

# MARTYRS ALL: The Hero Of Key West And The *Inocentes*

by JOSÉ B. FERNÁNDEZ AND JERRELL H. SHOFNER\*

In November, 1971, a group of youthful Cuban expatriates in Miami celebrated a century-old Cuban holiday by placing shrouded caskets at prominent places in the United States. The caskets symbolized eight innocent students who were executed by a weak Spanish government in November, 1871, to appease the *peninsulares*. These were an extremist group of reactionaries whose strength was probably greater than that of the Spanish colonial government of Cuba during the ten-year revolution which gripped the island after 1868. It was fitting that the 100th anniversary of the executions be celebrated in the United States since the events leading to the incident began there.

There has always been a close relationship between South Florida and Cuba and not only because early American leaders thought the island would eventually be annexed to the United States. In the 19th century, trade was so extensive between the Gulf coastal ports of the United States and Cuba that Key West was the hub of an extensive trading area. Steamship lines plying between New Orleans and Havana regularly carried cargoes from both ports to Key West where they were reloaded on vessels operating out of the Atlantic coastal ports. Business partnerships frequently had offices in Havana and Key West or other United States ports. Trade and transportation as well as geographic affinity contributed to extensive social and cultural ties between the two islands off the Florida mainland. Labor disputes in the Cuban tobacco industry and growing resistance to Spanish rule in the late 1860's caused Vicente Martínez Ybor, a major cigar manufacturer, to move his factories to Key West in 1868. When the first Cuban revolution occurred that year, it only increased the exodus of Cubans from their native island to Key West, where many of them planned to make their permanent homes and others lived in exile until the revolution either succeeded or was suppressed. The result was an immediate increase in the population of Key West by several thousand new residents who had conflicting loyalties toward the revolutionary movement and the Spanish efforts to suppress it. Frequent confrontations between pro-Spaniards and those who sympathized with the revolution disturbed the peace of Key West. Events in Cuba were watched closely from the other island. Newspapers and public speakers commented on the revolution and expressed opinions about it. Most of the Cubans in Key West were sympa-

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\*Dr. José B. Fernández is Assistant Professor of Foreign Languages, University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. Dr. Jerrell H. Shofner is Professor of History and Chairman of the Department of History, Florida Technological University, Orlando.

thetic to the revolutionaries and the newspaper *El Republicano* of Key West, edited by José María Reyes, catered to their opinions with provocative editorials against the Spanish forces.

Reyes' principal antagonist was Don Gonzalo Castañón Escarano, a reactionary Asturian who edited a pro-Spanish newspaper in Havana ironically entitled *La Voz de Cuba*.<sup>1</sup> Castañón had emigrated to Cuba as a youth and worked for a government official in Puerto Príncipe (now Camagüey) until the revolution of 1868. He then moved to Havana and worked with the *Banco Español de la Habana*. In Havana he met several wealthy *peninsulares*—pro-Spanish residents of Cuba—who appreciated his reactionary views and financed his newspaper efforts. His extremist editorials soon became by-words for the *peninsulares*, and he was regarded as a hero by the *voluntarios*. The latter constituted a kind of home guard or militia, theoretically formed to replace the regular army while it was away fighting the revolutionaries, but in practice providing an organization for pro-Spaniards to conduct themselves as vigilantes and threaten the Civil Governor if his policies were unpopular with them. A test of the *voluntarios*' strength and that of their hate-mongering spokesman came when Governor Dulce ordered Castañón expelled from the island. When the matter was settled the editor kept his position while the Governor was recalled to Spain.

The *Voz de Cuba* in Havana and *El Republicano* in Key West frequently exchanged insults and Castañón finally challenged Reyes to a duel. Since it was unlikely that the pro-revolutionary editor would go to Cuba, Castañón decided to meet him on his own ground. Arriving at Key West with four travelling companions on January 29, 1870, the editor of the *Voz de Cuba* was met by an angry group of revolutionary sympathizers as soon as he reached the docks. The commander of nearby Fort Taylor sent an officer and five soldiers to quell the disturbance. Several persons were arrested and peace was restored by early evening. The Spaniards registered at the Russell House—Key West's best hostelry—and let it be known that they were prepared to meet Reyes and his seconds for the duel.<sup>2</sup>

When Reyes declined the invitation, Mateo Orozco, a local baker, set out for the hotel with Francisco and José Botella at about noon on January 31, to act in Reyes' place. Castañón refused to fight Orozco, perhaps because of the latter's lowly social status. A heated argument followed and Castañón was shot to death. An angry crowd gathered around the

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<sup>1</sup>Jose M. Angueira, "Inocentes," in *Miami Diario Las Americas* November 17, 1971.

<sup>2</sup>J. B. Shinn to Joseph H. Taylor, February 1, 1870, Letters Received, Adjutant General's Office, Micro Copy 619, Roll 815, National Archives; Angueira, "Inocentes."

hotel, causing Mayor Henry Mulrennan to ask for military assistance from Fort Taylor. Captain J. B. Shinn sent a twenty man detachment which patrolled the town during the remainder of the day. No further violence erupted despite considerable excitement engendered by the shooting.<sup>3</sup>

Orozco and the Botella brothers left Key West aboard the *Fulton*, a fishing smack owned and operated by an American named Thomas Athelston Franklin.<sup>4</sup> Since the United States was trying to maintain a strict neutrality toward Spain and the Cuban revolutionaries, Monroe County Judge James W. Locke hurriedly convened a coroner's jury which decided that Castañón had been assassinated by unidentified persons. The body was released only a few hours after the shooting. Former Confederate Secretary of the Navy Stephen R. Mallory immediately took charge of the remains and escorted them back to Cuba.

News of the assassination spread across the island, causing "profound indignation" among the *peninsulares*. Receiving an account of the affair by cable from Key West, the *Voz de Cuba* reprinted it on a hand-bill which was widely distributed throughout Havana. The impression was created that Castañón had died a martyr to the Spanish cause. According to the American Vice-Consul, Henry C. Hall, the news stimulated the "excitable passions" of the "lowest and worst class of *Peninsulares*."<sup>5</sup>

An elaborate funeral procession and ceremony on February 2 passed without incident. But on the same day, Don Vincente Danni, a native Cuban who had become a naturalized citizen of the United States, was shot in a coffee house in Havana. Having returned to Cuba on the same vessel which brought back the body, he attempted to give his own version of the incident in Key West in rebuttal to an exaggerated story being discussed in his presence. An argument ensued and he was shot.<sup>6</sup>

At Matanzas a battalion of Spanish *voluntarios* returned from the field just in time to receive news of the assassination. A few of the soldiers decided to take a number of prominent Cuban prisoners from jail and execute them to revenge Castañón. Just before midnight on February 2, the *voluntario* battalion was assembled at the *Plaza de Armas* in Matanzas. For about an hour there were cries of "Death to Traitors," and demands that the prisoners be delivered for execution. The Provincial Governor

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<sup>3</sup>Shinn to Taylor, February 1, 1870, Letters Received, Adjutant General's Office, Micro Copy, Roll 815.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas Biddle to J. C. B. Davis, February 21, 1870, Despatches from United States Consuls in Havana, 1783-1906, Micro Copy T-20, Roll 19, National Archives.

<sup>5</sup>Henry C. Hall to J. C. B. Davis, February 9, 1870, Despatches from . . . Havana.

<sup>6</sup>Hall to Davis, February 3, 1870, *ibid.*

came to the square and demanded an explanation. Over the objections of their officers a few of the *voluntarios* launched verbal assaults on the Governor. Several shots were fired into private houses along the streets and threats of violence against prominent Cubans were made.

Ignoring the hostile threats the Governor made a speech in which he pointed out that most of the troubles faced by Spanish authorities in Matanzas were caused by excesses such as the midnight demonstration. When two companies of marines promised to support him, the Governor marched them into position in the Plaza. Gradually the officers regained control of the *voluntarios* just as day broke. A review was called for eight o'clock in the morning. Addressing the assembled soldiers, the Governor announced his determination to punish those responsible for the previous night's disturbance. A few days later six men were arrested and transported in handcuffs to Havana where they were shipped back to Spain. That led to new demonstrations against the chief executive and the local police chief. The latter finally agreed to resign on February 8 and order was restored in Matanzas.<sup>7</sup>

After the shooting of Danni in Havana, Vice-Consul Hall reported that the event was being capitalized on to give the impression that "American citizens are in jeopardy here. But this in my judgment is not true." He expressed hope that "nothing will be done to disturb the existing harmony."<sup>8</sup> Three days later on Sunday, February 6, Isaac Greenwald, a German-born citizen of New York, was walking with Thomas K. Foster, Gardner Wells, and Hugh Johnson near the Tacón theatre in Havana. Everyone except Wells happened to be wearing blue neckties. A man described as "in civilian dress wearing a panama hat and cockade of the volunteers" accosted Greenwald, then backed off about six feet and shot him with a pistol. A large crowd immediately assembled and numerous additional shots were fired. All three Americans wearing blue neckties were struck by bullets.<sup>9</sup> Greenwald was pursued and stabbed to death. Johnson managed to escape. Foster was being hotly pursued down a main street, along which the French Consul General, the Marquis de Tobin Janson, happened to be driving. Seeing them shoot Foster in the back, Janson stopped his carriage and approached the two assailants. His interference enabled Foster to escape with his life. According to Janson, "the two men approached me menacingly, one was cleaning a stiletto." When asked what was happening, the man with the knife answered that Foster

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<sup>7</sup>Hall to Davis, February 11, 1870, *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>Hall to Davis, February 3, 1870, *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup>Affidavit of Gardner Wells, in Hall to Davis, February 7, 1870, *ibid.*

was a "villain" who wore "an American cravat" and that more such persons should "suffer the same fate."<sup>10</sup>

Crediting the French Consul with saving Foster's life, Hall wrote that "I must modify the statement I made about the safety of Americans here." Although the Spanish authorities had offered a \$1,000 reward for the man who had caused the incident, Hall thought they would be unable to "protect the lives of peaceable inhabitants or to punish the atrocities that are being daily committed . . ." <sup>11</sup> He was displeased that the Spanish were fixing responsibility on one person when "there could not have been less than fifty engaged in the affair."<sup>12</sup> He called on Washington to send warships to Havana to provide a safe refuge for American citizens if further "popular outbreaks" occurred.<sup>13</sup>

In late February, Thomas Franklin, whom the *peninsulares* believed had provided transportation of the assassins of Castañón, foolishly sailed the *Fulton* into Havana harbor. Hearing of his arrival, a group of *voluntarios* determined to punish him. Franklin was told of their plans just in time to escape to the safety of the *Defense*, a British warship anchored nearby. Realizing that Franklin was in danger until he could reach the open sea beyond the point near Morro Castle, the British commander suggested that the American be escorted beyond that point. The Spanish Consul General agreed and another incident was averted.<sup>14</sup>

When he arrived in Havana, Thomas Biddle, the newly appointed United States Consul, reported that the Captain General of Cuba expressed his determination to sustain the cordiality existing between the two countries and promised a rigid investigation of the death of Isaac Greenwald.<sup>15</sup> A few days later Eugenio Zamora was arrested for the crime. He was tried, found guilty, and sentenced to be shot. Except for the verbal exchange between Biddle and the Captain General, there was no official discussion between the United States and Spain regarding the events either at Key West or Cuba. Determination to maintain neutrality during the revolt on the island was strong in 1870.

But the *voluntarios* continued to intimidate the civil authorities in Cuba and their wishes sometimes rendered the administration of justice impossible. They never forgot their martyred hero who lay in a sealed glass

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<sup>10</sup>Affidavit of de Tobin Janson, February 8, 1870, *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup>Hall to Davis, February 9, 1870, *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup>Hall to Davis, February 12, 1870, *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup>Hall to Davis, February 9, 1870, *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup>Howell Salmon of the *Defense* to Thomas Biddle, February 21, 1870, *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup>Biddle to Davis, February 18, 1870, *ibid.*

tomb in the Espada Cemetery. On November 23, 1871, a group of medical students at the University of Havana provided an opportunity for the *voluntarios* to express themselves. Forty-six students—forty-three Cubans, a Spanish army officer, another Spaniard, and a British citizen—tired of waiting for their anatomy professor who was later than usual that day and left the school in search of amusement until their next class. Four of them entertained the others by riding around the nearby Espada Cemetery in the carriage which was normally used for transporting indigent bodies to the school for scientific use. Another plucked a flower from the cemetery garden.<sup>16</sup>

The cheers of the exuberant students unfortunately awakened Vicente Cobas, the cemetery watchman, from his siesta. He chastized the errant students, who departed the cemetery after directing some remarks at the indignant Cobas. While they returned to class, the watchman, an ardent Spanish colonialist with strong prejudices against Cubans, complained bitterly of the incident to the cemetery chaplain. The priest attempted to calm Cobas, explaining that the foolish youngsters had done nothing to warrant further pursuit of the matter. But the old *peninsular* was not persuaded. These were the kind of people for whose extermination his martyred hero, Gonzalo Castañón, had called only a short time earlier. Unwilling to heed the priest's urging that he drop the matter, Cobas went in search of a more receptive audience. At the Casino Español he met Apolinar del Rato and Felipe Alonso, both of whom were *voluntario* officers. Alonso, who had accompanied Castañón on his fateful journey to Key West in 1870, was especially interested in Cobas' story. Since the mere charges of riding in a carriage through the cemetery and picking a single flower from its garden were scarcely serious enough for their purposes, the three decided to embellish the story by charging that the students had desecrated the grave of Castañón, the hero of Key West.<sup>17</sup>

After releasing the revised version of the cemetery incident to the *voluntarios*, the two officers went to the Civil Governor, Dionisio López Roberts, with their charges against the students. While the *voluntarios* were beginning to call for action on his part, López Roberts accompanied Rato and Alonso on an inspection of the cemetery. Although the glass cover on Castañón's grave showed three small scratches, the cemetery chaplain testified that they had been made long before the students made their unfortunate afternoon excursion. López Roberts was unconvinced and resolved to question the students directly. At three P.M. on November 25, he

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<sup>16</sup>Angueira, "Inocentes."

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

and the 2nd battalion of *voluntarios* interrupted a class at the university. López Roberts took over the lectern and delivered a strong admonition against the parties who had desecrated Castañón's grave and threatened to send them all to prison unless the guilty party confessed. Shocked by the distorted account of the incident, the students protested. The impatient López Roberts ordered the arrest of all the students, except for the Spanish officer. In prison, four students—Bermúdez, Laborde, Marcos and Rodríguez—confessed to riding in the carriage and Álvarez de la Campa admitted that he had taken a flower from the garden.

On November 26 an irate mob of *voluntarios* formed near the prison. Acting Governor-General Romualdo Crespo had called a military parade for that same day. *Voluntarios* assembled for the parade had further opportunity to become aroused and determined for action. When Governor-General Crespo returned to his palace after the parade, he was met by about 3,000 *voluntarios* demanding "justice" toward the "traitors." Although he had information indicating that the students were innocent, Crespo named a tribunal of Spanish regular army officers to try them. Captain Federico Capdevilla was assigned to defend them. After a brief trial that evening a verdict of guilty was reached and the students were sentenced to short prison terms.

Incensed by what they alleged to be an inadequate sentence, the *voluntarios* went on a violent rampage. Capdevilla's life was threatened and López Roberts was physically assaulted when he went to the prison to try to calm the excited crowd. Two Spanish generals were injured in the disturbance. Shouting "Death to the Profanators of the Hero of Key West," the *voluntarios* surged drunkenly through the streets of Havana. In one of several shooting incidents, two Spaniards were injured and three free blacks were shot.<sup>18</sup>

When a group of *voluntarios* stormed his palace, Governor-General Crespo surrendered to their demands and appointed a new tribunal composed of six regular army officers and nine *voluntarios*. The presiding judge was Apolinar del Rato, one of the originators of the fictitious charges. The students were brought to trial for a second time at five A.M. on November 27. Capdevilla was not allowed in the room where the trial took place. Eight hours later the five students who had ridden in the carriage and taken the flower were sentenced to be shot. The Spanish citizen and the British subject were freed. The thirty-eight remaining students—all Cubans—were sentenced to long prison terms, except that three of their number, to be

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<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*



chosen by lot, were to be executed along with the condemned five. The tribunal had decreed that eight students must die. The three who lost the draw were Carlos de la Torre, Eladio González and Carlos Verdugo. The latter had been absent from Havana on the day of the cemetery incident. The eight were shot that same afternoon.<sup>19</sup>

The executions set off a wave of indignant protests from nations all over the world. Even several prominent Spanish officials denounced the act so vigorously that both López Roberts and Crespo were recalled from their positions. But the United States again remained strictly neutral. Although the Washington government had carefully avoided involvement in the Cuban revolution since its inception in 1868, its representative in Havana—Henry Hall was again in charge—made the task much simpler by his reports of the cemetery incident and subsequent events. On November 27 he called for an American warship to be sent to Havana harbor because he feared that the *voluntarios* might overpower the government and launch a wholesale massacre. But on the following day he reported that the students were guilty of the charges against them and that they had additionally attacked the cemetery chaplain. After having forwarded that report based on what he called “reliable sources,” Hall sent Joseph Raphael, a Spanish-speaking employee of the consulate, to investigate. Raphael found no evidence of damage to Castañón’s grave. Hall then told the state department that the students were not guilty of the alleged offenses and that thirty-five of them were erroneously serving prison terms at hard labor. An American warship, the *Terror*, arrived in Havana on December 1 in response to his earlier request, but found the city quiet.

Neither President Ulysses S. Grant nor Secretary of State Hamilton Fish had taken any official notice of the events in Cuba, but on December 6 they were shocked out of their indifference by Massachusetts Congressman Nathaniel Banks who demanded that the President inform the House of Representatives of the “recent execution of Cuban students under the pretext that they had insulted the memory of a Spaniard.”<sup>20</sup> Banks’ implicit threat brought a promise from the administration to negotiate with the Spanish government on the matter of releasing the imprisoned students. Henry Hall was replaced in Havana by A. A. Torbert whose dispatches assumed a tone much more favorable toward the Cuban revolutionaries and criticized the role of the colonial government in the student affairs.

The government of King Amadeo I faced a dilemma. Fervently wishing to appease the United States government, it was afraid that any conciliation toward the students would set off a reign of terror by the *voluntarios*. In

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<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup>*Congressional Globe*, 42nd Cong., 2nd Sess., part 1, 29.



March, 1872, after three months of steady pressure from both the United States and Britain, the Spanish government officially admitted that the students had been innocent of any wrongdoing, that their execution and imprisonment had been a crime, and the survivors should be freed. In May the King signed an amnesty proclamation, but refused to declare them innocent for fear of further *voluntario* violence. The students were quietly taken aboard the Spanish frigate *Zaragoza* and transported to Spain where the *voluntarios* could not reach them.<sup>21</sup> In 1887 Gonzalo Castañón's son, Fernando, affirmed that his father's grave had never been damaged by the students or anyone else.<sup>22</sup>

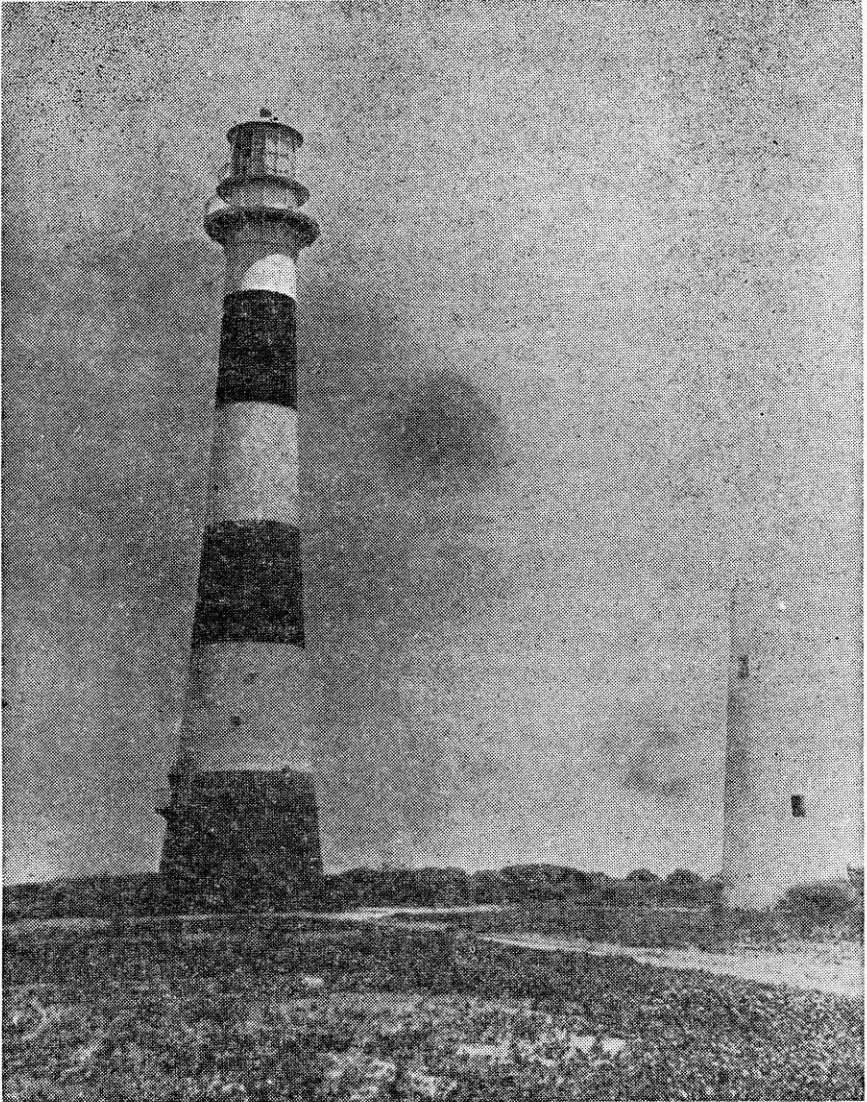
Just as Castañón became a martyr for the extremist *peninsulares* and their paramilitary *voluntario* supporters, the eight students became heroes of the Cuban revolutionaries. Castañón's assassination was forgotten by Key West citizens as other violent confrontations occurred to attract attention. The United States government was forced to take notice of the *Virginius* affair when several Americans were executed by the Spanish government in 1873, but again the pressures exerted on the Madrid government were restrained. The revolution was suppressed by the late 1870's, although Cubans still yearned for independence and politicians in Florida frequently called for American assistance in their behalf. When revolution occurred again in the 1890's, the United States was more aggressive in its demands on the Spanish government. Cuba became free from Spain, although American tutelage endured for several decades. With Spanish control removed, the new Cuban government made November 27 a national holiday. Cuban schools were annually dismissed for that day in memory of the martyred students.

In the 20th century, Cuban government has undergone several changes. In the 1950's Fidel Castro's revolution against the Batista regime was successful. For the Cuban expatriates who are once again living in South Florida—this time in Miami—Castro has come to symbolize suppression of freedom in the manner of the Spanish colonial government of a century ago. "Abdala," the Miami-based organization of Cuban exiles, used the empty caskets to remind the world that November 27, 1971, was the 100th anniversary of the arbitrary execution of eight innocent persons by a wavering Spanish colonial government. It was appropriate that the demonstration occurred in South Florida where Castañón's assassination had set in motion the series of turbulent events which culminated in the execution of the eight innocent students.

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<sup>21</sup>Herminio Portell Vila, "La Inocencia de Estudiantes," *Bohemia* (November 29, 1959, Año 51, No. 48).

<sup>22</sup>Angueira, "Inocentes."



*Cape Canaveral light showing old original tower.*