

Raging Against the Machine

...at the Dawn of the Anthropocene

John Clark

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a review of

Red Round Globe Hot Burning: A Tale at the Crossroads of Commons and Closure, of Love and Terror, of Race and Class, and of Kate and Ned Despard by Peter Linebaugh. University of California Press, 2019

The title of this fascinating and inspiring work comes from visionary poet William Blake (1757–1827). In one of his most memorable passages, Blake writes that “They told me that I had five senses to enclose me up, / And they inclos’d my infinite brain into a narrow circle, / And sunk my heart into the Abyss, a red round globe hot burning / Till all from life I was obliterated and erased.”

In this passage, Blake writes of the descent into the abyss of spiritlessness, the result of Civilization’s narrow, dualistic, and reductionist view of reality.

But as Peter Linebaugh points out, the “red round globe hot burning” can also refer to our new abysmal age, the Anthropocene, which we might more accurately call the Necrocene, the new era of global warming and mass extinction, which has resulted from the triumph of capitalism, the state, patriarchy, and mechanization. Finally, Linebaugh also notes, the phrase can refer to the inflammatory revolutionary struggles across the globe that fight the fire of planetary destruction with the fire of universal liberation.

Red Round Globe Hot Burning is a far-ranging and fascinating account of a crucial period at the end of the 18th century and dawn of the 19th in the history of the destruction of the commons, the privatizing of traditional common land, and the quest to preserve and reinstitute it. At the center of this account, we discover the story of Ned and Kate Despard, iconic figures who have appeared in some of Linebaugh’s previous works.

Ned was born in rural Ireland in 1751 and was eventually sent as a British soldier, engineer, and colonial administrator to Jamaica, Honduras and Belize to represent the forces of Empire. However, his life was transformed, first through his encounter with, and radicalization by, the communal traditions of colonized and enslaved peoples, and secondly, by his meeting Kate, a gifted African-American woman who became his life partner, inspiration, and fellow revolutionary. Their saga ends in 1803 with Ned’s arrest, hanging, and decapitation before a crowd of 20,000 for allegedly plotting to ignite a popular revolution by seizing the Tower of London and Bank of England and killing the King, and with Kate pleading his case and helping write his moving gallows speech.

Linebaugh is wise to give such a central place in this history to Ned and Kate. They fit the true definition of revolutionaries, “a man and a woman consciously working with others to change the course of history to obtain specific goals.” We are desperately in need of their inspiration, their revolutionary fire, as we now face the choice between revolutionary transformation, and not only barbarism, but also extinction.

We have gone through two world-historical revolutions (the agricultural and the industrial) as the *objects* of world historical developments. We are now faced with the challenge of fundamentally changing the course of world history for the first time through conscious human activity, that is, as *agents* of universal revolution. Ned and Kate give us a model of the quest for such agency.

It is impossible to summarize briefly the enormously rich content of this work, so I will merely hint at it by noting a few of my own favorite parts. One is its recognition and documentation of the place of indigenous society in preserving the commons and inspiring recommunization.

Linebaugh cites an observer of the Miskito indigenous commons that directly inspired Ned Despard: “These Indians live under an almost perfect equality, and there are no rich or poor among them. They do not strive to accumulate, and the great unwearied exertion, found among our civilized societies, is unknown among them.” Another observer remarks that “they live under the most perfect equality, and hence are not impelled to industry by that spirit of emulation which, in society, leads to great and unwearied exertion.” Indeed, they regarded the lives of the struggling colonists with “pity or contempt.”

Iroquois leader Joseph Brant makes the case eloquently for indigenous society as the truly free one. He explains that “we have no law but that written on the heart of every rational creature by the immediate finger of the great Spirit of the universe himself. We have no prisons—we have no pompous parade of courts.” He argues that “to a rational creature, liberty as much exceeds property, as the light of the sun does that of the most twinkling star, but you put them on a level, to the everlasting disgrace of civilization.”

Linebaugh also cites the rich legacy of the commons that was still alive in the Ireland of Ned Despard. Among its many living forms was the custom of “hasty diggings.” In it, the local community comes together *en masse* to aid the persecuted, imprisoned or needy at the crucial moment of the harvest, demonstrating strikingly the true meaning and power of what Proudhon called “collective force.”

In one example, “fifteen hundred people dug Samuel Neilson’s potatoes ‘in seven minutes,’” in another, “a thousand dug the potatoes of a jailed shoemaker,” and in yet another, “two hundred people dug ‘upwards of 400 bushels of potatoes’ in two hours and fourteen minutes.”

Linebaugh’s account shows that the period’s revolutionary movement contained the seeds of later eco-communitarianism and radical social ecological politics. For example, William Covel fought enclosure and developed a comprehensive communitarian vision in which division of labor would be overcome, and citizens would live in “small communities of a hundred houses and forty families on one or two thousand acres.” In such communities “the ‘gifts of nature’ were not bought and sold” and “the resources used by handicrafts were ‘a common stock.’”

In 1793, Scottish radical communitarian and revolutionary martyr John Oswald published a work in revolutionary France proposing a system of “direct democracy based on neighborhood assemblies.” In them, “people might debate such questions as ‘Whether the land should be cultivated in common, or divided equally between the individuals of the nation.’”

Linebaugh’s discussions of prisons are among the most fascinating and enlightening in the book. Go to Linebaugh rather than Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, if you want a real insight into the “birth of the prison.” While he abundantly demonstrates its brutality and oppressiveness, Linebaugh also relates the manner in which radicalism infiltrated it, and, in some ways, subverted its hierarchical and disciplinary aspirations.

He notes that at King’s Bench Prison in London, “debtors held the keys to their own rooms. Those on the common side and those on the masters’ side both had their own organization. The latter, called “the college,” held general assemblies and controlled the allotment of rooms.”

But more astoundingly, prisoners at the New York debtors’ prison created “a shadow republic,” with processes for “electing officers, assigning rooms, organizing cleanliness, and settling disputes, all according to a book of Constitution.” Such accounts pose the question: are we today still capable of establishing the level of direct democracy in our daily lives that these prisoners achieved in theirs?

In Ned (and Kate) Despard’s gallows speech, Ned expressed trust that “the principles of freedom, of humanity, and of justice will triumph over falsehood, tyranny, and delusion.” Linebaugh’s invaluable work records the stories we need most to hear if this triumph is to take place.

These are the stories that might reawaken our spirit of revolt, re-creation, and regeneration, as we face new onslaughts of falsehood, tyranny and delusion, and as we begin to recognize the intolerable and ultimately genocidal and ecocidal costs of enclosure and the loss of the commons.

John Clark is a communitarian anarchist activist and theorist. He is director of La Terre Institute for Community and Ecology, which sponsors educational and organizational programs in New Orleans and on an 88-acre site on Bayou La Terre in the forest of the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

His latest book is *Between Earth and Empire: From the Necocene to the Beloved Community* from PM Press.

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