

A Cuban Perspective

It is with great pleasure that we celebrate the centennial of the opening of the Commercial Office of the Republic of Cuba in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, in 1903. This is the prime impetus for the exhibit being opened to the public today under the title *Cuba-Canada: One Hundred Years in View*.

The Canadian Embassy in Havana showed considerable foresight in its contribution to the restoration of the Plaza Vieja, and in the surrounding area – which is part of a World Heritage site – erected a residence for a group of families that had previously been living in an ancient and dilapidated building.

At this centenary commemoration we should include mention of noble and historic antecedents. I refer to the ties established between the island of Cuba, and its capital Havana, and the northern part of this continent – a place of incomparable natural beauty, where different cultures came together to shape the great nation that is now Canada.

I am reminded of the voyage through these waters of Admiral Samuel de Champlain and the maps he bequeathed us as a memento of his tropical experiences during his travels at the end of the 16th century; or the death in 1706 of the celebrated commander and sailor, Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville, in the town of San Cristóbal de La Habana.

Many years later, as the Cuban people began their emancipation movement, the young William Ryan would demonstrate untiring solidarity with our country, arriving aboard the steamer *Annie*. Born in Toronto on March 28, 1843, Ryan was executed at the age of 30 in Santiago de Cuba on November 4, 1873. A member of the *Virginus* expedition, he was returning to Cuba to fulfill the mission assigned to him by the Government of the Republic in Arms. He and his companions were surprised and captured on the high seas by a Spanish vessel and the anxiously awaited reinforcements were thus lost, along with these precious lives. Ryan had reached the rank of Brigadier General through his exploits on Cuban soil. During his short life, he was moved to defend the causes of freedom and abolition of slavery. For the same reasons he had joined Battalion 192, renowned for its role in the Union Army during the US Civil War. He subsequently met Cuban émigrés in New York and embraced their cause. Ryan's example is a symbol of the ties uniting the peoples of Canada and Cuba in eternal friendship.

Portrait of William Ryan,
by Federico Martínez (c. 1910)
Palace of the Captains-General, Old Havana

