

In the air

Guevara's Green Notebook

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Forty years ago, on 9 October 1967, an asthmatic Argentinean book-loving revolutionary was murdered near the Bolivian town of La Higuera and propelled into the high spheres of romantic legend.

For Jean-Paul Sartre, he was „l'homme le plus parfait de son temps“; he was also called a „Red Robin Hood“, the „Don Quixote of Communism“, the „Rebel Christ on the Cross“; Andy Warhol gave him iconic status in his famous multi-portrait.

His name of course was Ernesto Guevara de la Serna, later known as Che.

Ernesto was born in Rosario, Argentina, on 14 June 1928. His parents, committed socialists, had to struggle to feed their family: Ernesto had four younger siblings (he was to have five children of his own) to whom he remained deeply attached – as he did to his feisty mother, known as „la rebelda“, although she was the unintentional cause of the illness that would condition his life. The two-year-old contracted asthmatic bronchitis after a swimming expedition and thereafter suffered frequent crippling asthma attacks. He refused to let these gain control over him, developing immense powers of mental resistance and forcing himself to excel at sport and athletics.

The solitary Ernestito took refuge in nature and in books – reading anything and everything: adventures by Jack London and Jules Verne, works by Freud and Bertrand Russell – and poetry. He responded particularly to Pablo Neruda, whose epic hymn to the natural beauty, the heroes and the economic exploitation of Latin America, *Canto General*, was formative in his revolutionary vision for his continent.

Another powerful influence were the endless stories of social injustice and oppression told by visitors to his parents' home, among them poor workers and political refugees from the Spanish Civil War.

In 1948, he began studying medicine at the University of Buenos Aires, dreaming of helping the poor and finding a cure for asthma. He graduated, but his reading, upbringing and experiences during three journeys round South America between 1950 and 1953 had already determined him to become „a soldier for America“. Even before setting out for the third time, he wrote: „I will perfect myself and do whatever may be necessary to become a true revolutionary.“

The rest is history.

In 1954, in Guatemala, Ernesto turns to Marxism – and becomes the „Che“, the „colleague“ or „friend“; a year later, in Mexico he meets Fidel Castro, who persuades him to join his expedition to free Cuba

from the Batista dictatorship; the Cuban revolution, ending with „Comandante“ Guevara's decisive victory at Santa Clara on 31 December 1958; Cuban citizenship and involvement in politics: government posts, official visits abroad, delegations and speeches (including to the UN); differences with Castro and departure from Cuba in 1965; the „African Odyssey“, his attempt to create a

common front against imperialism and (neo)colonialism, notably in Tanzania and the Congo; failing health and the last doomed campaign to bring revolution to Bolivia, which ends when the Che and his guerrillas are tracked by CIA-backed Bolivian forces (part of Kissinger's „Operation Condor“) and finally ambushed in the Quebrada del Yuro gorge. Che is wounded, captured and taken to La Higuera, where he is murdered; his body is put on show then secretly buried at the airfield of Vallegrande. In 1997, his remains are exhumed, transported to Cuba and buried with full military honours in a mausoleum at Santa Clara.

And there the story ends.

But then came the *Green Notebook*.

It is well-known that Che never lost his love of books and would profit from any break in any battle to plunge into one of his favourite authors: there is a wonderful photograph of him lying back, cigar in mouth, deep in Goethe. He himself wrote copiously, including the famous *Motorcycle Diaries*, notes on his Latin American journeys, various addresses and treatises on revolutionary theory and strategy and the final *Bolivian Diary*. We also know he wrote poetry all through his life – though he had read enough to know it wasn't very good.

And it has been known for some time that a battered spiral notebook, densely filled with his handwriting, was found on his body when he was murdered – but no Che-scholar had ever actually seen it.

Until now: forty years on, *Planeta* is to publish what it claims are the contents of the book under the title *The Green Notebook of Che*.

The book contains a preface by Mexican novelist and Che-biographer, Paco Ignacio, who has described how the Mexican publishers first approached him and asked for



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Che never lost his love of books

his opinion on the manuscript. He recognised Guevara's controlled handwriting and was able to identify it as the lost notebook.

According to Ignacio, the notebook first got a thorough going-over by CIA agents who were convinced it contained some kind of code or battle plans but ended up having to concede it was probably just what it seemed to be ...

... An exercise book filled with poems, many of them love poems ...

There are passages from 69 poems by four writers: Pablo Neruda, the Cuban Nicolás Guillén, César Vallejo from Peru and the Spaniard León Felipe. Che had copied out his favourite poetry to keep with him in the Bolivian jungle – he could scarcely have carried around all the books – and his personal anthology stayed with him till the end.

Planeta are not telling how they got hold of the notebook, though they say they spent two years checking on its authenticity before going public with it.

It is known that after its examination by the CIA, the book was locked up in Bolivian army archives.

There is much speculation - contradictory, as with so much about the Che - over the circumstances of its release: some maintain this was authorised by Evo Morales, after he became president in January 2006, while others believe the Bolivian authorities tried to prevent its publication.

We may never learn what happened.

But whatever the truth, the *Green Notebook* will induce a melancholy smile of recognition, a nostalgic sigh, in all those who cherished the iconic figure of the romantic revolutionary, gazing dark-eyed and wavy-haired into a better future from all those posters and banners, all those years ago.

When shall we look upon his like again?