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# The Rescue of John Steinbeck

By [Robert Gottlieb](#)

Travels with Charley and Later Novels, 1947–1962: *The Wayward Bus* / *Burning Bright* / *Sweet Thursday* / *The Winter of Our Discontent* / *Travels with Charley in Search of America*

by John Steinbeck

Library of America, 990 pp., \$40.00

The extraordinary thing about John Steinbeck is how good he can be when so much of the time he's so bad. There are talented writers who grow into their full maturity and then decline, slowly or precipitously. But that isn't Steinbeck. You can divide his work up into coherent periods, but there's no coherent trajectory of quality.

The publication of the fourth (and, blessedly, final) volume of his fiction by the Library of America makes it easy to track the entire writing career, apart from some journalism and the two weakest of his novels: his first—a puerile potboiler, *Cup of Gold* (pirates!)—and the late *The Short Reign of Pippin IV*, a limp, petulant social satire. In fact, just about everything he wrote is in print, not only in these four volumes<sup>[\*]</sup> but in handsome Penguin paperbacks, which sell well over a million copies a year, with *Of Mice and Men* accounting for more than half of them. (It's short, it's easy to follow, and it's full of feeling—a perfect assignment for junior high school readers.) Two other short books are assigned to younger kids: the affecting *Red Pony* stories (why are so many horse books so sad?) and a faux-primitive parable, *The Pearl*, that makes *The Old Man and the Sea* read like Flaubert. *The Grapes of Wrath* also sells well, of course, and so does *East of Eden*, which a few years ago had a tsunami moment when Oprah "picked" it. (No doubt the Elia Kazan movie featuring James Dean attracts readers—little do they suspect that it tackles only the final segment of the novel.)

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So if all of Steinbeck is in print forty years after his death (in 1968), and despite the force-feeding of hundreds of thousands of school kids with his work—and official canonization by the Library of America—why is he so decisively off the literary map? Other than Brad Leithauser, who in 1989 published a perceptive fiftieth-anniversary homage to *The Grapes of Wrath*, who in America considers him seriously today, apart from a handful of Steinbeck academics and some local enthusiasts in Monterey?

Nor is dismissal of his work by the literary establishment anything new. When to everyone's surprise, including his own, he won the 1962 Nobel Prize, the reaction was startlingly hostile. "Without detracting in the least from Mr. Steinbeck's accomplishments," ran a *New York Times* editorial, "we think it interesting that the laurel was not awarded to a writer ... whose significance, influence and sheer body of work had already made a more profound impression on the literature of our age." And on the eve of the award ceremony in Stockholm, Arthur Mizener, again in the *Times*, questioned why the Nobel committee would reward a writer whose "limited talent is, in his best books, watered down by tenth-rate philosophizing." It's a

question difficult to answer. (Steinbeck himself had doubts. When asked by a reporter whether he believed he deserved the prize, he responded, "Frankly, no.")

This philosophizing—his compulsion to hector us with heavy-handed opinions and ideas—remains one of the chief obstacles to reading Steinbeck with pleasure today. Like so many other writers of his time, he's disgusted with capitalism, yet he's not really a revolutionary—he comes across more as a disaffected adolescent, dishing out a kind of callow cynicism. Although he's constantly laying down the moral law and grappling with the larger issues, he's not an abstract thinker or theorist. Instead, he's got a chip on his soul—a suspicion of formal education, a resentment of authority and institutions. (It's that resentment which undoubtedly kept him from joining the Party, even at the peak of his radicalism in the Thirties.) In other words, he has the ardor and sincerity—and the confused notions—typical of so many intelligent autodidacts.

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His rebelliousness doesn't seem to have been triggered by reaction to a constricting upbringing. The Steinbecks were genteel middle-class, although John's low-key father suffered the failure of his modest business in Salinas. Mrs. Steinbeck was a cultured schoolteacher who came from a large Irish clan, the Hamiltons, whom John would later dramatize—and romanticize—in *East of Eden*. When his parents grew old and ill, he looked after them devotedly, but his family situation doesn't appear to have imposed greatly on his psychic life. In fact, although he had many male friends to whom he was unswervingly loyal, a wide assortment of girls, and a handful of encouraging and influential teachers, individuals don't seem to have meant as much to him as The People—or as animals. You could say, in fact, that he tended to regard human beings primarily as a species of animal: there to be studied.

The young John actually was an autodidact of sorts. He sporadically attended Stanford, dropping in on it for a term or two of courses, retreating, returning, never graduating. He wasn't denied an education, he chose to educate himself. In his early twenties he spent two fierce winters in almost total isolation, alone with his dogs, his books, and his typewriter, caretaking a summer house on Lake Tahoe. Big, burly, and awkward, he was an imposing physical presence, and he did long stretches of physical labor to support himself. He came close to starving during a miserable sojourn in New York when he was twenty-four, working as a laborer on the construction of Madison Square Garden and failing as a reporter for a New York paper. Through all of this he never doubted his vocation as a writer. And he wasn't shy about what he wrote. When friends, girls, former teachers weren't being bombarded with his early stories and sketches, they were held prisoner as he read aloud to them for hours at a time.

Early in 1930, just short of twenty-eight, he married bright, capable Carol Henning. They more or less lived on love—his parents were able to give him a bare-bones place to live and an allowance of \$50 a month. Food was basic, possessions spare. But their happy-go-lucky penury didn't last long. Steinbeck's fumbling apprenticeship and erratic early publishing career were over by the early 1930s, when he began attracting critical appreciation and a readership.

The earliest books are hard to take, straining for meaning and literary effect. His third published work, *To a God Unknown* (1933), reveals many of his worst qualities. Its protagonist, Joseph Wayne, leads his family of farmers from desiccated New England to lush

California, where his empathic relationship with the land eventually explodes into what we, if not Steinbeck, recognize as a feverish psychopathology:

He stamped his feet into the soft earth. Then the exultance grew to be a sharp pain of desire that ran through his body in a hot river.... His fingers gripped the wet grass and tore it out, and gripped again. His thighs beat heavily on the earth.... For a moment the land had been his wife.

(He arrived at this febrile style mainly on his own—Jack London, among others, had more influence on him than D.H. Lawrence, the more obvious source.)

There's a vast disparity in tone and content between this overwrought literary exercise and his next novel (and first best-seller), *Tortilla Flat* (1935), that rompy account of salt-of-the-earth down-and-outers in Monterey. They drink, they brawl, they fornicate, they steal—oh, those happy simple paisanos! And what about their dialogue? Danny: "I looked for thee, dearest of little angelic friends, for see, I have here two steaks from God's own pig, and a sack of sweet white bread. Share my bounty, Pilon, little dumpling."

But through all this "undiluted cuteness," as Alfred Kazin called it in *On Native Grounds* (1942), Steinbeck's lifelong themes begin to emerge, first among them the idea of community. Danny's house, we're told in a preface, "was not unlike the Round Table, and Danny's friends were not unlike the knights of it." They're innocents, and they're all for one and one for all. Most important, they're "clean of commercialism, free of the complicated systems of American business." Far better to be a bum with a heart of gold than a solid citizen.

By the mid-1930s the crucial events of Steinbeck's youth were behind him. He was married. His parents had died. He was a name to be reckoned with. And he'd met the man who would prove to be the most important friend of his life—Ed Ricketts, a marine biologist in Monterey, who for eighteen years, even after John moved east and until Ed's untimely death in 1948, would be his philosophical and moral touchstone. Ricketts appears and reappears in Steinbeck's work in various inspirational guises, an idealized figure, a counterbalance to all the demonized figures—the greedy, the small-minded, the hypocritical—at whom Steinbeck endlessly rails. He also is the central figure in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (1951), a chronicle of a Ricketts-led marine biology expedition to Mexico that Steinbeck introduced with a moving and perceptive tribute to his late mentor. *The Log* shows Steinbeck at his best—he's active, he's outdoors, he's focused on the natural world, and of course he's with Ricketts. The prose is uncluttered and unfancy, the observation acute. Tellingly, although Carol was along for the ride, her presence is unacknowledged in Steinbeck's account: it's all guys on his Sea of Cortez.

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In 1934 Steinbeck befriended several labor organizers and was immediately engrossed by their stories of the cotton workers' strike of the previous year. Within months he began work on *In Dubious Battle* (1936). The California of *To a God Unknown* and *Tortilla Flat* was a convenience—a place he knew and could plunder for material. The plight of the dispossessed and the exploitation of the poor during the Depression years was a calling, a crusade, that led to his finest work.

*In Dubious Battle* centers on Jim, an alienated and angry young loner who joins the Party in San Francisco. The strike begins: vigilantes, scabs, gunfire. Jim is wounded, and grows more

and more fanatical. "I'm stronger than anything in the world, because I'm going in a straight line." The straight line leads to his being killed.

The style of *In Dubious Battle* is radically new. Description, action, dialogue are straightforward and gritty. Still, Steinbeck can't resist injecting an idealized guru figure into this realistic world—a kind of fellow-traveling doctor who lends the strikers a hand. "Doc": "Man has met and defeated every obstacle, every enemy except one. He cannot win over himself. How mankind hates itself." Jim: "We don't hate ourselves, we hate the invested capital that keeps us down." One suspects that this is what the endless bull sessions between Steinbeck and Ricketts must have sounded like. Even so, *In Dubious Battle* is an impressive step forward.

The second of Steinbeck's populist novels, *Of Mice and Men* (1937), is written in the same direct and effective manner. It begins, as so many Steinbeck novels do, with a loving evocation of its natural setting:

A few miles south of Soledad, the Salinas River drops in close to the hillside bank and runs deep and green.... On the valley side the water is lined with trees—willows fresh and green with every spring.

And he loves his central characters, too, the pair of itinerant ranch hands—"bindlestiffs"—named George and Lennie. George is the smart one, the leader; Lennie is the massive semi-idiot, worshipping George, dreaming of the little bit of land they might one day own, and—his most powerful fantasy—the rabbits he might one day be able to tend and caress.

We know that this isn't going to happen, and on some level George knows it too, but he needs to believe in it as strongly as Lennie does: it's the illusion they live by. And then, catastrophe. Yes, the pathos is laid on thick; yes, everything is foreshadowed and manipulated. (Edmund Wilson called it "contrived with almost too much cleverness.") But Steinbeck's sympathy for these decent, forlorn men is so intense that it carries us along with it. Uninfected by moralizing, ingeniously if stagily constructed, and credibly populated, *Of Mice and Men*—far from Steinbeck's most ambitious book—is the closest he came to a fully satisfying work of art.

It also provided his entrée to the world of Broadway. The play version—cannily crafted by George S. Kaufmann—was not only a hit but won the New York Drama Critics award. Alas, this easy success encouraged what was to become a lifelong infatuation with, and failure in, the theater, a form essentially alien to Steinbeck's talents. His finest work is almost always reportorial.

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Although he didn't (as was frequently misreported) go to Oklahoma to observe the migrant Okies as they set out on their hegira to the West, he did spend weeks with them in California—on the road, in their camps. At first he was working as a journalist to air their desperate situation, but quickly he realized that here was the material for the major novel he felt ready to write.

The motor of *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) is Steinbeck's compassion for—his ready identification with—these people. Yet even here, his characters are somehow generalized, more real as a group force than as individuals. Ma Joad is too good to be true. ("Her hazel

eyes seemed to have experienced all possible tragedy and to have mounted pain and suffering like steps into a high calm and a superhuman understanding.") Tom is the strong, basically virtuous young man trapped by fate and history. Rose of Sharon (that name!) is more a symptom than a real young woman. This is the crucial flaw in Steinbeck's fiction, pinpointed by both Kazin and Wilson in the early 1940s and even more glaring in the light of what was to come. As Kazin put it, "Steinbeck's people are always on the verge of becoming human, but never do." Wilson:

The characters of *The Grapes of Wrath* are animated and put through their paces rather than brought to life.... It is as if human sentiments and speeches had been assigned to a flock of lemmings on their way to throw themselves into the sea.

Still, *The Grapes of Wrath* is unquestionably a major achievement. The question is, is it a good book? Steinbeck drove himself to write it in a mere five months, but it was already all worked out in his head, as we learn in *Working Days*, the fascinating journal of its composition that remained unpublished until 1999. The chapters alternate between straightforward, powerful storytelling and authorial commentary, just as the dialogue alternates between sharply observed speech and preposterous hot air. How can the writer who reports a dying old woman saying "I'm jus' pain covered with skin" also have his Ed Ricketts—substitute, the itinerant preacher Casey, spout things like "Listen to people a-talkin', an' purty soon I hear the way folks are feelin'.... I hear 'em an' feel 'em; an' they're beating their wings like a bird in a attic"?

In the chapters of commentary the migrants are seen as bugs, as ants. Early on, there's an extended description of a land turtle crawling along—indomitable, symbolic. Mechanized farming has broken the bond between man and the earth: "Tractors don't love the land." And then there's the Manself:

Fear the time when Manself will not suffer and die for a concept, for this one quality is the foundation of Manself, and this one quality is man, distinctive in the universe.

*The Grapes of Wrath* is a vertiginous conjunction of sweeping, irresistible narrative and highfalutin theorizing. That readers in 1939 tolerated the latter is testimony to the power of the former—and to the readiness of America to be affected by the terrible story of the Joads. With the book's overwhelming success—it was the best-selling novel of the year, won the Pulitzer Prize, etc.—and the further impact of John Ford's impressive film version, which appeared in movie houses only months after the book's publication, Steinbeck graduated from being an admired young writer to worldwide acceptance as a major figure in American literature.

We can see in hindsight that with *The Grapes of Wrath*, the most significant arc of Steinbeck's career came to an end—the impassioned reporting of large-scale human tragedy, the Zola-esque attacks on injustice. Indeed, an entire cultural era was coming to an end: the populism that broadly ranged from *Waiting for Lefty* to early Frank Capra movies and documentaries like *The Plow That Broke the Plains*. At the close of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Tom Joad, on the lam, slips away into the dark to join the good fight for The People. A year or two later, with the war upon us, he would have been heading for the nearest draft board.

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Meanwhile, Steinbeck's life was disintegrating. He was depleted, resentful of attacks from the left and the right, aggrieved by the negative response of critics like Wilson and Kazin, and facing the fact that his marriage was coming to an end. Carol had been a real collaborator, serving as a sounding board and editor, coming up with the titles for *Of Mice and Men* (from Robert Burns) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (from "The Battle Hymn of the Republic"). But now she was feeling trapped and unfulfilled. And he had embarked on a passionate affair with an aspiring band-singer, "Gwyn" Conger, that would lead to another failed marriage. The war came to his rescue, giving him the subject of his next novel, *The Moon Is Down* (1942), as well as an excuse to get out of America and the doldrums (leaving Gwyn resentfully behind) by hiring himself out as a war correspondent.

*The Moon Is Down* is set in a small town in one of the German-occupied countries—presumably Norway, though unnamed. The occupying soldiers are not all bad, the locals are not all good, and the book was angrily attacked for comforting the enemy by, among others, James Thurber! But its real flaws are not political. It's a play masquerading as a novel (Steinbeck thought he was inventing a new art-form—the narrative play), and it's excruciatingly creaky and stogy. It's also unbearably preachy. As the noble mayor of the town is led off to be executed, we're treated to Socrates' final speech from the *Apology*.

On the other hand, his war reportage is fresh and strong—England under the blitz, North Africa, Italy. Steinbeck was several times in the heat of battle, most dangerously at Salerno. He's the kind of reporter who turns events into human-interest stories and creates "characters," but his eye is keen and persuasive. You can tell that he's still happier looking outward than inward, and more at ease as a man among men—or boy among boys—then in more emotionally challenging relationships. (Although he had a busy sexual life and was married three times, Steinbeck was never at ease with his female characters: they tend to be either saints or whores—and sometimes both—or they're symbolic, except for those who are pure evil.)

You see his ease as a journalist again in the *Russian Journal* he published in 1948, after spending six weeks with the photographer Robert Capa exploring the postwar Soviet Union. Capa serves the same function here as the poodle will in *Travels with Charley*—he's chum, ally, and comic relief. Steinbeck understands the telling detail, as when his hosts in Stalingrad troop into his hotel to show him with pride "a red velvet shield, covered with a lace of gold filigree from the King of Ethiopia" and "a tablecloth with the embroidered names of fifteen hundred women in a small British town." This is more appealing stuff than anything in his two most recent novels.

In these, he's clearly scrambling for material. *Cannery Row* (1945) is a dip back into *Tortilla Flat*, "born out of homesickness," as he acknowledged—homesickness not only for Monterey but for Ed Ricketts, who is sanctified as "Doc." *The Wayward Bus* (1947) presents a bunch of disparate characters artificially thrown together under difficult circumstances—*The Bridge of San Luis Rey* with a bus instead of a bridge. It's not only artificial, it's sour and unconvincing, its people specimens Steinbeck has collected and studied the way he helped Ed collect and study marine animals.

Meanwhile, he was turning over in his mind the novel that "may be my swan song, but...certainly will be the largest and most important work I have or maybe will do." *East of Eden* (1952) was intended both to tell the epic story of the Salinas valley and to stage the eternal struggle between good and evil in terms of the *original* family: Adam and Eve and their two sons.

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It's a perplexing book—melodramatic, self-indulgent, even trashy; yet at last you feel you're reading a real novel rather than fictionalized reportage—a novel with strong characters, large-scale story development, a central idea holding it together. And in the first-person passages, which lovingly reimagine his mother's family, the Hamiltons, he was able to move beyond the impersonality of his earlier work.

The fulcrum of the book is the tragic story of the fictional Trasks: Adam, the good man; Cathy (Eve), his evil wife; Adam's brother, Charles; and a second pair of brothers, Adam's sons, Cal and Aron (Cain and Abel, in case you missed the connection). To an impressive degree Steinbeck succeeds in turning this ambitious metaphor into a moving human drama, and it can be gripping when it isn't maddening. Alas, it's disfigured by the most intrusive of all his guru figures, who stains the narrative with his relentless wisdom. This is Lee, Adam's Chinese "houseboy," who discards his faux pidgin in order to say profound things in impeccable English (he's been to college and, as a hobby, translates classic Chinese poetry into English). It's Lee who introduces to Adam (and to us) the ultimate message of *East of Eden* and the heart of Steinbeck's philosophy: the Hebrew concept of *timshel*, which Lee happens to have picked up from a learned old rabbi. *Timshel*, we're told, means "Thou mayest"; in other words, thou hast a choice. "I have a new love for that glittering instrument, the human soul. It is a lovely and unique thing in the universe. It is always attacked and never destroyed—because 'Thou mayest.'" And he can cook, too!

On the positive side, Steinbeck's descriptive style is by now highly fluent and convincing. How surely, for instance, he evokes the town's brothels:

They seemed very small, and they tried to efface themselves in outside neglect, and the wild overgrown front yards tried to hide them from the street. Remember how the shades were always drawn with little lines of yellow light around their edges? You could hear only a murmur from within. Then the front door would open to admit a country boy, and you'd hear laughter and perhaps the soft sentimental tone of an open-face piano with a piece of toilet chain across the strings, and then the door would close it off again.

In *East of Eden* the reporter Steinbeck is often effectively at the service of the novelist Steinbeck. Yes, the book is highly overheated, its fervid drama uninflected by humor or irony, but it's hard to forget.

The personal aspects of *Eden* are painful to relate. By the late 1940s, Steinbeck's second marriage had shattered. (Domestic life and giving birth to two boys, Thom and John, had kept Gwyn from the "creative" life she felt entitled to.) Late one night in 1948, Ed Ricketts's car was struck by a train. "The greatest man in the world is dying," Steinbeck told his pal Nathaniel Benchley. In despair he rushed to Monterey—arriving too late to see his friend alive—and, as Jackson J. Benson puts it in his monumental biography, *John Steinbeck, Writer* (1984),

With that sense of timing that only someone with show-business experience could have developed, Gwyn confronted John upon his return from California and told him that she wanted a divorce.

She also told him that she hadn't loved him for years and had been abundantly unfaithful to him. Benson circles around the real point—the Steinbeck family was up in arms to keep it

quiet—but Gwyn also tortured John with the "confession" that he was not the father of their second son.

In his book *The Other Side of Eden* (2001), the younger John dismisses this notion as preposterous, and indeed father and son were far too physically alike for it to be true. Gwyn was lying to hurt her husband. But Steinbeck had no way of knowing that at the time, and the hatred he came to feel for her saturates *East of Eden*. Adam Trask's wife, the sadistic, murderous, brothel-keeper Cathy (later Kate), torments him with the story that their twin boys are actually the sons of Adam's brother, Charles.

Young John's book is a horrifying portrait of dysfunction, his father alternately overprotective and indifferent, his mother alcoholic and violent. On his sixteenth birthday, he tells us, she became so drunkenly abusive that he threw a TV set out of the twelfth-story window of her apartment and then "punched her in the mouth as hard as I could, and hammered at her body for God knows how long." Therapist: "Why didn't you go to your father for protection after you beat your mother?" Young John:

I'd already given up thinking he would protect me from her insanity. He was into his Great Writer Bubble, so it wasn't like having a dad around, but instead having the Great Writer present. By the age of thirteen, I realized my father was an asshole.

Nevertheless, in interviews over the years both sons spoke affectionately and admiringly of their father, if not of his fathering.

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Steinbeck was only fifty when *East of Eden* was published, but very little of merit was to follow. Most disappointing to him was the failure of his years-long struggle to retell his beloved *Morte d'Arthur* for contemporary readers. (To get closer to the source he transplanted himself and his third wife, Elaine, to Arthur country for a year.) This effort was never completed and is of little value except as a reminder of Steinbeck's lifelong romance with the nobility of individual heroic effort. (His favorite book was *Don Quixote*.)

As had happened after *The Grapes of Wrath*, after *East of Eden* he was a writer without a subject, by now decisively cut off from his roots. For his first forty years, his worldview had been dominated by California, and when he abandoned it, he was deracinated. Hemingway, you feel, never looked back; Faulkner never left home. Steinbeck did leave home, choosing to live in New York, but he remained at heart a small-town guy, an outdoorsman, a fisherman, a handyman, not an urban sophisticate. His life in the big city was populated by well-known New-Yorkers-about-town: Abe Burrows, John O'Hara, Fred Allen, the Benchleys, Burgess Meredith, the Frank Loessers. When Joshua Logan invited him to a party for Princess Margaret, he told Elaine, "That's not the way I live." But it *was* the way he lived.

Still, he could never have written about Manhattan. What eventually gave him a new fictional world was the old whaling port of Sag Harbor on Long Island, in which he and Elaine (a happy marriage at last!) settled down for much of his final fifteen years—a kind of Monterey with a down-East accent. He could slop around, gossip with the locals, enjoy the waterfront—and observe. The result was his last novel, *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961), which, although hardly a masterpiece, was Steinbeck's best work since *East of Eden*.

This book is not only a geographical and sociological world away from everything that preceded it, it's also a new kind of novel for Steinbeck—a novel of moral crisis, told entirely in the first person, very much in the spirit if not the tone of East Coast novelists like his friend John O'Hara, James Gould Cozzens, John P. Marquand, Hamilton Basso (*The View from Pompey's Head*), and Sloan Wilson (*The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*). Its protagonist, who presents himself as a decent man and law-abiding citizen, is confronted with temptation and succumbs, almost committing a serious crime and betraying both his employer and a childhood friend—in effect, everything he believes in. At the end, he's a demoralized man, forced to acknowledge to himself exactly what he has become.

*The Winter of Our Discontent*, however, is not only about a personal crisis but about a greater one as well:

Readers seeking to identify the fictional people and places here described would do better to inspect their own communities and search their own hearts, for this book is about a large part of America today.

Steinbeck had found his last big subject—the moral deterioration of the times. *The Winter of Our Discontent* pits honest work against new, get-rich-quick money; decency against slickness and trickiness. Ethan Hawley's moments of weakness and the dishonesty of his adolescent son, reflecting the contemporary Charles Van Doren scandal, are deliberately projected as symptoms of a national collapse.

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It's not, then, by accident that Steinbeck's last ambitious project is called *Travels with Charley in Search of America* (1962). On his cross-continent trip in the camper he's named Rocinante, after Don Quixote's horse, he finds the old-fashioned virtues of independence and community more or less vanished. Everyone's on the move: "You got roots you sit and starve," a woman living in a mobile home tells him. In Monterey, his fantasy paradise, he's faced with the painful truth that "Doc," "Danny," and the Round Table of good-natured bums and big-hearted whores no longer exist—if they ever did. The horrible racism he encounters in New Orleans when a group of white women—"The Cheerleaders"—scream obscene and violent words at a tiny black girl being ushered into a newly desegregated school propels him back home, sickened for his country.

Steinbeck's heart, as always, is in the right place, but there's something artificial about *Charley*: many of the encounters he reports sound like pure inventions. His son John put it bluntly: "Thom and I are convinced that he never talked to any of those people.... He just sat in his camper and wrote all that shit."

During the Sixties he had become a kind of cultural ambassador for the United States, close to people like Yevgeny Yevtushenko and Dag Hammarskjöld. He had always been less radical than people thought he was—the outrage over injustice and poverty in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *In Dubious Battle* was personal, not ideological. He was, in fact, a liberal, middle-of-the-road Democrat—passionate about FDR, an ardent campaigner for Adlai Stevenson, and eventually close to Lyndon Johnson, whom he liked and vigorously supported, particularly on the Vietnam War.

This position did nothing to improve his standing with intellectuals, but it was sincere. He believed the Viet Cong were murderers, despised the draft-card burners back home, and

admired the American troops he encountered as a war reporter on a trip to Southeast Asia in 1966, only two years before his death. Young John was in Vietnam, and Steinbeck managed to get himself helicoptered to an exposed hill outpost where John was fighting. In a surreal moment, the mutually antagonistic father and son found themselves under fire together. The son was to write, "I saw my father behind some sandbags overlooking my position with his M-60 at the ready.... I mean, who, in God's name, was producing this movie?"

Steinbeck's final work years were spent on journalism, and his subject was almost inevitably America. A collection of think pieces and nostalgia called *America and Americans* (1966) reveals him at his most characteristic. He's moralizing, he's didactic, he's searching for big answers to big questions. He's generous and vulnerable and touchy. And he's more and more dismayed by what he sees around him: "I have named the destroyers of nations: comfort, plenty, and security—out of which grow a bored and slothful cynicism." You could say that by the end he had evolved into a kind of minor and irrelevant prophet, both disillusioned and irredeemably optimistic.

And he's become that unfashionable and embarrassing thing, a patriot. "I believe," he wrote at the end of his life,

that out of the whole body of our past, out of our differences, our quarrels, our many interests and directions, something has emerged that is itself unique in the world: America—complicated, paradoxical, bullheaded, shy, cruel, boisterous, unspeakably dear, and very beautiful.

Somewhere along the way, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" had turned into "My Country, 'Tis of Thee."

#### Notes

[\*] The first three volumes are *The Grapes of Wrath and Other Writings, 1936–1941*; *Novels and Stories, 1932–1937*; and *Novels, 1942–1952*.