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Review of "The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberty and Commons for All"

James Sabathne
Hononegah Community High School

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Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberty and Commons for All*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2008).

Peter Linebaugh's most recent manifesto merits widespread attention. He convincingly renewed, and rehabilitated largely forgotten, but relevant and important, documents and concepts central to a modern pursuit of human liberty, justice, and rights. Linebaugh's *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberty and Commons For All* restored lost legacies.

The English Magna Carta of 1215 fell further from use and original purposes than many government documents promising civil rights. Even well preserved documents delineating rights - such as the American Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights - suffer extreme curtailments in the early 21st century climate of never-ending war. The Magna Carta, moreover, languishes incomplete and outside the consideration of many seeking social justice. Linebaugh reminded that, "Magna Carta puts an emergency brake on accelerating state despotism" (p. 22). Chapter 39 stands for habeas corpus and trials by juries of peers, and against torture. Were the Magna Carta better remembered and honored in practice there can be little doubt that the so-called war on terror would have to be conducted differently.

More importantly, Linebaugh revived the "*Magnae Chartae Libertatum Angliae*" or "the great charters of English liberties" - for there were two (p. 38 emphasis added)! The Magna Carta as it is commonly recalled represented only one of the documents negotiated and signed in 1215 at Runnymede. The king and rebel nobility also acceded to The Charter of the Forest. The Charter of the Forest, of which most historians remain ignorant, protected the subsistence and material culture of commoners. The practices and liberties of the Magna Carta - both what is normally thought of as The Magna Carta and also the Charter of Forests - protected a material culture composed of wood: wood fuel, wood fencing, wood building, and wood tools. Drawing from J. M. Neeson Linebaugh noted, "The woodlands were a reservoir of fuel; they were a larder of delicacies, a medicine chest of simples and cures" (p. 43).¹ The Charter of the Forest codified economic access to food, clothing, heat, and shelter. When taken in total then "Magna Carta defined limits of *privatization*" (p. 40). Linebaugh noted what was known in 1215, and what needs to be relearned today more than anything else, "political and legal rights can exist only on an economic foundation" (p. 6).

Linebaugh's wide-ranging treatment approaches the great charters of liberties at documentary, legal, cultural, and constitutional levels while maintaining a connection to current concerns including fuel, enclosure, and expropriation of indigenous peoples. Access to sufficient fuel in the capitalist world is not a recognized human right, and world woodlands are increasingly privatized and cleared for profit. As governments and corporations privatize fuel, water, and woodlands indigenous people are yet violently separated from land and subsistence. An impressive scholar, Linebaugh digs deep into

¹ J.M. Neeson, *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England, 1700-1820* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

culture, and sprinkles the volume with relevant and telling quotes from the likes of Mark Twain, P. B. Shelley, Monty Python, Karl Marx, Carl Sandburg, and Shakespeare among others.

Secondary social studies teachers ought to find Linebaugh's monograph useful. Major sections of the work center on issues of government. The appendix includes complete texts of the great charters of liberties – both Magna Carta and The Charter of the Forests. Linebaugh included an extensive glossary useful for aiding students in puzzling out the difficult issues of the English language of 13th c. England. The primary history straddles the Atlantic, and delves deeply into English and American constitutional and legal history. Chapter 7, "The Law of the Jungle," synthesizes the major modern impacts of British enclosure and expropriation in India. This single chapter perfectly illustrates and integrates Linebaugh's major arguments and themes. Teachers of world history might usefully incorporate "The Law of the Jungle," either the content or perhaps even the text, into their classes. Likewise teachers of humanities and literature may enjoy this chapter's enlightening and unique exploration of Rudyard Kipling in the context of liberty and commons for all.

James Sabathne
Hononegah H.S.
Rockton, IL