

Peter Linebaugh, *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*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2019. ISBN: 9780520299467 (cloth); ISBN: 9780520971189 (ebook)

The title of Peter Linebaugh's astonishing new book is a line from a William Blake poem, "Visions of the Daughters of Albion", published in 1793. The red round globe signifies both the human heart and planet Earth. Burning speaks to the hellish conditions of plantation, mine, ship, factory, and prison, that make up the matrix of global enclosures in the late 18th century. Subterranean depth speaks to the nascent science of geology that first maps below ground, separating life from inert earth, marking the onset of the fossil-fuelled Anthropocene. But it also speaks to different underground forces: the slaves, servants, craftsmen, factory workers, sailors, dispossessed, and urban poor, that erupt on to the stage of history in the final decade of the 18th century. This was a moment when a "revolutionary common people manifested their potential to turn the world upside down permanently" (p.316).

This is not new territory for Linebaugh. His previous books all dwell to some degree on this tumultuous period in world history. His subjects – better, his interlocutors – are those excluded from official archives and history, the intellectual legacies of the very closures that split the "revolutionary common people" into hierarchies of race, class, and gender. *Red Round Globe Hot Burning* builds on decades of research and investigation, the meticulous sifting of popular archives that span the Atlantic and combine political broadsheets, scientific tracts, and folksongs. From the outset, the book's argument is clear: that there existed the "widespread possibility in 1802 of a multiethnic, nonsectarian, transatlantic project of a republic composed of citizens and commoners, the people of no property, sharing common things – the *res plebeia*" (p.62). To make the case, Linebaugh follows the life and times of two figures, Edward (Ned) and Catherine (Kate) Despard, who through their love for each other and commitment to the cause of justice help us to understand the place of both the human heart and planet earth in the commons.

Without this book, all you are likely to learn about Ned Despard is that he was born in 1751 in Queens County (now County Laois) in the midlands of Ireland to a Protestant, landowning family. Along with his four brothers he served as a soldier in the British Army, defending colonial interests (sugar plantations in Jamaica) and suppressing US bids for independence (Nicaragua and British Honduras [now Belize]) in the Americas. After the US War of Independence, he became Superintendent of British Honduras but was recalled to England in 1790 after certain interests began questioning his conduct. In 1803, he was executed for his part in a conspiracy to seize the Tower of London and the Bank of England and be rid of King George III. All you may have learnt about Kate Despard is that she was of African descent, met Ned in Jamaica, married and had a son by him, and then advocated for prison reform after her husband was imprisoned in 1798.

What is it about Ned and Kate that so draws Linebaugh to them? The title of the book helps explain. Blake's poem is an allegory of Atlantic oppression. Oothoon, a female slave, is raped by Bromion, a slave master. Bromion commands Theotormon, a young worker in England, to marry her and protect the child. He refuses. The rest of the poem relays the argument that takes place between Oothoon and Theotormon – the narrow-minded thinking of the latter opposed to the generosity and love of the former. Oothoon rails against the spirit of possession and mercantilism that oppose generosity and mutualism. She presents the principle of infinite love as the alternative to enclosure. Together they can unite against Bromion. Theotormon fails to accept Oothoon, and so the moment when slave labour in America and labour in England could come together through common love to oppose the empire of greed is lost.

Ned and Kate break with this tragedy built from the binaries of slavery and freedom, black and white, male and female. When Ned returns to England in 1790 with Kate as his wife, his two sisters refuse to recognise her as anything but a negro slave. When Ned plots to overthrow the crown in the Oakley Arms in London in 1802 it is with workers, artisans, soldiers, sailors. Though the 1790s mark the beginning of the English working class, Linebaugh insists that before the English working class there was the making of something

else. The multiethnic, nonsectarian, transatlantic project Linebaugh describes did not consist of just one division of a globally stratified community of labour – exploited in plantations, on ships, in factories, in mines, and also those dispossessed of the commons, mobile and without means of reproduction, thrown together in prisons. In the 1790s, the Poor Laws in Britain were already distinguishing between the deserving poor and the undeserving, the respectable and the unrespectable, shot through with emerging racial and gender distinctions. “This is how humans were *split*”, Linebaugh writes emphatically, “Ned and Kate were *not* split, and it was that unity that partly explained their danger to the Atlantic ruling class” (p.206).

Peter Linebaugh is perhaps most well-known for his writings on the commons – often cited (including in this journal) as the originator of the term *commoning*, emphasising the ongoing process of collective labour that produces the commons. But there is so much more to his thinking on the subject, which thankfully comes to light in this book. Here the commons becomes the touchstone, connecting places, people and political projects that have otherwise been examined separately, that have been split. It begins with Ned’s upbringing in Ireland, where the rundale system of collective agriculture was still practised, what James Connolly, the labour activist and anti-colonial rebel, described as the basis of a “Celtic Communism”. Despite repeated efforts to map, divide, plant, improve and dispossess, the British were unsuccessful in wiping out these agrarian social relations, which extended to cultures of hospitality, *meitheal* (collective labour), and living myth. Crucially, Linebaugh identifies how these Irish commons were not vestiges from the past, but were active responses to the expansion of commercial agricultural economies. From this vantage point, it is easier to connect the Irish experience with the experience of the mixed race Miskito people in the Americas, a population drawn from three continents, the product of “shipwreck and mutiny” (p.165). “One of the roots of Despard’s egalitarianism came from his experiences in Nicaragua and on the Mosquito Shore” (p.157), Linebaugh writes. Linebaugh describes how Ned’s time as a soldier in these parts forced him to lead “motley crews in unprecedented, cooperative, production efforts” (p.147), but also to survive difficult conditions through a reliance on the knowledge and commons of the Miskito people. He lived in British Honduras

(now Belize) when the Mayan *milpa*, or common land, was the basis of subsistence. In England, Ned visited the Midlands, at the time wracked by the Enclosure Acts that sought to rid rural populations of access to the commons. Ned was also in a life partnership with an African American woman whose cultural and social heritage included the commons of the West African village. Kate's and Ned's experience of empire connects the enclosures *and* commons of Africa, America, Ireland and England.

At its foundation, the commons is about material sustenance. Linebaugh demonstrated this most powerfully in his earlier book, *The Magna Carta Manifesto* (2008), re-connecting the legal basis of the Magna Carta with the material basis of the Charter of the Forest, the pledge that protected rights and access to the commons for the people of no property. At this time of Atlantic enclosure, it was the commons that were under attack – through dispossession and enslavement, and the establishing of the monetary wage relation as the dominant means of social reproduction. This war did not take place in only one place or time; it was not a single, spectacular event. Returning to his early work on criminalisation in England (Linebaugh 1991), Linebaugh traces with characteristic detail the growing gulf between theft as violation of legal ownership, versus affirmation of communal resources, including customary appropriations through the urban commons and in work itself. “Allowances” and “sweepings” were urban customary practices that from an economic standpoint were analogous to the rural practices of estovers, turbary, herbage, and pannage, “that is, they were means of subsistence among the direct producers, urban or rural, manufactures or agriculture. Their names signified types of access to the means of production and subsistence” (p.311). And thus, the commons, far from a traditional remnant extinguished by capitalist enclosure, persist through “fugitive expression”, the subsistence underground that resonates with Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's (2013) idea of the “undercommons”. “If we understand the commons to be a means of subsistence, then we can look at all actions undertaken to use the means of production as a kind of commoning” (p.306). This is a vital contribution: the commons exists any place, any time; it is the basis of collective autonomy from exploitative labour and exclusive proprietary relations; and it is best observed in the

“minute facts”, as Linebaugh calls them, drawing on the writing of novelist Maria Edgeworth, of customs, practices and labours, around which questions of crime, rights and justice arise.

The commons are always specific to place, ecology, and community, but they are not just that. The book attempts to break out of this way of thinking, to amplify the commons beyond its diverse particularities. Linebaugh quotes E.P. Thompson from his 1963 classic, *The Making of the English Working Class*, writing about a similar period: “These years appear at times to display, not a revolutionary challenge, but a resistance movement, in which both the Romantics and the Radical craftsmen opposed the annunciation of Acquisitive Man. In the failure of the two traditions to come to a point of junction, something was lost” (p.81-82). Linebaugh takes this up as a challenge: “I am going to try to describe that junction point with the purpose of finding that lost ‘something’” (ibid.), he writes. He does this first by enlarging the working class – not just to include prisoners, sailors, miners, servants, housewives and the criminalised, but also the commons. Referring to 21st century interest in the commons, he rightly points out that many writers compare agrarian commons of the 18th century with informational and cultural commons of the present, thereby skipping the “manufactory” commons of the past two hundred years: “Stadialist habits of mind obliterate the memory of commoning economies” (p.87). What is more, this obliteration of the commons serves to evacuate the importance of class in the defence and creation of the commons. As observed above, the commons are the means through which people secure autonomy from the discipline of the factory and plantation.

Second, while working from the ground, immersed in the cultures and practices of the commoners he defends, Linebaugh also links the mundane, “vulgar” commons with “the dream, the gothic, the surreal, the hidden, the mythic” (p.87). It is at this junction point that the “something” is found, where Romantic and working-class traditions meet. Consider the Miskito law of “two haves” which states, “if have, have to give”; the Iroquois Confederacy’s law of “dish with one spoon” which establishes the sharing of hunting territories amongst native American peoples; or the words of Gerrard Winstanley, writing in 1649, “that

undeniably the earth ought to be a common treasury of livelihood for all, without respecting persons” (p.263). Linebaugh finds in these geographically and culturally distinct expressions the substance of a universal basis of the commons. “To sum up, the loss of the commons included a manifold of practices from the country, from the ‘barbarian’ and ‘semibarbarian’ nations (Marx), from customary trade practices, and from urban ‘criminality’” (p.409). This is nothing less than an alternative genealogy and politics of the commons – not just rural, not just European, not just tradition, but mobile and mutable, founded in axioms of equality and generosity and in struggles for autonomy.

Writers like Thomas Spence, the English Radical, combined the practicalities of the commons’ customary rights with the ideals of universal equality. Like Blake, Spence “drew on several ideas and traditions, the Garden of Eden, jubilee, the golden age, utopian, Christian, Jewish, American Indian, millenarian, dissenting” (p.266). Like the antinomian inspirations he is drawn to, Linebaugh does not apply academic discriminations to the material he works with. The terrain he covers in 400 pages is breath-taking. Alexander von Humboldt’s contemporaneous expedition to South America, from which he drew correlations between plant species, altitude, precipitation and temperature, is connected with Ned and Kate who sought to “recognise the general connections that link organic beings’ – spalpeen, pleb, sailor, plantation slave, soldier, servant ... [the] causal unity beneath the surface of the directly visible” (p.410). Ned and his co-conspirators gathered in the Oakley Arms, “coughing, wheezing, sneezing, heaving, planting, catarrh, nose blowing, the cacophony of the lungs, the dyspnea of the Anthropocene” (p.321). The quality of the air in London is connected to geology, mining, combustion, urban spectacle, diseases of the working poor, and the nine-inch “enclosure” where child chimney sweeps toiled. Zooming in and out, from the intimate to the planetary, this is not “old materialism” or “new materialism” in the writing of history, it is both and more – more expansive, an atmosphere that you come to inhabit with every turning page. And it is this method and form that brings into relationship with Ned and Kate the historical forces that determined the context of their lives.

Linebaugh's approach to history is knowingly speculative but its truth is in the experiences of his subjects, namely Ned and Kate Despard, individuals who travelled the empire and found the commons. From Haiti to Ireland, this represented an "objective antiperistasis to global commodity production" (p.408). Not primarily a legal or civic matter, the commons were an *objective* resistance to fast developing commodity capitalism – including slavery, exclusive proprietorship, waged labour, individualism, avarice, cruelty. Opposition to the loss of subsistence powers touched on nearly every facet of popular experience of the time: criminalisation, enclosure, slaving, conquest, taxation, war, disease, famine. "As these movements began to include more workers, the expression of material demands also emerged. According to the dynamics of revolution, the leading reformers appealed to ever-broadening parts of the people – its demands becoming more relevant to their conditions. And since their condition was characterised by want, revolutionaries began to add subsistence to their project. This happened in France, in Saint-Domingue, in Ireland, and in England" (p.360). From disparate sites and cultures came a common demand for a moral economy, the regulation of subsistence goods, that was opposed to the values of the commodity.

Late in the book, Linebaugh recounts his quest to find the grave of Catherine Despard in Ireland. "The purpose of my search for her body was not for closure, the enemy of the commons, but for memory and its two daughters, imagination and inspiration" (p.406). Closure is about denying the "huge energy of historical solidarity" (p.124) that travels not in a neat, straight line but moves underground, like the mole, out of sight, until it erupts to its own power. Reading the book as the murder of George Floyd sparked the Black Lives Matter movement into a global reckoning with legacies of slavery, war, colonialism and empire, it was hard not to feel a tingle on the back of the neck. Two hundred years later the world has again been gripped by "acquisitive man", unleashed from a brief generation or two of the post-War compact between organised labour and capital. History moves in leaps. "Whether in open-field commons or enclosed by fences, the mole tunnels on" (p.80).

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Patrick Bresnihan
Department of Geography
Maynooth University
Patrick.Bresnihan@mu.ie

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