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Tales from the Underground

Review of Ramor Ryan's book – "Clandestines : the
Pirate journals of an Irish Exile"

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At this point in time it is a rare and welcome event when a book by an Irish activist is published and rarer still when a book by an Irish anti-capitalist writer receives widespread praise and acclaim. "Clandestines: the Pirate journals of an Irish Exile", which has received a slew of positive reviews following its publication in the US by AK Press, is just such a rarity, and as it is being launched in Ireland this week means readers here will soon be able to make their own appraisal of the book. Although this is Ramor Ryan's first full length book many readers may have already come across Ryan's articles and essays before as the author is relatively well known and his work is included in probably two of the most notable collections of anti-capitalist writing of recent years- the Verso Press publication : "We are Everywhere" and Softskull Press's "Confronting Capitalism".

".....the only thing that works is memory. Collective memory, but also even the tiniest, most insignificant memory of a personal kind. I suspect, in fact, that one

can barely survive without the other, that legend cannot be constructed without anecdote” — Paco Ignacio Taibo II

Clandestines consists of a series of stories and reflections culled from Ryan’s experience of over twenty years of activism. The result is an entertaining and readable mixture of memoir, political essay, travelogue and literature. Clandestines then is not your standard political tract but rather a form of political picaresque documenting Ryan’s adventures as a wayward radical with an uncanny ability to find himself in interesting and often tricky situations everywhere from the mountains of Kurdistan to jungles of Chiapas. Ryan has certainly been around the block and the book includes a number of eyewitness accounts of events of major political and historical importance such as the massacre of mourners at a Republican funeral in Belfast by Michael Stone in 1988 and the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in 1990.

However, Ryan is at his best when he is observing the everyday and the marginal rather than the epic and grandiose and much of the book is taken up with Ryan’s descriptions of various encounters with people at the edges of history. These memorable character sketches, by turns affectionate and exasperated, often ironic and occasionally derisive, fill and enliven the pages of Clandestines. Ryan wanders amongst this motley crew—the generous and riotously joyful Berlin squatters, the Zapatista peasants, the disaffected Cubans, a drunk Croatian war veteran, the Central American gang members, a charismatic Venezuelan punk singer, the self-indulgent hippies at a Rainbow Gathering and a host of others—observing, conspiring, joking and drinking and ultimately turning these encounters into a series of amusing and interesting tales without ever stretching the reader’s credulity too far.

But Clandestines is more than a series of anecdotes about the “wretched of the earth” and eccentrics from the activist milieu. In the most impressive sections of the book, like the chapter on life

in a dismal Guatemalan backwater, Ryan manages to interweave these colourful and finely observed character portraits with a political analysis that outlines the sort of historical and social pressures that can shape, embolden or even crush the lives he describes.

Obviously enough this sort of writing is made possible by a libertarian sensibility that combines Utopian hope with a keen awareness of human frailty. In all of these essays we find an unresolved and creative tension between Ryan's attraction towards political romanticism that is tempered, undercut and sometimes completely usurped by an intelligent scepticism. This tension is one of main sources of the book's constant ironies, pathos and humour but it does also mean that the reader is occasionally left with the impression that the author is sometimes uneasy with some of his own political rhetoric. On the other hand there are some sections in the book in which Ryan's storytelling is disturbed and subsumed by political analysis and in one particular chapter, on the Milltown massacre, this certainly undermines the quality and impact of the piece. However, for the most part Ryan gets the balance between right and this dynamic tension means the writing never degenerates into political liturgy or a disconnected series of anecdotes.

Despite the fact that *Clandestines* is a profoundly political book Ryan swerves away from answering in a systematic way the political questions that his varied experiences have thrown up. And these are pertinent and difficult questions for the anti-capitalist movement: for instance how should libertarians relate to national liberation struggles, how do we forge meaningful grassroots democracy, what is to be taken and what is to be dispensed with from the Marxist tradition, and most consistently Ryan's poses questions about how solidarity is built between activists from the global north and those struggling in the global south. These issues are explored but left unresolved however it would be a mistake to believe this is because Ryan is either naive or unreflective. He clearly marks these issues over the course of his essays and understands their significance. Neither can this be attributed to a lack

of interest in political theory as *Clandestines* is clearly influenced by the work of, amongst others, the radical historians Galeano, Linebaugh and Federici, the situationist theorist Vaneigem and of course the whimsical and passionate writings Sub-Commandante Marcos of the EZLN. It is also obvious from his analysis of Latin American politics and his critique of Kurdish Marxist guerillas that he has absorbed the best of libertarian thought right into his bones. Nonetheless, Ryan chooses to avoid neat and easy answers as he crisscrosses the Atlantic marking historical transitions, observing and organising, and chasing hope in the face of a whirlwind of neoliberal and imperialist destruction.

All the same, or perhaps because of this refusal, Ryan's singular account of an unusual activist life paradoxically serves as a metaphor for the anti-capitalist movement as a whole in all its contradictions. Ryan's tales trace the patterns of globalisation from below and his search for new political communities, his desire to sustain hope, his discovery of a new world in the making in a forgotten corner of Mexico, his questioning of how we can fruitfully anchor our own life stories within grand historical narratives, his suspicion of easy answers, even his celebration of glorious and seedy marginality makes him, despite his steadfast refusal of such roles, something close to an anti-capitalist Everyman.

If, for the most part, even *Clandestines* little imperfections are interesting the book does deserve unequivocal criticism in one small regard. Although *Clandestines* is quite nicely produced with evocative black and white photos and hand drawn maps it does suffer somewhat from poor quality editing-there are quite a few typos, the occasional repetition and most seriously of all a certain unevenness in parts of the book that could of been simply remedied by some simple revisions or minor excisions.

That said *Clandestines* is a lively, humorous and, at times, a touching book. At his best Ryan captures both the poetry of everyday moments and the roar of history and, to use a phrase from the book describing one of his acquaintances, Ryan as a writer often

“embodies what is seductive about the rebel milieu-smart, vigorous and passionately committed to some great mysterious ideal”