

# What A Trip!

CCLA

2007

Havana Trip Reports



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ISBN  
978-1-894553-93-3

Published for CCLA  
by Hidden Brook Press



*Photos and Layout by Richard M. Grove*

# What A Trip!

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# Who was on the trip?



In front of the Canadian Embassy: John, Linda, Douglas, Kim, Sophie, Tai, Graham, Stella. Manuel - Cathy was taking the picture and Susan was not with us that day and Wendy and James had not arrived in Havana yet..

*Photo by Cathy Lee*



Cathy



Wendy



Susan



Bruno and James. Bruno lies in Havana.

*photo by RD Roy*

# Trip Reports



**José Julián Martí Pérez**

## Dear All:

Start saving your pesos for the next CCLA trip to Cuba. We just got back from the sparkling seas of the Carribean. Before the tan is totally faded let me tell you what a fabulous time we had. Two weeks of fun in the sun only describes a spec of what we were up to. Palm trees, the Caribbean Sea, the city streets of Habana were important but these were only the backdrop to building cultural bridges and the poetry events that we participated in.

We stayed at Hotel Tropicoco about 15 minutes from old Havana. Depending on the website that you look at it was either a 2 star or a 3 star. What ever the stars, it was a fine place to stay. The shower was strong, the TV worked – though we didn't watch it much, the food was pretty good – somewhere between fine and pretty darn good, depending on what food was delivered that day.

We did a poetry workshop at Villena Library Havana Cuba with some Cuban authors. The workshop poems will be published in a CCLA anthology as the third book of the



Manuel  
Douglas  
Susan

"Intimate Strangers" series. Manuel Leon and R.D. Roy will be the Cuban and Canadian co-editors. Other workshops for this anthology will be announced at a later date so stay tuned.

The following week we returned to the same library and did a poetry reading and book presentation as an official part of the International Book Fair. Over time we will help to build their collection of Canadian Literature.

A few days before that we did a poetry reading at the University of Havana. Everything happens in "Cuba time" when you are on the island. First we went to the wrong campus. By the time we were found and delivered to the right location – 20th floor with a view of the ocean, we were only 2.5 - 3 hours late. Some of our audience had escaped by then but the reading went very well and the lunch that was served after was very much appreciated – thanks to Alexander, our newest poet friend.



Manuel  
and  
Alexander

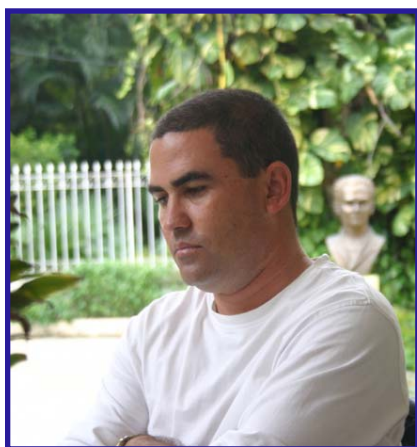
What else did we do – The reading at our hotel was kind of fun. It might be the only reading that I will ever MC in a bathing suit with a wet towel around my neck – the sparse audience was appreciative. Oh, and the trip to the Canadian embassy was fun, interesting ... well maybe more aptly described as uneventful. We were originally scheduled by Yamilka Peña and Raquel de los Reyes to do a reading but things don't always work out the way one hopes when one is at an important international embassy when the leader of the country has handed over power to his brother. An unexpected diplomatic furvour meant that our audience was unexpectedly dispersed into meetings. Despite the discontinuity the Embassy Council came down and greeted us but had to make it short, the cultural attache was able to greet us for a few minutes but to our pleasure the Ambassador, Her Excellency Mrs. Alexandra Bugailiskis, was able to spend considerable time with us before she finally had to return to a pressing meeting. We made book presentations and agreed to come back.



James, Graham, John, Douglas, Linda, Richard, Wency

One day our CCLA Ambassador, Bruno Henriquez – a Sci-fi writer, poet and scientist – organized a long, sought-after business meeting so I could talk with, Edel Morales, about the CCLA and our future publishing projects and how we can possibly get permission to distribute in Cuba. Among his many titles, Edel is the Director of Centro Cultural Dulce Maria Loynaz (an important cultural centre) and was able to press the right button, literally on his computer and open a spot for us to participate in the international book fair – "Feria Internacional del Libro, Cuba, 2007". By the way it was televised – someone at our hotel said they saw us on TV – as my niece might say – Way Cool!!!!.

Thanks to Wency Rosales, a poet, tour guide and translator we saw parts of Cuba that we might not have seen including a 100-year-old coffee plantation – personally I liked the guinea fowl that clucked and scratched at our feet. They had soft light grey feathers with black specks that shimmered as they strut. Wency was our primary translator for all of our readings, negotiator for our tour bus etc, etc. Thanks mi amigo.



Wency

One cannot forget to mention our VP, our amigo, mi hermano (brother) Manuel Velázquez León. He traveled 13 hours by bus from the city of Holguín to be with us for a week. He is a professor at the University of Holguín, the Editor-in-chief of our literary journal – The Ambassador and is a marvelous man, sincere and generous in every way. He made much of his week with us very special. Mucho gracias mi compañero, mi hermano.

There is much more that I could tell you about but the best thing you can possibly do is become a member of the CCLA and join us next year.

Con muchos cariños, (with many affections)

Richard M. Grove  
CCLA el Presidente



## *Report from: Kimberley E. Grove*

*– Freelance writer*

People go to Cuba to find the summer sun and escape the winter weather. Others go because they can and Americans can't. And some go because they want to be part of a poetry excursion. The last is the minority, but I found myself among them in February. My husband, Richard Grove, organized a group of poets and their travelling partners to tour Havana. It was an invitation to any member of the Canada Cuba Literary Alliance.

The advantage to travelling in a group is that you can never get bored. If I wanted to go to Havana instead of baking on the beach, there was always someone going into the city.

It was an enriching vacation because it wasn't just absorbing the sights and sounds of Cuba, but I also exchanged life experiences with my new friends (and in a non-English speaking country this is a plus).



Kim and  
Graham  
at Canadian  
Embassy

I also learned about writing from both the Cubans and Canadians. When I sat in on the workshop in the Havana library, we went around the table sharing the inspiration we gained from the photo presented. The Canadians had no problem allowing their imagination to take them to different worlds, even the life hereafter. The Cubans expressed such a richness to our present life. One accomplished Cuban poet read his poem of images and ideas so full of energy that I sat motionless.

There were happy moments of feeling like I was with family as 10 of us sat at the dinner table discussing our day's events. There were cultural moments looking everywhere at old buildings, gardens peaking out of churches, dogs lying lazily on street corners, statues of Havana's hero Jose Marti, and children in school uniforms shoving and pushing as children like to do.



There were exciting moments feeling like celebrities as cameras readied to take pictures of the poets reading at the International Book Festival.

There were musical moments when the Cuban trio serenaded us at a meal or when Richard came drumming along the Malecon with two Cuban guitarists he met on his journey.

There were joyous moments of reuniting with CCLA friends - Manuel Leon, the vice-president, Wency our translator and guide and Bruno our science fiction ambassador.

There were quiet moments watching the ocean roll into the shore, an escalator of waves, allowing me to go over and over my gratitude for the opportunity to be with such a talented, fun group of people.



A bit of a stormy day miles from the hotel.

*Report from: R.D. Roy*  
*- "Poetry Canada" Editor*

There are fifteen poets in a conference room at Havana's public library. Most of them speak only one language, either Spanish or English, and most have not previously met one another, or read each other's work. The CCLA has provided a fluent translator for the workshop. There exists a spectrum of literary maturity within the group that has gathered.

Under the guidance of poets Richard Grove and Manuel Leon there will emerge a series of insightful and well crafted poems.

This was but one event organized by the CCLA during a two week working trip to Havana earlier this year.

Eight Canadian poets were welcomed by their Cuban counterparts and together we participated in several literary events including readings at the University of Havana and the Havana International Book Fair.



International  
Book Fair.

The back of  
Stella and  
Graham's heads  
on the left.: -)

Between events there was the embattled city of Havana to enjoy. There were some edgy urban photo safaris made with my intrepid friend and fellow shutter-bug, Susan. Visiting the barrios, the gritty back streets, lets you get some idea of the Cuban people's stoic dignity and warmth.

And, regarding the food, we were introduced to a Chinese restaurant, away from the tourist section, where the best pizza south of the 49th parallel is made!

The intensity and depth of this tour have added to my skill and confidence as a poet. The friends I met and worked with have touched me profoundly.



RD Roy (Douglas - other wise known as Doogla) sitting with John B. Lee in a cafe in Old Havana.

*Report from: John B. Lee*  
*- Poet Laureate of Brantford*

Cuba always brings us a little closer to the spirit of what it means to be human, or at least it did for my wife and me. In early February my wife and I accompanied eight fellow Canadians on a return journey to the much beloved destination of Cuba. We went as part of a group of Canadian poets travelling under the auspices of a Canadian contingency of members of the Canada Cuba Literary Alliance. The leader of our expedition, Richard Grove, assisted us in our travel arrangement and aided us in our cultural exchange with Cuban poets, Cuban and Canadian dignitaries, and provided us with an opportunity to renew our acquaintance and deepen our friendship with many Cuban writers, professors and citizens with a shared love and profound interest in literature, culture, history, the arts and photography.

Our journey as a "holiday" had many highlights including swimming, eating, travelling in the countryside and spending



Cathy, Linda, Kim, Stella, John, Sophy, Graham, Douglas  
all leaving the book fair.

several fruitful days walking the streets and visiting the sites of Havana.

As for our culturally enriched lives, we spent a wonderful hour in the company of the Canadian ambassador to Cuba and her staff. We read to a fine group of young students of English at the University of Havana. We spent a morning with a group of well-established Cuban poets and authors in a workshop setting at the University of Havana. We read at the Library of Havana and were given a tour of the library. We read at the resort hotel to an enthusiastic audience of fellow tourist. We participated in and read at the Latin American Book Fair at the old Fort in Havana where our reading was televised, our photographs were taken by the local press and our participation at the festival was mentioned on the radio.

It was an honour to be included in this year's CCLA tour. The



Tree clinging to wall - hmmm interesting metaphor for Cuba.

Cuban people are amazing – poets and musicians all. Manuel and Wendy are friends of Canada and Canadian culture and poetry in particular. I managed to write another seven or eight poems inspired by Cuba, her landscape, her history and her people. I am privileged to have fallen in love with this Island and the culture of Cuba. Little did I know when I was a student of Spanish literature twenty some years ago at UWO, that one day I would have the honour of reading my work in Latin America. Manuel's translations honour us all. We owe him a debt we cannot hope to repay. Like the many trunked ficus trees indigenous to Cuba, this strange stalked, large shadowed, wide girthed beauty which stands in the poets square at the old fort of Havana with its green leafed quiet dignity shading us all, we now are stronger for what we share and have shared in our common humanity. Thank you Cuba for reminding a wealthy Canadian what is truly to be cherished. Friendship and the common bond between people of good will everywhere on our blessed planet.



The Canadian Ambassador,  
Her Excellency Mrs.  
Alexandra Bugailiskis with  
John B. Lee at the Embassy.

## *Thrilled To Be Included*

- *Stella and Graham Ducker*

- *CCLA Ambassadors*

As poets and members of the Canada Cuba Literary Alliance (CCLA) Stella and I were thrilled to be asked to join the delegation to Cuba. Our two-week stay included: a visit and donation of books to H. E. Ambassador ALEXANDRA BUGAILISKIS and the Canadian Cultural Attaché; poetry workshop at the Havana Library with some leading award-winning Cuban poets; readings and donations to the University of Havana English Department; an evening of poetry with guests at the Tropicoco Hotel; readings and donations to the Havana Library; and reading to a group attending the International Book Fair.



Graham, Raquel (*Assistant Cultural Attache*), Stella

There was particular interest shown in Stella's Stellar Showcase Journal in which poets from all over the world publish their works in print and on line.

With specific activities occurring about every second day, we took advantage of the 'off-days' to enjoy the beautiful weather and beach, explore Havana and prowl the markets.

On one particular tour, the delicious lunch of chicken, beans, and rice had a side order of French Fries! Since the tables were outside, the clean-up routine was to throw the bones and scraps into the bushes where chickens and dogs cleaned them up.

We were very thankful for our guides - also members of CCLA - Manuel Velázquez León, Wency Rosales, and Alexander Valdivia who steered us to 'correct' restaurants where the food was plentiful and not too expensive.

One required item of things to bring to Cuba was 'a roll of toilet paper'. Venturing into Cuban restaurant bathrooms is a whole new experience.



It has been said that Cuba is a land of antique cars and excellent mechanics. Everywhere you look, there is a continuous procession of old model cars. We had a taxi ride in a 1950 Dodge that purred along beautifully.

Cuba is one of the safest tourist destinations and we highly recommend obtaining a package that includes the hotel, meals, and shuttle in and out of Havana.

It will be nice to go back again.



Yamilka and  
Raquel at the  
Canadian  
Embassy

# A Few Cuba Poems



Linda Rogers

*Letter From Playa Del Este Near La  
Boca Where We Once Found A Conch*

This morning I woke up tasting salt in my mouth and imagined you were dreaming about dogs chasing sticks in the Selkirk Waters.

Later, I watched blue men of war ride the waves while a young husband from our hotel swam out to sea and his bride sat still as her wedding photo under a beach umbrella. This is an old story on the *Playa del Este*, where men, lured by the neon streets of Miami, risk *agua malo* in the Straights of Florida.

*Are these primal waters? Do these men believe  
the pink insides of conches and rooms in Miami  
brothels will give them the freedom to sing?*

Judging from the way the swimmer plunged into the dangerous surf, ignoring the red flags, he needed to bring his wife a shell that would sound her praises.

*Was the mad poet who swam the Bosphorus  
simply writing his beloved's name on water?*

While the yaw between bride and groom widened, a lifeguard took refuge, refusing to rescue the fool who would risk his life to impress a woman. Wind blew coconuts down from the palm trees. Wind blew sand in the bride's face. She sneezed. Did she cry, "Soul come back," the way we say, "Bless You?" Was it a compassionate wave that brought her husband back and laid him gently on the beach? We are relieved when our lovers return safe from their dreams, but why is it that some men must dive like dogs into troubled waters while others are content to sing in their sleep?

*John B. Lee*

*Remembering the October Missile  
Crisis with Cuban Friends,  
March 17, 2006*

we were all merely children  
scorched in the burn shadow  
of thermonuclear war  
as we crouched in crawl shades  
at school  
like sundials in gardens of noon  
turned to salt  
in the suddenly lucid illusions of light  
and this was our lot  
to live  
among liars  
while missiles bristled like coral in Cuba  
and madness built shelters at home  
stocked cupboards with cans and stale crackers  
and we watched the grey box  
in the parlour  
for comforting tinctures of truth  
and why were we slaves of such fires  
ask the man with the hammering shoe  
ask the handsome Narcissus  
with his face an eventual coin  
a profile in silver  
like all ancient Caesars of Rome

ask Manuel  
whose mother was frightened  
by droning of bombers come low  
and buzzing the fields near Holguin

I think now of dragon flies  
skimming their blue-green wet-winged reflections  
in the gravel ponds of home  
for now, we meet as friends  
as gentle poet  
of our own peculiar pasts

I can see  
grim Grominko  
I can see  
Fidel  
I can see  
Kruschov, Kennedy  
MacNamara  
all those powerfully powerless men  
who left us  
children quivering in our feckless bodies  
our fathers blanched and helpless  
our teachers  
rigid and stoic with instructions  
as Ontario autumns rattled orange  
and smouldering with deciduous doom.

*John B. Lee*

*Astonished*

there is a poster on a billboard  
above the sand-swept sidewalk  
of a beach street shop  
in a local lake town  
it shows a model in a bathing suit  
and she is swimming in self seduction  
the rayon ravishment of her private desire  
revealed as a slight relief in the trace of a fold  
like the manifest ripeness of plum  
and her elbows are out  
like half-folded wings of a waterfowl  
coming to rest  
and her thighs are flung wide as a bible  
and her palms prove the femoral ardour of 'still'  
like framing the frailty  
with a carnal caress  
and her eyes  
flicker with feeling  
as if they fluttering shut  
on the darkness of dream

and this is so matter of fact  
among comers and goers  
the hanger rattling women and girls  
who fling about  
these flimsy silks  
these flowering fabrics  
draping their arms in the staplines  
and leg loops  
like the fragrance of sleep on the floor

and as I think  
on this week at the poolside  
in Cuba  
with no two swimsuits the same  
how the girls  
touched their toes  
to the water  
as if they were testing a bath  
how they waded  
in trails of reflection  
how they dazzled the surface  
with the slow irrumation  
of undulous mirrors  
unnatural blue  
and some were whispering 'rosebud'  
and some were drifting  
like April in orchards  
with the easy release of frail white  
too weak to cling to the sky  
and oh, the aromas of heaven  
the vernal perfumes  
of wet spring  
with the sweeping of limbs into sweetness  
like songbirds leaping the branch

and I am a muse  
of such mystery

not by the brutal dogs of the law  
will I be dissuaded  
from beauty

not by the yawping of harpies  
not by the lying of lawyers  
for  
we are  
as it is with the fountainhead  
of all creation  
a complexity  
in the quivers of Cupid

and I am  
I assure you  
a fletcher of fidelity

so sharp with one flint  
in the luminous crimson of hearts  
the arrow I am  
from nock to point  
true to the wound  
in the trembling shaft  
like a reed  
I am rooted  
though I feather myself  
in a river  
to the one wild always  
and forever dominion of waters  
come the hungry seedkites  
of my soul  
the myriad eidelons of my flesh  
that I might measure the weathers  
like names  
fading grey on cold stone.

*John B. Lee*

*The Waters That Circle Us All*

the sunlight  
on the Cuban coast  
comes tinting the waters  
like an indecisive overpainter  
ever changing and tainting  
the mutable hues of the sea  
close by  
the pale white sand shallows  
are but a sallow green  
a faded acqua marine  
of ankle-stained statues  
and almost chilly children  
thrilled to be belly dry  
and then the surface  
is blackened by weed  
like the ink shadow of clouds  
locked in time, a vegetative blot  
in the turquoise brilliance  
the shiny undulations  
lie shattered by foam frilling white  
like the ruff-collar throats  
of gentlemen sailors arriving from Spain  
Diego drowning  
and the deep water death of a king

what commingles here  
among reefs  
and shell shelves  
where the seen combers shatter their will  
is ocean enough

the swimmers, the  
waders, the walkers  
the watchers  
the boaters, the  
sailors  
the waters that circle us all.

RD Roy

*I See God From Ricardo's Rooftop*

We are on your rooftop  
in the heart of Havana  
and we can see the old cathedral  
topped with its blackened bronze  
Madonna and the God infant

And when I ask you  
about the revolution and religion  
you shrug and tell me  
that life is more complicated than that  
and point to other spires in the distance

I ask about Cuba's divorce rate  
the highest in Latin America  
and again you shrug  
and remind me  
that life is complicated

It is then that I notice  
strung to dry on a rooftop wire  
rows of lacy panties and tiny thongs  
warm Cuban flags fluttering  
between us and the God

And we both laugh  
as men will laugh about these things  
I see your pride in your people and country  
and that life is not always  
so complicated

RD Roy

## My Two Islands

There is a difference here  
the greens and the blues  
vibrating on another frequency  
but familiar

The birds are larger  
and lushly plummed  
always winking at me  
as if sharing a secret

Restless Caribbean waters  
rise into the northern seas  
where the sweat of both peoples  
has joined

Blurred horizons are impossible  
history vague in time and distance  
but living waves have always  
united these two islands

Blue eyed and blond  
Norseman traces  
keep me in shadows while  
my swarthy friends shimmer in light

But Somewhere in my blood there's a Spaniard  
after the Viking  
so that the heart of your island  
knows my island well.

*Kimberley E. Grove*

*La Vida Dura*

We picked them off the broken coral shore: pieces  
Of shells that had been beaten against rock,  
Their beauty intact, the curves and twists of colour -  
Torn apart, forbidden for tourists to take whole,  
An understanding of the Cuban's life.

Richard M. Grove

The Sucking Sea  
Agua Malo

The sea was filled  
with rage last night.  
Foaming, churning,  
whipped to crashing crests.

Low led clouds  
hurled shafts of cold rain  
careening to dancing beach  
pitted deep.

Flung beyond surf line  
agua malo, blue  
swollen man-of-wars  
laying in wait for foaming  
burst to carry them back  
on sucking waves.

Today calmed to placid blue  
under dour pink.  
Sacrificial lambs strewn— lifeless  
poisonous purple tentacles dead  
still poised  
for unsuspecting tourist  
victim's tread.

*agua malo – Portuguese man of war – literal translation = Bad Water*

*Richard M. Grove*

*Havana Harbour*

Floating stinking,  
oily black crap,  
iridescent shimmerings  
of political indifference ,  
coating, clinging,  
smothering future  
with short term  
gain of disregard.

The smell of judgement,  
Canadian narrow perspective  
lingers in conceit,  
filling ego with  
false pride  
an arrogance that may  
linger longer than the tar.

Graham Ducker

Fiddler Crabs  
Translucence scurries  
Among the seashore debris.  
Fiddlers are feeding.

## Graham Ducker

### MAYBE

On the bustling Malecon  
tourists acclimatize  
to 'Cuba Time',  
where the optimum word  
in scheduling is  
maybe.

Bus eight-twenty-six  
will be ready,  
or substituted,  
similar kind,  
maybe.

The A C'd bus  
will pick you up  
along the wall,  
or the market,  
maybe.

The rendezvous  
will be at one,  
or three,  
or later,  
maybe.

The antique taxi ride  
will cost three pesos,  
or four,  
or five,  
maybe.

The market lanes  
squeeze shoppers  
making progress,  
gradually,  
sometimes,  
maybe.

Tourists yearn  
to return  
and learn  
to spurn  
avarice,  
a little,  
maybe.

# James Cockcroft

## Why?

Denying they are heroes  
my five new friends  
don't know me.

That's why...

Nourishing humanity  
like a global river  
their love bathes me.

That's why...

By resisting, shut away  
for having struggled against terrorism  
they reduce me to silence.

That's why...

Giving me hope  
their humble courage  
flames my soul.

That's why...

Their patriotic acts  
like their letters from the abyss  
protect families of the world/island.

That's why...

According to Jose Marti  
"Homeland is humanity" and  
"Patriotism is nothing less than love",

Yes, that's why!  
They are humanity's heroes,  
they will return

*A View from Richard's  
Apartment in Havana.*



# *A Few Reading Moments*



John B. Lee



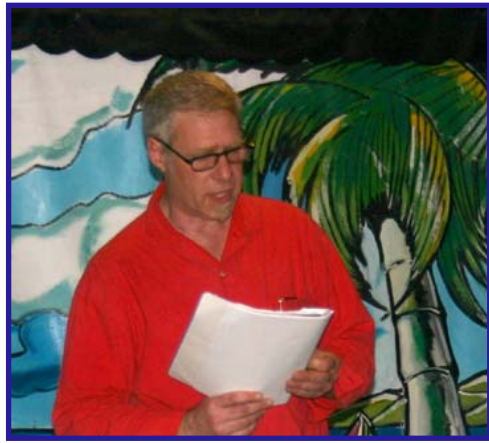
Linda Rogers and Wency Rosales



James Cockcroft



Kimberly E. Grove



RD Roy



Wency Rosalas and Stella Ducker



Graham Ducker



Richard M. Grove (Tai)

## *For information about CCLA*

For information about the Canada Cuba Literary Alliance you can go to our website at:

[www.CanadaCubaLiteraryAlliance.org](http://www.CanadaCubaLiteraryAlliance.org)

We publish a perfect-bound literary journal called “The Ambassador” and an eNewsletter called “The Envoy”.

We publish many different books including workshop anthologies, member anthologies, as well as books by one or two authors. Ask us how we can publish your work.

Members are welcome to organize literary, art and photography projects. Let us know what you have in mind.

The goal of the Canada Cuba Literary Alliance is to advance literary solidarity between Canada and Cuba through the creative expression of poetry, prose, photography and art. We hope you will join us in our endeavor .

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Ask us to send you information about membership.