

Background For Peter Maurin

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Summary: A detailed description of Mott Street's environs and the people who lived there as a backdrop to writing about Peter Maurin—"a genius, a saint, an agitator, a lecturer, a poor man and a shabby tramp; all in one." Reviews his early life, much of the story told in Peter's own words. (DDLW #405).

Mott street, New York, is a mile long, extending from Houston street down to Chatham Square. It is a curved street, very slightly and gently curved. It turns into Chatham Square where the Bowery ends and becomes Park Row, where East Broadway, New Bowery, Bowery, Park Row, and Mott street all run together. All of Chatham Square is dark and dank under the elevated lines, for here the Third Avenue line branches out and goes down Park Row to Brooklyn Bridge, and down New Bowery to South Ferry, a mile or so away.

Here Chinatown and the Bowery meet, and the Bowery used to be like a bower, and lovers used to walk there. Now it is a street of the poor, a street of cheap hotels, where men can lodge for twenty or thirty cents a night. In all the larger cities of the country they have such streets, and the migrants call them Skid Roads, and the term originated in the northwest among the lumber workers who came to town from the woods with their pay envelopes and either put the skids under themselves or had them put under them by the liquor they drank or the company they kept.

The Bowery is the street of the poor, and there are pawnshops and second-hand clothes shops. Here sailors and coal heavers and dock workers without families come to live because they have not enough money to live elsewhere. Here are their cheap amusements, movie houses, penny arcades and taverns. Here also the unemployed congregate, and there is a thief's market, where everything can be sold, from a razor to a pair of pants. The very clothes on one's back can be sold and substituted for overalls or dungarees. Here, too, men lie prone on sidewalks, sleeping in doorways and against the housefronts. Here, too, are fights; and because of this the street now has the name of a street of bums and panhandlers, drunks and petty thieves. But it is the street of the poor, the most abandoned poor. It is the street of missions, where for a confession of faith, men are given a bed, and thus religion is dragged, too, in the mire, and becomes an attempted opiate of the people.

Here is Christ in His most degraded guise, spat upon, buffeted, mocked, derided. Here are temples of the Holy Ghost, men made to the image and likeness of God. Here are men. "Thou knowest we are but dust." Thou knowest, too, that Thou hast made us "little less than the angels."

This is not a glamorous neighborhood. There is no romance or beauty here. Waterfront neighborhoods have the beauty of the water, the mystery of the river, lake or sea. Then, too, the national neighborhoods, whether they be Irish, Syrian, Russian, Italian, Basque, Jewish—all these neighborhoods have their own atmospheres. There are homes there, even if they are tenement house apartments; there are cafes, grocery stores, there are distinctive sights, sounds and smells, not without charm.

One block west of the Bowery is Elizabeth street, and next comes Mott, then Mulberry, then Baxter. These four streets in their less than a mile extent comprise little Italy. Mott street is the most colorful of all. Beginning at the north end there is the old Cathedral, with a high walled graveyard around it and catacombs beneath it. Legend has it that the builder of the tenement we live in, stood on the steps of old St. Patrick's and with a gun in his hands, held off the Know Nothings, rioting and attempting to wreck and burn the church.

Here thanks to the church yard, the sun pours down on the section and there are parades of baby carriages and stout mothers backed against sunny walls, winter and summer.

Further south the street takes on the aspect of a canyon, and the buildings are six stories high and the street narrow so that little sun lights here save in the middle of the day. But below Grand street the push carts begin and these take from the drabness of the street, and the bright fruits and vegetables light up the scene. Here are grapes, mushrooms, yellow squash, tomatoes, bananas, beans and greens of all kinds, fishstands with whelks and live eels and snails. Here are cheese stores and cheeses pressed into the shape of reindeer and pigs or just displayed in twig baskets. They hang in skins, in raffia woven nets; they are white, yellow and smoked, and the smoking takes place out in front by the curbstone, underneath barrels. There are spaghetti stores with all variety of spaghetti, all shapes, all lengths, and the wheat which makes it comes from all parts of the world and families have their preference. There are bakeries, and from down in the basements where there are ovens built in, the warm delicious smell of fresh loaves steals out into the street to mingle with the smell of pizzas, flat doughy cakes with cheese and tomato paste spread on top and sold hot to eat in the street.

In their season there are vendors of hot roast sweet potatoes, roast corn, roast chick peas, and during fiestas, hot meat cakes and sausages. In the good weather one could live out of doors without ever carrying on any housekeeping inside. And families do, the fathers sitting around tables playing cards, the mothers by the children's or grandchildren's carriages, knitting, crocheting, talking, shouting, laughing, crying, living out their lives under the open sky.

No matter how early you are up, Katie will be arranging her push cart at the corner; a new shift will have come on duty at the restaurant on the corner where they sell beer and shrimp, whelk and smelts, and there is always a great cleaning of fish and a hosing out of basement and sidewalk.

And no matter how late you stay up, there are always groups on the street corners in front of taverns, and coming and going from work. This is a neighborhood of workers, just as the Bowery is a street of the unemployed.

Below Grand to Hester street the push carts line the street. Then from Hester to Canal there are tenements and factory lofts, and directly across the street from The Catholic Worker office (where Peter Maurin lives) there is a big paved playground with trees and ponds and animals painted on the walls of the Children's Aid Society, a settlement which flanks it on Hester. Always there is the sound of children in your ears, winter and summer, and during the summer here is dancing either in the playground or under the roof of the settlement three nights a week. During festas they set up a bandstand across the street and the twenty-piece band adds its slow and majestic clamor to all the other noises.

New York during its working hours when people flood in from Jersey, Long Island, Westchester, Staten Island, from north, south, east and west, is the largest city in the world.

"Where seven million people live together in peace and harmony," one of the radio announcers used to say happily.

There is Harlem, of course, where close on to a million of our population live in degradation and misery and unemployment. There is the threat of class war and race war in Harlem.

There are occasional battles between police and pickets in class war.

There are anti-Semitic meetings, and anti-anti-Semitic meetings in Brooklyn and the Bronx and occasional fights at both.

But just the same we all live in comparative peace and concord in New York City. If you count the commuters, you can say this is a city of nine million inhabitants.

Canada has only eleven million people. There are truly too many people gathered together in this little space.

Down here on Mott street, half a block north of Chinatown, in the Italian section, in the most congested city in the world, Peter Maurin, God's fellow-worker, prime mover in the decentralist movement in this country, makes his headquarters.

This book is about him, and it will be filled with digressions, just as Peter's conversations seem to be filled with digressions, so that it is hard to pin him down. But it will be seen when I have finished that with all these digressions, all these perambulations, there is a picture presented, a point made, history being written, even history being made.

I am writing of a genius, a saint, an agitator, a writer, a lecturer, a poor man and a shabby tramp; all in one. And to make the picture more complete, I am trying to give it background, color, people—because Peter does not live in a vacuum, but in a community, in a parish, in a street, in a neighborhood, in a city, in a society, in a state, in the world.

St. Paul like to use that term, “God’s fellow worker”; and Peter is God’s fellow worker because when he prays, he is saying, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” and then he goes around trying to see to it that God’s will be done.

How can he tell what is God’s will, many people may say. “What is God’s will?” And Peter, who never answers questions directly, will begin quoting some of his easy essays, as we have come to title them in *The Catholic Worker*.

I do not remember what were the first essays he showed me. He carried sheaves of them around in his pockets, entangled with pamphlets, books, digests of what he had been reading.

But it was not with the social encyclicals of the Popes that Peter began my indoctrination. It was with the prophets of Israel and the fathers of the church. It was also with Pius XI’s encyclical on St. Francis of Assisi. “Here is the way,” he seemed to shout, “but,” sadly, “since men are what they are, and want a plan, all right, here are plans.” and then out came the social encyclicals of Leo XIII, Pius XI, and now latterly, Pius XII.

This book is going to be full of quotations, some of them straight prose and some of them in Peter’s neatly phrased digests. But when I mention encyclicals and such pamphlets, it is not necessary to quote from them. They can be obtained from many a church pamphlet rack throughout the length and breadth of the land. One of the best racks in New York is that at the Paulist Church, on Columbus avenue and Fifty-ninth street.

Ever since my book, *House of Hospitality*, was printed three years ago, I have been trying to write this book, *About Peter Maurin*.

Now the work is about done, or as much done as it ever will be, because it could go on and on, and after it is published I will be thinking for the rest of my life of the things that didn’t go into the book, how it should have been written, and so on. That is one of the things that has held up the work. Peter has so much to say, and there are so many people waiting to hear what he has to say, that I falter, thinking of my own inadequacy. Perhaps my doing it will prevent others who are more capable than I from writing about him.

And yet my job is that of an editor and so the only thing to do is to go about it with humility and prayer, get the work down on paper and give it out.

There is already one book about The Catholic Worker movement entitled *The Green Revolution*, published by the Dominican Press in Belgium, with a foreword by Abbe Cardign, who is now in a German concentration camp. That book has not yet been translated.

Peter is sixty-six years old, this year of 1944. He was born in a small French community, 200 miles from Barcelona, one of a family of twenty-four children. His own mother died after having given birth to five children, and his father married again, and there were nineteen more children. Amongst them now there are four teachers, three carpenters, some farm hands, and Peter lost track of the rest. Some of his sisters are nuns, and some of his brothers are religious.

"My mother's name," said Peter, "was Marie Pages. She died in 1885. Of her five children, only I and Celestin, a brother who was eighteen months younger than I, and my sister Marie, two years younger than my brother, were left. My whole name was Aristide Pierre. Pierre was my grandfather and my godfather. He died at the age of ninety-four and he was never sick. He worked in the fields until he was eighty-five and after that he could not because of his eyes. So he stayed home and made baskets and recited his rosary. He liked to work. He knew it was good for him.

"The last I heard of my brother he was the head of a school in Paris, St. Clothilde's, a parish school. He had been a Christian Brother, but when they were secularized they no longer wore the garb but went on teaching just the same. One of my half brothers taught for the Christian Brothers' School and he was married to a school teacher, who taught in the public school. In the last war he had a bullet in his body seventy-one days when he was taken prisoner by the Germans. I, myself, taught school with the Christian Brothers for about five years.

"Celestin was teaching in Pueblo, Mexico, when the last war broke out and he returned to France, and because he had not served his time in the army, he was put in the medical corps. He was buried alive by one shell bursting near him, and unburied by another. Another half brother was lost in the war and there were five others in that war and maybe some in this.

"My youngest half sister was a weakling but got stronger as she got older. She studied in England and she is a nun, I don't know what order, and is head of a school in Bolivia."

One time when Peter was giving us slogans, as we sat around the table at the Easton farm, and he proposed the slogan, "Eat what you raise and raise what you eat," we asked him what they ate in his family when he was a boy.

"We did not eat the calves, we sold them," he said. "We ate salt pork every day. We raised no hops, so there was no beer. We raised no grapes, so no wine. We had very little meat. We had plenty of bread—there was a communal oven. We had plenty of butter to season things with; we had eggs. We had codfish from the Brittany fishermen. They went all the way to Newfoundland and Iceland to fish. We had vegetable soups, salads and cheese.

"It was in 1882 when the public school system started; when I was five years old. It was obligatory in every village. My mother and father could not speak French, only a dialect like Catalan. (Joffre was born in French Catalonia, and Foch in Basque. Catalanian is spoken in Barcelona.) Our home language was more Latin than French. The name of our town was a Latin one, Oultet.

"The seat of our diocese was twelve miles away, and our parish church two miles away. Oultet had fifteen families and in the parish there were ten villages. There were two priests, and they worked very hard. To help make their living they worked in the garden. The villagers provided them with wood, and they got some little pay from the state, a compensation which was regulated by the concordat made by Napoleon.

"There are eight-nine departments in France, and in my province, Languedoc, there were seven or nine departments.

"My family owned eighty sheep and there was a herder for all the village. He had an assistant in summer. There were probably three thousand sheep in the flock and they grazed on what was still communal land. It was very cold in winter. The fuel we used was branches from the trees. We used to cut the branches every three years. The leaves were for the sheep and the branches for firewood. We cooked at an open fireplace.

"My father is dead, and my stepmother must be seventy-five now. Her name was Rosalie. She was nineteen when she married my father. Last I heard, my brother was still farming, and dealing in cattle.

"I lived there in the southern part of France, a peasant, on the soil, until I was fourteen, and then I went away to school. When I went to the Christian Brothers' school near Paris, and five years later when I was teaching there, I was a member of a study club in Paris. It was the same time Charles Peguy was there, but I did not know him, nor was I influenced by him. Instead I was interested in a group which published a paper which came out twice a week, called *Le Sillon*. It had nothing to do with the decentralist movement, no, but it was interested in ethics. It understood the chaos of the times. Marc Sangnier was editor and backer of the paper. Later my friends got out a weekly paper called *The Spirit of Democracy*. They were looking for an ideology. They were preoccupied about the idea of an elite in a democracy.

"I did not like the idea of revolution. I did not like the French revolution, nor the English revolution. I did not wish to work to perpetuate the proletariat so I never became a member of a union even though here in America I did all kinds of hard labor. I was always interested in the land and man's life on the land.

"That is why I went homesteading to Canada but after two years, when my partner was killed, I went around the country with work gangs and entered this country in 1911, where I have been ever since."

(To be continued)