

**John Steinbeck, American Writer**  
**by Dr. Susan Shillinglaw**



*Steinbeck in 1909 with his sister Mary, sitting on the red pony, Jill, at the Salinas Fairgrounds.*

John Steinbeck was born in the farming town of Salinas, California on 27 February 1902. His father, John Ernst Steinbeck, was not a terribly successful man; at one time or another he was the manager of a Sperry flour plant, the owner of a feed and grain store, the treasurer of Monterey County. His mother, the strong-willed Olive Hamilton Steinbeck, was a former teacher. As a child growing up in the fertile Salinas Valley —called the "Salad Bowl of the Nation" — Steinbeck formed a deep appreciation of his environment, not only the rich fields and hills surrounding Salinas, but also the nearby Pacific coast where his family spent summer weekends. "I remember my childhood names for grasses and secret flowers," he wrote in the opening chapter of *East of Eden*. "I remember where a toad may live and what time the birds awaken in the summer-and what trees and seasons smelled like."

The observant, shy but often mischievous only son had, for the most part, a happy childhood growing up with two older sisters, Beth and Esther, and a much-adored younger sister, Mary. Never wealthy, the family was nonetheless prominent in the small town of 3,000, for both parents engaged in community activities. Mr. Steinbeck was a Mason, Mrs. Steinbeck a member of the Order of the Eastern Star and founder of The Wanderers, a women's club that traveled vicariously through monthly reports. While the elder Steinbecks established their identities by sending roots deep in the community, their son was something of a rebel. Respectable Salinas circumscribed the restless and imaginative young John Steinbeck and he defined himself against "Salinas thinking." At age fourteen he decided to be a writer and spent hours as a teenager living in a world of his own making, writing stories and poems in his upstairs bedroom.

To please his parents he enrolled at Stanford University in 1919; to please himself he signed on only for those courses that interested him: classical and British literature, writing courses, and a smattering of science. The President of the English Club said that Steinbeck, who regularly attended meetings to read his stories aloud, "had no other interests or talents that I could make out. He was a writer, but he was that and nothing else" (Benson 69). Writing was, indeed, his passion, not only during the Stanford years but throughout his life. From 1919 to 1925, when he finally left Stanford without taking a degree, Steinbeck dropped in and out of the University, sometimes to work closely with migrants and bindlestiffs on California ranches. Those relationships, coupled with an early sympathy for the weak and defenseless, deepened his empathy for workers, the disenfranchised, the lonely and dislocated, an empathy that is characteristic in his work.

After leaving Stanford, he briefly tried construction work and newspaper reporting in New York City, and

then returned to his native state in order to hone his craft. In the late 1920s, during a three-year stint as a caretaker for a Lake Tahoe estate, he wrote several drafts of his first novel, *Cup of Gold* (1929) about the pirate Henry Morgan, and met the woman who would become his first wife, Carol Henning, a San Jose native. After their marriage in 1930, he and Carol settled, rent-free, into the Steinbeck family's summer cottage in Pacific Grove, she to search for jobs to support them, he to continue writing. During the decade of the 1930s Steinbeck wrote most of his best California fiction: *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932), *To a God Unknown* (1933), *The Long Valley* (1938), *Tortilla Flat* (1935), *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).

*To a God Unknown*, second written and third published, tells of patriarch Joseph Wayne's domination of and obsession with the land. Mystical and powerful, the novel testifies to Steinbeck's awareness of an essential bond between humans and the environments they inhabit. In a journal entry kept while working on this novel - a practice he continued all his life — the young author wrote: "the trees and the muscled mountains are the world — but not the world apart from man — the world and man — the one inseparable unit man and his environment. Why they should ever have been understood as being separate I do not know." His conviction that characters must be seen in the context of their environments remained constant throughout his career. His was not a man-dominated universe, but an interrelated whole, where species and the environment were seen to interact, where commensal bonds between people, among families, with nature were acknowledged. By 1933, Steinbeck had found his terrain; had chiseled a prose style that was more naturalistic, and far less strained than in his earliest novels; and had claimed his people - not the respectable, smug Salinas burghers, but those on the edges of polite society. Steinbeck's California fiction, from *To a God Unknown* to *East of Eden* (1952) envisions the dreams and defeats of common people shaped by the environments they inhabit.

Undoubtedly his ecological, holistic vision was determined both by his early years roaming the Salinas hills and by his long and deep friendship with the remarkable Edward Flanders Ricketts, a marine biologist. Founder of Pacific Biological Laboratories, a marine lab eventually housed on Cannery Row in Monterey, Ed was a careful observer of inter-tidal life: "I grew to depend on his knowledge and on his patience in research," Steinbeck writes in "About Ed Ricketts," an essay composed after his friend's death in 1948 and published with *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (1951). Ed Ricketts's influence on Steinbeck, however, struck far deeper than the common chord of detached observation. Ed was a lover of Gregorian chants and Bach; Spengler and Krishnamurti; Whitman and Li Po. His mind "knew no horizons," writes Steinbeck. In addition, Ricketts was remarkable for a quality of acceptance; he accepted people as they were and he embraced life as he found it. This quality he called non-teleological or "is" thinking, a perspective that Steinbeck also assumed in much of his fiction during the 1930s. He wrote with a "detached quality," simply recording what "is."

The working title for *Of Mice and Men*, for example, was "Something That Happened" - this is simply the way life is. Furthermore, in most of his fiction Steinbeck includes a "Doc" figure, a wise observer of life who epitomizes the idealized stance of the non-teleological thinker: Doc Burton in *In Dubious Battle*, Slim in *Of Mice and Men*, Casy in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Lee in *East of Eden*, and of course "Doc" himself in *Cannery Row* (1945) and the sequel, the rollicking *Sweet Thursday* (1954). All see broadly and truly and empathetically. Ed Ricketts, patient and thoughtful, a poet and a scientist, helped ground the author's ideas. He was Steinbeck's mentor, his alter ego, and his soul mate. Considering the depth of his eighteen-year friendship with Ricketts, it is hardly surprising that the bond acknowledged most frequently in Steinbeck's oeuvre is friendship between and among men.

Steinbeck's writing style as well as his social consciousness of the 1930s was also shaped by an equally compelling figure in his life, his wife Carol. She helped edit his prose, urged him to cut the Latinate phrases, typed his manuscripts, suggested titles, and offered ways to restructure. In 1935, having finally published his first popular success with tales of Monterey's paisanos, *Tortilla Flat*, Steinbeck, goaded by Carol, attended a few meetings of nearby Carmel's John Reed Club. Although he found the group's zealotry distasteful, he, like so many intellectuals of the 1930s, was drawn to the communists' sympathy for the working man. Farm workers in California suffered. He set out to write a "biography of a strikebreaker," but from his interviews with a hounded organizer hiding out in nearby Seaside, he turned from biography to fiction, writing one of the best strike novels of the 1900s, *In Dubious Battle*. Never a partisan novel, it dissects with a steady hand both the ruthlessness of the strike organizers and the rapaciousness of the greedy landowners. What the author sees as dubious about the struggle between organizers and farmers is not who will win but how profound is the effect on the workers trapped in between, manipulated by both interests.

At the height of his powers, Steinbeck followed this large canvas with two books that round-out what might be called his labor trilogy. The tightly-focused *Of Mice and Men* was one of the first in a long line of "experiments," a word he often used to identify a forthcoming project. This "play-novelle," intended to be both a novella and a script for a play, is a tightly-drafted study of bindlestiffs through whose dreams he wanted to represent the universal longings for a home. Both the text and the critically-acclaimed 1937 Broadway play (which won the 1937-1938 New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for best play) made Steinbeck a household name, assuring his popularity and, for some, his infamy. His next novel intensified popular debate about Steinbeck's gritty subjects, his uncompromising sympathy for the disenfranchised, and his "crass" language.

*The Grapes of Wrath* sold out an advance edition of 19,804 by 1939 mid-April; was selling 10,000 copies per week by early May; and had won the Pulitzer Prize for the year (1940). Published at the apex of the Depression, the book about dispossessed farmers captured the decade's angst as well as the nation's legacy of fierce individualism, visionary prosperity, and determined westward movement. It was, like the best of Steinbeck's novels, informed in part by documentary zeal, in part by Steinbeck's ability to trace mythic and biblical patterns. Lauded by critics nationwide for its scope and intensity, *The Grapes of Wrath* attracted an equally vociferous minority opinion. Oklahoma congressman Lyle Boren said that the dispossessed Joad's story was a "dirty, lying, filthy manuscript." Californians claimed the novel was a scourge on the state's munificence, and an indignant Kern County, its migrant population burgeoning, banned the book well into the 1939-1945 war. The righteous attacked the book's language or its crass gestures: Granpa's struggle to keep his fly buttoned was not, it seemed to some, fit for print. *The Grapes of Wrath* was a cause celebre. The author abandoned the field, exhausted from two years of research trips and personal commitment to the migrants' woes, from the five-month push to write the final version, from a deteriorating marriage to Carol, and from an unnamed physical malady. He retreated to Ed Ricketts and science, announcing his intention to study seriously marine biology and to plan a collecting trip to the Sea of Cortez. The text Steinbeck and Ricketts published in 1941, *Sea of Cortez* (reissued in 1951 without Ed Ricketts's catalogue of species as *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*), tells the story of that expedition. It does more, however. The Log portion that Steinbeck wrote (from Ed's notes) in 1940 - at the same time working on a film in Mexico, *The Forgotten Village* - contains his and Ed's philosophical musings, his ecological perspective, as well as keen observations on Mexican peasantry, hermit crabs, and "dryball" scientists. Quipped *New York Times* critic Lewis Gannett, there is, in *Sea of Cortez*, more "of the whole man, John Steinbeck, than any of his novels": Steinbeck the keen observer of life, Steinbeck the scientist, the seeker of truth, the historian and journalist, the writer.

Steinbeck was determined to participate in the war effort, first doing patriotic work (*The Moon Is Down*, 1942, a play-novelle about an occupied Northern European country, and *Bombs Away*, 1942, a portrait of bomber trainees) and then going overseas for the *New York Herald Tribune* as a war correspondent. In his war dispatches he wrote about the neglected corners of war that many journalists missed - life at a British bomber station, the allure of Bob Hope, the song "Lili Marlene," and a diversionary mission off the Italian coast. These columns were later collected in *Once There Was a War* (1958). Immediately after returning to the States, a shattered Steinbeck wrote a nostalgic and lively account of his days on Cannery Row, *Cannery Row* (1945). In 1945, however, few reviewers recognized that the book's central metaphor, the tide pool, suggested a way to read this non-teleological novel that examined the "specimens" who lived on Monterey's Cannery Row, the street Steinbeck knew so well.

Steinbeck often felt misunderstood by book reviewers and critics, and their barbs rankled the sensitive writer, and would throughout his career. A book resulting from a post-war trip to the Soviet Union with Robert Capa in 1947, *A Russian Journal* (1948), seemed to many superficial. Reviewers seemed doggedly either to misunderstand his biological naturalism or to expect him to compose another strident social critique like *The Grapes of Wrath*. Commonplace phrases echoed in reviews of books of the 1940s and other "experimental" books of the 1950s and 1960s: "complete departure," "unexpected." A humorous text like *Cannery Row* seemed fluff to many. Set in La Paz, Mexico, *The Pearl* (1947), a "folk tale. . . a black-white story like a parable" as he wrote his agent, tells of a young man who finds an astounding pearl, loses his freedom in protecting his wealth, and finally throws back into the sea the cause of his woes. Reviews noted this as another slim volume by a major author of whom more was expected. *The Wayward Bus* (1947), a "cosmic Bus," sputtered as well.

Steinbeck faltered both professionally and personally in the 1940s. He divorced the loyal but volatile Carol in 1943. That same year he moved east with his second wife, Gwyndolen Conger, a lovely and talented woman nearly twenty years his junior who ultimately came to resent his growing stature and feel that her

own creativity - she was a singer - had been stifled. With Gwyn, Steinbeck had two sons, Thom and John, but the marriage started falling apart shortly after the second son's birth, ending in divorce in 1948. That same year Steinbeck was numbed by Ed Ricketts's death. Only with concentrated work on a film script on the life of Emiliano Zapata for Elia Kazan's film *Viva Zapata!* (1952) would Steinbeck gradually chart a new course. In 1949 he met and in 1950 married his third wife, Elaine Scott, and with her he moved again to New York City, where he lived for the rest of his life. Much of the pain and reconciliation of those late years of the 1940s were worked out in two subsequent novels: his third play-novelle *Burning Bright* (1950), a boldly experimental parable about a man's acceptance of his wife's child fathered by another man, and in the largely autobiographical work he'd contemplated since the early 1930s, *East of Eden* (1952). "It is what I have been practicing to write all of my life," he wrote to painter and author Bo Beskow early in 1948, when he first began research for a novel about his native valley and his people; three years later when he finished the manuscript he wrote his friend again, "This is 'the book'...Always I had this book waiting to be written." With *Viva Zapata!*, *East of Eden*, *Burning Bright* and later *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961), Steinbeck's fiction becomes less concerned with the behavior of groups - what he called in the 1930s "group man" - and more focused on an individual's moral responsibility to self and community. The detached perspective of the scientist gives way to a certain warmth; the ubiquitous "self-character" that he claimed appeared in all his novels to comment and observe is modeled less on Ed Ricketts, more on John Steinbeck himself. Certainly with his divorce from Gwyn, Steinbeck had endured dark nights of the soul, and *East of Eden* contains those turbulent emotions surrounding the subject of wife, children, family, and fatherhood. "In a sense it will be two books," he wrote in his journal (posthumously published in 1969 as *Journal of a Novel: The "East of Eden" Letters*) as he began the final draft in 1951, "the story of my country and the story of me. And I shall keep these two separate." Early critics dismissed as incoherent the two-stranded story of the Hamiltons, his mother's family, and the Trasks, "symbol people" representing the story of Cain and Abel; more recently critics have come to recognize that the epic novel is an early example of metafiction, exploring the role of the artist as creator, a concern, in fact, in many of his books. Like *The Grapes of Wrath*, *East of Eden* is a defining point in his career. During the 1950s and 1960s the perpetually "restless" Steinbeck traveled extensively throughout the world with his third wife, Elaine. With her, he became more social. Perhaps his writing suffered as a result; some claim that even *East of Eden*, his most ambitious post-*Grapes* novel, cannot stand shoulder to shoulder with his searing social novels of the 1930s. In the fiction of his last two decades, however, Steinbeck never ceased to take risks, to stretch his conception of the novel's structure, to experiment with the sound and form of language. *Sweet Thursday*, sequel to *Cannery Row*, was written as a musical comedy that would resolve Ed Ricketts's loneliness by sending him off into the sunset with a true love, Suzy, a whore with a gilded heart. The musical version by Rodgers and Hammerstein, *Pipe Dream*, was one of the team's few failures. In 1957 he published the satiric *The Short Reign of Pippin IV*, a tale about the French Monarchy gaining ascendancy. And in 1961, he published his last work of fiction, the ambitious *The Winter of Our Discontent*, a novel about contemporary America set in a fictionalized Sag Harbor (where he and Elaine had a summer home). Increasingly disillusioned with American greed, waste, and spongy morality - his own sons seemed textbook cases - he wrote his jeremiad, a lament for an ailing populace. The following year, 1962, Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature; the day after the announcement the New York Times ran an editorial by the influential Arthur Mizener, "Does a Writer with a Moral Vision of the 1930s Deserve the Nobel Prize?" Wounded by the blindsided attack, unwell, frustrated and disillusioned, John Steinbeck wrote no more fiction.

But the writer John Steinbeck was not silenced. As always, he wrote reams of letters to his many friends and associates. In the 1950s and 1960s he published scores of journalistic pieces: "Making of a New Yorker," "I Go Back to Ireland," columns about the 1956 national political conventions, and "Letters to Alicia," a controversial series about a 1966 White House-approved trip to Vietnam where his sons were stationed. In the late 1950s — and intermittently for the rest of his life — he worked diligently on a modern English translation of a book he had loved since childhood, Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*; the unfinished project was published posthumously as *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* (1976). Immediately after completing *Winter*, the ailing novelist proposed "not a little trip of reporting," he wrote to his agent Elizabeth Otis, "but a frantic last attempt to save my life and the integrity of my creativity pulse." In 1960, he toured America in a camper truck designed to his specifications, and on his return published the highly praised *Travels with Charley in Search of America* (1962), another book that both celebrates American individuals and decries American hypocrisy; the climax of his journey is his visit to the New Orleans "cheerleaders" who daily taunted black children newly registered in white schools. His

disenchantment with American waste, greed, immorality and racism ran deep. His last published book, *America and Americans* (1966), reconsiders the American character, the land, the racial crisis, and the seemingly crumbling morality of the American people.

In these late years, in fact since his final move to New York in 1950, many accused John Steinbeck of increasing conservatism. True enough that with greater wealth came the chance to spend money more freely. And with status came political opportunities that seemed out of step for a "radical" of the 1930s: he initially defended Lyndon Johnson's views on the war with Vietnam (dying before he could, as he wished, qualify his initial responses). And true enough that the man who spent a lifetime "whipping" his sluggard will (read *Working Days: The Journals of "The Grapes of Wrath"* [1989] for biting testimony of the struggle) felt intolerance for 1960s protesters whose zeal, in his eyes, was unfocused and whose anger was explosive, not turned to creative solutions. But it is far more accurate to say that the author who wrote *The Grapes of Wrath* never retreated into conservatism.

He lived in modest houses all his life, caring little for lavish displays of power or wealth. He always preferred talking to ordinary citizens wherever he traveled, sympathizing always with the disenfranchised. He was a Stevenson Democrat in the 1950s. Even in the 1930s, he was never a communist, and after three trips to Russia (1937, 1947, 1963) he hated with increasing intensity Soviet repression of the individual. In fact, neither during his life nor after has the paradoxical Steinbeck been an easy author to pigeonhole personally, politically, or artistically. As a man, he was an introvert and at the same time had a romantic streak, was impulsive, garrulous, a lover of jests and word play and practical jokes. As an artist, he was a ceaseless experimenter with words and form, and often critics did not "see" quite what he was up to. He claimed his books had "layers," yet many claimed his symbolic touch was cumbersome. He loved humor and warmth, but some said he slopped over into sentimentalism. He was, and is now recognized as, an environmental writer. He was an intellectual, passionately interested in his odd little inventions, in jazz, in politics, in philosophy, history, and myth - this range from an author sometimes labeled simplistic by academe. All said, Steinbeck remains one of America's most significant twentieth-century writers, whose popularity spans the world, whose range is impressive, whose output was prodigious: 16 novels, a collection of short stories, four screenplays (*The Forgotten Village, The Red Pony, Viva Zapata!, Lifeboat*), a sheaf of journalistic essays - including four collections (*Bombs Away, Once There Was a War, America and Americans, The Harvest Gypsies*) — three travel narratives (*Sea of Cortez, A Russian Journal, Travels with Charley*), a translation and two published journals (more remain unpublished). Three "play-novelettes" ran on Broadway: *Of Mice and Men, The Moon Is Down, and Burning Bright*, as did the musical *Pipe Dream*. Whatever his "experiment" in fiction or journalistic prose, he wrote with empathy, clarity, perspicuity: "In every bit of honest writing in the world," he noted in a 1938 journal entry, "...there is a base theme. Try to understand men, if you understand each other you will be kind to each other. Knowing a man well never leads to hate and nearly always leads to love."