

The Free

Book review

E.B. Maple (Peter Werbe)

1986

a review of

The Free by M. Gilliland. Hooligan Press, 142 pp., London, 1986, 1.80 pounds, \$4.00 (U.S.)

The Free is a short, quick-paced novel about insurrection and revolution, its eventual defeat and the repression which follows. Although the quality of the prose is a bit ragged in parts, it is powerful and real enough that witnessing the dreams of the central characters first realized and then dashed creates a mood of utter despair by book's end.

On a circular announcing the book's publication, the prospective reader is advised, "Don't lose the last page," as if the one small ray of hope emitted there will compensate for the hopelessness which precedes it.

The Free, set in a fictional country similar to Ireland, begins with a few chapters detailing the wretched backgrounds of the protagonists, but quickly clicks into high gear, and the rest is non-stop military action until the last period is typed.

Events begin with a dock strike that becomes an insurrection which leads to a full-scale libertarian revolution in which capitalism and the state are eliminated and replaced by worker-self-management and a large network of cooperatives established prior to the uprising. This section, in which the inertia of capitalist daily life is overcome and the workers, co-op supporters and revolutionaries decide to move beyond its boundaries, is the best done and the most interesting.

However, world capital, unwilling to let any portion of its domain slip from its grasp, unleashes its NATO armed forces in a massive counter-revolutionary expedition which quickly overcomes the fledgling revolutionary society. The Free are reduced to using rear-guard guerrilla tactics as the state and capital are re-established with a vengeance. The revolutionaries then suffer imprisonment, hideous torture and execution so graphically detailed that the reader is left looking for the exit.

To be sure, what is chronicled here in fiction is no less than what radicals (and ordinary people) suffer in reality in the torture states of Central America and in the prisons of South Africa and Northern Ireland, but at some point one begins to wonder what message the author is trying to convey.

If it is that revolution is not a tea party, s/he is successful because both the scenes of battle and of the repression are enough to make those who eagerly await armed conflict take significant pause. Often revolutionary struggles are portrayed in radical thought as glorious while it is imperialist war alone that is a bloody slaughter. *The Free* shows all military action in its full gore as faces are blown off, eyes wrenched out, people burned to death, shot accidentally by their own side, and careful battle plans become a tumult of death. Blood, death and suffering are on almost every page of this painful book.

Still, revolutionary and insurrectional violence are not outside of the anti-authoritarian experience and are considerations which those serious about a new society cannot shrink from facing. Revolutionary literature is not alien to the subject either, and, in fact, *The Free's* story line runs strikingly similar to Jack London's 1907 novel *The Iron Heel* (Lawrence Hill & Co.). The latter title refers to the repressive mechanism of the Oligarchy that crushes

“The Cause” in a struggle which lasts three hundred years. Both novels dwell considerably on the viciousness by which the capitalist state is willing to protect and perpetuate itself, but somehow being supplied in *The Iron Heel* with the knowledge that all of the bloody sacrifices eventually secured success for the revolution makes its carnage easier to take.

In the London book, a capitalist who has just been listening to a condemnation of capitalism says, “We will grind you revolutionists down under our heel, and we shall walk upon your faces.” In *The Free*, that is exactly what happens.

The Free’s concentration on the details of insurrection, military and guerrilla strategy, its description of violent interrogation and imprisonment, seem consistent with the armed struggle concerns which permeate the milieu around the *Black Flag* newspaper (BM Hurricane, London MN 3XX England) of which the Hooligan Press seems to be a part since they share the same BM box. Here in the U.S. fascination with such matters never seems more than a rattling of chains, a macho glorification of violence, but perhaps in England where the ragged edge of capitalist collapse is nearer the surface, staring revolutionary war in the eye may be necessary for what the near future portends.

Yet, the telling of *The Free* brims with a hopelessness that seems all pervasive. If a mass revolutionary movement can be smashed from the outside, why does the vague optimism at the conclusion promise anything more than a repetition of the same process? A message which says that resistance will never cease seems to contain more than a small whiff of martyrdom if the revolutionaries can expect nothing more than an unending cycle of torture and death for their efforts.

Those who operate in the rarefied atmosphere of urban guerrilla warfare adhere to this emotional and strategic process. These warriors face the overwhelming power of the state with virtually no hope of success, their efforts ignored by the multitudes in whose name they struggle.

On the other hand, the book’s suggestion that revolution hasn’t a ghost of a chance unless it occurs in the heartland of the empires—the US or the USSR—rings true as recent history illustrates. It seems a certainty that if the Polish Solidarity movement of the early 1980s had gone further than where its reformist leadership tried to contain it and had overcome the state apparatus, the oft-predicted Soviet invasion and occupation surely would have occurred and probably created a situation of terror much like that portrayed in *The Free*. Poland’s only hope was a generalization of the revolt within the Eastern branch of capital, but failing that, Solidarity had nowhere to go except to reformism and finally defeat.

But all said, the message still remains murky. A book which chooses a fictional scenario from an infinite number of possible ones to show a wheel of endless repression certainly doesn’t act as inducement to revolt, but maybe Gilliland wants to present a strong dose of the reality before a road of illusions is set out upon.

fifth Estate

E.B. Maple (Peter Werbe)
The Free
Book review
1986

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/324-fall-1986/the-free>
Fifth Estate #324, Fall, 1986

[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/324-fall-1986/the-free)