



# The Sugar King of Havana: The Rise and Fall of Julio Lobo, Cuba's Last Tycoon

By John Paul Rathbone

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**"Fascinating...A richly detailed portrait." -Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times***

Known in his day as the King of Sugar, Julio Lobo was the wealthiest man in prerevolutionary Cuba. He had a life fit for Hollywood: he barely survived both a gangland shooting and a firing squad, and courted movie stars such as Joan Fontaine and Bette Davis. Only when he declined Che Guevara's personal offer to become Minister of Sugar in the Communist regime did Lobo's decades-long reign in Cuba come to a dramatic end. Drawing on stories from the author's own family history and other tales of the island's lost haute bourgeoisie, *The Sugar King of Havana* is a rare portrait of Cuba's glittering past—and a hopeful window into its future.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. The rise and fall of sugar trader Julio Lobo becomes a window into prerevolutionary Cuba, the mechanics of building an economic empire--and the author's own personal history--in this atmospheric biography by Rathbone, deputy head of the Financial Times's Lex column and former World Bank economist. Lobo, "Cuba's richest man and one of the world's greatest speculators," is an intriguing subject ("friends nicknamed him El Veneno, the poisonous one, for his charm and sibylline tongue"), and Rathbone handles his volte face, from hobnobbing with Bette Davis to the loss of his fortune and death in exile in Spain, with finesse. Ample drama--multiple divorces, audacious hostile takeovers, assassination attempts--is given gravity by Rathbone's parallels with and personal connections to his subject: his family traveled in Lobo's social circle in Cuba during the first half of the 20th century. An exceptionally rich portrait not only of an empire and its progenitor but Cuba itself, and the economic legacy of Castro's revolution, the loss of capital, and the end of Cuba's "great age of sugar."

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From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

No critics disputed that John Paul Rathbone has written an excellent biography of Julio Lobo. Their enthusiasm varied somewhat, however, in relating Lobo's life to the larger story of Cuba. Reviewers interested in business and trade had no trouble understanding Lobo's importance, but many who would have otherwise not shown much interest in sugar were similarly impressed by Rathbone's use of the tycoon's life to show how Cuba has changed. A few critics, however, found the fit unsatisfying and some of Rathbone's personal digressions distracting (his mother was a Cuban exile of Lobo's social class). Overall, though, critics felt *The Sugar King of Havana* to be essential reading for those interested in business history or Latin America.

From [Booklist](#)

Like Tom Gjelten in *Bacardi and the Fight for Cuba* (2008), journalist Rathbone evokes pre-Castro Cuba through one of the country's most successful enterprises, in this case, a sugar empire built by Julio Lobo (1898–1983). Beginning as a trader in his father's firm, Lobo became, by the 1930s, a force in the global sugar market. Rathbone recounts Lobo's speculative coups en route to direct ownership of cane fields and mills. A visitor to Lobo's office, homes, and mills in Cuba, Rathbone contrasts the dilapidation of contemporary Cuba with the look of the prerevolutionary country that he recovers from both Lobo's biography and that of his own Cuban-born mother, whose social life tangentially intersected with Lobo's world. The present/past technique effectively dilutes the polarizing imperatives of pro- and anti-Castro presumptions and restores a realistic sense of what 1950s Cuba was like, including the guarded optimism with which many upper-crust Cubans such as Lobo initially viewed Castro's seizing of power. Rathbone's care with social atmosphere lifts his portrayal of Lobo above the usual life-of-a-tycoon and enriches the historical understanding of readers contemplating post-Castro Cuba. --Gilbert Taylor

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**James Williams:**

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