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# John Reed and the Real Thing.

by Michael Gold

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John Reed was a cowboy out of the west, six feet high, steady eyes, boyish face; a brave, gay, openhanded young giant; you meet thousands of him on the road, in lumber camps, on the ranges, in fo'c'sles, in the mines.

I used to see Jack Reed swimming at Provincetown together with George Cram Cook, that other Socialist and great-hearted adventurer now dead too. I went out a mile with them in a catboat, and they raced back through a choppy sea, arm over arm, shouting bawdy taunts at each other, whooping with delight. Then we all went to Jack's house and ate a big jolly supper.

He loved every kind of physical and mental life; the world flowed through him freely. He lived like an Elizabethan. Because of this, friends like Walter Lippmann would say with affectionate contempt that Jack Reed was a romanticist. They said he never studied politics or economics and rushed in where wise men feared to tread. But Walter Lippmann, the Socialist, supported the war, and now supports Al Smith for President. He is wrong on everything. And Jack Reed wrote the most vivid book on the Bolshevik Revolution that has yet appeared in any language. After ten years it is as sound and fresh as at first. It was written white-hot, almost at the scene of the event. It is the greatest piece of reporting in history. It is a deathless book that sells by the million.

The Revolution is the romance of tens of mil-

lions of men and women in the world today. This is something many American intellectuals never understand about Jack Reed. If he had remained romantic about the underworld, or about meaningless adventure-wandering, or about women or poem-making, they would have continued admiring him. But Jack Reed fell in love with the Revolution, and gave it all his generous heart's blood. This the pale, rootless intellectuals could never understand. When he died they



said he had wasted his life. It is they who lead wasted, futile lives in their meek offices, academic sanctums, and bootleg parlors.

Jack Reed lived the fullest and grandest life of any young man in our America. History is already saying this in Soviet Russia. It will say it a century from now in the textbooks of America.

At first he wrote short boyish sketches. He liked roughnecks, he gave himself to queer, far places, he loafed about cities and the underworld. His eyes were

keen, his blood boiled with animal joy. The exuberant words leaped in his prose, they swam like laughing athletes, he wrote with broad humor, he exaggerated the bright suns and moons of nature, he splashed the colors on his canvas like a young god. His early stories remind me of Dickens, of Tolstoy, and of Stephen Crane — a strange mixture, but an epic one.

He burst into American writing like a young genius. Everyone followed his work eagerly, waiting for the inevitable masterpiece. At the outbreak of war Jack Reed was the best-paid and most brilliant war correspondent in America. He had written some of the best short stories. Everyone waited for the masterpiece. When it came, “they” were all voting for Al Smith, and drinking bootleg with Mencken. “They” had not the great spirit which recognizes masterpieces.

Jack Reed’s life was not wasted; he did write his masterpiece, *Ten Days That Shook the World*. But the “intellectuals” haven’t yet recognized this.

The role of the intellectual in the revolutionary labor movement has always been a debating point. In the IWW the fellow-workers would tar and feather (almost) any intellectual who appeared among them. The word “intellectual” became a synonym for the word “bastard,” and in the American Communist movement there is some of this feeling.

It is part of the American hard-boiled tradition, shared by revolutionists here who believe it is unproletarian and unmanly to write a play, or study politics, or discuss the arts. Mr. Babbitt feels the same way.

This tradition is dying in the American revolutionary movement. Jack Reed was one of the “intellectuals” who helped destroy the prejudice. He identified himself so completely with the working class; he undertook every danger for the revolution; he forgot his Harvard education, his genius, his popularity, his gifted body and mind so completely that no one else remembered them any more; there was no gap between Jack Reed and the workers any longer.

He was active in forming the Communist Party in this country. He edited one of the first Communist propaganda papers.† He was on trial during the war for sedition. He rose in the courtroom, hitched up his

pants, looked the Judge squarely in the eye, and testified boldly and frankly, like a revolutionist.

It is a difficult career being an active revolutionist. It takes all one’s nerves, energy, and character. It is almost as difficult to be a pioneer revolutionary writer. Jack Reed, in his short life, managed to combine both careers. But not many have this exuberance, this versatility. Robert Minor has given up his magnificent art for the revolution; is this necessary? Jack Reed did not think so, in Soviet Russia no one thinks so. But most Americans, even revolutionists, believe it unworthy for the man of action to be also a man of thought. Lenin was both.

The revolutionary intellectual is an activist thinker. This is what makes him so different from the careful men with perpetual slight colds who write for *The New Republic* and *The Nation*. Jack Reed needed for his activism a magazine like *The Masses*. It was the beginning of my education. It educated a whole generation of youth in America, many of whom did not survive the spiritual holocaust of the war. Those who did survive remember Jack Reed, and his courage flows in their veins. And the revolution will grow in America, and there will be a new youth and Jack Reed will teach them how to live greatly again. This depression, this cowardice, this callousness and spiritual death will not last forever among the youth of America. It cannot. Life is mean only in cycles; it sinks defeated, then it inevitably rises. There will be more Jack Reeds in America, his grandchildren perhaps. This mean decade of ours will pass on.

He had his faults. Most people have. But he was never petty in his faults. You can tell that even by his writing. It is difficult to write that way in America today. It is difficult to admit you enjoy life so hugely; that you are simple and loyal, that you are tender to the friendless, and wear your heart on your sleeve. A writer must act as mean and hard-boiled as the rest of modern Americans. Maybe this is a good discipline for writers. Maybe it is the way to the strength that writers need in this age. But I am sure that the best elements of Jack Reed’s spirit will be preserved in any revolutionary writers who will appear in this country. They will have the bigness to be humane. They will

†- Jack Reed, a founding member of the Communist Labor Party of America, was an editor of the Left Wing Section and CLP trade union publication *Voice of Labor*. Due to a paucity of funds only a small handful of issues were produced. Business manager of this publication was Benjamin Gitlow.

laugh, but they will not sneer. Jack Reed was a fierce enemy to capitalism, but in all his books you will never find a sneer at humanity. And this is difficult to refrain from, too.

Many of his bourgeois friends were always sure Jack Reed was a kind of playboy in the revolution. The revolution was just another one of his huge jolly adventures, like the one in which he dived off an Atlantic liner leaving New York, and swam back to land on an impulse. Yes, the revolution was an impulse. It would exhaust itself when the fun had gone out of it.

Walter Lippmann, in his article in *The New Republic* on John Reed, smiled affectionately as he recounted how his Harvard classmate, Jack Reed, had confessed to the fact that he hadn't heard of Bergson, the latest Paris fashion among the intellectuals of the period. Walter Lippmann and many others thought this showed Jack had no brains, and that his revolutionary philosophy was just a romanticist's impulse.

But Jack Reed went through the Paterson strike, and the Lawrence strike, and the Bayonne strike, and understood their significance. And he understood the economic basis of the World War, and refused to be a tool of J.P. Morgan, like Walter Lippmann, and so many other wise men who knew so much about Bergson, and so little about the inevitable treaty at Versailles.

And he had read and thought enough to grasp the full political and economic significance of the Bolshevik revolution for the world, when it was still a raw, bloody, chaotic embryo, which the "intellectuals" predicted could not last a month. The book he wrote on it had an approving preface by the scientist and scholar, Lenin.

I was in Soviet Russia two years ago [1925] and visited Jack Reed's grave under the Kremlin wall. Under the rough stone, near the mausoleum of Lenin, and in sound of church bells now forced to ring out

"The Internationale," lay the splendid body of our comrade. He had not been a playboy. He had loved the Revolution when she was a haggard outlaw fighting for life against the ravening pack of capitalist nations.

He had lived with the revolution in famine, in civil war, in chaos and stern Cheka self-defense. He had seen hundreds of frozen corpses of Red Guards piled high in a railroad station. He had worked himself to the bone for this Revolution. He had wandered through typhus areas, he had been bitten by a typhus louse, and died. It was not all an impulse. It was the real thing with Jack Reed.

And what he had died for was the real thing — but what the boys whom the *New Republic* intellectuals sent out to die for was not the real thing. Walter Lippmann's war to end war did not end war, but was the prelude to a more rapacious capitalist imperialism and a greater imperialist war.

But Jack Reed's revolution was all about me in the Red Square of Moscow, where he lay under the rough stone. Peasants passed, coming from the land given them by the revolution to lay their problems before Kalinin, their peasant premiere, in Moscow. Workers passed, coming from factories where they were masters, not the slaves. Old men passed, who had learned to read and write by the millions since Jack Reed died for them. Young writers and artists passed, thousands of them growing up to express themselves as freely and grandly as Jack Reed. Women passed, walking with their heads up, the freed victims of ancient bondage. Children passed, no longer drugged by the superstitions of a medieval church. There was a new social system growing up; the Elizabethan and Greek genius that had lived in Jack Reed had flowed into a whole nation; it was spreading with red banners in every land; it was the real thing. It was the romance of the real thing.

*Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.*

*Photograph of John Reed lying in state, October 1920, from John S. Clarke, Pen Pictures of Russia under the "Red Terror," (Glasgow: National Workers' Committee, 1921), pg. 207.*

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