

One of the most accurate histories of a country and its people I have ever read.

BOOK REVIEW: *OTRA ISLA PARA MIGUEL (ANOTHER ISLAND FOR MIGUEL)* BY HENRY ERIC HERNANDEZ

👤 Richard Marcus 🕒 January 24, 2009 👁 29 Views

Henry Eric Hernandez is a historian even though you'll not find his name listed as the author of any textbook or learned article about the subject. He doesn't write the kind of history that deals with dates, battles, or famous historic figures.

In his book published a couple of years ago, *La Revancha (Revenge)*, Hernandez documented a series of what he called interventions; he and a group of people carried out renovations on buildings in Cuba where events of historical significance had taken place. Through these restoration projects he brought history to life as he recalled what it was that had originally made a building famous; what is now a rundown toilet in a school was once the military barracks that both Batista and Fidel Castro had used as their the staging grounds prior to marching on Havana during their respective revolutions.

While the work he carried out in *La Revancha* focused primarily on events that took place in the earlier part of the twentieth century, either before Castro had taken power or in the early days of revolutionary government, his most recent book, *Otra Isla Para Miguel (Another Island For Miguel)*, published by Perceval Press brings us into the modern era. This time he has turned to the people of Cuba in order to paint a picture of the effects its involvement in the Angolan, Ethiopian, and Somalian civil wars of the late 1970's and early 1980's. The focus is split between stories that reflect the economic impact of the wars and personal accounts from women left widowed.

In his introduction to the book, Kevin Power provides us with the basic facts surrounding the civil war in Angola, and the circumstances which led to Cuba's involvement – first there and subsequently in both Somalia and Ethiopia. This being the height of the Cold War, Russia and America were up to their usual tricks of vying for influence in the region.

Russia, instead of deploying their own troops, "asked" Cuba to send advisors to the side they supported in Angola, while the US, South Africa, and China backed the other side. In excerpts from speeches given by Fidel Castro that are included in the first couple of stories, we see that in the late 1970's Cuba was considering normalization of relations with the United States as part of a plan to expand their industry and economy. Instead, they involved themselves in the civil wars in Africa and deepened the split.

There are two parts to *Otra Isla Para Miguel*: the stories included in the book, and a DVD of Cubans telling their stories. Like the book, some of the people in the DVD talk about loved ones lost in the wars in Africa, while others detail the economic hardships they face and what they have to do in order to survive. In an

interesting twist both the book and the DVD combine visual elements with words to tell the story of the impact these wars have had on Cuba and her people.

Throughout the text, Hernandez has scattered photos celebrating the people's contributions to the cause of Cuba. Tawdry certificates commemorating years of service and charitable contributions, pictures of men and women posing under banners celebrating agricultural triumphs, and images of men in uniforms — either at training facilities in Cuba or in action in Africa — are juxtaposed with a widow's reflections on losing her husband or an account of a woman working as a prostitute because she has no other way to support her family.

The DVD interviews, with individuals talking about their lives, cut away to footage of life in Cuba. We see row after row of buildings crumbling in disrepair, dirty streets with garbage heaped in mounds against the sides of buildings, and aimless groups of people wandering, sitting in desolate groups on street corners, wearing the blank expression of the hopeless poor the world over. While the individuals we see being interviewed are animated, the primary emotions that appear to be driving them are anger, fear, and grief as they recount what they have been through and what they continue to experience.

Without using any of the usual characteristics of a history textbook like dates, statistics, and the names of famous people, *Otra Isla Para Miguel* gives the reader and viewer a history of Cuba. The picture that gradually develops isn't positive by any means, but at the same time you never once get the feeling that anybody involved in the project has a particular political agenda in presenting this information. This is a people's history of their day-to-day lives, not a rant against the horrors of Communism or the "evils" of the Castro regime.

In the 1970's, Cuba's government made the decision to become involved with a series of wars overseas, and the results have proved catastrophic for the country. Not only did they leave countless people bereft of fathers and husbands for reasons they still don't understand, they took the country down a path that has resulted in their near economic ruin. Not only does *Otra Isla Para Miguel* bring that reality to life in a way no textbook could, Henry Eric Hernandez reminds us of the human face that resides behind the events that are called "History". In the process he has rendered one of the most accurate histories of a country and its people I have ever read.