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Review: Portraits of Fidel Castro

Reviewed Work(s): Fidel Castro: Nothing Can Stop the Course of History by Jeffrey M. Elliott and Mervyn M. Dymally: Fidel and Religion: Castro Talks on Revolution and Religion with Frei Betto by Frei Betto: Fidel: A Critical Portrait by Tad Szulc: Castro by Peter Bourne: The Closest of Enemies: A Personal and Diplomatic History of the Castro Years by Wayne S. Smith

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## FEATURE REVIEWS

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### Portraits of Fidel Castro

*John Griffiths*

**Fidel Castro: Nothing Can Stop the Course of History**

Edited by Jeffrey M Elliott and Mervyn M Dymally

New York: Pathfinder Press. 1986. 258pp. £5.75pb

**Fidel and Religion: Castro Talks on Revolution and Religion with Frei Betto**

Frei Betto

New York: Simon and Schuster. 1987. 314pp. \$19.95hb

**Fidel: A Critical Portrait**

Tad Szulc

London: Century Hutchinson. 1987. 585pp. £14.95hb

New York: William Morrow. 1986. 703pp. \$19.95hb

**Castro**

Peter Bourne

London: Macmillan. 1986. 332pp. £14.95hb

**The Closest of Enemies: A Personal and Diplomatic History of the Castro Years**

Wayne S Smith

New York: W W Norton. 1987. 308pp. \$19.95hb

In 1974 a Canadian television crew languished in a Havana hotel waiting for the opportunity to interview Fidel Castro. It never came and *Waiting for Fidel* (National Film Board of Canada), an award-winning documentary, was their record of the way they occupied the time. Many of us, academics as well as journalists, have cooled our heels in Havana, waiting for Fidel. Since then, Fidel Castro gives few interviews and only when, and with whom, he chooses. In the 1960s and 1970s these amounted to a mere handful. One of the most probing, Lee Lockwood's *Castro's Cuba, Cuba's Fidel* (1967), is still regarded as an important insight into Fidel Castro's thinking at that time, particularly with regard to the United States, to which readership it was directed. In the late 1970s, when the chances of a *rapprochement* with the United States seemed more than just a distant possibility, Fidel Castro made himself more available to the world's press especially the American press. *With Fidel*, Frank Mankiewicz and

Kirby Jones's portrait of Castro and Cuba (1975), presented Castro's ideas in detail, and for popular consumption, for the first time since the beginning of the revolution. Barbara Walters's mammoth interview in 1977 for American television, despite his later reservations, gave Fidel Castro the opportunity to present a softer image of himself, and of the Cuban Revolution, to American viewers. The significance of this could not have been lost on him given the fiercely anti-Communist, anti-Castro, and anti-Cuban campaigns that had been waged by successive US governments.

In the 1980s of President Ronald Reagan the chances of a 'normalisation' of relations between Cuba and the United States appear non-existent. The cooling of enthusiasm on the part of the US to restore relations with Cuba, ostensibly over Cuba's 'involvement' with Africa, in the period leading up to his inauguration, hardened to ice-cold and led to the imposition of further obstacles to economic, political, or even cultural, contacts. In such a cold climate, how does one explain the willingness of Fidel Castro to avail himself for major interviews with, for example, Madrid's *El Pais*; the Spanish news agency EFE; Mexico's *Excelsior*; Swedish television; American television and press; to political figures; and to a biographer, one of the books reviewed here? Perhaps because this is the only way that Fidel Castro can exert any control over the diffusion of information about himself and the Cuban Revolution. Whatever the reason, the attention he has given to public relations in the 1980s to date represents a formidable effort.

*Fidel Castro: Nothing Can Stop the Course of History*, is an example of just one of those efforts, the result of twenty-five hours of interview, in March 1985, between Fidel Castro, US Congressman Mervyn M Dymally and Jeffrey M Elliott, Professor of Political Science at North Carolina Central University. This interview, described as 'boring' by Tad Szulc, the latest of Fidel Castro's biographers, is anything but. The book does tread the well-trodden path of earlier interviews in trying, but failing, to get behind the public face of Fidel Castro, but in the process, does provide valuable insight into his thinking on a range of issues such as Cuban-US relations, Central America, and Cuba's position on Africa. The section dealing with Fidel Castro's close relationship with Maurice Bishop, and the New Jewel Movement in Grenada, is especially poignant and informative. *Fidel and Religion*, the result of another mammoth session of interviews, this time twenty-three hours with Brazilian Dominican priest, Frei Betto, provides a rare glimpse into the personal life of Fidel Castro, as well as a platform for a discussion of his ideas on the congruence of religion and revolution. The interview, and the book that comes from it, stems from Fidel Castro's contact with Sandinista revolutionaries in Nicaragua, some of whom are themselves priests and exponents of 'liberation theology', and is illustrative of a wider Cuban interest in, and softer attitude towards, religion. Castro's interest in religion should not surprise anyone; he was educated by Jesuits in Havana and in many early speeches makes numerous references to

religion and Christianity. At the time of the expulsion of Catholic priests from Cuba in 1961, he was particularly scornful of them since their first duties appeared to be with the rich rather than with the poor. It was a theme he was to return to during a visit to Chile in 1971, then again in Jamaica in 1977 when his visit coincided with a meeting of the Caribbean Council of Churches, and in Nicaragua in 1980. At other times Fidel Castro has shown concern with religion, meeting a delegation of Catholic bishops in Cuba in 1985 after a very public visit with Jesse Jackson to a Cuban Methodist Church the year before. Also, despite problems with the Catholic Church in the first years of the Revolution, Cuba maintained relations with the Vatican, as well as gradually strengthening and improving relations with the Cuban Church, throughout the period of the Revolution. In the interview with Frei Betto, Fidel Castro demonstrates a wide knowledge of religious matters, and of the place of religion in a revolutionary process, particularly in the case of Cuba. What is remarkable, however, is the detail which Castro provides on his own religious experiences as a young person, his relationship with his parents, and other adults, and the effect these had on his personal and political development. The accounts of his childhood, his home, and of his mother are especially touching. It is remarkable, too, that a Head of State, in a society where Christian people are excluded from membership of the sole political party, should have publicly entered a dialogue on religion in this way. Not surprisingly, the book has been snapped up by a million Cuban readers, a tenth of the population, anxious to discover for themselves the content of the interviews, with translations appearing throughout the world.

No doubt, too, the two most recent biographies of Fidel Castro, by Peter Bourne and Tad Szulc, will be similarly eagerly read since they are the first, covering his entire life, to appear since Jules Dubois's biography in 1959, that by Enrique Meneses in 1966, and the late Herbert Mathew's book in 1969. Although numerous books have been published dealing with discrete periods in Fidel Castro's life, Tad Szulc's book, *Fidel: A Critical Portrait* is by far the most ambitious work and has the advantage over Bourne's in that Fidel Castro agreed to extensive interviews, and made possible interviews with associates and members of his family, during the nine months that Szulc lived in Cuba working on the book. For all that, the book is a great disappointment. The bulk of it deals in great detail with the period of Fidel's early life and during the Revolution up to the 1970s, fields which have already been well ploughed. After that, a period in which the nature of Castro's influence over the course of the Cuban Revolution changed dramatically, in which he emerged as a world statesman of considerable stature, and in which he showed every sign of being conscious of his own mortality, detail about which the reader has every right to expect is, alas, lacking. Nor does the considerable detail on earlier periods provide us with anything new in the way of information or analysis. Mercifully, the British edition of the book is, at least, 150 pages shorter than its American

counterpart without losing anything by the excision. Peter Bourne's *Castro* is a clearly presented, up-to-date, synthesis of Fidel Castro's life and influence in the world which, although modest in its scope, has the advantage of accessibility, consistency, and clarity of analysis.

*The Closest of Enemies*, Wayne Smith's personal and diplomatic history of 'the Castro years' is quite a different work from the other books reviewed here—coming, as it does, out of Smith's considerable personal experience. This was first as a member of the US Embassy, then as head of the US Interest Section, in Havana, the latter coming into existence in the thaw in relations between the US and Cuba in the 1970s. It provides a wealth of detail, and depth of analysis, of recent events in US–Cuban relations that are only touched upon in the Szulc and Bourne biographies. The treatment of the exodus from the port of Mariel in 1980 is but one example. Smith deals with the US–Cuban relations, and his own role in carrying out, as well as initiating, US policy, from the years immediately preceding the start of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 to the recent history of US relations with Nicaragua and Cuba. His is a gripping account of the way in which no US president, since 1961, has dealt 'sensibly and effectively' with the 'Cuba problem' and how, even in the 1970s, when the US Administration expressed a desire to normalise relations between the two countries, the initiative failed due largely to divisions between the Department of State and the National Security Council. Zbigniew Brzezinski, the National Security Adviser, was able effectively to dictate the US policy towards Cuba and thereby scupper any moves towards *rapprochement*. Smith is justifiably scathing in his refutation of Brzezinski's analysis of Cuban policies. The Cubans, for their part, are shown to be mystified by the confusion of 'signals' emanating from Washington; 'rewarded' for conciliatory gestures by shows of strength and provocations from the US Administration. Only with the election of Ronald Reagan, and a return to what can only be described as 'Cold War' politics, does the confusion for the Cubans end. Under Reagan there is no chance of restoring relations. By this time Wayne Smith, too, has had enough and retired from the Foreign Service because he so strongly disagreed with the policies of the Reagan Administration in Central America, with respect to Cuba, and with many policies elsewhere. As a private citizen he could publicly express his concerns about US policies, as he has done with regard to Cuba and Central America. *The Closest of Enemies* is a fascinating, though saddening, account of US confusion, ineptitude, and failure in its policies with Cuba. Wayne Smith has not only provided us with an admirably reasoned book but has, at the same time, done his country a considerable service by pointing up this dangerous record of failure.

Since it was not his intention to do so we should not be disappointed that Wayne Smith does not provide us with more than just a shadowy image of Fidel Castro. I suspect he may be holding that back for another occasion. Castro's biographers, however, set out on more ambitious journeys, even though Tad

Szulc set himself the modest task of painting us a 'portrait', but we are left with too many unanswered questions at the end of both these books to be entirely satisfied. The best source of insight into the mind of Fidel Castro remains his own thinking, as the published interviews once again demonstrate. Only through the vision, clarity and incisiveness of his own ideas, and the policies they give rise to, can we begin to comprehend the stature and influence of Fidel Castro.

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## Kwame Nkrumah and African liberation

*Jeffrey Haynes*

### **The Rise and Fall of Kwame Nkrumah: A Study of Personal Rule in Africa**

Henry L Bretton

London: Pall Mall Press. 1967. 232pp. n/p

### **Black Star: A View of the Life and Times of Kwame Nkrumah**

Basil Davidson

London: Allen Lane. 1973. 225pp. n/p

### **Ghana's First Republic 1960–1966**

Trevor Jones

London: Methuen. 1976. 366pp. £3.95pb

Kwame Nkrumah, who died in 1972, remains one of the most fascinating and controversial of Africa's political visionaries. Rosberg and Jackson's characterisation of him as a 'political Prophet' is consistent with his elevation to the pantheon of Africa's martyrs and saints since his death.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, Tibor Szamuely, a Hungarian who taught at Nkrumah's 'Ideological Institute', writing in 1966, labelled him a 'fascist'.<sup>2</sup> Bretton, in another contemporary account, sees him as a vain, easily-led, venal dictator. Other accounts are more sympathetic. Davidson, writing in 1973, believes him to be a great man. Another report, this time by Trevor Jones in 1976, is critical but understanding.

<sup>1</sup> Robert H Jackson and Carl G Rosberg, *Personal Rule in Black Africa: Prince, Autocrat, Prophet, Tyrant*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981, p 199.

<sup>2</sup> Tibor Szamuely, Introduction to A A Afrifa, *The Ghana Coup: 24th February 1966*, London: Cass, 1966, pp 15–19.