

# John Reed arrived in Mexico eighty years ago

*Miguel Angel Sánchez de Armas \**

*In memory of Miguel González González,  
who rode with Pancho Villa.*

**I** For those of us born at a time when heroes are sooner put down than praised, and those who are different are repressed rather than imitated, John Reed's biography can seem as overwhelming as a full-length movie played at high speed. We are dragged along by the film's overlapping images, facts and anecdotes, at twice the normal speed, a pace for which we are little prepared.

John Reed died three days before his thirty-third birthday, on the opposite side of the world from where he was born, honored by the flags of another country. He took part in two of the first revolutions of the century and published books explaining to the world the full implications of the social changes they brought. In his own country he fought passionately, with that youthful ardor that combines hope, idealism and innocence, to improve the lot of the oppressed.

At an age when most men are only just beginning to take charge of their own lives, Reed had already created a legend about himself. And when Reed's feverish life as a writer and rebel came to an end in a hospital bed in Moscow and the news went around the world, there were as many sighs of relief as demonstrations of grief in his homeland.

We do not know what kind of man Reed would have become if he had lived another twenty or thirty years. He started very young —Walter Lippman remembers him as a legend just five years after he left university— and his life was sketched in large and occasionally awkward strokes, rather than with meticulous brushwork. However, we can imagine that the tide of McCarthyism that could be foreseen even in his day would have marked him as one of its first targets; and that the response from this passionate, volcanic spirit would have been fierce indeed —even from within the prison cell where he would doubtless have landed.

Perhaps Jack, acclaimed as the finest journalist of his time at the age of 26, and a consummate writer and social activist by the age of 32 —Kipling is reputed to have said that Reed's articles made him "see" Mexico— also managed to die at just the right time.

**II** The afternoon of Saturday October 23, 1920 was cold and rainy, as befits a Russian fall. A grayish fog from the Moskva river swirled around the Kremlin walls. In the great Red Square, flags fluttered in the mist when the huge procession arrived from the Temple of Labor to the sound of a funeral march, while the drumming of boots on the flagstones added a note of nostalgia.

John Reed had died of typhoid, and the procession was carrying his remains to the geographic and emotional heart of the Soviet peoples, with honors befitting a hero of the proletariat.

Three funeral speeches were made in memory of the dead man. When the coffin was placed inside the Kremlin walls under a red flag emblazoned with gold letters reading "Leaders die, but the cause lives on," banners were lowered and the air was filled with a fusillade of gunshots, followed by a deep silence.

Louise Bryant observed the final moments of the ceremony, her grayish-green eyes blazing intensely. She had barely reached Moscow in time to hold Jack in her arms as he died, and had stayed by the coffin throughout the days of official ceremonies in honor of her companion. This frail-looking woman had been the great love of a man who found it easier to understand countries than fathom the mysteries of the opposite sex.

What thoughts crossed Louise Bryant's mind that cold and rainy afternoon? Perhaps the memory of their nights together in the cabin at Croton, or images of that great clumsy man, bursting with energy and wit, haranguing a crowd of workers while impatiently sweeping his unruly hair out of his eyes, or immersed in endless

Introduction to the author's translation of *Insurgent Mexico*, to be published shortly by Fundación Manuel Buendía.

\* Journalist.

alcoholic discussions with his friends in a Greenwich Village garret.

Louise Bryant may have felt that the *enfant terrible*, poet, journalist, writer and social activist, who had finally found rest, had also, in the last analysis, found eternal victory.

"True revolutionaries," Reed had written, "are those who reach the limit."

### III

John Silas Reed was born on October 22, 1887, in the bosom of a wealthy, conservative family from Portland, Oregon, and was baptized in the Episcopalian Church. He lived the protected life of a sickly child in his maternal grandparents' house, "...a great, lordly mansion, in the style of a French chateau, with a huge park, carefully manicured gardens, meadows, cow sheds, greenhouses and vines that climbed up around the windows, docile deer grazing among the trees.... At the end of the house there was a lawn terrace surrounded on three sides by firs with gas tubes concealed in the bark. In the summer, they used to put up a marquee, and people used to dance in the light of the fairy lights that seemed to have grown out of the trees," as Reed recalls in his autobiographical essay, "Nearly Thirty Years."

In 1887, Portland was a bustling Puritan community whose leaders exalted the value of work, religion, decency

and moderation. A chronicler of the time defined the city fathers as "prudent and worthy, with a morality, religious conviction and strength of character unsurpassed by any other social class in America."

Reed's father and grandfather were prototypes of such civic virtues, although the former was eventually rejected by the Portland bourgeoisie because of political ventures that had what they viewed as "unfortunate" consequences.

Although Reed's mother regarded herself as a "rebel" and was one of the first women to smoke in public, she despised the working classes, foreigners and radicals. Years later, as a penniless widow, she went so far as to refuse money from Reed since she did not want to be supported by a pro-Soviet son.

Reed's grandmother was also a rebel. Widowed at a time when women were supposed to be models of devotion, discretion and submission, she set off on voyages to exotic places like China as well as turning her Cedar Hill parlor into a center of intense social activity.

The atmosphere of righteousness, prudence and calm that prevailed in the Reed household was disturbed only by the occasional visits of a brother of Jack's mother, Uncle Horace, who —no doubt to the horror of that Christian abode— embellished his globe-trotting adventures with fantastic stories portraying the uncle as a key figure in revolutions, coups d'état and all kinds of escapades.

## John Reed

(October 22, 1887 - October 19, 1920)

U.S. poet-adventurer whose short life as a revolutionary writer and activist made him the hero of a generation of radical intellectuals.

Reed, a member of a wealthy Portland family, was graduated from Harvard in 1910 and began writing for a Socialist newspaper, *The Masses*, in 1913. In 1914 he covered the revolutionary fighting in Mexico and recorded his impressions in *Insurgent Mexico* (1914). Frequently arrested for organizing and defending strikes, he rapidly became established as a radical leader and helped form the Communist Party in the United States.

He covered World War I for *Metropolitan* magazine; out of this experience came *The War in Eastern Europe* (1916). He became a close friend of Lenin and was an eyewitness to the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, recording this event in his best known book, *Ten Days That Shook the World* (1919).

When the U.S. Communist Party and the Communist Labor Party split in 1919, Reed became the leader of the latter. Indicted for treason, he escaped to the Soviet Union and died of typhus; he was subsequently buried with other Bolshevik heroes beside the Kremlin wall. Following his death the Communist Party formed many John Reed clubs, associations of writers and artists, in U.S. cities.

*The New Encyclopaedia Britannica  
Micropaedia, 1993, Volume 9, pp. 990-991.*

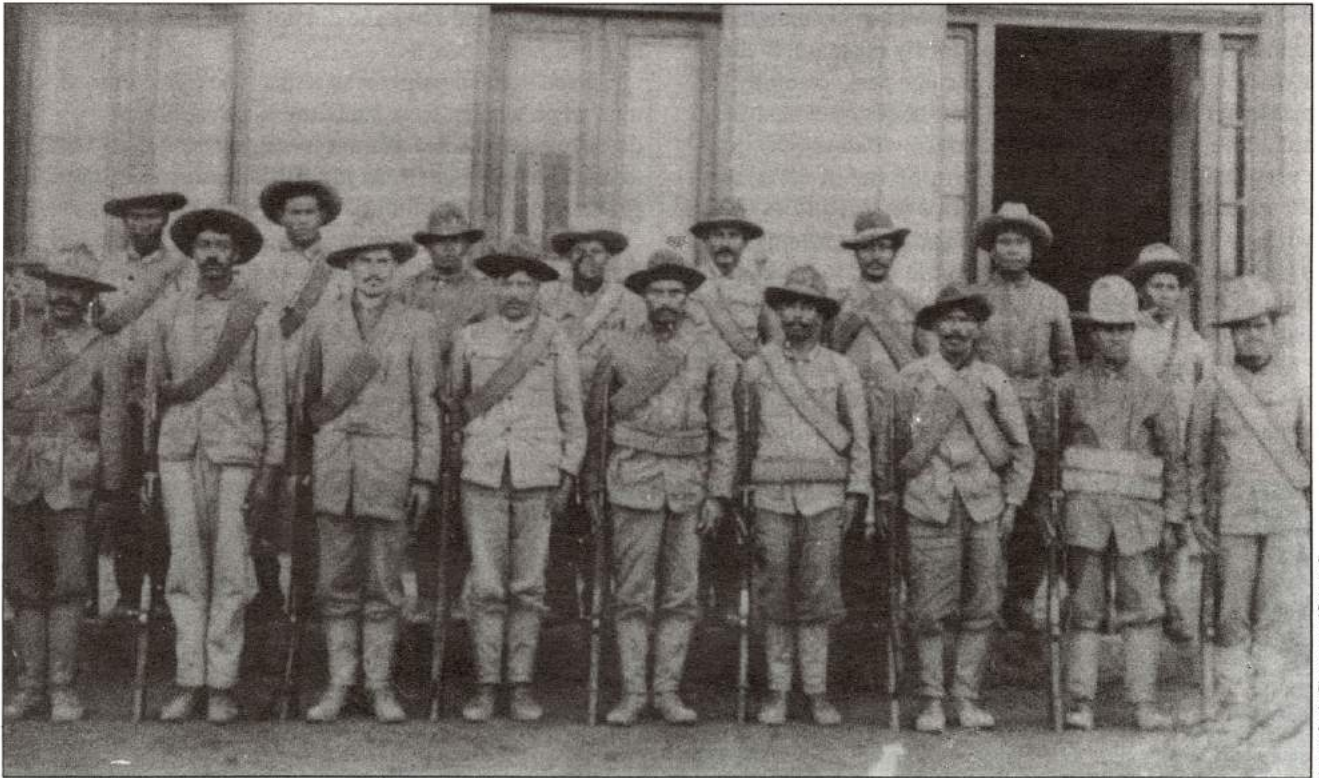
One can imagine the effect that these tales had on the young John. The uncle not only claimed to have led a popular revolt in Guatemala that ended with his seizing power for a few days (which he allegedly took advantage of, in his capacity as Secretary of State, to confiscate the national treasury and organize a lavish state dance, before declaring war on the German empire in revenge for his having failed a high-school German class!), but insisted that he had been crowned king of a South Sea island.

Jack was then a dreamy child much given to fantasizing; years later he remembered being “different

and would not follow in his father’s footsteps—even if this made him feel guilty.

Reed’s time at Morriston and Harvard is a story in itself. It was there that he began to stand out—albeit not as a model student, since his grades were barely adequate. Once his studies were over, he travelled to Europe and back, and at the age of 23 found a job at New York’s *American* magazine, and began writing for other publications as well.

John Reed, journalist and writer, was about to make his mark on the great concrete city.



Arqueología Cinematográfica, A.C.

Revolutionary army. Photo by Eustasio Montoya.

from others.” Still, he seemed destined for the life of a peaceful gentleman, a pillar of the community and the Episcopalian Church.

When the time came, his father, Charles Jerome Reed, better known as C.J., spared no expense or effort to send his son to the finest university, that would not only provide him with the professional tools to achieve a comfortable standard of living but also an aura of prestige that would be crucial to his future social life. The choice—after a two-year stay at an exclusive prep school in Morriston, New Jersey—was obviously Harvard.

But it was during those student years away from his family home that Jack realized he was not destined to return to Portland and that commercial and industrial success held no attraction for him. He had a different nature

#### IV

When Jack Reed crossed the border from Texas to Chihuahua, on an afternoon in late 1913, and climbed onto the roof of the Presidio post office to get his first look at Mexico, he already bore the double mark of being a great journalist and social activist.

His work in the radical magazine *The Masses*, his activities in Socialist and bohemian circles, his explosive, unpredictable personality and his account of the great strike in Patterson, New Jersey—where he was able to experience the warm atmosphere of the local prison—had given him a name by the time he was 26.

Nevertheless, Reed did not come to Mexico on his own account. He was commissioned by *Metropolitan* magazine and the *World* newspaper to cover the revolutionary events

## La tropa on the march

"What are you fighting for?" I asked...

"We are fighting," said Isidro Amayo, "for Libertad."

"What do you mean by Libertad?"

"Libertad is when I can *do what I want!*"

"But suppose it hurts somebody else?"

He shot back at me Benito Juarez' great sentence: "Peace is the respect for the rights of others!"

I wasn't prepared for that. It startled me, this barefooted *mestizo's* conception of Liberty. I submit that it is the only correct definition of Liberty —*to do what I want to!* Americans quote it to me triumphantly as an instance of Mexican irresponsibility. But I think it is a better definition than ours —Liberty is the right to do what the Courts want. Every Mexican schoolboy knows the definition of peace and seems to understand pretty well what it means, too. But, they say, Mexicans don't want peace. That is a lie, and a foolish one. Let Americans take the trouble to go through the Maderista army, asking whether they want peace or not! The people are sick of war.

John Reed, *Insurgent Mexico*,  
Greenwood Press,  
New York, 1969, pp. 37 and 40.

south of the border, particularly the actions of the rebel leader Francisco Villa, whose movements so near the U.S. border had made him front-page news.

Yet while there is no evidence that Reed had a moral commitment to the Mexican revolutionaries before entering the country, it is clear from his book on Mexico that he made that commitment very soon.

Years later, Reed was to say that Mexico was the place where he found himself. This clumsy, explosive gringo,

who was simultaneously lucid, warm-hearted and brave, not only wrote articles on Mexico of an extraordinary quality, which were recognized as such by the obsessive Walter Lippman, but also provided his American readers and their government's decision-making conclaves with a view of Mexican revolutionary events that no doubt influenced U.S. attitudes to Mexico's internal conflict.

His descriptions of Francisco Villa, whom he knew and profoundly admired, raised Villa from bandit to hero

## The rise of a bandit

Everywhere he was known as The Friend of the Poor. He was the Mexican Robin Hood.... Villa lived in El Paso, Texas, and it was from there that he set out, in April, 1913, to conquer Mexico with four companions, three led horses, two pounds of sugar and coffee, and a pound of salt.

There is a little story connected with that. He hadn't money enough to buy horses, nor had any of his companions. But he sent two of them to a local livery stable to rent riding horses every day for a week. They always paid carefully at the end of the ride, so when they asked for eight horses the livery stable man had no hesitation about trusting them with them. Six months later, when Villa came triumphantly into Juarez at the head of an army of four thousand men, the first public act he committed was to send a man with double the price of the horses to the owner of the livery stable.

John Reed, *Insurgent Mexico*,  
pp. 118 and 121.

status in U.S. public opinion. Reed managed to transmit the deepest feelings of a people in arms to the rest of the world.

Reed was obviously not a reporter in the traditional sense; he was a far cry from the humdrum special envoy. John would plunge into the lives of the men and women involved in the revolution to see the conflict from their point of view.

He took the side of "the men" so he could experience for himself the promise of a new dawn that the bloody conflict would bring to Mexico: a free nation where there would be no underclass, no oppressive army, dictators or Church at the service of the powerful. Together with the Mexican people, Reed lived through a painful but necessary war that would make Mexico a free country.



Arqueología Cinematográfica, A.C.

*Pablo González's troops on parade after their victory at Villaldama, Nuevo León.*

Reed was remarkably perceptive. In less than four months he was able to capture the essence of an armed conflict that was transforming a nation, and absorb the idiosyncrasies of its protagonists—something that modern correspondents with several years' experience in this country have not managed to achieve, as shown by their "portraits" of the Mexicans.

This degree of understanding of the motivations of a country in arms was reflected in the reports that John Reed sent back to the newspapers for which he wrote. These chronicles were later compiled in *Insurgent Mexico*, published in July 1914 by the D. Appleton Company.

In his essay "The Legendary John Reed," Walter Lippmann wrote: "The public realized it was able to experience what John Reed saw, touched or felt. The variety of his impressions and the color and sources of his language seemed unending. The articles he sent from the Mexican border were as passionate as the Mexican desert and Villa's revolution... he began to capture his readers, submerging them in waves of a marvelous panorama of land and sky.

"Reed loved the Mexicans he met, just as they were. He drank with them, ran with and risked his life with them.... He was not too boastful, or too cautious or too lazy. Mexicans were people of flesh and blood to him.... He

## The dream of Pancho Villa

It might not be uninteresting to know the passionate dream—the vision which animates this ignorant fighter, "not educated enough to be President of Mexico." He told it to me once in these words: "When the new Republic is established there will never be any more army in Mexico. Armies are the greatest support of tyranny. There can be no dictator without an army.

"We will put the army to work. In all parts of the Republic we will establish military colonies composed of the veterans of the Revolution. The State will give them grants of agricultural lands and establish big industrial enterprises to give them work. Three days a week they will work and work hard, because honest work is more important than fighting, and only honest work makes good citizens. And the other three days they will receive military instruction and go out and teach all the people how to fight. Then, when the Patria is invaded, we will just have to telephone from the palace at Mexico City, and in half a day all the Mexican people will rise from their fields and factories, fully armed, equipped and organized to defend their children and their homes.

"My ambition is to live my life in one of those military colonies among my *compañeros* whom I love, who have suffered so long and so deeply with me. I think I would like the government to establish a leather factory there where we could make good saddles and bridles, because I know how to do that; and the rest of the time I would like to work on my little farm, raising cattle and corn. It would be fine, I think, to help make Mexico a happy place."

John Reed, *Insurgent Mexico*, pp. 145 and 146.

## The army at Yermo

At dawn next morning General Toribio Ortega came to the car for breakfast—a lean, dark Mexican, who is called “The Honorable” and “The Most Brave” by the soldiers. He is by far the most simple-hearted and disinterested soldier in Mexico. He never kills his prisoners. He has refused to take a cent from the Revolution beyond his meager salary. Villa respects and trusts him perhaps beyond all his Generals. Ortega was a poor man, a cowboy. He sat there, with his elbows on the table, forgetting his breakfast, his big eyes flashing, smiling his gentle, crooked smile, and told us why he was fighting.

“I am not an educated man,” he said. “But I know that to fight is the last thing for any people. Only when things get too bad to stand, eh? And, if we are going to kill our brothers, something fine must come out of it, eh? You in the United States do not know what we have seen, we Mexicans! We have looked on at the robbing of our people, the simple, poor people, for thirty-five years, eh? We have seen the *rurales* and the soldiers of Porfirio Diaz shoot down our brothers and our fathers, and justice denied to them. We have seen our little fields taken away from us, and all of us sold into slavery, eh? We have longed for our homes and for schools to teach us, and they have laughed at us. All we have ever wanted was to be let alone to live and to work and make our country great, and we are tired—tired and sick of being cheated....”

John Reed, *Insurgent Mexico*,  
pp. 179 and 180.

*didn't judge them. He identified with the struggle and what he saw was gradually blended into his hopes. And whenever his sympathies were in accordance with the facts, Reed was splendid.”*

Throughout *Insurgent Mexico*, what emerges time and time again is John Reed's commitment to the struggle he was sent to report on, a struggle he identified with deeply. Reed's

accounts seem so modern and up-to-date, and on a par with those of the best chroniclers of the Mexican Revolution.

My generation are the grandchildren of the men with whom Reed rode and shared tortillas, chili, beans, meat and brandy. Many of us learned of the great battles of Villa's Northern Division through talking with those ghosts of the past who kept their uniforms, hats, cartridge belts and 30-30s in a wardrobe with plate-glass mirrors, and showed the bullet marks on their bodies with a smile; whose eyes lit up when they recalled their general, Francisco Villa.

Villa was the man they did not hesitate to follow, even though Death beckoned from the battle-field and there were more bullets than flies buzzing around a three-day-old body, because following the leader of the Northern Division was the only conceivable route toward the other Mexico they hoped they could one day call their own. The grandchildren of those men, who read *Insurgent Mexico* in our adolescence, when their memory was like the smell of the drawers in wardrobes with plate-glass mirrors and the dull gleam of the barrel of a 30-30, discovered this thanks to Reed's pen.

V  
In the pages of Reed's book, journalism and literature jostle for space, each providing a marvelous background to the other. This friendly quarrel is complemented by Reed's message, which we read sometimes between the lines and sometimes directly: here is a man who has reached the great luminous deserts of Durango and Chihuahua, in a country called Mexico, to reaffirm his own revolutionary convictions, and find himself among ragged, semi-literate, poorly-armed men, undisciplined and free, whose instinct, more than an ideology, told them that war was the only possible means, at the time, of transforming a situation in which some lived by exploiting others, even while they realized that they themselves would not be able to enjoy this new order, and perhaps not even their children either; only their children's children.

It is no exaggeration to say that the John Reed who returned to the United States in April 1914 was not the same as the one who saw Mexico for the first time from the post office roof in Presidio.

In Mexico, Reed perfected the tools for his great work, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, an account regarded by Lenin himself as one of the finest books on the October Revolution and to which he wrote the foreword, in the hope that it would be read by the workers of the world.

To say that Reed died too young is a cliché. He did indeed die young, yet his work was complete. It might be better to say that his demons abandoned him so that he could die in time. ❧

Quotations taken from: Robert A. Rosenstone, *Romantic revolutionary, a biography of John Reed*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1975, 430 pp.