment's seven articles had given the United States the right to intervene 'for the preservation of Cuban independence', and led to three US military interventions between 1906 and 1921. This extraterritorial power, encoded in the island's constitution, led Cuban opposition politicians to create conditions for US intervention in order to oust an incumbent government from power.

Of course, diplomats themselves were not infallible. In July 1959, British Ambassador (1956–60) Stanley Fordham lamented both his misreading of the insurgency that had led to Fulgencio Batista's rapid demise months earlier, and his backing for sales of British tanks and fighter aircraft to the dictator. Evidently crestfallen by the turn of events, he wrote, 'Members of Her Majesty's Foreign Service are expected to be right when all around them are wrong. I have been greatly concerned that I have failed in this respect and that in consequence I led you and others astray.'[23] He was perhaps suffering the existential despair common to ambassadors from time to time, vulnerably exposed at the end of a long and often encrypted line of communication when fluid events conspire to overturn their considered predictions.

Cuban 'Independence'

Cuba, a 'new nation', has defined its national identity in contrast to aggressors who acted against its independence aspirations. Since 1959, for example, many Cubans have viewed their country in polar opposition to the United States of America, which, from a nationalist perspective, intervened at the eleventh hour in 1898 to restrict ambitions for full independence. Cubans of a nationalist bent have viewed their 'patria' ('homeland') as a victim of imperialism, initially engaged in a drawn-out nineteenth-century struggle to free itself from Spanish colonial rule, only to achieve a nominal independence constrained ignominiously by Washington from 1902 to 1958. Cubans belonging to the economic and political elite, however, benefitted from this period of close collaboration with the United States, and have been viewed as traitors to the cause of true independence.

Britain's historic involvement with Cuba has also led to negative views. In past centuries Britain was seen as an untrustworthy nation of pirates and enslavers, referring to the actions of various sea-going adventurers, both state-sponsored and unofficial, during the sixteenth century and beyond; corsairs and buccaneers, figures such as John Hawkins and Francis Drake, who sacked and plundered in Caribbean waters.[24] Britain's alleged duplicity in abolishing slavery and the slave trade, institutions it had upheld for centuries, led to severe censure from Spanish colonial authorities and Creole sugar planters alike in the nineteenth century. In this light, its opponents portrayed Great Britain as 'perfidious Albion', a term invented by the French for their cross-channel rivals in the eighteenth century, referring 'to their alleged treacherous policy towards foreigners'.[25]

On the other hand, various prominent Cubans held a certain respect for British institutions and authority, and experience derived from control of the world's largest empire. At the end of the nineteenth century the island's elite were well informed about the industrial revolution, the influence of British capital, democracy and traditions. When Spain lost Cuba, the Caribbean island seemed ripe for financial investment and commercial exploitation. Britain and its empire, along with the United States, appeared well positioned to partake in the potential bonanza, although geographic proximity naturally gave US interests a great permanent advantage over British competitors.

When the United States defeated Spain in 1898, it had no precedents of its own on which to model its military occupation of Cuba. Naturally, new Secretary of War Elihu Root (1899–1904) consulted British models for instruction. In December 1899 he wrote,

> The first thing I did after my appointment was to make out a list of a great number of books which cover in detail both the practice and the principles of many forms of colonial government under the English law, and I am giving to them all the time I can take from my active duties.

Root's archive contains a list of 15 such works, dealing with English colonial policy and practice.[26] Of course, US administrators appropriated and rejected those parts of the British model that did not, in their view, accord either with their own principles or with conditions on the ground. India and Egypt were a long way geographically and culturally from Cuba, with different native experiences and aspirations. And given the history of their own colonial subjection by the British, US officials were at pains to show that they were not acting imperialistically.[27]

There was, however, a notable symmetry between British control in Egypt, initially a 'veiled protectorate' from 1882 and then a formal protectorate from 1914 to 1922, and US ties with Cuba from 1898 until the early 1930s. British proconsul Lord Cromer famously asserted, 'We do not govern Egypt, we only govern the governors of Egypt'. The statement might equally have been applied to US influence over Cuban politicians during the first three decades of their republic.[28] There were analogies between Egypt and Cuba in military occupation, strategic control of shipping lanes (and access to the Suez and Panama canals), protection for the export of essential commodities (cotton and sugar) and periodic readjustments in formal and informal control through revised treaties: the 1936 Anglo–Egyptian defence treaty (ending British occupation, but maintaining a garrison and canal zone control); the 1954 Anglo–Egyptian defence agreement (relinquishing canal zone control); the Platt Amendment, 1902–34; and two US–Cuban reciprocity treaties in 1903 and 1934. The proconsular roles of colonial/diplomatic representatives and their overbearing interference in the internal affairs of Egypt and Cuba provoked virulent nationalist reactions, as did an ongoing foreign military presence, at Guantanamo Bay for example. Furthermore, there is a remarkable symmetry in the unravelling of Anglo–Egyptian and US–Cuban relations, notably the nationalization of the Suez Canal and the Eden government's doomed military invasion in 1956, and Cuba's nationalization and expropriation of US companies and properties from 1959 followed by the Bay of Pigs debacle in 1961. Nationalist leaders of these small nations, namely Gamal Abdel Nasser and Fidel Castro, both revelled in the ignominious defeats of their alleged imperialistic oppressors.

Three decades earlier in 1931, in the midst of a severe economic crisis, Cuban nationalist elements railed against US support for President Gerardo Machado's increasingly dictatorial rule. In temporary charge of the British legation, Clarence Ezard described how Cubans could not bring themselves to believe that Americans were neutral in their disputes. Ezard shared their point of view that the US ambassador need only express open disapproval of Machado's government for it to fall. In his opinion, they therefore drew the erroneous conclusion that the US government was supporting the president. Local feeling, he wrote, aped what had been reported from Egypt the previous year. By doctoring a recent diplomatic despatch from Egypt and replacing Prime Minister Ismail 'Sidky' with 'Machado', British 'residency' with the US 'Embassy', and inserting 'Cuban' instead of 'Egyptian', his view of the political scene in Havana now imitated that in Cairo:

> The rough conclusion drawn is that 'Machado' continues in power on a sort of monthly renewable licence from the [United States] 'Embassy', and the conclusion is not very far from the reality, as viewed through 'Cuban' spectacles. The possibility of a force remaining really neutral when it had the power to intervene, and may at any moment have the will, simply does not exist in their philosophy.

Absorbing their colleague's reflection, David Kelly in London annotated, 'The comparison with the situation in Egypt is original & suggestive.' Permanent Under Secretary Robert Vansittart added, 'The Egyptian parallel is apt.'[29]

Cuba's Foreign Relations

Until the 1959 Cuban Revolution, the United States appeared in full control of its neighbour's political destiny. But by early 1960, Washington had received a rude shock to its accustomed primacy with the sudden emergence of a rapidly radicalizing communistic regime in the island. After a series of incendiary incidents early that year, British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan commented that the Americans were 'pained and uncertain'. 'What a pity they never understood "colonialism" and "imperialism" till too late', he lamented in his personal diary.[30] This acerbic private observation, written just four months after his 'wind of change' speech concerning African decolonization, highlighted an apparent gulf between the allies in their experience and handling of unruly domains.

This study of Anglo–Cuban relations adds a new point of view to the considerable historiography on Cuba. In one sense its findings confirm why studies of the island's foreign relations have been so fixated on the Havana–Washington axis. Nations like Britain acted as passive bystanders to a struggle largely peripheral to their essential interests. Cuba faced experimental and evolving US foreign policy in the early post-1898 period. One scholar accurately defined the early US approach as 'a mixture of policies and actions characterized by paradox and ambiguity; a kind of ambivalent imperialism continually modified by guilt, domestic policies and the lack of a true colonial drive'.[31]

The period of study, from 1898 to 1964, also witnessed a transformation in the status of Britain and the United States. From the end of the nineteenth century, Britain was an imperial power in decline, while the United States was an ascendant economic and political power. Financially and militarily, the United States assured British victory in two world wars, although the conflicts decimated Britain's economy and global trading position. Massive US loans to its wartime ally meant Britain was in financial debt to the United States for the rest of the twentieth century.

Only occasionally did the transatlantic allies fall out. The 1956 Suez Crisis was the prime example, although the two allies soon resolved their differences, agreeing to share nuclear weaponry from the 1960s. Harmonious Anglo–American relations were the cornerstone of British foreign policy during the twentieth century, and particularly after 1945. In this sense, the following analysis of Anglo–Cuban relations constitutes an original case study of London–Washington relations in the twentieth century. But while the United States was increasingly powerful and dominant for much of the century, the 1959 Cuban Revolution indicated the limits of US power. Cuba soon shifted from US tutelage to Soviet influence, commencing a key stage in Washington's superpower rivalry with its Cold War adversary, the Soviet Union.

It is therefore time to dilute the narrow US–Cuban focus adopted by many studies of the island's history. While Cuban diplomatic records are closed to all but the most trusted foreign scholars, and US records from 1898 to 1958 contain only occasional mentions of British involvement in Cuba, the British governmental records are uninterrupted and revealing. The British views they contain were not neutral or disinterested, but neither were they uninformed, at least most of the time. Professional diplomats and the institution they worked for had long-standing experience in the administration of empire, making them experts in the control of foreign possessions. Their views on Anglo–Cuban relations and the island's trajectory from the juncture of the US military intervention in 1898 add a new dimension to the existing historiography.

1

Perfidious Albion? Britain and Cuba before 1898

English involvement in the Caribbean was longstanding. As long ago as 1586, for example, pirate Francis Drake headed a large fleet that threatened Cuba's long coastline, but he neglected the island for more easily attainable mainland treasures. Following this scare the Spanish strengthened their colony's defences.[1] At great expense they erected impressive fortifications to guard the entrance to Havana's natural harbour, an essential port of rendezvous for galleons returning from Central and South America laden with gold and silver treasure, and continuing in convoy to Spain. The Spanish considered Havana impregnable to foreign invasion, but from 1748 to 1815 the British prioritized the Caribbean – strategically and economically – as never before.[2]

Spain's entry into the Seven Years War between Britain and a French-led coalition of countries turned the Caribbean into a theatre of conflict. Havana, a vital military outpost and conduit of the Spanish Empire's riches, was a key strategic target. A hastily assembled British fleet departed from Spithead near Portsmouth on 5 March 1762. After joining up with other forces off French-controlled St Domingue in the Caribbean, the British took Havana by surprise. With amphibious landings of 16,000 men, they undertook a diversionary attack west of the city and covert main assaults east of Havana. Columns attacked Spanish rearguard defences and laid siege for two months. Reinforced by a contingent from its New England colony in North America, sappers finally breached the seaward wall of the Morro Castle and stormed inside.[3]

But a lengthy mid-summer siege, amidst the ravages of mosquitoes and tropical diseases, decimated the British. As was the case with Cuba's nineteenth-century independence wars, far more foreigner combatants died from sickness than in battle. Between 7 June and 9 October nearly 800 seamen and 500 marines of the Royal Navy perished, only 86 from

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enemy action. Of the 2673 seamen and 601 marines sick in October, only a few were expected to recover. Meanwhile, the army's losses were even greater: 5366 dead between 7 June and 18 October, 4708 of them through disease.[4]

The British had seized the Spanish power base in the West Indies in a single action. Spain's most important link between the Old and New Worlds was in foreign hands, a shattering blow to Spanish prestige. There were celebrations with bonfires and gun firing at the Tower of London. The Duke of Cumberland wrote to campaign Commander Lord Albermarle:

> Upon the whole no joy can equal mine, and I strut and plume myself as if it was I that had taken the Havanah. In short you have done your King and Country the most material service that any military man has ever done since we were a nation.

With this trump card now in British hands, prominent personages implored their government to drive a hard bargain with the Spanish.[5]

British Occupation and the Slave Trade

Cuba was an excellent bargaining counter, and not for the last time, foreign powers negotiated possession or control of this strategic entrepôt. Planters in the neighbouring British colony of Jamaica worried about a lengthy occupation of Havana, fearful for their wealth should Britain become responsible for other Caribbean islands. In London, parliamentary members with West Indian interests lobbied on their behalf against such action.[6] In Paris peace negotiations, the Spanish gave up East Florida and recovered Havana from the British, returning it to Bourbon rule. But in less than a year, British merchants and commercial practices had given the island's producers a taste of Cuba's economic potential when opened to free trade with Britain, the British West Indies and North America. Spain's trade monopoly ended at a stroke and more than 1000 vessels called at Havana's port during the occupation, compared to a previous annual average of around 15.[7] The short occupation also left a linguistic legacy. Havana's inhabitants likened the British Redcoats to a local tropical fruit, the black-seeded and red-fleshed *mamey*. For the occupying soldiery they invented the expression *a la hora de los mameyes*, a pertinent equivalent in Spanish to 'when push comes to shove'.[8]

Cuba's increased trade included the importation of slaves, during and following occupation. British merchants such as Cornelius Coppinger delivered increased numbers of African slaves to Cuba from Jamaica and Barbados. But the American Revolution and subsequent war (1776–83) interrupted British trade. The loss of its 13 North American colonies obviously lessened Britain's power in the continent, but commerce was not slow to recover, including trade in slaves.[9]

Britain, for so long heavily involved in the slave trade, was paradoxically instrumental in the long campaign to abolish this practice in its colonies and throughout the Atlantic. A reform movement finally achieved its aim of outlawing the slave trade in 1807. By 1833 the practice of slavery had ceased to exist in British colonial possessions, and the vociferous campaigners targeted instead the suppression of flourishing slave traffic in other parts of the Atlantic; for example, from Africa to Brazil and Cuba. Much of the stimulus for British abolitionists came from religious conviction and newfound humanitarianism, but there was also an economic imperative. By the 1820s it was difficult to justify British taxpayers' subsidies to West Indian planters, which supported the importation of slaves. Or, as one strong Latin American critic of foreign exploitation in the continent asserts, 'The English were the champions in buying and selling human flesh until it ceased to be convenient for them.'[10]

With the abolition of the slave trade in British island possessions, Cuba became its principal centre in the Caribbean. Britain's determination to suppress the trade attracted the corresponding odium of those in the island who depended on slave labour for their lucrative agricultural production. Through the course of the nineteenth century this principally and increasingly involved sugar cultivation. British government pressure on Spain's government impelled it to sign two treaties in 1817 and 1835, prohibiting the slave trade in the Spanish Empire, but neither agreement achieved its objective. Creole planters and merchants feared economic ruin if the Spanish authorities implemented such a policy. Meanwhile, British West Indian planters pointed to their competitive disadvantage, having to pay workers on their estates while rival producers exploited slave labour.[11]

Spanish officials themselves were up in arms when the British government appointed to Havana a declared and assertive abolitionist, David Turnbull, to replace Consul David Tolmé – a merchant accused of involvement with slave-trading interests. Tolmé's case highlighted a very real conflict between British commercial and humanitarian interests. Criticism by abolitionists contributed to his recall and replacement by Turnbull, a former *Times* correspondent in Europe, who had travelled in and written about the West Indies (including Cuba).[12]

Turnbull's abolitionist activities on the island soon led to vociferous demands from the Spanish authorities for his recall. Even those few Creoles that supported his efforts suspected sinister motives.[13] Britain had the power to enforce the treaties made with Spain, so why did it allow the trade to flourish? Did it have annexationist designs on the island?[14] Cuban historians have concluded that Britain was playing a double game in the island; Rodolfo Sarracino, for example, argues that behind the facade of an abolition campaign the inconsistent British were actually contributing to the strengthening of slavery as an institution in Cuba.[15]

Even British interests in Cuba reacted negatively to the campaign, but support at home from the abolition movement was decisive, at least initially. Turnbull's critics included Tolmé. David Murray, author of *Odious Commerce*, writes, 'The rivalry between commerce and humanitarianism in British foreign policy which had, in part, been responsible for Turnbull's appointment surfaced again to bring him down.' With a commonality of interests, British merchants on the island along with London merchants and shipowners lobbied the Foreign Office to remove the root of their discontent. In fear for his life, Turnbull sought refuge on a British vessel at anchor in Havana, and his wife eventually persuaded him their future lay elsewhere.[16] In this way ended the representation of one of Britain's first men in Havana, who had stridently defended Britain's controversial position on abolition. Owing partly to the slowness in communications in a period before the telegraph, he had enjoyed considerable autonomy during his posting. His activities, however, left many Cubans with the impression that Britain's policy in the island could be duplicitous and certainly not altruistic, as sponsors of the abolition movement claimed.

Cuba's classic nineteenth-century novel *Cecilia Valdés* voiced such sentiments. Its author Cirilo Villaverde had escaped from a Cuban prison in 1849 a year after participating in an anti-colonial conspiracy. He settled in the United States and continued his political activism against the colonial regime, first publishing his lengthy novel in 1882. Set in 1830s Havana, its main character is a beautiful fair-skinned mulatta who is pursued by the son of a slave owner, but both are unaware they share the same father. Reflecting contemporary society and the Spanish colony's troubled political and economic affairs, the novel is replete with references to the treacherous English. Citing the

1817 treaty between Britain and Spain that stipulated the complete cessation of the slave trade within three years, Cecilia's male suitor asserts,

> That's where the evil lies. For £500,000 sterling the unwise counsellors of the best of monarchs granted perfidious Albion the right to inspect our merchant ships on the high seas and to insult, as it still insults with impunity day after day, the sacred flag of the nation that not long ago was mistress of the seas and owner of two worlds.[17]

Britain's projection of power in the Caribbean was keenly felt at this point in the colony's development, while Spain's star appeared to be waning.

British and US Interest in Cuba

British commercial interests in Cuba fluctuated during the course of the nineteenth century. From 1829, the Anglo-Cuban company *La Consolidada* started to extract newly discovered copper in Cuba, soon becoming Britain's chief source of the commodity with annual exports of 10,000 tons. But from the outbreak of the ten-year independence war in 1868, Chilean and South African mines began to out-compete their rivals and the Cuban copper industry collapsed.[18] British capital was heavily involved in the financing of a private railway system. Preceding its mother country by 11 years, the island's first line from Havana to Bejucal opened in 1837, only 12 years after the inauguration of the first public railway in North-East England.[19] British Minister in Madrid George Villiers had put the proposers of Spanish America's first railway in contact with London bankers, and Alexander Robertson provided a loan.[20]

One of London's oldest merchant banks, J. Henry Schroder & Company (with origins in Hamburg, Germany), was the principal source of British capital for railway construction in the island. In the mid-nineteenth century, Cuba held the largest concentration of Schroder's clients outside Hamburg, owing to their longstanding interest in sugar and its export to Europe and the United States. Starting with the company's first ever bond issue for the Matanzas & Sabanilla Railroad Company in 1853, Schroder & Company continued to invest in railway infrastructure that considerably reduced the freight costs for transporting sugar and its derivatives from the island's interior to its coastal ports.[21]

Indeed, Britain's chief interest in Cuba, as with the rest of Latin America, lay in the economic field. For most of the nineteenth century, Britain was pre-eminent in international trade, manufacturing and finance.[22] Due in great part to technological advances in communications that linked the world by railway, steamship and telegraph, world trade grew tenfold between 1850 and 1914, after doubling between 1800 and 1850.[23] The security offered by the solid and conservative institutions of British commercial banking and insurance gave Britain an advantage in Latin America, where easy access to cheap capital was in much demand.[24] For decades, the stability of new import–export elite regimes in Latin America depended to a significant degree on their financial connections with capital-rich London, in mutually profitable economic dependence.[25]

For Latin America, Britain was the most important trading partner, as well as being its pre-eminent foreign investor from the 1820s until the start of the First World War. From the mid-nineteenth century until the war, British holdings in railways and government loans constituted the largest areas of investment in private industry.[26] In pursuance of new commerce or simply to maintain that existing, Britain rarely asserted itself politically, instead allowing its supremacy in these fields to function mostly unaided, carried out by merchants in the field.

Foreign trade brought Britain huge economic benefits. Liverpool, which like Bristol had profited enormously from the slave trade during the eighteenth century, was Britain's premier Atlantic trading port. Through its enlarged and improved system of docks, sailing and steam ships imported sugar, tobacco and raw cotton for households and mills in the north of England. A new canal network connected the northwest port with inland manufacturing centres like Manchester. From Liverpool, outbound ships exported cotton and other manufactured textiles and goods from outlets such as Manchester mills and Sheffield foundries, reaching consumers around the globe who demanded the cachet of British products. Merchant shipping also re-exported British Empire produce such as Indian and Burmese rice to foreign markets.[27] Havana was one of the closest Latin American ports to Liverpool. It was also conveniently located for the lucrative triangular trade between Britain and the Atlantic and Gulf ports of the industrially booming United States.

The political outlook changed with the increasing continental assertiveness of the United States. Mutual distrust between British Foreign Secretary George Canning and John Quincy Adams resulted in the US Secretary of State's sponsorship of a new doctrine, applicable to the