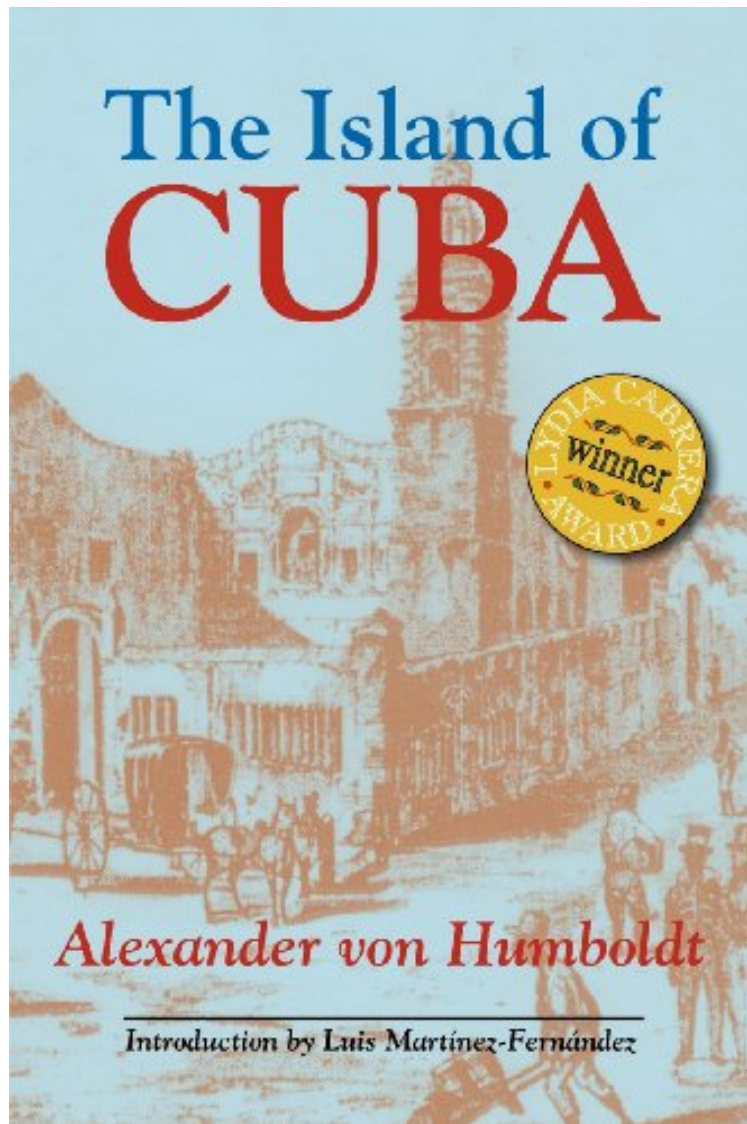


The Island of Cuba: A Political Essay

Alexander Von Humboldt

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Alexander Von Humboldt : The Island of Cuba: A Political Essay before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Island of Cuba: A Political Essay:

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Alexander von Humboldt, a more-than-Renaissance-man and naturalist's mansided description of Cuba before 1850By Frank T. ManheimThis book is a modern reprint of a book translated from Spanish and French texts and edited by J.S. Thrasher in 1856. Thrasher also provides a long (95 page) essay on von Humboldt's observations on Cuba. Let me note in passing that I can't make sense of the earlier review of this book. Its author writes as though he is not aware that von Humboldt lived from 1769 to 1859 and is widely

regarded as a great pioneer of oceanography, biogeography and other fields. I had heard much about Alexander von Humboldt from college studies in geology and later but never read anything by him until buying this book. I was completely overwhelmed. In my experience, and I've made a special study of scientific and technical advances from the 17th Century to the present, von Humboldt may be the most many-sided scientist-naturalist in history (possibly excepting Aristotle). To judge from his writings on Cuba, nothing he observed and wrote about was not examined to the degree of detail possible, not only through his own observations, but by his remarkable resourcefulness in pulling out every possible piece of information from data sources of his time. Von Humboldt's travels to Latin America from 1799 to 1804 ended with travel to North America (including intensive discussions about science with President Thomas Jefferson) before returning to Europe. He spent only a few months in Cuba, so that all of the data in the book after 1804, with references as late as 1846, must be from later sources. Von Humboldt begins with an overview of the general comparative geography and political history in the northern Caribbean. He then adds summaries of the populations in historical context, pointing out questions of the validity of some data. He makes a special point of noting puzzling conflicts in data about the earliest estimates of native populations and absence of Indians later (contrasted with continental Central America). Recent authors like Jared Diamond (in his book, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, have pointed out that native populations in North America are now believed to have been much larger than earlier estimates in the 17th and early 18th century up through the 20th Century - because native populations were decimated by European diseases through indirect transmissions even before tribes ever encountered a white man. It appears that Humboldt's data point to the likelihood that in addition to brutal treatment by early Spanish conquistadors disease and suicide may have helped eradicate native Indian populations on Cuba. v.H. has a later chapter on slavery, giving detailed statistics on racial distributions. The author abhors slavery and refers critically to its practice in America. He notes that at least Cuba had the most liberal policy for slaves buying or otherwise gaining freedom in the colonized slave-employing area. Von Humboldt describes geology, vulcanology, mineralogy, and soils distribution of Cuba, followed by botany and physical properties. Von Humboldt not only provides detailed temperature and barometric statistics but was the first to attempt a quantitative latitudinal temperature and magnetic zonation of the earth, based in part on own observations. To gauge these other of his great syntheses remember that there was no Google, no published library catalogues or interlibrary loan services in the early 18th Century! It's difficult for me to put in words that may not seem like overkill my impression of von Humboldt's modern (in the best sense) way of writing, with emphasis on compiling comprehensive and precise detail (to the degree possible) on human affairs - populations, disease, economy and trade, social and political status and practices, history, as well as the natural science of the Island of Cuba. We are now used to scientists limiting themselves to their discipline - though the benefits of broadened perspectives are well demonstrated by Diamond and a few others. Add Humboldt's clearly expressed opinions about human values (completely admirable to my mind) and you have an individual that I'd put ahead of "Renaissance man" - which implies a set of qualities largely limited to skills and interests, not necessarily including concern for the human condition. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A By Manuel Carta A most meticulous study of agriculture a ,finances and politic of the nineteen century Cuba. It is a must to read by any one interested in its culture and financial development. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Exhaustingly complete Geological-Sociological Cuba in mid 1800s By Julio Claret Unique perspective of the dictator-plagued island from days of Spanish colony- mid 1800s--- German anthropologist goes into exhausting (that is the key word) details about Geology and Sociology. As a Cuban, I learned a lot from it.

This book remains an up-to date and engrossing document more than one hundred fifty years after its initial publication. The Island of Cuba is a key source for studies of 19th-century Cuba and slavery in the Caribbean, and has appeared in translated editions throughout the world. Humboldt's description of the island, which brings together the fields of anthropology, geography, agriculture, demographics, commerce, and communications, provides a context in which to trace the history of Cuba-U.S. relations as well as a basis for modern Cuban studies. Cubans celebrate Humboldt as the second "discoverer" of the island (after Columbus), and the controversial publication history of this book mirrors Cuba's history. The Spanish version was banned in colonial Cuba, and the American translation created an international controversy because of the translator J.S. Thrasher's open call for the American annexation of Cuba. Thrasher also deleted a chapter in which Humboldt condemned slavery, in order to please the pro-slavery party. This new edition restores the missing chapter on slavery in a new translation and provides the text of the letter by Humboldt condemning the omission as well as Thrasher's response (both published in the *New York Daily Times*) and his polemical preface. Luis Martinez-Fernandez analyzes the publication history of Humboldt's book on Cuba, including an anniversary edition published under Fidel Castro, and follows the Cuban point of view on Humboldt over the course of the book's multifaceted history.

Winner of the Lydia Cabrera Award --Latin American Studies Association
Language Notes
Text: English (translation)
Original Language: French, German
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