




THE APOSTLE

 After the Second War of Cuban Independence, which ended in 1898, the name of José Martí was remembered in Cuba by the veterans of the war and by his fellow poets and writers. Sometimes their praise of him was extravagant. Many began to refer to him as the “apostle,” a name that was first given to him in 1889 by Gonzalo de Quesada, who later wrote of him: “. . . like Christ, he was the victim of mockery, he suffered injuries and ingratitude from the very ones whom he proposed to save.”¹ He was remembered with great respect by the soldiers



and peasants who had known him during the war, but he was not too well-known among the middle class. His literary reputation was kept alive from abroad—from Latin America and Europe—and he had always been respected in New York.

After the downfall of the dictator Machado in 1933, however, Cubans began to look to their political heritage for inspiration in their efforts to govern themselves. Martí's name began to be mentioned more and more frequently in speeches, dedications, memorials, and all other events in which Cuba displayed its pride in its past history.¹ Politicians began to invoke his name when praising their party or program, whether they were liberal, conservative, or reactionary. If a political party was out of power, it would quote Martí to the effect that all government was corrupt and controlled by wealthy landowners or American business executives. If a party was *in* power, it would urge the people to follow Martí's example of trust, forgiveness, and unity for the good of all. In death, Martí became a man for all seasons and every political outlook.

The rebirth of the Cuban people's pride in their heritage after the removal of the Platt Amendment from their constitution and their increased awareness of themselves as a free people brought about a renewal of interest in

Martí. The new nation needed heroes, and Martí fit the bill perfectly. During the late 1930s he was well on his way to becoming a national legend. His likeness began to appear on postage stamps, coins, and medals. Statues of him were placed at prominent intersections and in parks in all the major cities; there were contests among architects to design fitting memorials to him.

Biographies of Martí began to appear, and his huge literary output began to be edited and arranged in a final edition. Words were formed from his name. *Martiano* referred to anyone or anything that reflected the ideals of Martí; *Martiniano* meant something that applied to Martí; *Martista* designated a person who acted politically as Martí would have; *Martiolatría* was the worship of Martí; and, of course, *Martianismo* covered just about everything to do with Martí. One of his most famous poems, one which is known to just about every Cuban, is titled *Rosa Blanca* (White Rose). When a Cuban wants to compliment someone, he or she will say "Rosa Blanca."² There was even a patriotic group called *La Orden de la Rosa Blanca* (The Order of the White Rose) whose large membership was devoted to spreading the gospel as written by José Martí. At one time this group published a monthly magazine called *La Rosa Blanca* and



had its own radio program that featured readings from the master's works.

All this began to verge on idolatry and, at times, appeared a little silly. The hundredth anniversary of Martí's birth was celebrated in 1953, and the committee chosen to oversee the festivities decided to make a motion picture of the apostle's life. Since film facilities in Cuba were limited, they chose a Mexican company to make the picture. Unfortunately, the film company picked a Mexican actor to portray Martí, and a lot of the film was shot in Mexico. An uproar erupted in the Cuban press. Newspaper columnists and editorial writers howled that their own beloved Martí ended up speaking with a Mexican accent and looking like an "Aztec."³ The controversy that raged over the film *La Rosa Blanca* lasted for months, and many people still feel that the fuss it caused was much more entertaining than the film itself.

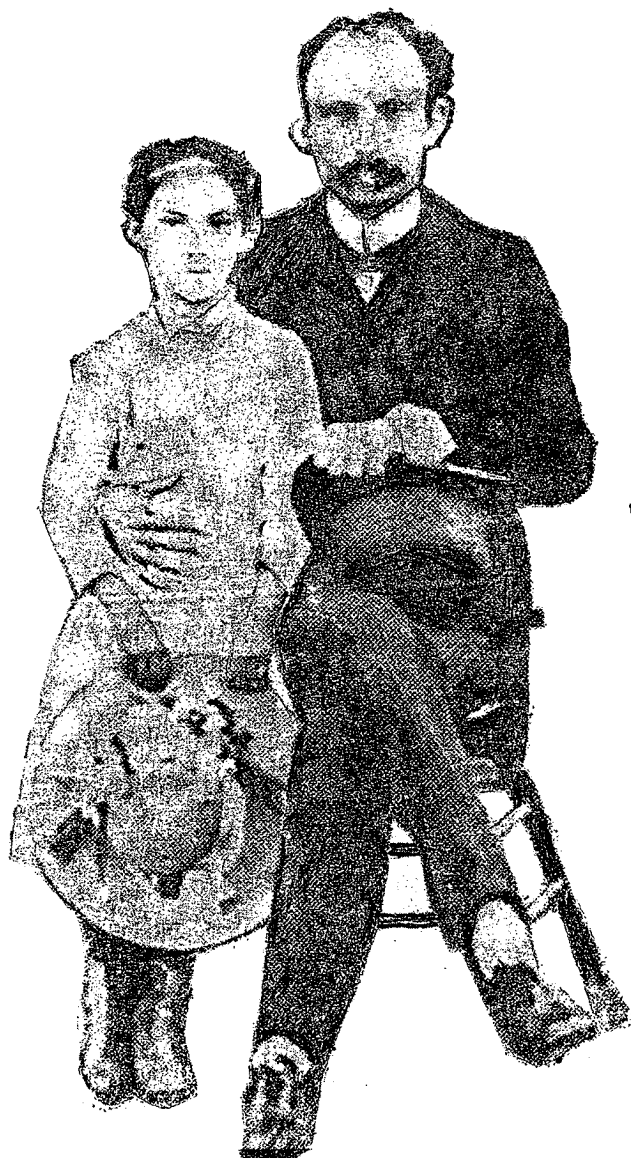
Then, in 1956, Warner Brothers studio in Hollywood quite innocently included the character of Martí in one of its movies. The movie, called *Santiago*, starred Alan Ladd and Lloyd Nolan. It was about the Spanish-American War, which Cubans now call the Hispanic-Cuban-American War, and had a scene in which Martí is interviewed by American soldiers of fortune who



have volunteered to fight for Cuba. Unfortunately, the year is 1898, three years after Martí's death, and the interview takes place in a gorgeous mansion in Haiti, with Martí surrounded by luxury. Another uproar followed this film's showing. Critics took it as an insult to the Cuban people and a deliberate attempt to belittle their national hero. One critic called it "a case of open aggression."⁴ Radicals urged all Cubans to rise up against this national insult by the United States. The producers in Hollywood must have been puzzled by the reaction in Cuba. After all, they often rewrote history to fit the romantic plots of their movies, and nobody ever seemed to mind.

Martí is connected with Hollywood in another way. In 1880, when Martí first arrived in New York, he stayed in a boardinghouse owned and run by a woman named Carmen Miyares de Mantilla. Some time after he moved in, Carmen gave birth to a daughter, María. It is widely believed that Martí was María's father. Normally, this would be just another rumor whispered about famous people after they die, but when María grew up she had a child who became a well-known movie star, César Romero. Romero always claimed to be Martí's grandson and took pride in the fact.⁵ When one sees the tall, powerfully built, handsome, and confident César Romero on film,





Many believe that José Martí was the father of María Mantilla.

however, it is hard to imagine that he is the grandson of the frail, shy, unassuming poet and scholar who wrote, "*Cultivo una rosa blanca*" ("I grow a white rose").⁶

The fame of José Martí has grown under the Castro regime as never before. Havana's central square, library, and airport are named after him. His works are widely read and have become part of the nation's school curriculum. His poetry is read aloud, memorized by schoolchildren, and set to music. The folk song "Guantanamera," which uses Martí's words, is known throughout the world, and is used as an anthem by any group that has any cause whatsoever to promote.

As might be expected, Cuban exiles and other anti-Castro groups also use Martí's words to condemn the oppressive regime in Cuba. They regularly broadcast into Cuba news and opinion from the outside world over their own radio station in Florida. The name of their station? Radio Martí.

José Martí continues to be a living presence for all Cubans, regardless of their politics. He stood for some basic principles that hold for everyone: individual freedom, the rights of people to determine their own destiny, and a tolerance for all races and beliefs. Along with this went a love of literature, art, music, philosophy, and learning that is almost unique in a national leader and hero.





César Romero had an active career in Hollywood from the 1930s through the 1970s.

The man himself would probably be embarrassed by all this fame and adulation. He tried to avoid the spotlight, even though his cause required him to become a public figure. He cared more for his country than for himself. He fought for it throughout his life and sacrificed himself for it willingly and with forgiveness:

*Cultivo una rosa blanca
En julio como en enero,
Para el amigo sincero
Que me da su mano franca.*

*Y para el cruel que me arranca
El corazón con que vivo,
Cardo ni oruga cultivo:
Cultivo la rosa blanca.⁷*

(I grow a white rose
In July as in January,
For the sincere friend
Who gives me his open hand.

And for the cruel one who tears out
The heart that gives me life,
I cultivate neither thistle nor worm,
I grow a white rose.)

