

[Back to index](#)

Reviews

New Year in Cuba: Mary Gardner Lowell's Travel Diary, 1831-1832.

Mary Gardner Lowell, [Karen Robert](#) (Editor), [Laurel Thatcher Ulrich](#) (Preface)
Massachusetts Historical Society and Northeastern University Press
Reviewed by Cheris Brewer, Washington State University

Since colonization, the U.S. and Cuba have enjoyed a closer relationship with each other than they did with their respective mother countries. Mary Gardner Lowell's journal recalls this period of strong economic and social ties. This previously unpublished manuscript is the latest journal issued in The New England Woman's Diary Series. Lowell's vivid account recounts her departure from Boston society, introduction to the plantations of Cuba, and her return to Boston by way of the Mississippi River. Her pithy narrative records a wealth of experiences, producing an important resource for social historians. Lowell also provides interesting discussions on the interconnections of U.S. and Cuban cultures. Her keen social commentary should interest those who follow U.S.-Cuba relations.

Lowell chronicles her passage across geographical, social, and racial borders, and in doing so gives life to topics not covered in traditional histories of the period. The Lowells leave Boston during the winter of 1831 and are overwhelmed by sea travel. Despite seasickness and uncomfortable berths, Mary Lowell details the daily aspects of their voyage. Upon arriving in Havana, the Lowells are absorbed into the vast community of Americans living in Cuba, who were drawn there by economic interest and the medical benefits of wintering in the tropical climates. While in Havana, Lowell attends a number of Spanish parties. Her foray into Spanish society provides her the opportunity to contrast it against Boston society. She clearly denotes variations in gender roles, social mores, and material culture.

Lowell's uniquely feminine perspective allows the reader to better understand the lives of women of her class, and brings to light items that are lacking in men's' travelogues of the period. She writes as a privileged white woman, a wife, mother, and independent woman enjoying the freedoms allowed a foreigner abroad. Lowell is harsh in her judgment of Spanish women. She views them as lazy, corpulent, and lacking in refinement or occupation. Her opinion of Spanish women is, in part, influenced by linguistic barriers, Lowell speaks no Spanish and is unable to speak directly with the people she critiques. Lowell also records her interactions with female slaves who care for both white and black children on the plantations.

While in Matanzas, Lowell stays on a number of plantations where she is quick to describe the living conditions of the slaves as well as their function on the plantation. She does not appear to oppose slavery; her feelings might be linked to her husbands' economic ties to the plantations. While Lowell does speak out against slave owners who do not provide their slaves with proper clothing, she believes that some of the plantation owners she encounters are guilty of mistreating their slaves. In comparing the Cuban to the American slave system, she argues that American slaves are better fed and clothed.

Lowell's social class strongly influences the journal. Working within social parameters, she deftly portrays the lives of the landed elite and those who serve them. Lowell is oblivious to the proletariat surrounding her in Cuba and only mentions working American men when she is forced to share accommodations with them while on the Mississippi. In ignoring the Cuban natives Lowell fails to address ethnic variation. While she holds ethnocentric prejudices

towards blacks, she makes no indication that she views the Spaniards as racially different than herself.

The editor of the series wanted the text to be unhampered by “scholarly apparatus”. Given this limited approach, the general introduction written by Karen Robert is successful in placing the journal within the necessary historical context. She also points to the text as potentially useful for future scholars and suggests that it raises important issues of race, gender, and class. Lowell’s journal of converging cultures in Cuba is problematic, for the same reason that it is useful. The journal provides readers with insight into nineteenth century Cuba through the eyes of a privileged white woman.