

FJM-31

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Report From a Cuban Prison

535, Fifth Avenue,
New York,
NEW YORK 10017.

September 7, 1972.

Mr. Richard H. Nolte,
Executive Director,
Institute of Current World Affairs,
535, Fifth Avenue,
New York,
NEW YORK, 10017.

Dear Mr. Nolte,

One year ago, I was living in Havana, enthusiastically engaged in a study-visit of Revolutionary Cuba. Scanning a calendar, I calculate it would have been a Wednesday, one of the two days each week I lectured to political science students at the University of Havana. Although they were attentive and I think, interested, my students were burdened with so many extra-curricular activities that I doubted if they were really learning very much about contemporary Caribbean affairs, the subject matter of the course. Meanwhile, however, I was learning a great deal from and about the Cubans.

Following that particular morning lecture, I recall taking bus 195 to Guanabacoa, a small 17th century town not far from Havana. There, in a large house built in 1647, I visited the Museum of Afro-Cuban religion, a fascinating exhibit displaying the myth and ritual of the Yoruba, Arara and Palo cults as they are practiced today in Cuba. Without at least a fundamental understanding of Afro-Cuban religions, one is ignorant about the roots of Cuban culture, since so much of the color, sound and rhythm of Cuban art, music and dance have their origins in Africa.

At noon, I returned to Havana to lunch with Rene, an old friend and established poet of the Revolution. Sympathetic yet honest enough to be critical, he wasted little time on pleasantries before talking about some of the more controversial, complex and, for me anyway, unpleasant aspects of the Revolution's current cultural policies: the arrest of the "enfant terrible" of Cuban poets, Heberto Padilla; the narrowing definition of what constitutes a Revolutionary writer in Cuba today; the purge of homosexuals from the cultural life of the Revolution; and the quality of a controlled Press that "forms rather than informs" the Cuban masses.

In the afternoon with Doris, an actress from one of Havana's theater groups, I arranged to see a special showing of feature films produced by ICIAC, the Cuban Institute of Cinematography. The films -- "Lucia", "Memories of Underdevelopment", "Days of the Waters", and "The First Charge of the Machete" -- were surprisingly good; I say surprisingly given the limited resources and experience of the ten year old Cuban film industry. Having seen these and a dozen other films produced in Cuba, I agree with international critics from every side of the ideological spectrum who consider ICIAC to be the finest of Latin America's contemporary film makers.

Back at the hotel an hour before dinner, Doris and I went to the Turquino bar for another interview, this one with Dominguez, a representative of the Cuban Trade Union Council. Over daiquiris, he explained to us some of the recent changes in the Trade Union movement; the democratisation of Union leadership through secret elections in each work center; the encouragement of worker participation in planning norms or production goals; the crack down on absenteeism; the passage of stiff, "anti-loafing" laws in an effort to incorporate 75,000 new workers into the Cuban labour force; and the prospect for higher production with implementation of a New Economic Policy designed to place greater stress on material rather than moral incentives.

Dominguez, Doris and I then had dinner in the hotel's 25th floor restaurant. The fish was delicious: but the view of the lighted streets of Havana below was even better.

After coffee - thick, black and sweet - we decided to walk through the narrow streets of central Havana. Selecting a route along the Avenida Infante, we eventually came to an area sealed off by wooden barricades and illuminated by a series of lights strung from house to house. In the middle of the street, a Popular Tribunal was in session.

Officiated by three judges, one of whom was Manuel, a sixty year old factory worker and Party Member, the Tribunal (a people's court) was convening for three and half hours to hear four cases: a young man of 22, a homosexual, had been accused of being a bad influence on the boys of the neighbourhood; a mother and son were charged with operating a black marketing ring selling shoes, soap and tobacco; another woman was alleged to have stolen provisions from the local bodega or grocery store; and an older man, maybe fifty, had been brought to court by the Ministry of Labour for having failed to comply with the recently enacted "anti-loafing" laws.

When the tribunal adjourned, Manuel took us to the Copelia, an outdoor dairy bar where we each had an ice-cream sundae. It was midnight, a time we found convenient to go because the lines were short and the breezes cool coming off the sea-walled Malecon. We reviewed the cases Manuel had heard that evening. The young man of 22 was found not guilty; but his case served as a catalyst for a highly sophisticated, public discussion about the problems of being a homosexual in the neighbourhood. Manuel defended the man's wish "to incorporate himself into the Revolution" and at the defendant's request, arranged for him to see a psychiatrist at the University.

The contraband from the black marketing ring (boxes of footwear, soap and cigarettes were brought as evidence into the court) was confiscated by the Tribunal and the mother placed on probation for a year. Her son was sentenced for 60 days in Lenin Park, a large recreation center west of Havana.

The unemployed man of fifty was instructed to go to the Ministry of Labour for employment within the next week. He was obliged to work at any job for which he was qualified. He said he would, and was dismissed.

That was it; no stiff sentences. On the contrary, as Manuel explained, the Revolution was "trying to develop a court system at street level that educated rather than punished the defendants". For me, it was an enlightening evening that concretized the difficulties of making communists out of Cubans.

Days such as this one were regular fare for me then. And happy ones they were. However, six months later although I was still in Cuba, my life style had drastically changed. I wasn't walking the streets of Havana anymore. Instead, I was pacing a ten by eight foot space in solitary confinement. No longer a Professor, I was prisoner of the Revolution, interrogated rather than interviewing, and eating rice or bean soup in place of the

the well-cooked meals served in style at the Hotel Havana Riviera.

How, and as I have understood it, why this happened is the substance of the Report that follows. In the series, you will have my analysis of nine month's research done when I was a student of the Revolution, as well as an account of the three months I spent in solitary confinement, the subject of an intensive investigation by the Revolution.

As you can imagine, my feelings about the Revolution are complex. But in writing this Report I've tried to balance the whole and place my personal experiences in perspective. I would like to think my arrest deepened, rather than altered, my understanding of what is going on in Cuba today. And in this sense, the Report I've written, at least its essential judgements about what it is to live and work in a communist society, would have been recorded had I never been arrested. In brief, in a society undergoing radical change, I believe great idealism, courage and a willingness to sacrifice underlie the Cuban revolutionary process. Likewise, as I discovered, there are injustices, contradictions and a certain degree of hypocrisy as well.

Yours,

Frank Mc Donald

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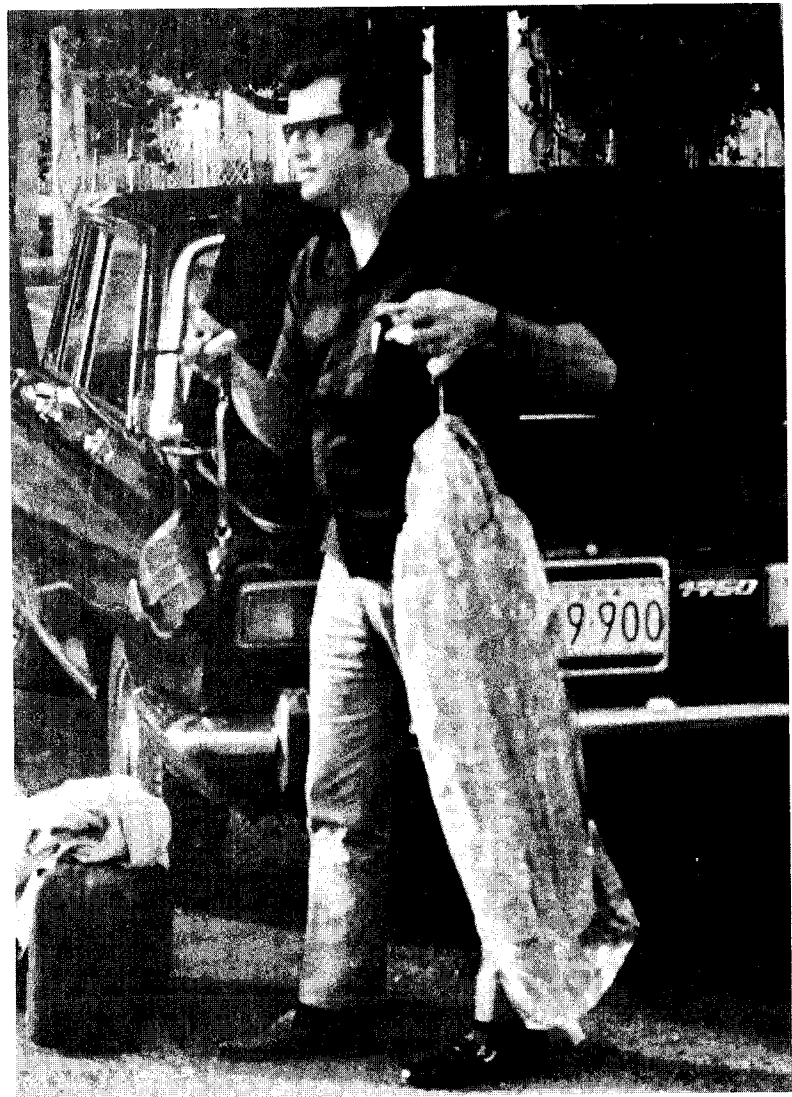
REPORT FROM A CUBAN PRISON: I

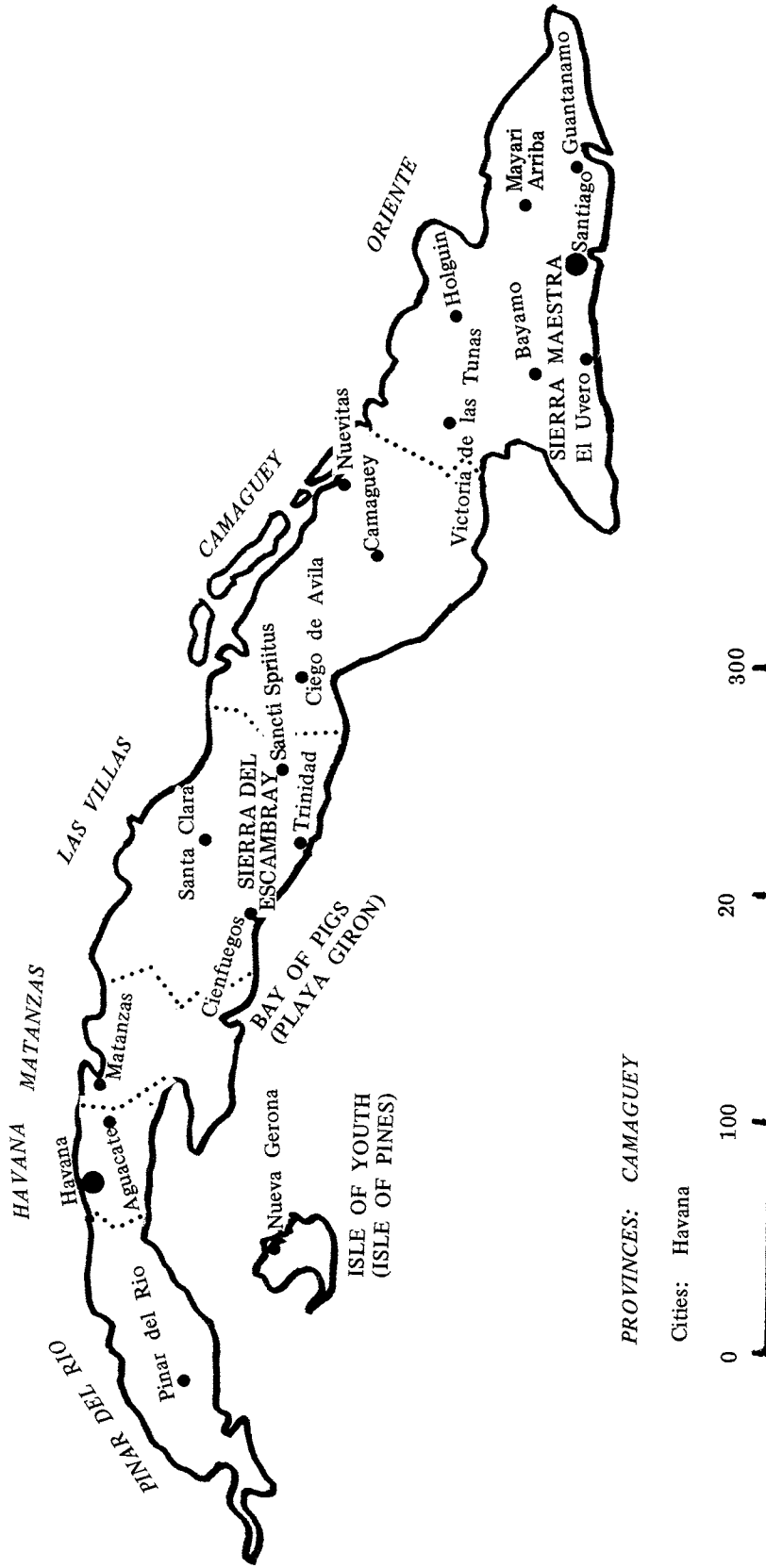
An Introduction

December 25, 1971. Christmas. In Cuba it was a working day, and for me an early one. Just past 4:00 AM I left my hotel room -- a spacious, plushly furnished accomodation in the Hotel Riviera -- and took an elevator to the lobby 15 floors below. Built by an American syndicate during the late 1950's, the Riviera was once Havana's finest blend of sun, Planter's Punch, sex and roulette, a combination that made millions for its owners (Cubans list George Raft as one) before all of Cuba's hotels were nationalised in 1959. Now the Riviera's three dining rooms and bar, while still serving up a most potent Planter's Punch, host instead hundreds of Russian and Bulgarian technicians, collections of Cuban couples on their week's honeymoon, gatherings of quiet diplomats, assorted West European businessmen, and the occasional, very discreet revolutionary celebrity - in this instance Regis Debray. Apart from these changes in clientele and in contrast to the gaiety of former days, a serious, almost puritan atmosphere now prevails. Guests are required to have a special pass - not easily obtained -- if they wish to invite visitors to their own rooms, and one has the feeling that the ICAP guides (Cuban Institute of Friendship with the Peoples) in constant attendance are there not only to serve, but to observe.

So it was that the night clerk watched curiously as I walked with my bags along the dimly lit corridor toward the hotel's front entrance where Jorge, beside his carefully cleaned wine-red Alfa Romeo, was already waiting for me. Jorge's Alfa, one of the few thousand imported by the Revolution in the past year or two, belonged to the University of Havana; he himself had been given the important task of chauffeuring Dr. Jose Miguel Miyar (Chome to his friends), the Rector of the University. This Christmas morning, however, apparently for lack of other transport, the University's International Relations Department had provided me with this luxurious combination of car and driver. It must have been important to someone, I thought, that I make that 5:30 flight to Santiago. Cuba's second city, Santiago is 1,000 miles east of Havana and the home of the University of Oriente, the second largest of Cuba's three universities. Dr. Carlos Amat, the University's Rector, had, I was told, asked that I postpone my departure to the U.S. so that I could deliver a lecture to the students studing Caribbean affairs. Flattered, I had agreed.

Jorge loads the Alfa.
A photo taken during
our trip to Las Villas





PROVINCES: CAMAGUEY

Cities: Havana



Scale of Miles

Jorge and I greeted one another amiably. We had become friends weeks before when the two of us and Delia, my official guide, spent six days visiting several factories and agricultural plants in Las Villas province.

He took my suitcase and typewriter, placed them in the trunk, and I moved into the bucket seat up front. Ready, we set off down the wide, tree-lined Paseo Drive toward the Plaza de la Revolucion and the highway to Havana's Jose Marti airport.

By Christmas, I had spent seven months in Cuba. This was my second visit, the first having been a two-month stay during the summer of 1970. Both times I'd been an 'invitado', a visiting lecturer sponsored by the University of Havana's Faculty of Humanities. This unusual opportunity, especially for an American, was initiated in 1969 in the Caribbean, where, after three years of writing about contemporary political and economic affairs, I made application to do the same in Cuba. Six months after giving up any hope of receiving a visa, a note arrived from the Cuban Consul in Jamaica informing me that my request had been approved by the Ministry of External Affairs and that accompanying the visa would be an invitation on behalf of the University of Havana to lecture on Caribbean affairs. I was delighted. Such a situation would offer me a much more immediate and realistic view of the Revolution than that provided the average journalist granted the usual three week visa.

From the moment I stepped off the Cuban Aviacion flight from Mexico in May 1971, I'd been warmly received by the University authorities. Within three weeks, I was comfortably installed in my rooms, had met with the head of the Department of Political Science and been assigned a large, air-conditioned seminar room in which to present my lectures. At the same time, through the Director of Foreign Press Accreditation attached to the Ministry of External Affairs, I was granted permission to write Newsletters for ICWA as well as newspaper articles for various American journals.

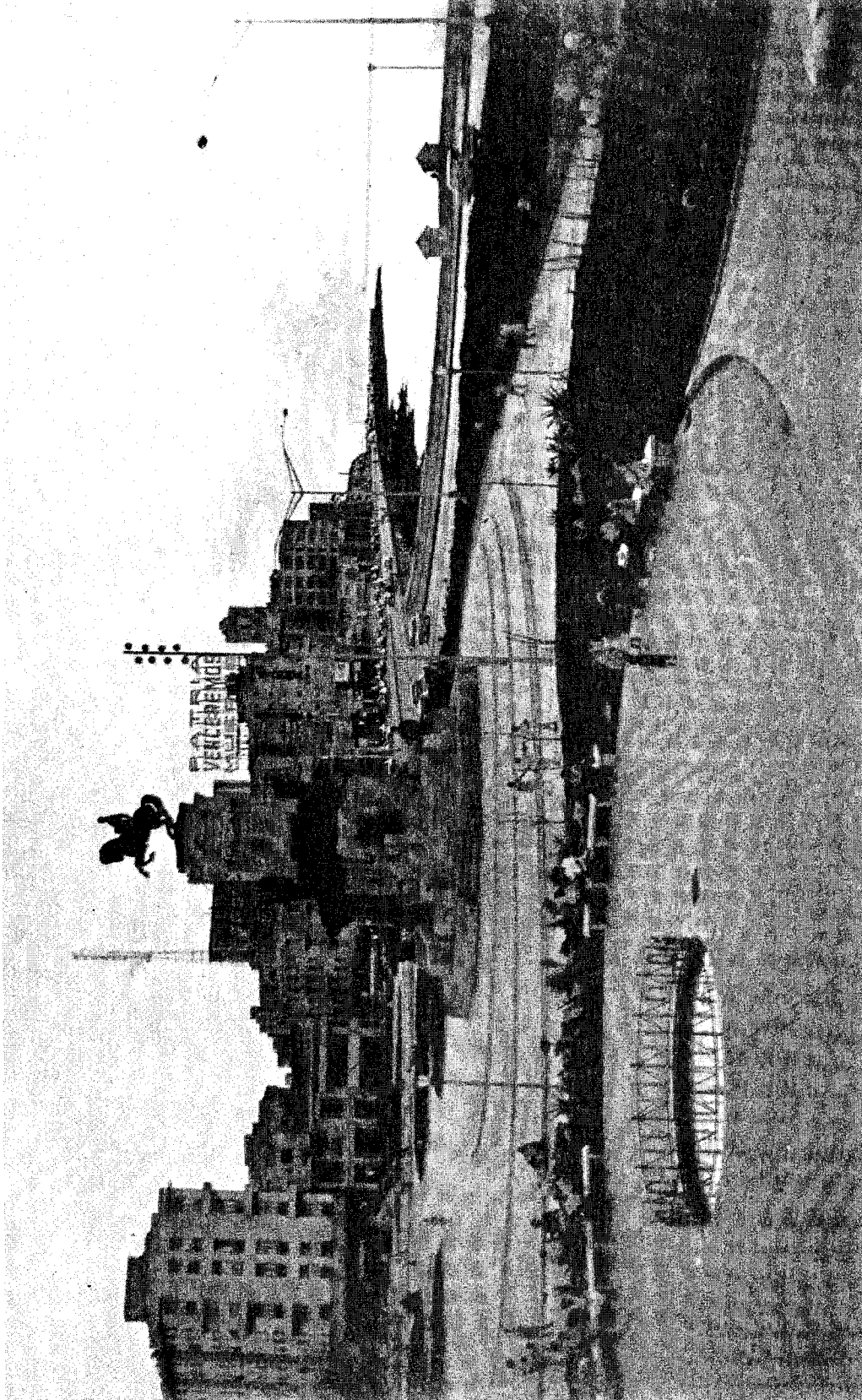
Consequently, over the course of seven months, while lecturing twice-weekly, I travelled quite easily and extensively throughout Cuba visiting industrial plants, schools, health clinics, hospitals, housing developments and agricultural plans. Even more enlightening, along with colleagues from the University, I did the normal stints of volunteer work in the countryside that every professor and student regularly performs; picking coffee, harvesting vegetables or planting and cutting cane. This experiential knowledge of Cuban society, coupled with approximately 150 interviews



Above: Fidel Castro with Dr. Miyar, Rector of the University of Havana, speaking with students

Below: The central entrance to the University. Building on the left houses the Department of Political Science





Central Havana and the Malecon
Sunset

arranged officially either by the University's Department of International Relations or through the Ministry of External Affairs, gave me a rare glimpse into the Cuban Revolutionary process. All this, I hoped would be reflected not only in the Newsletters and articles I was doing but in a book that was to deal with the problems and progress of the Cuban Revolution.

Gathering this material, especially that derived through informal contact and conversation with Cuban friends, had been an enjoyable and exciting effort especially for one writing about Caribbean affairs. Yet soon, I thought, I'd be leaving Cuba; time had run out and I would be saying goodbye to friends. But the prospect of writing about what I'd seen also made me anxious to be on my way. The reservations had been confirmed for the 29th of December and I mused on spending New Year's Eve in New York. It was only a week away.

Frank J. McDonald

Received in New York on September 11, 1972

Todos a la Plaza

