

FICTION IN  
REVIEW



G R E G J O H N S O N

Unlike his more famous and more accomplished close friend Karl Marx, the political scientist, theorist, and revolutionary Friedrich Engels is relatively little known in the United States. Though he was the co-author with Marx of *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), one of the most celebrated books published in the nineteenth century, and the single author of such influential titles as *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1844), *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880), and *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), few people other than academic specialists know his work well, and even fewer are familiar with his personal life. That may change with the publication of Gavin McCrea's *Mrs. Engels*, a dazzling first novel narrated by one of Engels's long-time mistresses and his eventual wife, an Irishwoman living in Manchester, England, named Lizzie Burns, about whom the historical record is almost silent but whom McCrea, in a thoughtful blend of research and imagination, has brought vibrantly to life.

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Mrs. Engels, by Gavin McCrea (Catapult, 388 pp., \$16.95 paper)

Engels and Burns couldn't have come from more divergent backgrounds. Engels's German father owned a flourishing textile manufacturing company, allowing his eldest son a privileged upbringing. Even as a teenager, Frederick (as he is called in the novel) was writing poetry and journalism, most of which directly contradicted his parents' strict, conservative religious beliefs. (He wrote under a pseudonym for a time, to avoid conflict with his family.) Soon enough he was a full-fledged atheist radical, determined to help change society's treatment of workers and the poor. His parents had hoped that he would join the family business, but when Engels was old enough to choose his path in life, he took a much different direction. The early 1840s, when Engels was in his early twenties, were years that changed his life forever. In 1842 he met a young Irish worker named Mary Burns, and two years later in Paris he met Karl Marx, with whom he formed an intellectual partnership that would last the rest of his life.

Mary Burns and her sister Lizzie, by contrast, were ordinary, uneducated Irishwomen, though it isn't clear whether they labored in the mills in Manchester or were domestic servants. Engels, who had gone to Manchester from his native Prussia to work in management at the firm his father co-owned, Ermen and Engels, met the two fiercely committed women, who, like Engels, wanted to improve not only their own lot but the conditions of the working class in general. (There is no photograph extant of Mary and only one of Lizzie, in which she looks plump, rather ordinary, and not very pleased.) The young Engels was drawn to Mary first, and they lived together for almost twenty years (they considered traditional marriage far too "bourgeois" for them) until Mary's death in 1863 from heart disease at the age of forty. She introduced Engels to the realities of working-class life in Manchester, the drudgery and overcrowding and grinding poverty. After Mary's death, Engels became involved with Lizzie, one of the few references to whom was penned in a letter by Karl Marx's daughter: "She was illiterate and could not read or write but she was true, honest and in some ways as fine-souled a woman as you could meet." Lizzie died young as well, at fifty-one, and only a few hours before her death Engels, at her request, married her. Evidently in her last illness Lizzie's religious upbringing overcame her political convictions. Engels later wrote of Lizzie: "My wife was a real child

of the Irish proletariat and her passionate devotion to the class in which she was born was worth much more to me – and helped me more in times of stress – than all the elegance of an educated, artistic middle-class bluestocking.”

Gavin McCrea begins his fictional account of Lizzie in 1870, just as she and Engels are leaving Manchester by train to live in London in a style befitting a famous philosopher and scion of a wealthy family. Engels was now rich enough himself to help support his friend and co-author Marx as well as to provide a luxurious existence for himself and Lizzie. The contradiction inherent in this scenario – an avowed Communist living a life of privilege – is one that McCrea explores with great wit and élan. For the Lizzie Burns presented here finds in money (which she often calls “mint”) one of the few things she truly values and trusts in this world. Her general skepticism extends to romantic love, about which Lizzie is notably acerbic, at times even cynical. Thus, in the first paragraph of *Mrs. Engels* Lizzie observes offhandedly that “the difference between one man and another doesn’t amount to much. . . . In the final reckoning, the good and the bad come to an even naught, and the only thing left to recommend him is his money.”

(However, her lover Engels has at least one other thing to recommend him: she stares in fascination at the “snake pushed down one leg of his breeches; a right gorger. He fidgets round and tries to throw off my gander. . . . I can’t see the crime in it, a lady taking a moment to admire.”)

Well-heeled and well-hung as he is, Frederick Engels and his partner in the avid pursuit of a socialist state, Karl Marx, are appropriately at the margins of this rich and superbly written tale. Self-absorbed despite her radicalism, Lizzie for the most part puts herself front and center, even though in 1870 she was preparing for life as a wealthy but essentially powerless grande dame in the tony London neighborhood of Primrose Hill. Not that McCrea doesn’t enliven the story with a wealth of colorful minor characters, such as Nim, Pumps, and Spiv, servants in the Engels’ and Marxes’ households; the rather snobbish Jenny Marx, Karl’s wife, who doesn’t quite accept Lizzie into the aristocracy into which Jenny was born; a mysterious man named Moss, an Irish national-

ist who, as her former lover, is still vivid in Lizzie's memory (though he drank too much and tended toward violence, Lizzie still cannot free herself emotionally of his personal charisma and sexual magnetism); and a lively gathering of others.

McCrea has Lizzie tell her story through a deft interweaving of past and present, so that we learn virtually everything relevant there is to know about her upbringing, her work prior to her meeting Engels, and various other people who have impacted her life. It's the present, however, that is most satisfying and entertaining: the former Irish working-class girl Lizzie Burns becoming the lady of a fine London house, and all the witty observations and general hijinks that ensue.

Essentially Lizzie is a lonely figure: like her sister Mary before her, she knows that a man raised in a wealthy family cannot really understand the plight of the poor. And she distrusts men in general, especially their tendency to victimize women sexually and give them diseases, as she complains in this acerbic, wholly characteristic passage:

It's men are at the bottom of every plague in this world. We come to the lock with this frontmost in our minds, and as we lie here stewing in our cures and wondering if we'll be next to go cripple, or walk off into fits, or turn so childish we've to be washed in bath chairs and given to drink with a spoon in a teacup, our knowledge turns to action: sometimes screams or fists but most often somber vows of chastity breathed out into the late-night miasmas. "Dear Lord," we says. "Dear Lord God Our Father, if you find the grace to spare me, I'll never go near another one again."

At one point she remarks memorably, "Is there a loneliness more lonely than mistrust?"

It's Lizzie's hard-won pragmatism, however, not any sense of victimization, which governs her distinctive sensibility. "I've seen enough of this world," she says, "to know that most of us have to accept men we don't feel for, and I'm not sure it's for the worst in the end. A marriage of emotions can't be lasting. It wouldn't be healthful if it was." And a bit later she argues internally with her leftist colleagues: "What puzzles me is why it's oftenest married

people who want marriage abolished, while the unmarried ones, like myself, want it kept safe, in case one day we might need it.”

Fascinating as Lizzie’s narrative and characterization are, it’s the writing itself that brings her story to life. The prose in *Mrs. Engels* is colorful, unpredictable, occasionally dense with meaning, always cleverly stylized and beautifully wrought. McCrea, appropriately for an Irish writer, invents a kind of contemporary Joycean *mélange* (in some of the commentary on this novel, Lizzie has been compared to Molly Bloom) of words familiar and words invented: at one point, a man “whistles through his lips and skips through puddles, jumps over the lushed-out bodies sleeping on the road.” At another, describing the poverty in which Lizzie was reared, she recalls another girl’s destitute existence: “Like all of us, she would’ve seen much brutality within the circle. A crooked look would’ve caught her a larruping at the hands of her slack-spined father and rag-and-scream brothers.” And during one of many looks askance at her own lover, Lizzie says to him: “Blessed be, Frederick, for a man who claims to know the destiny of mankind, you understand diddly-dick about the laws of womenfolk.’ Where the greatest crime is to have your own mind.” At times Frederick shares his future wife’s gift for language, as when he gets an unwanted letter from his mother: “He groans. ‘I can’t let out a fart without that woman finding out and expressing some lamb-of-God opinion on it.’”

Throughout the novel, Lizzie exhibits what Engels calls “the firesome spirit of the Irish.” Since so little is known about the historical Lizzie Burns, Gavin McCrea had a great deal of license in portraying her, a freedom he exploits brilliantly. It is her earthiness that has prompted critics to compare her to Molly Bloom – Lizzie, for instance, narrates a number of most unsentimental sex scenes – and *Mrs. Engels* implicitly suggests another parallel in Gustave Flaubert’s greatest creation, his characterization of Emma Bovary in *Madame Bovary*. Flaubert, a plump middle-aged novelist, famously remarked of his lithe, beautiful heroine, “C’est moi,” and McCrea, a young Irishman, says of his plump, middle-aged heroine (in an online essay about his novel): “If, now that she’s written, Lizzie can be said to be someone, that someone can only be me. When writing from Lizzie’s perspective, I wasn’t feigning

to be Lizzie. Rather, I *was* Lizzie, the only Lizzie I could imagine being.”

In *Mrs. Engels*, from its eloquent first paragraph to its superb last sentence, Gavin McCrea performs a remarkable feat of language that invites comparison with the best of recent first novels. It is bound to be widely discussed and, surely more important, to endure.