

Book Reviews

E.B. Maple (Peter Werbe)

L.S.D.

B. Traven, *The White Rose*, Lawrence Hill & Co., Westport, CT, 1979, 209 pages, (\$5.95, available from Fifth Estate Bookstore)

reviewed by L.S.D.

The White Rose by B. Traven is the story of the destruction of the pearl that was the most beautiful of all, the Rosa Blanca, The White Rose, and its transformation into an industrial wasteland. This Mexican hacienda was almost entirely surrounded by land rich in oil owned by the Condor Oil Co., where rich wells poured forth thick streams of black gold. The richest of these wells bordered Rosa Blanca where Jacinto Yanez, owner of the hacienda, and sixty Totonac Indian families lived and had lived in almost the same manner for generations past, for Rosa Blanca was their ancestral home.

Trouble arises when Jacinto refuses to sell the hacienda to C.C. Collins, the president of The Condor Oil Co., who needs this final pearl to grace the crown of his already extensive holdings. The ensuing story describes the conflict between the centuries old rural lifestyle of the Indians and the rising power of American industrialism.

Central to the book is the concept of "Patria," which is a homeland or native land. The families living on Rosa Blanca considered it their home. Their allegiance was to it and they really had no concept of the Republic or State as home. Indeed almost anything that took place or happened outside its realm had little meaning to them. This deep love and understanding of the soil, the desire to work it, and the realization of what the loss of the connection to it means are demonstrated by Traven throughout the book. The great respect he shows for the land is the result of a conscious understanding of the role it plays in humanity's survival both spiritual and physical. Jacinto tries without much success to explain to Condor's lawyer why Rosa Blanca cannot be sold. To him the soil means corn and he would not take a job as an oil-driller in exchange. If sold, Rosa Blanca would become like the factory in the city, something to which one has no personal connection. The families would travel from place to place until the father found work that would assure his family its daily bread. Nothing could be more certain than that. Today a good salary, tomorrow unemployment. But as long as the sun rose and set, Rosa Blanca had work and food. Outside of it, sustenance would come only from the factory, the oil field, the copper mine, and the textile plant, where all the workers are numbers and wear badges that are hung up on a board when they leave the factory in the evening. But the lawyer inhabits another world, a world where land and corn can be separated without his ever seeing the problems that develop from the separation. In his world the connection of corn and land, man and land, is completely severed. In his world people no longer think of "corn", but only of "product". In his world people say, "What do those who come after us have to do with us? After us, the end of the world with television in the bedroom. Land? What is land? We need land only for the production of oil that goes into feeding our automobiles. Corn? If we need corn we'll make it with machines and sell it in tin cans."

Jacinto tries with all his might to save the hacienda from Collin's grasp, but in the end the White Rose is ultimately plucked. The Indians are to be pitied for their loss but so too, as Traven vividly demonstrates, are we all: "We all, we poor people delight in the machine, in the airplane, the radio, precisely because we have lost our attachment

to the soil. The loss leaves us apathetic and distracted. That's why we need gasoline—to anesthetize us, to make us insensible to our loss of our pain, gasoline that deludes us with speed so that we can flee all the quicker from ourselves and the needs of the heart.”

Traven represents the small independent Indian community as preferable in lifestyle to that of the industrial technologically “improved” one of the “civilized” world. He sees the technology of C.C. Collin's world as an unacceptable alternative to the simple lifestyle of Rosa Blanca. He admits that the creations of technology are perhaps wonderful things, but the Indians will have to pay too dear a price to obtain them, the loss of the attachment to the soil and “the needs of the heart.”

***Ecotopia Emerging*, Ernest Callenbach, Bantam New Age Books, 337 pp., 1982, \$3.50
reviewed by E.B. Maple**

Writing fiction which is at once good politics and prose has always been a difficult task for writers, but certainly not one that is impossible. Writers such as Silone, Steinbeck or Traven were ultimately successful in their attempts, but none were free from sometimes winding up with pasteboard for characters.

Often, a reader's appreciation of the author's efforts is dependent upon a sympathy with the ideas being expressed to the point where critical judgment is suspended. For instance, Traven's *The White Rose*, has been called some of his weakest writing due to a lack of character development, melodramatic plot, and somewhat unbelievable scenes. However, to me it is one of his most powerful novels, the criticisms notwithstanding, with its portrait of Mexican peasant life destroyed by the invasion of the modern world.

Callenbach's second *Ecotopia* novel was difficult for me to appreciate since I felt it fell flat on both accounts, producing wooden prose and unpalatable politics. *Ecotopia Emerging* is set slightly in the future, prior to the establishment of the nation of *Ecotopia*, which is to be formed from Northern California, Oregon and Washington, and describes the “revolution” which brought it into being.

As the story opens the U.S. is ruled by a right-wing, military-industrial elite, crime and poverty have increased dramatically, and the environment is being destroyed by reactionary government programs. (Doesn't sound much different than the situation today, but events have moved to an even more critical stage as the story goes.) To confront this, a new political group, the Survivalist Party, emerges from the grass roots (and hot tubs) of Northern California which we are to understand is unlike the parties of yore.

This one really represents the interests of the people and is not comprised of power-mongering politicians, but staffed with good vibe folk who just want to live an ecological decentralized life.

The plot is fast-paced, to say the least, with the party-building process interspersed with the attempt of the energy companies to steal a teen-age scientist's secret of an energy device which will provide cheap, on-site power for everyone and which will put the utilities out of business. There's guerrilla action, suspense and intrigue, but the characters come off as such wonderful, open, happy, handsome, creative, and, hence unbelievable stereotypes, that it barely stops short of the parody of that lifestyle embodied in the book and movie *Serial*. In fact, the obnoxiously comic wedding ceremony in *Serial* and Lou Swift's coming to womanhood ceremony rites in *Ecotopia Emerging* are uncomfortably similar.

In terms of the book's politics, the racism implied in a strategy based upon the secession of affluent whites from the mess they are the main beneficiaries of seems obvious enough not to warrant comment. Also, the advocacy of revolution through the medium of political parties is one that only warrants tired arguments, but when will the legions of middle-class radicals tire of suggesting it?

In fact, even Callenbach relents to the flaws in *Ecotopia*, his first novel—a money economy is retained, small business continues to exist (all solar powered, of course), weird, macho, ritualistic war games designed as male aggression releases are institutionalized, and worse, strange cops from the “decentralized” government lurk ominously about (see FE #289, January 24, 1978, “*Ecotopia: From Nowhere and Back*”).

The only strong aspect of the book is Callenbach's narrative sections interspersed throughout the story describing the breakdown of the biosphere caused by the modern world and its technology. These sections are so eloquently stated that they would have made an excellent book on their own with the novel left aside.

I told a friend that if you are willing to suspend your normal criticality, swallow the West Coast myth in its entirety, and have your sense of reality defied, the book is worth reading just to see the good guys beat the bad guys for once. His response, “Why bother?” A good question.

***Alternative Papers: Selections from the Alternative Press, 1979–1980: Stories, Events, and Issues that the Mass Media Ignored, Distorted, Buried, or Missed Altogether*, edited by Elliot Shore, Laura Daly and Patricia Case, Temple University Press, 521 pp., 1982, \$14.95.**

reviewed by E.B. Maple

It probably seems at best ingracious of us not to wax enthusiastic over the appearance of this fairly massive compilation of writings from the alternative press, particularly since a selection from this newspaper was selected to be the lead article for the collection, and hence, set the tone for what follows.

The article of ours, "On Having Nothing to Say" (FE #297, April 18, 1979), notes the demise of the revolutionary movements and subcultures of the 'sixties and 'seventies and suggests the necessity of maintaining a voice of rebellion. *Alternative Papers* certainly illustrates that there still are a lot of publications out there speaking, but the message comes across fragmented into a sectoralism which has women's concerns here, nuke fear there, Latin America, South Africa, gays, and a host of other concerns split into a newspaper for each.

Gone for now is the "total assault on the culture" which typified the 450 member underground press movement of the Vietnam war era with its ebullient and optimistic call for "Revolution Now!" This, of course, is not the fault of the anthology editors, who rather than having the *L.A. Free Press*, the *Berkeley Barb*, the *Rat*, the *Seed*, the *San Francisco Oracle* and the like to draw upon, instead had to make do with dreary publications like *Labor Notes*, *Health Right*, *The Leaping Lesbian*, and *Dollars and Sense*.

It's not that these publications sometimes (or even often) do not contain interesting articles, for they do (and many of them have made their way into the pages of this anthology). Rather it is their individual and collective refusal to see that the particular reform desired by each paper is impossible without a generalized upheaval which realizes them all simultaneously. It is this failure of perspective which ultimately makes the collection lack any real punch. A collection ten years ago would have meant an anthology of revolution; now it is merely an anthology of angry demands for reform.

In fairness, though, there are articles which do exceed the limits of reform such as John Mohawk's "Technology is the Enemy" (although a few columns of type are mislaid out) and several other notable selections. The collection could have done well without the dismal inclusion of articles from that tired, old, trotskyist paper, *The Militant*, but that is the choice of the editors.

The annotated listing of papers in the back is worthwhile and led us at the FE to discover papers we didn't know existed. (However, the FE foreign subscription rate, through a typographical error, had \$50 added to it.)

Note: A zerox copy of the article mentioned above, "On Having Nothing to Say," is available free upon request with either book orders or a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

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