

Book Review. Robert L. Paquette's Sugar

is Made With Blood: *The Conspiracy of La Escalera* and the Conflict between Empires Over Slavery in Cuba

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**T**o understand the racial dynamics in the stratification of Cuban society today, a careful analysis of the history of slavery on the Caribbean Island becomes an

absolute imperative.

Thanks to the invaluable research uncovered by Robert L. Paquette in the Massachusetts Historical Society, the reader of *SUGAR IS MADE WITH BLOOD* learns, not only, about the “brutal, ruthless, and often barbaric practices of the Spanish colonial government,” but, also, about one of the most controversial subjects in 19th

century Cuba – The Conspiracy of the Escalera. “The conspiracy acquired the name La Escalera which means the Ladder in remembrance of the principal instrument to which slave subjects were bound before interrogation by the lash.” The author brings forth-historical arguments from both sides of the controversy regarding the REAL or IMAGINED 1844 slave revolt in Cuba. The alleged “prime mover behind the conspiracy, Gabriel de la Concepcion Valdes (alias PLACIDO), a free mulatto and one of Cuba’s most renowned poets, many claim to have been too weak, too servile, and too obsequious” to have organized a

revolt that would have destroyed an extremely lucrative economic system based on the exportation of sugar cane harvested by black slaves. While others state that Placido was a “keen, shrewd, talented actor,



*Sugar cane cut. Victor Manuel de Landaluze.*

whose poetry reflected his astute political awareness, who even when arrested and just prior to his execution refused to divulge any information about the conspiracy.”

Then there are those who adamantly maintain that the charges of conspiracy were nothing more than “pure fabrications manufactured by Spanish officials to sow mistrust and fear among the races, to repress dissidents, and to plunder well-to-do free people of color. What is certain, however, is that a Cuban military tribunal did conclude “that a complex revolutionary conspiracy of the people of color had existed in Cuba in 1844 with the subsequent

arrest and trial of the alleged conspirators. Persecution and torture spread throughout much of western Cuba in 1844. Government officials said they had exposed an even wider conspiracy, one that included slaves, free people of color, Cuban-born whites, and foreigners.

By the year's end, thousands of people of color, free and slave, had been executed, banished, imprisoned, or simply disappeared." Those blacks who survived the 1844 repression of the Spanish colonial government, "the year itself has gone down in Cuban history as EL AÑO DEL CUERO – the YEAR OF THE LASH—" found themselves at the bottom of a bewildering, mind-boggling, multi-layered social hierarchy that ranked the peninsular whites (those born in Spain) number #1 and the Creoles (Cuban born whites) number #2. The Monteros or Guajiros, a class of rural poor whites ranked at the bottom of the white stratum."

For people of color, the BOZALES or NEGROS DE NACIONES (the recent arrivals from Africa) were at the bottom of Cuba's social hierarchy even after successfully undergoing 'SEASONING', the deadly process of biological adaptation and FORCED acculturation to a new environment." More simply put SEASONING was the process of FORCEFULLY and irrevocably erasing from the mind of the African, his language, culture, religion, customs, and anything that would even remotely remind him of his heritage, thus creating a state of historical amnesia and thereby making the African more suitable for his new life as a mindless, ignorant sugar-cane cutting slave. Bozales were often mockingly referred to as SACAOS DE CARBON (bags of charcoal) "and only graduated to the position of LADINOS when they could communicate in Spanish. In contrast, the Criollo slave, born and raised in Cuba with a better understanding of the Spanish language, fared much better than the bozal. Among the slave population, mulattos, no doubt held the highest status."

"Among free people of color, a PARDO, a person of partial African ancestry, enjoyed greater status than a free MORENO, a pure-blooded African. Free people of color also looked to whitening to enhance their status. Those of darker color tended to prefer marriage to a lighter member of their class. The lighter skin of one spouse gave immediate social benefits to the other and eventual benefits to the offspring. Marriage between two parties of unequal color might well engender dissent from parents of the lighter side but no the reverse."

The author demonstrates with irrefutable clarity how the Cuban sugar plantation emerged as an economic enterprise of the first order as a result of the importation of Africans from the Gold Coast, Benin, Angola, Mozambique, and the Congo. In 1840 Cuba was the world's leading producer of sugar thanks to the Mandingas, Yorubas, Ibos, Minas, and Gangas. Robert Paquette explains in great detail how planters purposely brought mixed ethnic groups to encourage division within slave quarters and how they often callously calculated it to be cheaper "to work field slaves to death in five years or so and replace them by purchase, then to see to their long-term maintenance and reproduction. Little wonder that planters of the antebellum South used the threat of deportation to Cuba as an instrument for disciplining their slaves."

Without a doubt, SUGAR IS MADE WITH BLOOD is absolutely must reading for anyone interested in understanding the 'quiet as it's kept' color/class system in Cuba today, the Conspiracy of LA ESCALERA, and the history of slavery on the Caribbean island. For only from a careful, analytical study of the history of slavery in Cuba will one be able to understand the old saying of Cuban planters "CON SANGRE SE HACE AZUCAR," SUGAR IS MADE WITH BLOOD.