

spectacularly unusual. In many ways, Lalu-Polly resembles more the “typical” pioneer-woman in early American history than the early “typical” Chinese immigrant to the New World. Fortunately for the reader, McCunn in her *Thousand Pieces of Gold* focuses most clearly upon the life of the courageous and resourceful heroine, whereas the other characters, including Charlie Bemies whom Lalu-Polly married in 1894, are portrayed largely in order to bring out the many facets of the heroine’s very active eighty years.

*Thousand Pieces of Gold* should prove to be an invaluable addition to the library of anyone interested in Chinese-American studies or Asian-American literature. Different from the so-called “exclusion-law novels” produced about 1905-1910, *Thousand Pieces of Gold* presents no exaggerated, gruesome scenes of injustices suffered by the Chinese immigrants at the hand of the “white devils” during the early phases of their immigration; nevertheless, the silent sobs of the Chinese immigrant can be poignantly discerned through the tears, and smiles, of Lalu-Polly.

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Carmelo Mesa-Lago. *The Economy of Socialist Cuba: A Two-Decade Appraisal* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981). 234 pp., \$17.50, \$9.95 paper.

It’s not unusual for partisans of opposing viewpoints about Cuba to spark each other to flaming argument, while those who prefer less heat and more light can easily find adventure enough just in following the course of the Western Hemisphere’s most important social experiment since the Mexican Revolution. Shouldn’t a book about twenty years of post-revolutionary Cuba be exciting, especially when it comes to us from Carmelo Mesa-Lago, Cuban native, an early supporter of the revolution and also an early emigre to the United States, and now, as Professor of Economics at the University of Pittsburgh, one of only a handful of distinguished students of Cuba in this country? His book is a product of a good deal of effort over a long period of time. It is detailed, precise, balanced, and informative. It is easily understood, so that non-experts can profit from reading it even though its wealth of hard-to-get data makes it an indispensable

reference work for professional Latin Americanists. It is all this, but it is not exciting.

One reason is that a lot of excitement is gone from Cuba itself. Che Guevara's portrait on an enormous poster still looks down on Revolution Square, but Che lives only in memory, as a symbol of when he was both the spirit and embodiment of a pure revolutionary mystique driving forward an utterly utopian economics. True, Cuba remains Fidelista, not Stalinist, with a social order still so new that of all Latin American nations Nicaragua alone comes close to matching it. But Cuba has also devoted the last dozen years mostly to achieving economic growth along Soviet lines, hardly a thrilling task. The Cuban Revolution and Fidel are middle-aged now; their youth, like Che's life, become subjects not just of history but of mythic nostalgia.

Cuba's aging, which Mesa-Lago documents and helps to explain, is just one reason his book fails to excite. Another, which is actually one of the work's virtues, is that its answers to many important questions are simply too definitive to leave much room for argument. For example, the Revolution wrought major social change but brought no economic miracles. More specifically, post-revolutionary Cuba has taken great strides toward greater equality in wages, consumption, education, health care, and insurance and pensions. Its race relations are more equal too, particularly in law and in spirit, but for material matters the data are sketchy, evidently because the Cubans are reluctant to make measurable what is already known, namely, that blacks are still worse off in class, occupation, and housing than whites are. As for more standard economic matters, Cuba still runs or limps when sugar prices rise or fall, has had little sustained economic growth and not much more economic diversification, and has replaced its economic dependence on the U.S. with an equally great dependence on the U.S.S.R., now the major creditor behind Cuba's foreign debt (per capita the highest in Latin America, higher even than Brazil's or Mexico's).

These are important findings, but it's not easy to stay involved while reading about them. Statistic after statistic is necessary for full documentation, but before long adds to detail so great it overwhelms, although relief may be found either in the many excellent summary passages at the end of each section or in the Introduction and Conclusion, both of which cover much the same ground.

Is a Djilas-style "new class" forming in Cuba? Which sorts of Cubans are most disaffected with and most supportive of the regime? Are Cuban blacks, as many report, satisfied with their gains even though they remain nearer than whites to the bottom of the social structure? When does the ruling elite respond to public opinion and when does it manipulate it? How much does Cuba count on a predictable

American obtuseness and bluster to find a scapegoat for diverting attention from Cuba's own problems? Mesa-Lago neither raises nor responds to such questions, which are sociological and political, not economic. Thus, although we shall long be in his debt for his massive assemblage of materials, we may also note they have the unintended effect of reminding us that economics, like any single discipline, has clear limits when it comes to telling us not only why a revolution took place, but even what it cost and what it's been worth.

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Tom Miller. *On The Border*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 226 pp., \$12.95.

Tom Miller's *On The Border* is a disarmingly straightforward book. At first glance it seems to be a simple travelog—the account of his journey at the dawn of the decade in a 1968 Valiant, accompanied by a photographer companion, Norah Booth, along the entire distance of the United States/Mexico border from Brownsville and Matamoros to Chula Vista and Tijuana. The only photographs in the book, however, are verbal ones.

Miller talks with the local people he encounters, both ordinary and illustrious, and offers several anecdotes about them and their lives; he recounts Border history in opportune places and synthesizes everything with a just mix of his own reactions to what he perceives. But as with most trips, especially long ones to such exotic spots as Miller describes, there is much adventure and more than a little allegory involved in the trek.

Insofar as all life is a journey, a narrative like this one takes on larger meaning. More individuals than Miller have been lured to this particular Border and to their own personal borders, whether motivated by escape or something else that might be called “transitional” promises. The Border is a legendary place, mythic in its paradoxically narrow but extended dimensions and geographical vectors. And, as Miller makes clear, others have written about it (e.g., Graham Greene, William Burroughs, Larry McMurtry, Americo Paredes), sung about it (Marty Robbins, Willie Lopez), talked about it, explored it, and measured it in all its blending of promise and despair.