Education John Reed

SELECTED WRITINGS with an Introductory Biographical and

Critical Essay by JOHN STUART

THE EDUCATION OF JOHN REED



JOHN REED

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Selected Writings

by John Stuart



NEW YORK
INTERNATIONAL PUBLISHERS

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EDITOR'S NOTE

During the ten years between his graduation from Harvard and his untimely death in 1920, John Reed wrote enough to fill several volumes the size of this one. The bulk of his writing expressed his hatred of war and the evils out of which war grew. At the same time what he had to say reflected his profound desire for a future of peace and for a social order in which peace could thrive.

It is these things which have guided the choice of materials for this volume. The selections are representative of Reed's literary output as a reporter, a war correspondent, essayist, and poet. As a journalist, he was with Pancho Villa in Mexico, with striking workers in the United States, on the front lines in Europe during World War I, and in Russia during the revolution. Except for the poetry, grouped separately, the arrangement of selections is more or less chronological, with the year of publication appended. Because Ten Days That Shook the World continues in print and is still widely read, only a brief selection from this best known of Reed's works has been included here.

John Stuart's introductory essay on Reed's development and the meaning of his life gives the necessary background for the selections that follow.

INTRODUCTION

The Education of John Reed

By John Stuart

John Reed's life writes itself. Few men who have lived so earnestly, so joyously, and whose eyes consumed so much of the stuff of history, have left a more complete record of themselves. Yet it is not his books that tell his whole story nor his letters and verse. They are there. The poems are facets of his personality; each letter the key to a mood or an incident; each of the articles an incisive impression of what he saw at the moment he saw it and a graph of his opinion as well. They will not, however, delineate the full man. They will not tell why years after his death in 1920 he is etched on the American progressive consciousness, or how he became a spokesman for a new concept of society, a symbol of the writer fused with the man of action,

an observer of history and a maker of it.

There are values by which John Reed's life can be assessed. There is the literary value. He was a poet and a great journalist with perhaps no peer among American reporters at the time he wrote. There is the character value. He could not be shattered by the most savage pressures of reaction. Throughout his very brief adult life he was in unceasing rebellion against the unjust. It was not a blind, private rebellion in which the rebel is more often crushed than crushing. He started that way, but he learned that only in solidarity with others could his own strength reach its greatest effectiveness and serve him as the vehicle for his deepest hopes. Reed found his way to the working class and in that hard journey he freed himself of the pestilence of lies and the cruel illusions which have made the same road so perilous for others of his milieu. In shaking hands with the future he accepted the need for fundamental change, for socialism. It was the logic of his experience as an American, the turbulence of his years, that made him a militant crusader for a new society.

John Reed was born in his grandparents' house in Portland, Oregon, on October 20, 1887. It was, he remembered, a lordly mansion modeled on a French chateau, set in a park, with gardens and lawns and tame deer among the trees. His grandfather, Henry Green, had come west in a sailing ship and settled finally in Portland when it was a few years old, a town cut out of the Oregon wilderness. He made his money there and lived lavishly. The Greens were thus among the elite of the community, with the ease and gaiety of people sure of their position and the privileges that came with wealth. Charles Reed, on the other hand, while he never made the fortune that for a time distinguished his in-laws, was an enterprising business man who had migrated from upstate New York to sell farm equipment and married Margaret Green not long after he was established in Portland.

For Jack and his younger brother it was a boyhood of comfort. It was filled with the imaginative, romantic wandering of a child who loved fantasy, invented witches, giants, and monsters with which he terrified the small boys and girls of the neighborhood and incidentally himself. His mother taught him to read and then he plunged into an orgy of books-everything he could get hold of from Edwin Arnold's Light of Asia and Marie Corelli, to Scott, Stevenson, and Sir Thomas Malory. "History," he recalled, "was my passion, kings strutting about and the armored ranks of men-at-arms clashing forward in close ranks against a hail of cloth-yard shafts; but I was equally enamored of Mark Twain, and Bill Nye, and Blackmore's Lorna Doone, and Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, and The Arabian Nights, and the Tales of the Round Table. What I didn't understand, my imagination interpreted. At the age of nine I began to write a Comic History of the United States-after Bill Nye-and I think it was then that I made up my mind to be a writer."*

He was indifferent toward his schoolwork except when some teacher or subject stirred him and sent him soaring into his private world of Guineveres and Galahads. Moreover, there was,

^{*} From Reed's autobiographical essay "Almost Thirty" first published in the New Republic, April 15 and 29, 1936.

too much to do on the outside. The Reed boys had a theatre in the attic of their house where they acted their own plays. They built scenic railways in the yard, and log cabins in the woods back of the town, and went on camping trips up the Willamette River. Jack also had a number of schemes for getting adventure and wealth at the same time. He once began to dig a tunnel from his house to school about a mile away. He was going to steal two sheep and hide them in the tunnel, and these two sheep were going to multiply until a large flock had gathered. Then he'd sell them.

"But with all this," he wrote years later, "I wasn't entirely happy. I was often ill. Outside of a few friends, I wasn't a success with the boys. I hadn't strength or fight enough to be good at athletics—except swimming which I have always loved; and I was a good deal of a physical coward. I would sneak out over the back fence to avoid boys who were 'laying' for me, or who I thought were 'laying' for me. . . . The strange thing was that when I was cornered, and fought, even a licking wasn't a hundredth as bad as I thought it would be."

Between father and son there was a warm and steady affection. The elder Reed was a man of caustic wit, with a fine scorn of the local stuffed shirts, and a political maverick whose beliefs mirrored the newer social consciousness which a host of reformers helped to ripen in the middle class at the turn of the century. As a United States marshal appointed by Theodore Roosevelt, he helped smash the Oregon land fraud ring and later he ran for Congress but lost by a slim margin.

The young son admired his father's fighting qualities, while brooding over the fact that he did not completely emulate him in his own relations with the town bullies. Not until after his father died did Reed appreciate how he "poured out his life that we might live like rich men's sons. He and mother always gave us more than we asked, in freedom and understanding as well as material things. And on the day my brother graduated from college, he broke under the terrible effort, and died a few weeks later. It has always seemed to me a bitter irony that he could not have lived to see my little success."

It was at a fashionable preparatory school in Morristown, New Jersey, that Jack began to blossom. He was in fine health and was accepted by the other boys at his own worth. He was impressed by the school's orderly life, by its customs and traditions which he considered so different from what he knew in the raw west. He played football, had a fight or two and stuck it out, and wrote poetry and stories for the school paper. And then there were the perilous adventures of stealing out of school at night to country dances and fussing with the girls and winging his way among the social butterflies. Without trying too hard, he became more self-confident.

In 1906, he entered Harvard. He was desperately lonely during his first year. Despite his sweat to make the freshman crew and win recognition, he felt out of things. Later his loneliness began to disappear. He was elected an editor of two of the college papers, became manager of the musical clubs, captain of the water polo team, and an officer in several undergraduate activities. As song leader of the cheering section, he had what he described as the "supreme blissful sensation of swaying two thousand voices in great crashing choruses during the big foot-

ball games."

Harvard also found him boisterous and full of pranks, ambitious of place and power. He had a longing to achieve status through his writing. What he wrote for the Lampoon and the Monthly was not too outstanding among the innumerable things Harvard undergraduates have published. While his verse showed a natural poetic gift, it did not reveal anything original or trenchant. He spent his youthful talent in imitating the successful Victorians. But what he wrote was important to Reed. It is also an index to some of the bitterness he felt toward the Harvard aristocrats. He too was an aristocrat-but from the Oregon hinterland. The Harvard upper gentry appraised him as too much the eager beaver, a little too unconventional to meet the rigid standards of the Back Bay Brahmins. In turn, he was repelled by their cold, cruel stupidity, and the narrowness of their gaudy lives. With his resentment running deep, Jack satirized them in poems and in editorials and poked fun at their foibles.

Reed strongly sensed the rebel tradition in the Harvard community and saw it come to life in his senior year when the students swept the aristocrats from their undergraduate positions. Students criticized the faculty for not educating them, attacked the athletic institutions, and sneered at the sacred private clubs. To Reed this was an insurgency in perfect keep-

ing with the heresy of New England history. What also affected him was what he called "the manifestation of the modern spirit" among a group of students. In a blurred but articulate way the modernists recognized the cleavages that ramified their community. They read and talked about politics and economics as living forces acting on the world, and a few of them formed the

Socialist Club with Walter Lippmann as president.

Reed never joined the club, yet he was impressed by what it did and by the freshness and boldness of its members' thinking. The Socialist Club took part in the city elections. It introduced measures into the Massachusetts legislature, blasted the university for not paying its workers a living wage. The faculty was asked for a course in socialism, and prominent radicals were invited to Cambridge to discuss and debate issues of the day. And out of this agitation sprang campus groups such as the Harvard Men's League for Women's Suffrage and a Single Tax Club—an alert undergraduate movement which pierced the college press and pushed forward the radicals in music, painting, poetry, and the theatre.

In retrospect after Harvard, Reed saw that "all this made no ostensible difference in the look of Harvard society, and probably the clubmen and the athletes, who represented us to the world, never heard of it. But it made me, and many others, realize there was something going on in the dull outside world more thrilling than college activities, and turned our attention to the writings of men like H. G. Wells and Graham Wallas, wrenching us away from the Oscar Wildean dilettantism that had possessed undergraduate litterateurs for generations."

Reed's sympathies thus began to include the victims of snobbery beyond those in his own sheltered group. As president of the university's Cosmopolitan Club, his contact with students from many nations enlarged his view of the world just as his attraction to the local rebels sharpened his intellectual perception. In thinking of his future he could not, however, make up his mind where exactly he stood in his relations with the rebels and the aristocrats. His drive was in the direction of the serious and he found a comfortable bond between himself and the insurgents. Yet the rewards that went with social position at Cambridge were too tempting and too useful to be tossed away. He hungered for recognition from all sides. In its quest he spilled his boundless energy into college offices, into literary work,

athletics—the horseplay that made him different superficially but could not hide his desire to cut his life according to the patterns of his upper class milieu. In his own way, he was re-enacting the conflict in the lives of young, sensitive Americans who needed the kudos of the top crust to make their mark in the world, while their instincts revolted against the cost of its favors. This duality hung onto Reed for some time after he was graduated from Harvard in 1910.

Reed and his generation, of which the Harvard radicals were the academic fragments, grew up in a time of disenchantment. The discovery of corruption, the dissipation of myths that flourished during the seemingly rapturous decades of American development, the disillusionment with doctrines which in the past appeared unassailable brought forth a strong movement of re-

form and protest.

On its level, the Harvard Socialist Club was one reply to an age in which the lords of the trusts were setting their sights for new areas of conquest abroad. The arrival of a full-blown imperialism had already been announced by the roaring cannon of Manila Bay. The drift to empire was quickly visible in territorial aggrandizement, in the control of other sovereignties by financial manipulation or by direct intervention. For all their pious twaddle the imperialists could not completely hide their ruthlessness, their utter disregard of all morality. The cult of brutal chauvinism infected the press, the pulpits, the classrooms, and fathered all the myths by which a moneyed minority protects itself. The Reverend Josiah Strong preached a mystical racist doctrine which fitted snugly into Captain Alfred Mahan's theories of force and power. Out of all this came the sanctimonious gibberish that the security and progress of the United States depended on giving the light of civilization to barbaric, untutored peoples-a civilization defined in an unprofessorial way by William Sumner of Yale as a world "in which the rule is 'Root, hog, or die' . . . a world in which 'The longest pole knocks down the most persimmons."

The insurgent writers and artists, centered in New York, enlisted under their banners wanderers from west of the Hudson who along with them worshiped at many shrines—syndicalism, cubism, anarchism, imagism, feminism. The talk of a vague new freedom enchanted the embattled youth. Some of them, however,

took an interest in the I.W.W. or the Socialist Party. But most of the rebels, Reed among them, who made the pavements of Greenwich Village their tribal grounds, were romanticists whose individualism abhorred discipline, and they often crossed lances with the conformists for the sheer fun of it. Nevertheless, they did try to find out what it was that had upset the dreams of an earlier and more hopeful America. They undeniably improved the artistic landscape even if they did not show the way out of monopoly's corruption of cultural life. The philosophy of imperialism, pragmatism, with its disdain of history and its shibboleth that all truth arrives anew with every individual's experience, had a powerful sway over them. In time the cult of the new in the theater, in poetry, in painting and writing became an end in itself.

When American workers to whom some of the dissidents addressed themselves, seemed not to heed or understand their estheticism, they were disillusioned and the very social shams they were supposedly resisting re-emerged in their work. Their efforts at realism became in the end surrealist, their consciousness egocentric. It was a reflection of their distance from working class politics and their failure to understand working class life. Inbreeding led to intellectual sterility, and the constant temptation of the easy dollar won many of the rebels away from their unprofitable rebellion.

In the swirl of this setting, Jack Reed's own educative process was not simple. His romantic impulses had already played him many tricks, and his early writing, especially his poetry, showed how hard he sucked life out of a dim past. But in New York, where he had settled after Harvard and several months of happygo-lucky wandering in Europe, the present struck him hard. He saw what he had never quite seen before: a city strikingly split into classes and into whose social fabric was woven many patches of peoples and cultures. He threw himself into the city's life, feeling its warmth and its coldness, musing upon its ironic contrasts, and witnessing its endless drama. He tried to press the city to himself with the consuming joy that comes out of newfound love.

"I wandered about the streets," he wrote, "from the soaring imperial towers of downtown, along the East River docks, smelling of spices and the clipper ships of the past, through the swarming East Side—alien towns within towns—where the smoky

flare of miles of clamorous push carts made a splendor of shabby streets; coming upon sudden shrill markets, dripping blood and fish scales in the light of torches, the women bawling their wares under the roaring great bridges; thrilling to the ebb and flow of human tides sweeping to work and back, west and east, south and north. I knew Chinatown, and Little Italy, and the quarter of the Syrians; the marionette theatre, Sharkey's and McSorley's saloons, the Bowery lodging houses and the places where the tramps gathered; the Haymarket, the German Village, and all the dives of the Tenderloin. I spent one summer night on top of a pier of the Williamburg Bridge; I slept another night in a basket of squid in the Fulton Market, where the red and green and gold sea things glisten in the light of the sputtering arcs. The girls that walk the streets were friends of mine, and the drunken sailors off ships new-come from the world's end, and the Spanish longshoremen down on West Street. . . .

"I knew well the parks, and the streets of palaces, the theatres and hotels; the ugly growth of the city spreading like a disease, the decrepit places whence life was ebbing, and the squares and streets where an old, beautiful leisurely existence was drowned in the mounting roar of the slums. I knew Washington Square, and the artists and writers, the near-Bohemians, the radicals. I went to gangsters' balls at Tammany Hall, on excursions of the Tim Sullivan Association, to Coney Island on hot summer nights. . . . Within a block of my house was all the adventure of the

world; within a mile was every foreign country.

"In New York I first loved, and I first wrote of the things I saw, with a fierce joy of creation—and knew at last that I could write. There I got my first perceptions of the life of my time. The city and its people were an open book to me; everything had its story, dramatic, full of ironic tragedy and terrible humor. There I first saw that reality transcended all the fine poetic inventions of fastidiousness and medievalism."

There was little soul scratching in this pragmatist process of learning nor did Reed become the victim of a tormented ego such as afflicted other novices in social discovery. He had little feeling for the value of theory, and he had a cold scorn for the petty doctrinaires "who cling to the skirts of Change." The ideas he encountered had impact upon him only as he could place them in his catalogue of experience. "On the whole," he recalled, "ideas alone didn't mean much to me, I had to see. In my ram-

bles over the city I couldn't help but observe the ugliness of poverty and all its train of evil, the cruel inequality between rich people who had too many motor cars and poor people who didn't have enough to eat. It didn't come to me from books that the workers produced all the wealth of the world, which went to those who did not earn it."

New York was pushing Reed in a leftward direction but he had to make a living and help his mother. The truth also is that he craved the wealth and reputation that came with literary success. Yet, it was a craving tempered by the fear that success in the fashionable editorial offices would grind him down and warp his talent. After having seen what happened to the popular writers who churned the fattening literary pabulum, he was unhappy over what might happen to him. He was beginning to have qualms about his two souls. For the moment he could ease the clash between them by ribbing the producers of the current literary diet. In lyrics he wrote in 1912 for a Dutch Treat Club musical, he good-naturedly needled the club's writers and artists and the big magazines for which they worked. Of the Cosmopolitan he wrote:

Every month I'm full of spice:
And naughty Robert Chambers makes it nice.
Some lingerie, a glimpse of stocking.
Lips unlocking, nothing shocking.
And Gibson hints at hidden beauty,
Lovers' booty, tutti frutti.
Read me once and I'll bet I can
Refresh the tired business man.

And of the Outlook with its pretense at liberalism:

I'm a moderate reformer
Just because reform's the thing.
I've a practical religion
And my hat is in the ring.
I'm a catch-as-can uplifter
With a strong belief in jail.
It's a policy that gathers in the kale.

Then there was the dart flung at the magazine industry's vaunted freedom of the press:

It must not be inferred
That wealth is what we're after.
We greet that gibe absurd
With supercilious laughter.
The criminal and grafter,
From wickedness deterred,
Revere the printed word,
Revere the printed word.

These were gentle gibes at best and they also found their way into several short stories and sketches he wrote about capitalists, the city's night life, the snobs among his friends. The note of irony in them was strong, and they were amusing, but there was not much more. Middle-class values and sentimentalities came in for their usual thumping. He had an itch to defy and to mock the sacrosanct mores of the well-heeled, but there was seemingly no other purpose beyond mockery and defiance. His thinking amounted to contempt for the scrapers and resistance to the outworn. He was intent on sweeping away the longbearded corpses that blocked the path of the rebels with their impulse for innovation and change-almost any kind of change. And while the business of sweeping kept him bustling, it did not help him grasp what all this spilling of energy meant. Some of his respectable friends thought he was being arrogant deliberately. They hoped he would stop using so many sticks to beat the dog of convention.

When Reed learned that a magazine called *The Masses* was being reorganized and would give the upper gentry a good spanking, he quickly offered his services. A few years earlier, several New York Socialists had founded *The Comrade* to publish "such literary and artistic productions as reflect the soundness of the socialist philosophy... and to develop the esthetic impulse in the socialist movement." *The Comrade*, however, was an immature, short-lived venture but it had helped foster the idea of proletarian art and Marxist criticism of a sort. *The Masses* was its unappointed successor at a time when the Socialist weekly, *Appeal to Reason*, had nearly half a million paid subscribers with some special issues reaching almost a million readers. *The Masses* excluded from its pages the noisier faddists and attracted enthusiasts in hot pursuit of a new freedom in the arts as well as devoted followers of Marxism. For