

Clarke, C. (2018). *Mexico and the Caribbean under Castro's eyes: A journal of decolonization, state formation and democratization*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 261pp, hbk. ISBN: 978-3-319-77169-4. US\$84.99.

Colin Clarke's 2019 masterpiece presents a refreshingly rare combination of fact and opinion as the author transports his readers into the annals of history and his own documented experiences as a visitor to the "New World". The title immediately catches the reader's eyes as the author tantalizingly draws attention to Castro's Cuba, the Soviet satellite provocatively nested in the United States' backyard, menacingly threatening to spread its Socialist ideology to Latin America and the Caribbean, at the height of the Cold War.

The book consists of four journals that focus on Mexico and the Caribbean between 1966 and 1978. This geographical span is in itself a treat as Clarke glides back and forth from Latin America to the Anglo Caribbean. In the process, he underscores the rich diversity and contrasts between these adjacent regions of the Americas and their similarities in the post-colonial era. He identifies the differences in their topographies and histories, while pinpointing the commonalities as threefold: "colonialism, economic production based on the large landed estates, and forced labour affecting their subordinate non-white populations" (p. 11). These similarities are also evident in the author's interesting categorisation of Mexican and Caribbean societies into four groups: plural stratified, plural segmented, class stratified and folk (p. 21).

Clarke's seamless movement from colonialism, through slavery, emancipation, indenture (Caribbean newcomers) and through the historical processes of decolonisation, state formation, democracy and rebellion, grips the reader, even if some of the information presented seems familiar. The juxtaposition of Mexico and the Spanish-Caribbean with the Anglo Caribbean is quite unusual. The brief exploration of Guyana's and Jamaica's flirtation with Cuban socialism whets the reader's appetite for more. Clarke insists that "the book is not about Cuba but about the influence of Castro's 1959 revolution and its reverberations as refracted socially, economically and politically throughout mainland Mexico and the adjacent insular realm of the Caribbean" (p. 21). The reader may however beg to differ as to whether these shocks may not have emanated just from Cuba.

The book becomes progressively more interesting with Clarke's journal account of his 1966 visit to Mexico in Chapter Two and to the Caribbean in Chapter Three. The author's personal experience as he traverses the landscape of Mexico, brings to the fore detailed first-hand perspectives of the lingering impact of the Mexican Revolution (1911-1917) and the inability of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) to usher in relief from class polarisation, lack of democracy, meaningful land reform and to improve the lot of the Mexican-Indian. It is no wonder that his impression of Mexico City is dominated by the imagery of concrete, "giving rise to a grey, dense cityscape" (p. 49). Nonetheless, the vivid descriptions of his academic site-seeing adventures through the Aztec ruins, the churches, museums and the juxtaposition of oxymoronic images of slums and mansions, elitism and poverty, present the reader with tempting glimpses of the inherent contrasts in Mexican culture, society and economy. Through the eyes of the author, the reader is giddily transported into the paved streets and potholed roads of Mexico City, Jalapa, Veracruz, Oaxaca City, San Cristobal de las Casas and Tuxtla for a taste of the simple and the sophisticated, the ancient and the modern, the urban and the rural, north and south.

In Chapter Three, Clarke brings into stark relief the pervasive theme of rebellion and revolution underscored in his 1968 and 1969 visits to Mexico and Cuba. He poignantly presents Haiti's version of Black Power, chaos in the post-Trujillo Dominican Republic, insurgency and

Mafia meddling in Antigua, the Rodney riots in Jamaica and Creole-Indian violence and struggles in Guyana and Trinidad & Tobago, respectively.

The underdevelopment problematic of the Caribbean is also depicted through the author's journal accounts of the Caribbean as it was of Mexico. These testimonials are evident through vivid descriptions of poor shacks in Tuxtla and in San Juan, Puerto Rico; the poor-quality yards on the edge of Basseterre's city centre in St. Kitts; the unlit runway in Dominica, the inability of the small Grenadian farmer to afford fertilizer, and the non-functional baggage dispenser at the Piarco Airport in Trinidad & Tobago. Clarke also captures important aspects of Trinidad's politics, some of which find themselves in public political discourse, even in 2020. These include the rigging of the 1966 elections by the People's National Movement (PNM) and the government manipulation of the voting machines which reduced the politics to two parties, squeezing out the Liberals and the Workers and Farmers Party.

In beautiful prose, the author vividly narrates the reality of 1968 Trinidad, perhaps most evident in detailed descriptions of the island's diversity. From the Todd Street Hindu Mandir in San Fernando and Mr. Bhattacharya's Tagore College; the Susumachar Church and the Presbyterian Canadian Mission; through Harris Promenade and St. Joseph village; San Fernando Hill, destructively quarried; rural streets of Debe and Penal; glimpses of Divali and Eid celebrations. The author brings to life the warmth and hospitality of Southern Trinidad with minute details from a first-hand perspective, rarely found in history books. Similar details are presented of rural Guyana with its abundance of bicycles, motor bikes, *jhandis* (Hindu flags), Mosques and Church of God buildings.

Ten years after the triumph of Castro's revolution, Clarke takes the reader on a virtual tour of 1969 Socialist Cuba. From the city of Havana through Pinar del Rio, Matanzas and Cienfuegos, Trinidad, Santa Clara and Varadero, readers can digest delicious morsels of Cuban life. The author captures well the Soviet influence on the island while highlighting the flavours of Cuban culture, such as the towering Havana Libre, the cigar industry of Pinar del Rio, the sugar cane fields and the quintessential Cuban landscape.

In Chapter Four, Clarke returns to the Caribbean in the early 1970s. The reader is transported to the kaleidoscopic diversity of Jamaica, Haiti, Puerto Rico and Trinidad. For the author, the "high spots" are the slums of West Kingston, Jamaica; "the subjugation of the mulattoes, the elevation of the black elite and the subordination of the black masses" in Haiti (p. 144); the Marxist Left at the University of Puerto Rico and the 1970 Black Power disturbances in Trinidad.

In conclusion, this rare gem combines historical facts with first-hand journal accounts. It provides a colourful epic for any reader interested in the unique admixture of the cultural milieu of Latin America and the Caribbean. The book is also a heady travel-log for the wayfarer of this region, particularly with its sporadic black and white vignettes of: maps; Mexican, Dominican and Guyanese architecture; Amerindians; market places; and more. Through this extensive journey into history, Clarke has allowed the reader to delve into the deep recesses of his mind to discover and share his fascinating memories.

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