

## JOHN STEINBECK BIOGRAPHY

A highlight of this past summer was the reading of Middlebury Professor Jay Parini's biography of John Steinbeck which had the flavor of reading a Steinbeck novel. The author was clearly an admirer of his subject, but was in no way hagiographic. As a long time teacher of American History, I was eager to learn more about Steinbeck's life and personality. I have always been fascinated with his portrayal of the westward migration during the Great Depression and still remember driving through Kansas en route to looking for the Joad family wagon as tumbleweed drifted across the road. The time Steinbeck spent living in migrant camps and interviewing people living in conditions not too dissimilar to those we witness on the evening news is of course authentically portrayed in the *Grapes of Wrath* for which he earned a Pulitzer prize in 1940 when he was in his late 30's. Steinbeck experienced decades of living at the brink of poverty and accepting handouts from his parents.

A late bloomer Steinbeck is a complex individual who dealt with serious bouts of depression and afflicted with periods of alcoholism. He had a strained relationship with his parents. His father John Ernst Steinbeck was a relatively unsuccessful businessman, whom Parini describes as a "typical small town burgher who took his place in the community and his role as paterfamilias in the big house, though he did not have the personal authority to carry off this role." He was a fragile man emotionally, not physically. His daughter in fact reflected, "He was very tentative about things, you might say he was frightened. He was a buttoned up somewhat remote individual, socialized little, but was usually present at public functions." At his death, Steinbeck wrote, "I can think of nothing so eloquent for him as silence. Poor silent man all his life." Fortunately, he was careful with his money and able to subsidize his son during his early years as a writer. However, he seemed always in the shadows in the house

at the edge of things, lonely and depressed.” Steinbeck’s mother, Olive, was “firm and more than a little snobbish. She was head of every charity you can think of, always interested in poverty or injustice. Her values clearly influenced Steinbeck’s fierce almost Puritanical morality.” She respected his emerging brilliance, but did not encourage his urge to become a writer rather than becoming a respected as a lawyer or businessman. Steinbeck himself also was clearly embarrassed about his father’s early business failure and general weakness as an individual.

One of Steinbeck’s most important issues, Parini writes, “was his sense of himself as someone who never quite achieved enough.” In later years, he found himself terrified of failure. In reading this biography, I sympathized with Steinbeck’s having received negative reviews on his writing. The biggest blow was the dismissive response of many critics to his being awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1962. Many critics professed that they felt his writing was dated and had gone downhill since *Grapes of Wrath* and did not achieve the quality and relevance of authors who were writing at the that time. The *New York Times* ran an editorial maintaining, “The award of the Nobel prize for literature to John Steinbeck will focus attention once again on a writer, who though still in full career, produced his major work more than two decades ago. Without detracting in the least from Mr. Steinbeck’s accomplishments, we think it interesting that the laurel was not awarded to a writer, perhaps a poet or critic or historian whose significance, influence and earlier body of work had already made a profound impression on the literature of our age.” Many critics felt that Steinbeck was at his best in capturing the angst of the depression era, but was not subsequently able to repeat that quality of expression and poignancy. There was apparently a tie at the time he was awarded the prize. Steinbeck was devastated by the response, but gratified by the warm welcome he received in Stockholm. Others on the short list that year included the

authors, Robert Graves, Lawrence Durrell, the French dramatist Jean Anouilh, and Danish author Karen Blixen

As a youth, Steinbeck was somewhat moody and reclusive but was yet selected president of his high school class. He was sensitive about his physical appearance. His mother referred to him as her “little squirrel,” and his older sisters referred to him as “muskrat” or “mouse.” He was self conscious about his looks, “the bulbous nose and heavy brow, the long and later craggy face and massive ears that folded out like flaps, the swollen chest and long spindly legs.” He had a strong personality and made friends easily especially, as he became a celebrity in later life.

Steinbeck went to Stanford University, but did not excel as a student . He dropped out of school, subsequently went back, but never earned his diploma, which caused his mother great consternation. He was clearly attracted to women, had three wives and two sons by wife #2 Gwyn Conger, who was considerably younger than he. The first two marriages ended in divorce, but he remained married to Elaine Scott, who had formerly been wed to actor Zachery Scott.

Steinbeck was devoted to his two sons, John and Thom, but did not have access to them for a long time after his rather bitter divorce from Gwyn. At least one of them ended up at the pre-prep school, Eaglebrook in Deerfield, Massachusetts, where my wife’s father ogled his spiffy 1920’s roadster with stand up head lights. Later the sons apparently did not measure up to the father’s expectations. Both boys served in Vietnam at a time when he was moderately in favor of the war, because of his admiration for Lyndon Johnson.

Steinbeck's first marriage to Carol Henning started well, but deteriorated as his career blossomed and she remained more of his personal secretary and literary critic. She was politically liberal and influenced his social activism culminating in *Grapes of Wrath*. Unfortunately, when Carol got pregnant, he urged her to get an abortion, which led to an infection in the uterine tubes resulting in her having a hysterectomy, subsequent childlessness and ensuing bitterness. His marriage to Gwynn Conger who was a 20 year old singer when he met her was his least successful although she was the mother of his two boys. Neither of his first two wives remarried and there was a lot of residual ill will.

After a slow start Steinbeck's career took off and he became quite wealthy. However, he was never particularly comfortable with having money having, experienced a long period of minimal income. He also became estranged from several of his close friends as he gained success and prospered while they were still struggling. Steinbeck was self absorbed and not as considerate as he should have been to his wives, especially the first two.

At his wedding to Gwyn a prank occurred, when two supposed policeman appeared from nowhere just at the cutting of the cake, with a warrant for his arrest, "What can this mean ?," Steinbeck groaned to which. the officer responded, "a woman outside claims you are the father of her child." "This is impossible," Steinbeck exclaimed. Suddenly everyone broke into laughter. It was an inappropriate joke instigated by supposed friends. In addition to this unfortunate incident, the minister arrived drunk, the wedding cake arrived late, and Gwyn had lost her wedding ring the day before. The marriage did not last. To make things worse, shortly after his wedding day, the groom announced he was going to Europe in a few days to serve as a war correspondent.

Wife # 3 Elaine Scott who had had a career in show business and had directed *Oklahoma* on Broadway was a good complement to Steinbeck, who was emotionally fragile and temperamental. They had a close relationship and traveled widely together.

Steinbeck was very interested in science and developed a close relationship with Edward Ricketts, who ran a marine laboratory in Monterrey, of which Steinbeck became a part owner. They went on a long journey together in Baja California, chronicling types and habitats of various invertebrates. This evolved into a book called the *Log From the Sea of Cortez*. Ricketts and Steinbeck were almost like a married couple, nothing physical, but understanding each other and providing mutual support. Ricketts in effect became a kind of screen on which Steinbeck could see himself. His own father had failed him in this way. He became the older brother, Steinbeck never had. Steinbeck was physically rugged and could do anything with his hands. This was manifested in the time he spent in migrant labor camps in the 1930's. He also loved the out of doors. As a war correspondent, he came very close to danger and experienced rugged living conditions.

Steinbeck was a very hard worker and placed great demands on himself. But he always harbored doubts about his ability. He wrote, "I work because I know it gives me pleasure to work. A couple of years ago, I realized I was not the material of which great artists are made and that I was rather glad I wasn't. No matter how much acclaim you have for one book there will be constant disappointments and many critical reviews on style, sentimentality, or originality." Steinbeck was definitely jealous of Ernest Hemmingway, whom he emulated, but disparaged on style and image. In later years Steinbeck's style became more lean and less flowery but still quite sentimental. He was fascinated by myth and obsessed with Thos Mallory's work on the Arthurian Legend to the extent that he spent a year working on Mallory

in England. In fact Mallory influenced his novel *Tortilla Flat* and some of his other works of fiction.

Steinbeck had a strong social conscience and was very sympathetic to the plight of the agricultural workers in California. In the words of his sister, "John had a peculiar noble sympathy for those cheated out of their natural birthright and dignity. Injustice drove him wild," she continued, "Even as a child he sided with the underdog." Steinbeck got attacked in the McCarthy era as a Communist and was hassled in the 30's for his coverage of a big lettuce strike and his portrayal of Farm officials and management in *Grapes of Wrath*. He became active in politics. He attended Kennedy's inauguration and was subsequently asked to go to the Soviet Union on a cultural exchange designed to diffuse the tensions of the Cold War. After Kennedy's assassination, he was asked by Jackie to write the official biography, which did not materialize, but Steinbeck had some appreciative correspondence from Jackie. He campaigned for Adlai Stevenson and was awarded the medal of Freedom by Lyndon Johnson, with whom he also developed a close relationship even though he was conflicted on the Vietnam War.

Steinbeck lived a large part of his life in California, spending his childhood in Salinas Valley, Pacific Grove and Monterey. The location of his novel, *Cannery Row*, which received mixed reaction from its residents. He wrote to his publisher, "You remember how happy I was to come back here. Well there is no homecoming nor any welcome. What there is jealousy, hatred, and knife in the back." He also spent a lot of time in New York City and ultimately bought a house in Sag Harbor, Long Island, where he became quite a sailor, and dramatically rescued his expensive in a serious storm. In addition he spent time in Somerset, England where he worked on his study of Mallory.

Throughout his lengthy career, Steinbeck consorted with many influential people especially in the arts. He travelled to the Soviet Union with photographer Robert Capa, wrote the script for a film on Emilio Zapata, worked with Rogers and Hammerstein, and Frederick Loesser, was friends with Edwin Albee and Charlie Chaplin, as well as developing a warm relationship with both JFK and LBJ.

Steinbeck wrote 12 novels between 1929 and 1961, 3 novellas and seven works of nonfiction. He was also involved in about 15 films including the legendary rendering of *Grapes of Wrath* directed by John Ford, starring Henry Fonda. Others include, starring Spencer Tracy and Heddy Lamar, *The Red Pony* with Myrna Loy and Robert Mitchum, *Viva Zapata* directed by Eliza Kazan starring Marlon Brando, Anthony Quinn, and Jean Peters. and of course *East of Eden* also directed by Kazan with the debut of James Dean, along with Julie Harris, Jo Van Fleet, and Raymond Massey. Steinbeck did an Alfred Hitchcock film, *Lifeboat*, with Tallulah Bankhead and Hume Cronyn. There have been two films of *Mice and Men* the first starring Burgess Meredith and Lon Chaney and many others.

Steinbeck was also involved in theater with *The Moon is Down*, an adaptation of his novel about a Nazi Occupation of an imaginary town in Europe, *Burning Bright*, of *Mice and Men* and *Pipe Dream* starring Ethel Merman. Steinbeck's best known novels are probably, *The Red Pony* (a novella) *Tortilla Flat* his breakthrough, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Cannery Row* set in Monterrey, *Of Mice and Men*, *East of Eden* our focus today and the *Winter of Discontent*, his final novel. *Travels With Charlie in Search of America* and the *Sea of Cortez* are significant works of non fiction. The former work was his last hurrah in which he set off to explore the country in his new GMC pick up truck named Rocinante along with his wife's 10 year old poodle, Charlie. He was disillusioned with what he saw. In most of his fiction Steinbeck focuses on the underdog and champion's social justice. Perhaps his most

memorable characters are George Milton and Lennie Small, displaced migrant ranch workers during the Great Depression, who hope to settle down one day on their own piece of land. Lennie's dream is to tend pet rabbits on the farm as he loves touching soft animals. Regrettably Lennie is mentally disabled, though gigantic and physically strong. He unfortunately does not know his own strength which is eventually his undoing when he inadvertently kills his puppy and later accidentally breaks the neck of Curley's wife to whom he is strongly attracted. In this novel Steinbeck focuses on themes of loneliness, powerlessness and the impact of dreams.

I want to share with you biographer Jay Parini's epilogue on Steinbeck:

He writes "Whatever his faults, Steinbeck was a uniquely authentic writer who over nearly four decades produced a body of work that evokes life in this century with compassion and lyrical precision. His interests in the biosphere and his efforts to see human beings in their complete context, which includes their absorption into various larger units as well as their place in the environment in a strange way makes his writing feel remarkably current. He was also, of course, a socially conscious writer whose engagement with the world especially in the 30's has about it an almost visionary quality. " Summon a vision and declare it pure," the poet Theodore Roethke once wrote. Steinbeck did just that and the purity and wholeness of this vision will haunt, inspire, and move readers for years to come.