

CUBA!

One: Consolable memories

By Jack Seaton

Jack Seaton is a York graduate who recently spent a month and a half in Cuba with a group of Canadian students. The group was invited, with no obligations, by the Young Communist Party and was hosted in Cuba by the Instituto Cubano por la Amistad con los Pueblos (ICAP). The only expressed purpose of the trip was to view the Revolution first hand. During his stay Seaton was free to travel on his own.

He is currently leading a college tutorial (College E) in Third World Studies.

This is the first in a series of articles for EXCALIBUR.

Once upon a time

You could fly from Miami to Havana. You could take a plane early Saturday evening, spend a few hours at the famous Tropicana, and even return to Miami the same night. Today it may take months to get a letter to or from Cuba. Last Christmas a friend of mine sent some desperately needed books to the university in Havana. I checked this summer and found they still had not arrived. They said not to worry. It's normal.

Normality is a strange thing in Cuba. The island is difficult to understand not only because of its isolation but because Cuba itself is an inside-out scene. There are delinquents, but most of them are not in prison. There are police, but police who bear arms differently than our own. In the university there are professional faculties whose students, by their very presence, express their commitment to society, whereas their counterparts here are Canada's most privileged and inward-looking citizens.

I do not pretend to completely understand the revolutionary level at which Cubans normally operate. I was there too short a time for that. And I haven't been back long enough for my memories to assume the coherence or formality of a report. What follows, therefore, is a series of experiences unrelated to each other except as they provided me with some insight into a society concerned less with the rhetoric of principles than their application to people.

I spent my first few weeks

In Cuba weeding a field of Bermuda grass. The circumference was to be planted with coffee trees. One day a tractor came to plough the ground. It purred busily all morning at the north end of the field. Behind me an old man wailed intermittent commands to his team of bulls who were ploughing the south end. Cuba lies midway, somewhere between the futility of underdevelopment and the dignity of self-sufficiency.

Midnight, July 26

On the anniversary of the revolutionary movement I expected to be among the hordes of Cubans who traditionally crowd the Plaza de la Revolution in Havana to hear Fidel. On the 26th of July, however, all of us who would have been there, including Fidel, were chopping tall grass with a machete. In the Year of the Decisive Effort it is fitting to substitute voluntary labour for celebration. The gesture was more than symbolic if you consider all the grass cut that night.

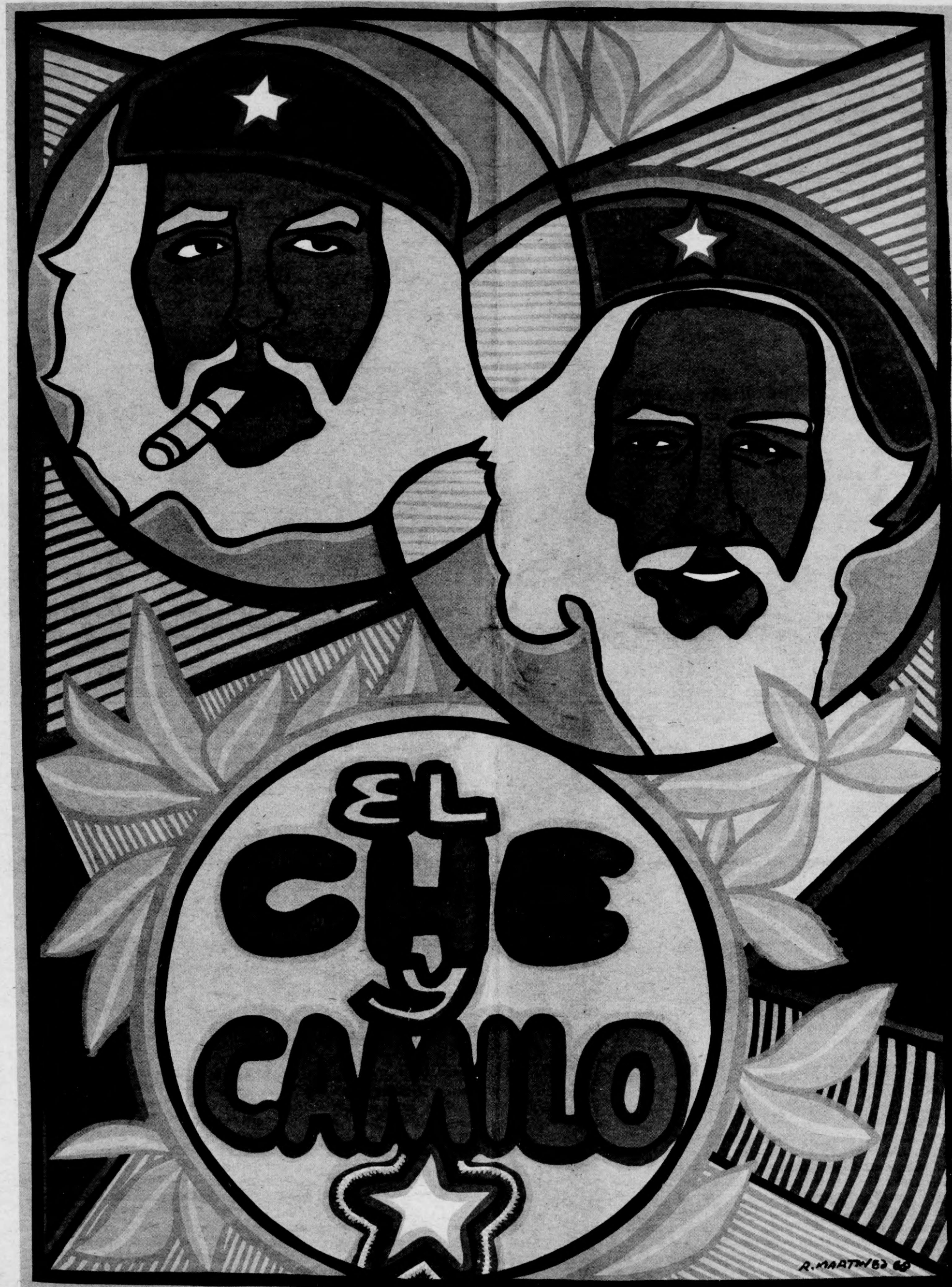
In the field, among the hundreds of volunteers, I stopped work from time to time and stood in the rain long moments, pondering that splendid, mind-blowing midnight scene. I let the tractors overtake me until I was left on the dark side of their beams. The night lights and rain especially all those people, sometimes whole families, suggested an essential unreality to the situation, as if this were a Fellini spectacle in reverse: the paradisaical socialist scene whose opposite is the infernal pursuit of fake visions in Dolce Vita.

August 15

The Peoples' Court, "O" Street. The argument: because of a damaged water tank, Mrs. A was forced to share the water in Mr. and Mrs. B's flat. (Mr. B, by the way, is president of the local CDR — Committee for the Defence of the Revolution.) This proved to be an awkward arrangement on both sides and inevitably evolved into a dispute. Matters came to a head when Mrs. A found the lock on the B's door changed and Mr. and Mrs. B gone for the weekend.

By the time the affair came to court a plumber had solved the water problem, but Mrs. A persisted in her charge against the B's claiming they had set a poor revolutionary example. There followed the case for the plaintiff, that for the defendant, cross-examinations, three witnesses on each side, more cross-examinations, time for the judges to discuss the case among themselves, and finally the tribunal's considered opinion:

"We have wasted two hours of the Peoples' time with this idiotic problem, which is all the more absurd since it no longer exists. What right have either of you to waste time like that in the middle of the ten million ton harvest? Go home and settle your own dispute and don't aggravate us any longer. Court adjourned!"



INSTITUTO CUBANO DEL ARTE E INDUSTRIA CINEMATOGRAFICOS

Here are two things

I read, the first as I was relaxing one morning by the pool at the Havana Libre Hotel, and the second that afternoon when I visited the Museum of the Literacy Campaign. Both passages are from the same year of the Revolution, 1961.

The environment is too poor, too soft, demands too little from the individual. Whatever talent Cubans might have is wasted as they try to adapt to the present, to this very instant. Wasted on appearances. People are not consistent, they're satisfied with so little. Drop projects when they're still half finished, interrupt their own feelings, fail to follow things through to their final consequences. Cubans can't endure suffering too long without laughing. The sun, the tropics, irresponsibility.

from *Inconsolable Memories*
a novel by Edmundo Desnoes

Havana

Year of the Education
June 9, 1961.

Dr. Fidel Castro

I am writing this to give you thanks, for even though I am a mother with three children there was time for me to learn to read and write.

Doctor: I wasn't able to learn when I was a young girl and now I want to keep on studying, now that the revolution gives this opportunity to whoever is ignorant. I want to learn so that my children will not know what it is to have a mother who knows nothing.

Gladys Frances Ramas

Patria o Muerte

Venceremos

Two years after the triumph of the Revolution a group of United Nations field workers spent two months in Cuba studying the effectiveness of the Literacy Campaign. In their report they declared Cuba the first Latin American country free of illiteracy.)

One day I went to see

Comrade Fernet in his office at the Book Institute of Cuba. The Institute is a clearing house for everything published in Cuba and Fernet is the senior editor in the department of Literature and Arts. If a novel, a play, a book of poems or essays is published in Cuba, it is only published after he has read it, perhaps discussed it with some other intellectuals or writers, and finally, in one manner or other, approved it. If a specific book is purposefully not published it is because he has not approved it. And if there is a shortage of paper, as there invariably is, he may have to choose between Dostoyevsky and Desnoes. Comrade Fernet exercises some power in this country.

"I'm sorry, Fernet cannot see you today. He's gone to cut cane. Can you come back next week?"

In Havana there is

a group of actors which call themselves the *Third World Theatre*. I went with my Egyptian friend Hanni to see them rehearse Hiber Conteris' *The Assassination of Malcolm X*. The play moved us both very much. When it ended we talked with an actor (Malcolm) named Luis Garcia.

"What do you think?" he asked. "Does the drama of our play have anything to do with the drama of Malcolm's life?"

Hanni answered first.

"I have loved Malcolm for a long time. I never knew him or met him but I always imagined what he must be like. And I imagined him to be as I saw him tonight."

For my part, I said that I wished I had seen the play earlier in my life. It would have simplified the task of having to unlearn my hatred for Malcolm. That night I saw even more clearly what he was saying to blacks. **And what did it matter that this Malcolm was white?**

San Andres, they say,

is where the Revolution is. It is a small municipality in Pinar del Rio, a three hours' drive from Havana.

"If you had come to San Andres ten years ago," a school teacher told me, "you would have had to come on foot or horseback. There were no roads, a few schools for those who had any money, no hospital, no running water, electricity or sanitary facilities in our homes, if we had a home. Worst of all there was no one who cared that we lacked these things. We were totally isolated from Cuba, physically and psychologically. Today it's a different story. Besides receiving all of the things I mentioned our men always have work to do and our women to can work, if they want to, since the day nursery is there to provide for the children."

I remembered then what a Mexican student told me just a few weeks earlier. I had asked him something about the Mexican Revolution. "No hubo," he replied. It never took place. Here in Mexico we live before the revolution. Don't you have the feeling that wherever you visit here that nothing has changed?"

In Cuba it is hard to find a place that has not changed. Everywhere there is something that was not there before.

Late one Saturday night

I was walking down La Rampa with some vague idea of going swimming in the sea. I was a little inebriated and soon got talking with another drunk. He had only one leg but otherwise looked very much like Hemingway: big chest, eyebrows really fierce and a white grizzly beard. And very chauvinistic! He got right into the thing about long hair since by the Revolution's standards mine was a bit long. I was in no mood to be original and anyway I could never really understand the Cubans' antipathy to long hair except that it has as much to do with being masculine as with being neat. So finally I said something simple like "En Canada el pelo largo es otra cosa." — In Canada long hair is another story. Aside from being unoriginal and simple it was a lie. (Last year a member of the Board of Governors at York University remarked to a senior professor with short hair that he couldn't see how anyone with long hair could have a neat and tidy mind. The professor replied, "So who wants a neat and tidy mind?") Desperate to recoup my credibility as a would-be revolutionary I said to the wounded drunk, "The difference between a man and a woman is down here, not up here."

I thought he would kill me. I'm sure he wanted to and perhaps he had a right to my life since I struck first at his mortality. This revolutionary had lost his balls in the Sierra for Cuba. We were obviously working on different revolutionary planes. En Canada la revolucion es otra cosa.