

## Jack London's *The Iron Heel*

*A Review by Garry Victor Hill*

Few American heroes (apart from fictional representations of George Washington) amongst the earlier American military figures were initiators or shapers of great events. They were more frequently idealistic eyewitnesses or not very important figures caught up in a maelstrom of conflict over which they had little control, despite their energy, dedication, luck and idealism. Ernest Everhard in Jack London's dark, futuristic fantasy *The Iron Heel*. (1906) appears in contrast to such characters, for he is an important revolutionary leader. He also contrasts in another important way, for the earlier examples are American patriots; while he rebels against America's government. Ernest questions authority and society and disputes such matters intellectually. Others had done this before him, but they had not gone beyond wry comments, or at most confronting an authority figure, while Everhard lives in a very literal state of war with the whole American system. This would make him a traitor and therefore a villain by the social standards of the Edwardian era when *The Iron Heel* was first published: for many it still does.

Jack London's ability to get away with having such a hero in his America dominated by strict censorship and a widespread, even pervasive and intolerant outlook amongst both the government and the general public rested on three factors. The first was his immense popularity at the time of publication. He was

then one of the world's most famous authors. His celebrity was such that when he died in November 2016 his death received more media coverage than that of another celebrity death the day before, the Emperor Franz Joseph of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, one of the world's longest ruling, best known and most powerful monarchs.<sup>1</sup> Due to London's early start and his enduring popularity in both the capitalist and Communist blocs, London would be one of the best-selling authors of the twentieth century. Like so many of his other works, *The Iron Heel* would be reprinted many times in the subsequent decades. The second reason for this work's success rather than censorship is that the Iron Heel (the American government London fights) is in a fantasy with a setting far into the future and an ideology that goes against everything America's founding fathers fought to achieve. The third reason is that London's villains were big business oligarchs and their corporate trusts. At the time he was writing the trusts were widely despised and under attack not only by socialists, but by politicians as conservative and diverse as Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson and William Jennings Bryan.<sup>2</sup> This distrust, fear and sense of betrayal was evident not only amongst socialists, politicians and the media, but amongst the general public. London was launching his attack not so much on a fictional power set in the future, but on the possible future of an existent power many Americans then saw as their enemy, one growing in power, which made them

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<sup>1</sup> Irving Stone, *Sailor on Horseback: The Biography of Jack London*. London; 1938, p. 327. Internet Archive. January 28<sup>th</sup> 2017. Accessed March 14<sup>th</sup> 2020.

<sup>2</sup> John Milton Cooper Jr, *The Warrior and the Priest: Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt*. Cambridge, Mass; 1983. Coper permeates his work from his third chapter onwards with this issue.

pensive about their and their nation's future. Not even London could foresee the brilliant timing of his attack.

Ironically *The Iron Heel* appeared at a time when traditional heroism was being increasingly questioned and exposed by modernist writers, but this novel's narrator, his wife, presents him as a traditional hero in every aspect except his radical socialist politics. He resembles Roland, Lancelot and Galahad, all created several hundred years before, more than he resembles other famous radicals in twentieth-century American literature,

While the presentation of Everhard is hagiographic, he differs from the classic American crusaders for liberty in his socialist politics and union affiliations, becoming among the few memorable socialist heroes in American literature. His ideological compatriots Tom Joad, Robert Jordan and Robert Hearn, all emerged as rebels against American capitalism several decades later. He also emerges as a bridging figure between the optimistic and idealistic heroes of the Imperial era and the more complex, cynical protagonists of the post war world. Before the rise of the oligarchical Iron Heel to government Everhard was an idealistic crusader for social improvement. When he joins the battle against the Iron Heel he becomes an urban guerrilla. Thus the champion of social improvement becomes a street fighter and a conspirator, a commander in a revolutionary American army.

We rarely see him as anything other than a paragon of revolutionary virtue, there are very few depictions of intimate moments, doubts or subconscious motivations. His surname is an apt if clumsy symbol of his unflagging mentality and sedulous efforts. London keeps this personality creditable because he puts

Everhard puts a remote distance from the reader by the novel's unusual narrative structure. London's creation Anthony Meredith, an editor, presents the account by his wife, Avis Everhard, to readers as a discovered manuscript. This was a common nineteenth-century device. Poe, Haggard, Twain, Mary Shelley, Stevenson and Wells used it at different times. London differs by setting the editor's introduction and comments more than seven hundred years into the future. Meredith, who lives in an era of established socialism, has to explain to his twenty-seventh century readers the quaint, barbaric time called the twentieth century. Back then as he sees it, archaic forms of ownership divided people and caused wars. Meredith's notes reinforce the idea for the twentieth century reader that socialism is not only possible, it is inevitable and desirable. Meredith's future society justifies Everhard, who, although he is executed by the oligarchy has been shown by history to be neither a fool nor a quixotic hero. Because he was a warrior-prophet fighting for a society that ultimately comes about, partly due to his efforts, he is a martyred hero, not a dreaming fool.

Avis presents Everhard as flawless, incisive, astute, brave and just in his judgements, but London shrewdly covers this hagiography with Meredith's assessment that Avis's text must be considered as too subjective after comparing evidence from other sources. He kindly describes this as understandable: as Meredith notes, Avis's "errors of perspective and vitiation" are written "due to the bias of love." The reader should accept this:

Yet we smile, indeed and forgive Avis Everhard for the heroic lines upon which she modelled her husband. We know to-day that he was

not so colossal, and that he loomed among the events of his times less largely than the manuscript would have us believe.

Meredith's comment allows the reader to accept that Avis's Everhard to some extent must be a construction, but essentially an accurate one, and this allows the reader to accept him, partly because after twenty years he has inspired the devoted account of a loving wife. Meredith's notes also praise Everhard's virtues as they add the authority of the year 2700 and give factual evidence to support his arguments. Meredith's greatest aid to Everhard's credibility however, is to present him as a remote historical figure. This gives him an almost mythic quality.

In the pantheon of American heroes from Columbus to Lincoln, heroes function more as personifications of ideas, beliefs or virtues than as human beings. Everhard also functions in this way, with the rider that he fights not for tradition, God or the nation, but for radical change. He does so less by heroic acts than by being a mouthpiece for Jack London, who uses set-piece speeches, debates and other arguments to expound his didactic mixture of evolution, Marxism, Nietzsche and self-righteous radicalism. Everhard's unadulterated virtue puts his heroism into the G.A. Henty Boy's Own magazine mould, despite his very different beliefs.

Everhard is not a trained soldier, he started his working life as a horseshoe maker and becomes a translator and writer before being elected to congress. He

becomes a revolutionary fighter and organiser when the Oligarchs use violence to crush the union movement and frame him for a bomb explosion in congress.

So begins a process that leads to America coming under a fascistic dictatorship known as the Oligarchs. Those who oppose it are crushed. Everhard, his wife Avis and many others become leaders of the secret revolutionaries. They have a relentless determination in their attempt to overthrow the dictatorship and in the conflict they show heroic abilities and apt ideas. They have popular support and fight for justice, but unlike in so many traditional tales, this no longer ensures immediate success as goodness can be easily crushed by well-organised, strong and ruthless forces. Even the fanatically confident Everhards need a respite from the draining struggle with such a powerful enemy, so as in so many American novels an interlude in the world of nature occurs. In *The Iron Heel* the interlude and refuge appears in a secluded cave in a rich man's Californian forest park. Here the Everhard's have moments of peace, rest and happiness, but as in virtually every work which features such forest idylls, conflict from the outside world intrudes. These intrusions are either in reality through messengers bringing news of danger or disaster or through their mental or emotional processes. The hero must return to the conflict, the forest idylls can only recall and cannot fulfil the fading American dream of a peaceful existence alone in the wilderness. The way the rich man owns the wilderness and keeps it as an artificial idyll demonstrates this. Civilisation now functions as the destroyer, either through war as in *The*

*Last of the Mohicans* and *The Red Badge of Courage* or through the power of the modern state as in *The Iron Heel*.

Avis and Ernest are executed by the Oligarchs, who rule for centuries. A description of the Oligarch's methods reveals among Avis's last written words reveal why - and reveal the ominous methodical power of the modern state as it swings into counter revolutionary terror:

And through it all moved the Iron Heel, impassive and deliberate, shaking up the whole fabric of the social structure in its search for the comrades, combing out the Mercenaries, the labour castes, and all its secret services, punishing without mercy and without malice, suffering in silence all retaliations that were made upon it, and filling the gaps in its fighting line as fast as they appeared.

Clearly the individual hero can do little against such massive well-organised forces - and this passage provides a prophetic description of twentieth-century totalitarian governments. By doing this, London also provided a strong contrast to the optimistic, often utopian fiction of many radicals and was one of the first science fiction writers to depict the hero's nation as the hero's powerful and (at least in his time) victorious enemy. Fortunately for London's credibility and the novel's readability, in the second half Avis focuses on political developments and Jack London proved to be remarkably politically prescient, making both Ernest's role of a prophet and Anthony Meredith's role as a voice of the future more creditable.

In *The Iron Heel* London predicted in broad outline the rise of American trusts into a centralising all-pervasive power, the rise of fascism, Japanese imperialism and the economic dominance of the world by America. He also foresaw some aspects of the First World War, the disintegration of the British Empire and the further expansion (which had started in his lifetime) of the massive building boom and funding of the arts that characterised twentieth-century capitalism,

Not only in outlines, but in many little details London gives prophetic details that add veracity to his hero's story and prophecies: the invention of synthetic butter and milk, the use of wireless in war, militias rushing to crush strikes and riots and the replacement of electrocutions with anaesthetic induced deaths. In London's 1918 Chicago Commune, the burning ghettos, ruthless police brutality and the use of spies in among the rioters, all eerily adumbrate the 1967 and 1968 Chicago riots. The kidnapping and brainwashing of the rich Californian youth Philip Wilkinson resembles Patty Hearst's experiences in 1974. Such prescience takes a reader's attention from things London got wrong. His belief that socialism would grow out of elite terrorist hit squads, kidnappings, secret trials and executions was mistaken as the Bolsheviks were the first to prove and others after them reinforced that truth. Avis frequently unintentionally reveals that by continually battling the Iron Heel with that organisation's methods the radicals are coming to resemble them:



The Iron Heel had triumphed in open warfare, but we held our own in the new warfare, strange and awful and subterranean, that we instituted. All was unseen, much was unguessed, the blind fought the blind, and yet through it all was order, purpose, control. We permeated the entire organisation of the Iron Heel with our agents, while our own organisation was permeated with the agents of the Iron Heel. It was warfare dark and devious, replete with intrigue and conspiracy, plot and counterplot. And behind all, ever menacing, was death, violent and terrible.

Everhard is deeply involved in all this. As a founder of the fighting groups he helped plan the Chicago rebellion, where in Avis's account, even manipulating Chicago's proletariat into being the victims of a massive slaughter as a diversionary tactic becomes permissible:

Why, we even depended much, in our plan, on the unorganised people of the abyss. They were to be loosed on the palaces and cities of the masters. Never mind the destruction of life and property. Let the abysmal brute roar and the police and mercenaries slay. The abysmal brute would roar anyway, and the police and Mercenaries would slay anyway. It would merely mean that various dangers to us were harmlessly destroying one another. In the meantime we would be doing our own work, largely unhampered, and gaining control of all the machinery of society.

Such manipulations were also prescient, but in a way that none of London's Communist admirers would mention then or mention now, for they use these combined tactics of "the worse the better" and protecting the sly, manipulating party leadership from being casualties while the unreliable elements amongst their ranks are led to destruction so that unreliaables are eliminated, the leadership seems blameless and their enemies are hated more for their brutal extermination. Very clever and very much a tactic and not just of Communists. What justifies such evil? Such manipulation will supposedly contribute to the destruction of evil. Victory justifies itself.:

In short, a sudden, colossal, stunning blow was to be struck. Before the paralyzed Oligarchy could recover itself, its end would have come. It would have meant terrible times and great loss of life, but no revolutionist hesitates at such things.

Thus Avis reveals her fanaticism and that of her husband, and shows their total ignorance of cause and effect and of the corruption of power. By not showing how the Iron Heel was crushed and replaced, or what replaced it, London avoids having to confront one of the essential failures of socialism and also of all rebellious movements right and left: the tendency in victorious revolutions for the new masters to strongly resemble the old. Though Avis and Everhard cannot see this, this becomes evident in the incongruity of so-called humanitarians acting like the calculating, terrorising killers of the Iron Heel:

For every man who betrayed us, from one to a dozen faithful avengers were loosed upon his heels. We might fail to carry out our decrees against our enemies such as the Pockocks, for instance; but the one thing we could not afford to fail in was the punishment of our own traitors. Comrades turned traitor by permission, in order to win to the wonder cities and there execute our sentences on the real traitors. In fact so terrible did we make ourselves, that it became a greater peril to betray us than to remain loyal to us. (601)

Although the radicals claim to be building a new world, Avis in one passage concedes that people inherit conditions from the past and that even the most radical proponents of change must organise themselves on older, once repressive models:

The Revolution took on largely the character of religion. We worshipped at the shrine of the Revolution, which was the shrine of liberty. It was the divine flashing through us. Men and women devoted their lives to the Cause, and new-born babes were sealed to it as of old they had been sealed to the service of God. We were lovers of humanity.

This passage follows the one previously quoted, so that avenging killers like herself and her husband are named on the same page as “lovers of humanity.” Avis does not follow or even understand these implications. Readers can easily detect a bizarre, even schizophrenic mentality which focuses on dreams of

liberation as it perpetuates the brutal repression of medieval chivalry and the conquistadors, who were also considered heroes and written up that way by contemporaries and sometimes by subsequent writers. In those systems a heroic man's task was to violently defend heavenly righteousness and he could reconcile these apparent opposites: violence in the imperfect world of men preserved the perfection of the world to come.

Avis reveals her awareness that this type of heroism can serve either side. It can be organised, indoctrinated and used to perpetuate as repression, as the Iron Heel does to the Oligarchs' children through conditioning which foreshadows the methods of the Bolsheviks, Mao's Red Guards, the Khmer Rouge, the Hitler Youth and Mussolini's Black shirts:

They were taught, and later they in turn taught, that what they were doing was right. They assimilated the aristocratic idea from the moment they began, as children, to receive impressions of the world. The aristocratic idea was woven into the making of them until it became bone of them and flesh of them. They looked upon themselves as wild-animal trainers, rulers of beasts.

The oligarch's children are trained for service and are indoctrinated with the righteousness of their mission against disorder, a familiar basis for heroism:

They were saviours of humanity, and they regarded themselves as heroic and sacrificing labourers for the highest good.

They as a class believed that they alone maintained civilisation. It was their belief that if ever they weakened, the great beast would engulf them and everything of beauty and wonder and joy and good in its cavernous and slime-dripping maw. Without them, anarchy would reign and humanity would drop backward into the primitive night out of which it had so painfully emerged.

This pits heroes against each other, for Everhard's socialists also self-sacrificingly and bravely fight for what they see as a just order. Although Avis does not develop the idea, such a conflict puts the whole idea of heroism and goodness under question. The radicals seem better because they have popular support and fight for justice; while the Oligarchs initiated the oppression and tyrannise over all. Meredith's words also show that the radical's methods are justified as they eventually establish a just, civilised society, but Avis's account unintentionally shows that in the twentieth-century goodness and heroism do not ensure success and are no longer easily defined qualities. Her accounts here omits Everhard's precise role in these more repulsive actions; incongruously he stays a storybook hero in this world.

Jack London died at forty in November 1916, a probable suicide.<sup>3</sup> In his largely autobiographical *Martin Eden* published in 1907, he depicted a successful but depressed writer who commits suicide because he finds his

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<sup>3</sup> Stone, pp. 326-327

success based on false values. London had been depressed after his employees had apparently burned his new house so that they would be paid his generous wages to rebuild it and he was also affected by debilitating illness, criticisms of his recent writings and drinking.<sup>4</sup> If London had lived to see the Russian Revolution and then its outcome would he have depicted the Bolsheviks' murderous secret police as heroes? Would he have exposed, justified or denied the Russian revolution's horrors? Like so many of his contemporary leftist writers, would he have become an active defender of Lenin and Stalin, who both admired his work? Or would he have written about Russia in disillusionment?

*The Iron Heel* has often rightly been praised as a prophetic analysis of the fascist movements which emerged less than two decades after its publication, and then soon gained state power, but the similarities of the Iron Heel to Communism are also strong. Despite London's use of an editor and a happy socialist future, the reality of twentieth century politics has put the heroic quest for various forms of utopia into something the hero cannot fight for without being foolishly quixotic or villainous.

The hero no longer fights dragons, devils, traitors or villains, the monster is no longer a single entity that can be vanquished by a lone hero: it is the state and its increasing and pervasive power. Edward Everhard, despite all his

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid pp. 318-327

virtues, could not defeat it. Such a hero, who leads a national fight, and has boundless self-confidence, courage and energy and has no vices, flaws, or ideological doubts would be rare among the American military figures who appear in twentieth-century literature. His fate clearly indicates how such attempts at large-scale heroism would fail in the modern novel, which became the dominant literary form of the twentieth century. In *Heroes' Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War* Bernard Bergonzi suggests that as a literary form, the novel would also contribute to the waning of the traditional hero in the twentieth-century:

The novel (as opposed to such sharply generic forms as the thriller or the western) is not an easy form in which to accommodate heroic figures; its natural bias is so much to the realistic, the typical, the ordinary that the presence of any figure of conspicuous stature and virtue is liable to set up ironic tensions. (180)

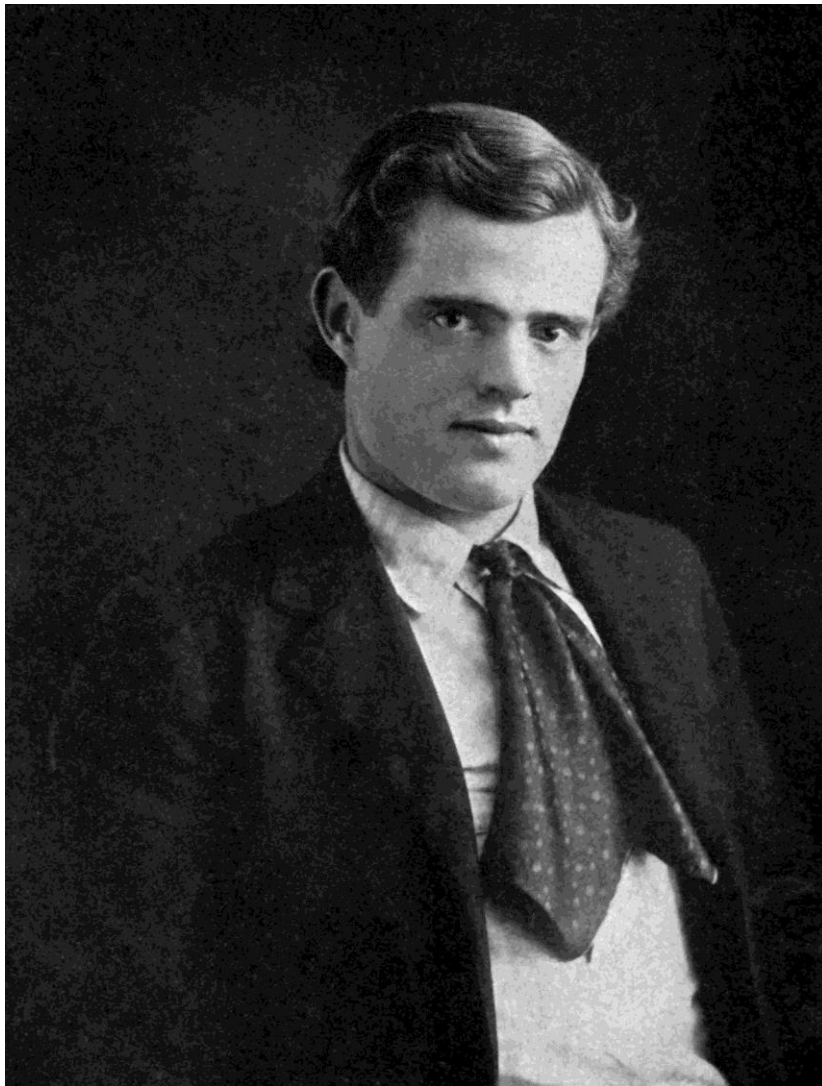
Increasingly the successful twentieth century hero appears at the more localised social levels. Even here uncertainty about what constitutes heroism often becomes apparent, even when characters follow fairly traditional moulds of heroism and scenarios.

The First World War reinforced this tendency. The war was too vast and the generals were too overwhelmed by events to become convincing national heroes or inspire others apart from adolescents of all ages who never saw a battlefield. Those of lesser rank suffered too much for frequent defeats and pointless victories to convincingly depict themselves as heroes in the traditional

mode. As even Woodrow Wilson stated in 1916, mechanised slaughter, gas and aerial bombardments, trench warfare and stalemates now deprived war of the glory of individual combat.<sup>5</sup>

Soon after the war new writers emerged with a new type of hero. They were rarely hearty, simple decent chaps like Ernest Everhard trying to live by heroic codes.

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*Jack London 1876-1916*

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<sup>5</sup> Cooper, p. 310 Quoting Wilson, p. 310.



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