

JOHN STEINBECK AS A SOCIAL REFORMER

By Winston Maxwell Jessup

Thesis presented to the Department of English of the University of Ottawa as partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Université d'Ottawa LA BIBLIOTHÈQUE  
 BIBLIOTHÈQUES  
 Ottawa  
 LIBRARIES  
 University of Ottawa  
 1963  
 Depuis corrigé  
 octobre  
 R. H. V. J. J.  
 Secret. grad. Div. S. O.

Ottawa, Canada, 1963

UMI Number: EC55956

### INFORMATION TO USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleed-through, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

**UMI<sup>®</sup>**

---

UMI Microform EC55956  
Copyright 2011 by ProQuest LLC  
All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against  
unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

---

ProQuest LLC  
789 East Eisenhower Parkway  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis was prepared under the supervision of Mr. Joseph Griffin, M.A., of the Department of English of the University of Ottawa.

The writer is indebted to Miss W.V. Buckels of the Department of National Defence Library for her assistance in arranging inter-library loans of reference material.

CURRICULUM STUDIORUM

Winston Maxwell Jessup was born December 15, 1915, in Cobalt, Ontario. He received the Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, in 1950.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
INTRODUCTION.....	v
I.- THE VOICE OF EXPERIENCE.....	1
II.- THE EXPERIENCE.....	12
III.- WRITER OF PROTEST.....	27
IV.- IN DUBIOUS BATTLE.....	40
V.- THE GRAPES OF WRATH.....	65
CONCLUSION.....	100
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	104
ABSTRACT OF <u>John Steinbeck as a Social Reformer</u>	

## INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, John Steinbeck will be evaluated as a social reformer in the field of labour relations concerning the migrant agricultural workers in the State of California. Steinbeck wrote two major works on this topic, and In Dubious Battle<sup>1</sup> and The Grapes of Wrath<sup>2</sup> certainly may be considered to be social novels. The former was an account of the attempt by Communist organizers to conduct a strike among orchard workers, while the latter followed the trek of a family, displaced from its farm in the "dust bowl" area of Oklahoma, which sought better times in agricultural California. Both novels described, in detail, the conditions under which migratory farm labourers were forced to exist during the years prior to the Second World War.

A biographical sketch of John Steinbeck will be presented to demonstrate his knowledge of this subject. A history of migrant labour in California will be followed by a description of the actual conditions which John Steinbeck deplored. These must be known if the veracity

---

1 John Steinbeck, In Dubious Battle, New York, Covici-Friede, 1936.

2 John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, New York, Viking Press, 1939.

## INTRODUCTION

vi

of his writings is to be accepted. In order to evaluate John Steinbeck as a writer of protest, his motives will be considered and his two novels, In Dubious Battle and The Grapes of Wrath, will be studied in detail. Because most of the attacks on these books have been based on the accuracy of Steinbeck's descriptions of events, the events described will be related to actual incidents which occurred in California. The Conclusion will contain a list of reforms in labour conditions which may well be attributed to the influence of Steinbeck's social novels.

Although In Dubious Battle and The Grapes of Wrath describe conditions which prevailed twenty-five to thirty years ago, the situation of unorganized labour is still open to abuses. A study of Steinbeck's social novels is timely now, since he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1940 for The Grapes of Wrath, and, in October, 1962, he won the Nobel Prize for Literature with his latest novel, The Winter of Our Discontent.<sup>3</sup>

No major work has been written about Steinbeck's role as a social reformer, although a large number of articles, favourable and otherwise, has appeared in periodicals over the past twenty-five years. All of these

---

<sup>3</sup> John Steinbeck, The Winter of Our Discontent, New York, Viking Press, 1961, p. 5-311.

## INTRODUCTION

vii

articles, if available, were examined, and those pertinent to this study will be included in the Bibliography. The facilities of the National Defence Library and the Ottawa Carnegie Library, as well as those of the libraries of the University of Ottawa and Carleton University have been used extensively. In addition, inter-library loans were arranged with the National Library, Parliamentary Library, Department of Agriculture Library, and the libraries of the University of Toronto and the University of Manitoba. From these sources were obtained most of the articles about John Steinbeck and the labour conditions of which he wrote. Various modern statistics on farming in the United States have been examined, also, to compare present agricultural conditions with those described in In Dubious Battle and The Grapes of Wrath.

## CHAPTER 1

## THE VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

John Ernst Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California, on 27 February, 1902. Salinas is the county seat of Monterey County, and the Salinas Valley roughly parallels the coast, thirty miles or so inland, for most of its length of about a hundred and twenty miles. Salinas itself is eighty miles south of San Francisco, and is the centre of California's lettuce industry. The rich, black soil, which is reclaimed swampland, produces several crops of fine lettuce a year, and at a time when no other lettuce in the United States is maturing. In addition, large areas which once supported cattle are now devoted to sugar beets, broccoli, carrots, and cauliflower. The Salinas Valley is typical of the agricultural areas of California, and it was here that John Steinbeck got the first-hand knowledge which he displays with such effect in his social novels In Dubious Battle and The Grapes of Wrath.

Steinbeck, reminiscent of the lettuce farming, writes:

The need for labor became great. We brought in Filipinos to cut and chop the lettuce (...) In addition the cutting and packing sheds required

## THE VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

2

labor. Women and men prepared the lettuce for the crates, and icers, and nailers. These were migrant people who went from one place to another as the crops came in. There were a great many of them, and they worked, some by the hour and some by piece work. Eventually, as was inevitable, these people decided that they wanted to have a union (...) The owners yelled that Communists were behind it all, and maybe they were (...) I guess wages were pretty low and profits pretty high. So now they had a union, the shed people made demands for higher wages, and, when they were refused, went on strike.<sup>1</sup>

Here, in one paragraph, is an almost complete outline of the situation as it was in California. The large-scale farming methods produced a requirement for large numbers of low-cost labourers. In order to play one class off against another, Filipinos and Japanese were used in the fields, while white migrant workers were employed in the plants during the harvests. It appears that the migrants, rather than the field-workers, began to organize, and the usual reaction from the growers resulted. When wage demands were not met, the workers struck.

A criticism aimed directly at Steinbeck's social novels was that the conditions described, either never existed, or, if they did, were greatly exaggerated.

---

<sup>1</sup> John Steinbeck, "There's Always Something To Do In Salinas", in Holiday, Vol.17, No.6, June 1955, p. 58.

## THE VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

3

Mr. Frank J. Taylor spoke about "the broad accusations hurled so heedlessly in The Grapes of Wrath."<sup>2</sup> This raises the question, then, "Does Steinbeck know whereof he writes?" It is obvious that he is familiar with the situation of the lettuce-workers in Salinas, and their attempts to organize.

Steinbeck, in the aforementioned articles in Holiday, goes on to describe the strike of the shed people, and how the local authorities submitted to the orders of a self-appointed, red-baiting, strike-breaker. This same incident is described in detail by Edward Robbin, who called it "perhaps the first open alliance in America of industry and government to crush civil rights."<sup>3</sup> These are the ingredients of In Dubious Battle; a hostile police, vigilantes, tear gas, and clubs to beat strikers. As Steinbeck says, "There's always something to do in Salinas."

As a boy, John Steinbeck worked with cattle, ran cultivators, picked fruit, and once was a straw boss on

---

<sup>2</sup> Frank J. Taylor, Jr., "California's Grapes of Wrath", in The Forum, Vol.102, No.5, November 1939, p. 238.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Robbin, "The General Staff Takes Charge", in The Nation, Vol.143, No.18, October 31, 1936, p. 520.

## THE VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

4

a Valley ranch. For a while he worked in the laboratory of the great Spreckel's sugar refinery, near Salinas. It was under these circumstances that Steinbeck learned the vocabulary of his labouring characters. As he wrote, while still working on In Dubious Battle:

I know this speech and I'm sick of working-men being gelded of their natural expression, until they talk with a fine Oxonian flavor (...)  
A workingman bereft of his profanity is a silent man.<sup>4</sup>

Steinbeck's workingmen are not silent.

It is apparent, therefore, that John Steinbeck is familiar with agricultural workers and the conditions under which they laboured. He is familiar, also, with the attempts of these workers to organize. In Dubious Battle is not just a story of workers - its heroes are Communist organizers. One of the objections made to this story is that Steinbeck diverged from the "party line". His answer is, "My information came from Irish and Italian Communists whose training was in the field, not in the drawing room."<sup>5</sup>

John Steinbeck was not, primarily, a labourer.

---

<sup>4</sup> Lewis Gannett, "John Steinbeck: Novelist at Work", in The Atlantic Monthly, Vol.176, No.6, December, 1945, p. 57.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

## THE VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

5

His mother taught for many years in the public schools in the Salinas Valley, and John Ernst Steinbeck, Sr., was Treasurer of Monterey County. The young Steinbeck did not experience poverty until he set out to earn his living as a writer. In 1919, he entered Stanford university, where he took courses in English and history. Although he attended intermittently for five years, he did not graduate, probably because he insisted on choosing his own courses. During those periods when he was not in attendance at Stanford, Steinbeck worked on ranches, and on a road gang. Here, again, he gained an intimate knowledge of the attitudes, habits, and speech of the workingman. In the mid-twenties he went to New York, where he had a short career as a writer for the New York Journal. He also spent some time as a free-lance writer before returning to California to write his first book.

In an autobiographical glimpse of Steinbeck's youth, "There's Always Something To Do In Salinas", may be found some of the material which later found its way into The Grapes of Wrath. This novel has a narrative which is interrupted and interpreted by a series of interchapters. The second interchapter, Chapter 7, describes a used-car lot which can only reflect a youthful

## THE VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

6

memory of Steinbeck. In The Grapes of Wrath, the used-car dealer said, "Listen, Jim. I heard that Chevy's rear end (...) Squirt in a couple of quarts of sawdust. Put some in the gears too."<sup>6</sup> The sales talk sounds like the "spiel" of a barker in a side-show: "Guarantee? We guaranteed it to be an automobile. We didn't guarantee to wet-nurse it."<sup>7</sup> This is pure memory. Of his youthful days, Steinbeck wrote:

In the days of the Depression, one of the centres of social life was the used-car dealer's lot. I got to know one of these men of genius and he taught me quite a bit about this business which had become a fine art. I learned to detect sawdust in the crankcase (...) To watch and listen to a good used-car man was a delight, but the razzle-dazzle was triumphant. It was a dog-eat-dog contest and the customer who didn't beware was unfortunate, for no guarantee went beyond the curb.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, when Al Joad reported the details of the truck purchase to the family conference, he said, "Stuck my fingers in the differential and they wasn't no sawdust. Opened the gearbox and they wasn't no sawdust."<sup>9</sup>, and,

---

<sup>6</sup> John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, New York, Viking Press, 1939, p. 85.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>8</sup> John Steinbeck, "Jalopies I Have Cursed and Loved", in Holiday, Vol.16, No.1, July 1954, p. 45.

<sup>9</sup> John Steinbeck, Op. Cit., p. 137.

## THE VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

7

Reason I says buy her is she was pop'lar car. Wreckin' yards is full a Hudson Super-Sixes, an' you can buy parts cheap. Could a got a bigger, fancier car for the same money, but parts too hard to get, an' too dear.<sup>10</sup>

This is the voice of Steinbeck's experience. In his youth he bought a big Marmon with an aluminum body, because big used cars were a drug on the market during the "Depression", and he could not afford to buy a smaller, more popular make of car. Like those on the Joad's truck, its tires were smooth, but no fabric showed. But when the rear end of the Marmon broke down, it took young John two weeks to find a similar model in a wrecker's yard, and two days of haggling to get the price down to where he could afford to buy the parts. This experience is remembered in The Grapes of Wrath, when the Wilson's car burned out a connecting-rod bearing on the trek to California. Tom and Al Joad had no trouble in locating a wrecked 1925 Dodge; and, as in Steinbeck's repair to the Marmon, they had to remove the parts themselves, with the wrecker lending the tools.<sup>11</sup> Steinbeck reported on his experience:

I drained the rear end, removed the covers, and heavy black grease ran down my sleeve and

---

<sup>10</sup> Idem.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 243.

## THE VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

8

into my hair. I had no special tools, only a wrench, pliers, and a screwdriver.<sup>12</sup>

Al and Tom Joad had only a wrench and a pair of pliers, and when Tom loosened the oil cap, "the black oil flowed down his arm."<sup>13</sup> The description of this roadside repair is masterly. Tom Joad is a good amateur mechanic, and so is his creator.

The publication of The Grapes of Wrath resulted in self-righteous objections, not only in California, but in Oklahoma, as well. The Altus, Oklahoma Times-Democrat stated:

A lot has been written about John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath, and we will not undertake to compete with the highbrow critics who have pronounced it swell literature. It may be (...) the book is now in its seventh printing so we must be all wrong when we say it's lousy and 95 per cent trash.<sup>14</sup>

Much of the so-called criticism of The Grapes of Wrath in Oklahoma has been no more than efforts to prove or disprove the accuracy of Steinbeck's story. The Head of the Department of Sociology at Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College spoke, however, at an interview, on

---

12 John Steinbeck, Op. Cit., p. 89.

13 John Steinbeck, Op. Cit., p. 232.

14 "Red Meat and Red Herrings", in The Commonweal, Vol.30., No.25, October 13, 1939, p. 563.

## THE VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

9

the economic and social problems involved.

The farm migrant, as described in Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath, was the logical consequence of privation, insecurity, low income, inadequate standards of living, impoverishment in matters of education and cultural opportunities, and a lack of spiritual satisfaction.<sup>15</sup>

The Kern County, California, Board of Supervisors ordered a ban on the book, and the Associated Farmers of Kern County considered it a "smear on the good name of Kern, California"<sup>16</sup>. The East Bay Labor Journal of Oakland, California, claimed, however:

John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath, a terrific exposure of the inhuman treatment of migratory workers by California employers has fallen under the ban of the so-called "Associated Farmers", a blind for the worst labor-baiters in the state. The organization has launched a campaign to block the sale of the book. It has met with some success.<sup>17</sup>

Most of these claims and counter-claims represent the views of interested parties, but such observers as Professor Duncan of the Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College and Carey McWilliams<sup>18</sup>, one-time

---

15 Martin Staples Shockley in "The Reception of The Grapes of Wrath in Oklahoma", in American Literature, Vol.15, March 1940 to January 1944, p. 356.

16 "Attempts to Suppress The Grapes of Wrath," in The Publishers' Weekly, Vol.86, No.10, September 2, 1939, p. 177.

17 "Red Meat and Red Herrings", in The Commonweal, p. 562.

18 Carey McWilliams, Factories in the Field, Boston, Little, Brown & Company, 1939, 334 p.

Commissioner of Immigration and Housing for the State of California, should be above bias, and they both support John Steinbeck without reservations.

There is little question that Steinbeck had experienced the conditions of which he wrote. While driving home from the East, he joined a band of migrant workers in Oklahoma. He lived with them in their make-shift camps, and worked beside them when they got to California. During this period, while writing The Grapes of Wrath, he lived in one of the federal migrant camps in Central California, and performed farm labour with the migrants.<sup>19</sup> He avoided neither troubles nor hardships to gain first-hand knowledge of the conditions about which he was writing.

John Steinbeck was born and raised in the agricultural area of California in which his novels are set. He had observed the evolution on the land, from grazing to vegetable farming, and with it, the growing demand for large numbers of transient workers on the great farms. He had worked beside farm labourers, and had seen their

---

<sup>19</sup> Peter Lisca, "John Steinbeck: A Literary Biography", in Steinbeck and his Critics, compiled by E.W. Tedlock, Jr., and C.V. Wicker, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1957, p. 12-13.

## THE VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

11

attempts to organize, and the resultant punitive action. Significantly, because of his family's social position in Salinas, he had been exposed, as well, to the viewpoints of the employers and the townspeople. Surely, John Steinbeck knows whereof he writes; he writes from experience.

## CHAPTER 11

## THE EXPERIENCE

It has been established, in Chapter 1, that John Steinbeck was familiar with the conditions of which he wrote, but a broader knowledge of these conditions is essential. To evaluate Steinbeck as a social writer, it is necessary to know and understand the conditions which existed during the periods covered by In Dubious Battle and The Grapes of Wrath.

A thorough study has been made of the history of agriculture in California, and three unique characteristics have been observed. The first is the phenomenon of the tenure of great tracts of land by a few wealthy owners, which has been inherent in California agriculture since the Spanish occupation. The second characteristic is the great variety of crops. Due to a combination of different soils and a two-season year, over one hundred and eighty specialty crops are grown; crops are maturing in one place or another throughout the year. The combination of these characteristics, i.e., large-scale farming with crops maturing at different times, produced the third characteristic. This is the requirement for a large floating labour force which will move from crop to crop, and then when no longer needed, disappear until the next

harvest. There had been little change in these characteristics since their inception, and this fact resulted in the shocking circumstances of farm labour in California in the 1930's.

The congregation of great areas under a few owners began with a swindle in Mexican land grants during the cession of California to the United States. The railroads later aided and abetted this congregation. By 1870 they had some twenty million acres which had been given to them along rights of way.<sup>1</sup> Speculators obtained much of this land, and again a few individuals gained control. The State itself gave away much of its land to influential speculators, politicians, and public servants. The whole story of the distribution of land in California is a tale of scandal, but the concern of this paper is the result; that instead of being settled, the fertile land was monopolized by wheat and cattle barons.

Farming in California was largely pastoral until 1860 when wheat-farming became popular. The use of machinery made wheat a crop well-suited to large-scale operations, and as it required little labour except during

---

1 Carey McWilliams, Factories in the Field, Boston, Little, Brown & Company, 1939, p. 15.

## THE EXPERIENCE

14

harvest, it offered quick returns. By 1890, California was the second highest state in wheat production.<sup>2</sup> The seasonal demand for labour had appeared, and white migratory workers, or "hobos", have ever since been a part of California farming. In 1886 the Proceedings of the State Agricultural Society stated:

Our nomadic herds of farm hands must have all the year employment and an abiding place with their work; they must be fed and housed as civilized men should be fed and housed; the wide gap between employed and unemployed must be closed.<sup>3</sup>

Fifty years

Fifty years later the same sort of thing was being said, but it was not in the growers' interests to provide "all the year employment," "an abiding place with their work," nor to "feed them and house them as civilized men."

After 1870 a drop in the price of wheat, the completion of a trans-continental railway, and the invention of the refrigerator car, all combined to encourage a switch to orchard crops. This transition led to an increased demand for transient labour, as there were more peak periods when the crop had to be harvested. A series of foreign migrant groups filled this need,

---

2 Ibid., p. 50.

3 Ibid., p. 56-57.

and they had much in common. The first were the Chinese, labourers made idle when the railroad was completed. They fell into disfavour, however, and were expelled. This departure of coolie labour cost California "over a half-million acres of farm land",<sup>4</sup> but the development of sugar-beet farming brought an influx of Japanese. The story was repeated with them, as it was with the Mexicans and the Filipinos who followed in quick succession.

As stated above, these groups had much in common. They were poor, and they were foreign, (except the Filipinos, who were naturalized Americans) and they had no families to care for. For these reasons they were wide open for exploitation, and exploited they were. The laws which would not protect them, protected their exploiters. They lived at subsistence level, asked for, and received, no accommodation, put in an appearance at the harvests, and conveniently disappeared afterwards. As a member of the California Fruit Growers' Exchange put it:

The Japs and Chinks just drift - we don't have to look out for them. White laborers with families, if we could get them, would be liabilities.<sup>5</sup>

---

4 Ibid., p. 105.

5 Ibid., p. 107.

## THE EXPERIENCE

16

All would have been well if each of these groups had not eventually tried to organize and ask for higher wages. When this happened they immediately became undesirable and they were expelled. The requirement was for a good worker who would accept starvation wages, require no shelter, do any type of work, and then disappear when no longer needed. Each of these groups had done this, originally, thus relieving the employers of any responsibility for their workers. The next migrants, after the Filipinos left, were the ones with whom this study is concerned; white Americans "tractored out" of the "dust bowl" of the Middle Western United States.

These refugees from the dust-bowl states of Texas, Arkansas, and Oklahoma, were known as "Okies", because the majority came from the last-mentioned state. A trickle of migrants had entered California from the Midwest in the 1920s when cotton became an important crop; with the "Depression" and the dust bowl conditions, this became a flood in the 1930s. A Senate Committee Report on "Unemployment and Relief" stated that between June 15, 1935, and December 31, 1937, more than two hundred and twenty-one thousand persons entered California by motor vehicle. It went on to state that "the serious displacement now in progress in the wake of the all-purpose farm

tractor has been scarcely noticed."<sup>6</sup> For a time the "Okies" were welcomed as there was a shortage of labour, but as soon as there was not enough work to go around, their presence was resented. Estimates, in 1939, of the total immigration range from three hundred thousand to half a million individuals.<sup>7</sup> The University of California estimated that in peak months the crops required one hundred and forty-four thousand, seven hundred extra workers, but by midwinter the demand dropped to fifty-nine thousand. There were at times, therefore, nearly eighty-six thousand more workers than jobs; and in 1939, the year in which The Grapes of Wrath was published, there was a surplus of fifty to seventy thousand workers even during the harvest period.<sup>8</sup>

Most of the migrants had exhausted what funds they had in reaching California, so they were penniless when they arrived. As it was quite impossible to save anything from the pitifully small wage being paid, they all went "on relief" as soon as the harvest season was over. Because of the system of relief payments in California, the large-scale growers were able to turn this sad

---

<sup>6</sup> Leon Whipple in "Novels on Social Themes", in Survey Graphic, Vol.28, No.6, June 1937, p. 401-402.

<sup>7</sup> Frank J. Taylor, Jr., "California's Grapes of Wrath", in The Forum, Vol.102, No.5, November 1939, p. 234.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 235.

## THE EXPERIENCE

18

situation to their financial advantage. Relief funds were obtained from the Federal Government, or in the case of the State Relief Administration, by indirect taxes. In the latter case, therefore, the burden of relief costs was borne largely by the heavily-populated urban centres. This meant, in effect, that the growers were being subsidized, since their workers were cared for during their non-productive periods at no cost to the employers. In order to exploit this situation still further, pressure was exerted on the State Relief Administration to suspend relief during the harvest seasons. This last step was necessary because the wages being paid were usually less than the amount a family would receive if on relief. To illustrate:

At 80 cents a hundred, working six days a week, a cotton picker would theoretically earn \$9.60 a week. Out of this he must pay his own transportation, buy his own cotton bag, and, usually, purchase supplies from a company store (...). The average family on relief in the San Joaquin Valley consists of four persons; the average state relief allowance for a family of this size is about \$43.45 a month (...). Moreover a family on relief can obtain allowances for medical care and emergencies. Thus at 80 cents a hundred, the cotton picker could not possibly make the equivalent of his relief budget. Living costs are high in California compared with other cotton producing areas and workers simply cannot live on the 80-cent rate.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Carey McWilliams, "The Joads on Strike", in The Nation, Vol.149, No.19, November 4, 1939, p. 489.

## THE EXPERIENCE

19

It is evident that migrant families had trouble even to exist on such meagre pay. Housing was one of their major problems. The Oriental and Mexican migrants had lived in tents or make-shift shelters during the harvest season, then conveniently disappeared into the cities or over the borders afterwards. The "Okies" had no other place to go, so they stayed on in flimsy shelters, which were not meant for the rainy California winters.

Outside nearly every agricultural community (...) is a shanty town or squatter camp. These are frightful places in which to live, devoid of adequate sanitation; often without pure water.<sup>10</sup>

While some attempt had been made to provide low-cost housing both by the growers and the Farm Security Administration, this housing was meant for permanent families. Little consideration had been given to the needs of the migrant workers. The Farm Security Administration had set up a few model camps by 1939, but the number was completely inadequate. These camps were similar to the one described in The Grapes of Wrath, and provided wooden tent platforms, toilets, showers, laundry facilities, and hot and cold water "the camps provide migratory workers, for the first time, with an adequate

---

<sup>10</sup> Frank J. Taylor, Jr., Op. Cit., p. 235.

## THE EXPERIENCE

20

supply of decent drinking water and proper sanitation."<sup>11</sup> The growers, generally, objected to these camps as hotbeds of radicalism, but there were other reasons, possibly more valid.

If my workmen live on the ranch and I tell them to be on hand at eight in the morning to pick peaches, they're on hand. If they're in a federal camp I don't know whether they'll be here or not. While I'm looking for other pickers peaches drop on the ground, and a year's work is gone.<sup>12</sup>

Another reason was that if the migrants had ceased to follow the crops and became residents, the rural communities would have become responsible for educating the children. In addition, the labourers, as residents, would have been entitled to vote, and thereby would have become more difficult to exploit. The growers did not want a stable labour force. When the harvest was over their interest in the harvesters ceased. As a direct result of this lack of interest, most of the migrants existed under shocking conditions.

In 1936 the State Relief Administration conducted an investigation into the conditions of housing, health and sanitation of migrant labour. The investigators

---

11 Carey McWilliams, Factories in the Field, p. 301

12 Frank Taylor, Jr., Op. Cit., p. 235.

## THE EXPERIENCE

21

agreed that "with the exception of one or two large ranches, the housing situation was indescribably wretched"<sup>13</sup>

The report of this investigation stated:

One investigator reported that he had found a two-room cabin in which forty-one people from South-eastern Oklahoma were living; another described a one-room shack in which fifteen men, women and children lived in "unimaginable filth"... Most of the boasted "model camps" maintained by the growers were found to be without baths, showers or plumbing; in most districts the workers bathed in, and drank from irrigation ditches. Eighteen families were found living near Kingsburg under a bridge. Workers in large numbers were found living in shacks built of linoleum and cardboard cartons; in tents improvised of gunny sacks on canal banks.<sup>14</sup>

Under such conditions it is not surprising that the "Okies" attempted to organize. This development, of course, did not originate with them. Attempts by farm labour to organize, and the resultant hostility of the growers, are, like subsistence wages and exploitation of workers, traditions of California agriculture. The original migrants, the Chinese, had been driven from the fields when they formed "tongs" in order to work as a group; the Japanese, Mexicans and Filipinos were expelled in turn, just as soon as they attempted to organize and

---

13 Carey McWilliams, Op. Cit., p. 316.

14 Ibid.,

## THE EXPERIENCE

22

strike for living wages. It was easy to inflame a community against those of another race or colour, especially when the victims had no roots and were unprotected by the laws of the land. It might have been thought that such repressions could not be carried out against fellow-countrymen, but this was not the case. Instead of race prejudice, the cry of "Communism" was raised, and while in theory all Americans had equal rights under the law, in practice both the law-enforcement agencies and the courts were on the side of the growers. Although they could, and did, harass and beat up labour organizers and striking labourers, the growers were unable to deport these fellow Americans.

Ironically, those most violent against the organization of labour were themselves very well organized. Exploitation of citrus farmers by brokers and shippers had led to the formation of that huge co-operative, the California Fruit Growers' Exchange. In 1936 this organization had 13,500 grower-members and represented 75 per cent of the citrus-growing acreage in California.<sup>15</sup> Another organization, the Associated Farmers of California,

---

<sup>15</sup> Frank Stokes, "Let the Mexicans Organize", in The Nation, Vol.143, No.25, December 19, 1936, p. 731.

(...) pledged to help one another in case of emergency. They agreed to co-operate to harvest crops in case of strikes and to offer their services to the local sheriff immediately as special deputies in the event of disorders arising out of picketing and sabotage.<sup>16</sup>

This organization, in one year, formed chapters in twenty-six counties, and its members have been called "bankers in overalls".

It is plainly and simply a front for big capital which knows exactly what it wants. It wants no united front for labor (...) It wants profits at all costs and it will use any tool at hand to insure or increase them.<sup>17</sup>

Between 1909 and 1913 the American Federation of Labor tried unsuccessfully to organize farm labor, but it ceased its efforts after the Wheatland Riot of 1913, where four laborers were killed in an attempt by growers, aided by the authorities, to break up a labor meeting. Throughout the ten years after the First World War, farm labour was completely unorganized, but during the depression years, when farm wages dropped, spontaneous strikes spread the length of the State. Communist organizers followed these strikes in order to unionize the workers. They received harsh treatment. During a

---

16 Carey McWilliams, Op. Cit., p. 232.

17 Howard Costigan, "The Maverick Far West", in The Nation, Vol.149, No.5, July 29, 1939, p. 123.

## THE EXPERIENCE

24

strike of fruit pickers at Vacaville, California in 1932,

(...) a masked mob of forty men in a score of cars took six strike leaders from the Vacaville jail, drove them twenty miles from town, flogged them with tug straps, clipped their heads with sheep clippers, and poured red enamel over them.<sup>18</sup>

Strike followed strike, each accompanied by violence, as vigilantes and police attacked the workers with pick handles, tear gas, and fire arms. Several workers were killed and the number of wounded was never counted. One strike which was characteristic of the employer-labourer attitudes of the day occurred in Salinas, the home town of John Steinbeck, in September 1936. This was a test of strength between the Union of Fruit and Vegetable Workers and the Associated Farmers. For three years the union had signed a contract with the lettuce growers in the Salinas Valley, but that year, due to pressure from the Associated Farmers, the growers refused to renew the contract. Five days before the strike began, a Colonel H.R. Sanborn arrived in Salinas and took command of the sheriff's office, the Chief of Police, and the State Highway Patrol. Under his "co-ordination",

About 250<sup>7</sup> citizens were deputized by the sheriff and sent through the city to disperse and drive out the pickets. Many of them were armed.

---

18 Carey McWilliams, Op. Cit., p. 215.

## THE EXPERIENCE

25

They were accompanied by police who threw tear-gas bombs into the crowds of pickets while the state highway patrol convoyed strike-breaking lettuce trucks.<sup>19</sup>

That these tactics were successful is attested by another report the following day:

Not a picket was in sight (...) Police believed they were in their homes nursing their wounds after being driven through the city with tear and sulphur gas, beaten with clubs, and finally driven from their union hall by a terrific blast of tear and nauseating gas.<sup>20</sup>

This suspension of the forces of law and order took place merely because a union wanted collective bargaining rights. The labour organizers were out-organized by the growers.

This then, was the world which Steinbeck described. These labour conditions were in existence fifty years before he deprecated them. The victims had changed from Chinese to Japanese, from Mexicans to Filipinos, and finally to the "Okies", but the pattern remained the same. The prejudice against migrant workers had always been intense in California, and these white Americans were treated in the same manner as their predecessors. As most of the "Okies" had not established legal residence

---

<sup>19</sup> "The Shape of Things" in The Nation, Vol.143, No.13, September 1936, p. 351.

<sup>20</sup> Edward Robbin, "The General Staff Takes Charge", in The Nation, Vol.143, No.18, October 31, 1936, p. 520.

## THE EXPERIENCE

26

because of the necessity to follow the crops, they could not be discriminated against without political repercussions. Let it not be thought that they were without champions; many of the small growers were on their side, but these had little influence. Until John Steinbeck drew national, indeed world-wide attention to the "Okies" plight, the political and economic power of their employers had prevented any effective alleviation of their miserable existence.

## CHAPTER 111

## WRITER OF PROTEST

The social novels of John Steinbeck certainly drew world-wide attention to the shameful labour conditions which prevailed in his native California. Although his first book in this field, In Dubious Battle, enjoyed only moderate popularity, The Grapes of Wrath sold at least two million copies and was translated into thirty-three languages.<sup>1</sup>

Steinbeck was called "a modern Dickens";<sup>2</sup> the impact of his social novels on the American scene was compared to that of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin;<sup>3</sup> and as a narrator of the theme "man pitted against the forces of Nature" his name was linked with that of Daniel Defoe.<sup>4</sup> In addition, he was compared to practically every modern English and American author.

---

1 "Steinbeck: Critical Thorns and a Nobel Laurel", in Newsweek, Vol.60, No.19, November 5, 1962, p. 65.

2 Hugh Holman, "A Narrow-Gauge Dickens", in New Republic, Vol.130, No.23, June 7, 1954, p. 20.

3 "Red Meat and Red Herrings", in The Commonweal, Vol.30, No.25, October 13, 1939, p. 562.

4 Joseph Warren Beach, "John Steinbeck: Art and Propaganda", in Steinbeck and His Critics, Compiled by E.W. Tedlock and C.V. Wicker, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, p. 265.

The comparison to Defoe was far-fetched, while the criticisms of his works in relation to those of his contemporaries was a normal circumstance. The comparison of Steinbeck with Dickens is, however, of much more interest in a study of Steinbeck as a social writer.

In every period of history there have been poverty and social injustice; and in every period there have been those who deprecated the inequality of the distribution of the world's goods and "man's inhumanity to man". Dickens and Steinbeck happened to have been born at times of particular social upheaval; with the former it was the Industrial Revolution; with the latter, a world-wide economic depression. Neither proposed a solution to the conditions which he deplored, but both aroused public interest in the plights of the unfortunates whom they described, and each possessed a deep affection for the poor and oppressed. Although they were both aware that, to a degree, the circumstances in which these people found themselves were the result of a lack of prudence and industry, neither writer permitted this to lessen his deep sympathy for the oppressed nor his anger with the oppressors. Dickens and Steinbeck displayed a common love for the common man. They were able to see the weaknesses portrayed by their fictional characters, and

to forgive these weaknesses without condoning them.

One of the main differences between the works of Dickens and those of Steinbeck is the characterization. Whereas Dickens was a master at minutely describing his characters so that the readers could visualize them clearly, Steinbeck's people tended to be faceless. Both writers were fond of eccentric and grotesque characters, but while Dickens tended to caricaturize these types, Steinbeck seemed to have an even deeper sympathy for them than for more normal persons. Dickens was, of course, a master of characterization, while Steinbeck has been criticized more on this point than on almost any other. It is considered that such criticisms lack a certain validity, for, while his characters may not be visualized clearly; they radiated life and energy by means of their language and activities.

There was a difference, too, in the abilities of Dickens and Steinbeck to use conversation. Except when they were drawn from the same social stratum as Dickens, the language of his characters often did not ring true. His nobles sounded too noble and his common people sounded too common. Generally, Steinbeck's characters in The Grapes of Wrath and In Dubious Battle sounded entirely authentic. His workingmen talked like workingmen.

This fact aroused some concern among readers who were not accustomed to the lurid speech of the labourer, and Steinbeck had reproduced it faithfully. This was a strength rather than a weakness, for, unlike Dickens, Steinbeck was repeating language he knew from actual experiences. As long as Steinbeck's characters spoke their own language they remained convincing and alive. More than occasionally, however, he had them speaking more like John Steinbeck, and the result was usually a stilted and unlikely piece of oratory. An example of this is Doc Burton's musings on the strike:

I want to watch these group-men, for they seem to me to be a new individual, not at all like single men. A man in a group isn't himself at all, he's a cell in an organism that isn't like him any more than the cells in your body are like you.<sup>5</sup>

or, even more incongruous, Ma's speech to her pregnant daughter:

You're gonna have a baby, Rosasharn, and that's somepin' to you lonely and away. That's gonna hurt you, an' the hurt'll be lonely hurt (...)  
They's a time of change, an' when that comes, dyin' is a piece of all dyin', and bearin' is a piece of all bearin', an' bearin' an' dyin' is two pieces of the same thing.<sup>6</sup>

---

5 John Steinbeck, In Dubious Battle, New York, Covici-Friede, 1936, p. 104.

6 John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, New York, Viking Press, 1939, p. 285-286.

Although the speeches of his characters sometimes do not ring true, Dickens was never guilty of putting such idealistic nonsense into the mouth of an uneducated female.

It is not the intention to carry further the comparison of Dickens and Steinbeck. In addition to writing in different centuries, they were writing for different audiences. In the nineteenth century only the well-to-do could read, and they would have found Steinbeck's characters quite inconceivable. The common factor remains, however; they both loved the poor and oppressed. As Ma Joad expressed it: "If you're in trouble or hurt or need - go to poor people. They're the only ones that'll help - the only ones."<sup>7</sup>

John Steinbeck's sympathies were with a traditionally exploited group - the migrant agricultural workers. He knew the people and he knew the work. Although he rarely explained the meaning of his works, in the following he had gone on record to show his real feelings. In October, 1936, in a letter to one of his agents, he wrote:

I must go over into the interior valleys. There are five thousand families starving to death there, not just **hungry**, but actually starving. The government is trying to feed them and get medical attention

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 513-514.

To them, with the fascist group of utilities and banks and huge growers sabotaging the thing all along the line (...) Do you know what they're afraid of? They think that if these people are allowed to live in camps with proper sanitary facilities they will organize, and that is the bugbear of the large landowner and the corporation farmer. The states and counties will give them nothing because they are outsiders. But the crops of any part of this state could not be harvested without them.... Talk about Spanish children. The death of children by starvation in our valleys is simply staggering (...) I'll do what I can.<sup>8</sup>

This letter, written shortly after the publication of In Dubious Battle, illustrated Steinbeck's intimate knowledge and deep concern with the situation.

In Dubious Battle dealt with a strike against highly-organized fruit-growers, fomented by two Communist agitators, and conducted by migrant fruit-pickers. The background of the dispute, the grievances of the workers, and the subsequent violence were all viewed through the eyes of the Communist agents. The one main incident, the strike, represented the whole struggle in California of the oppressed against their oppressors. In a tale of many, told through individuals, Steinbeck struck out against the growers' associations, the American Legion,

---

<sup>8</sup> Lewis Gannett, "John Steinbeck: Novelist At Work", in The Atlantic Monthly, Vol.176, No.6, December 1945, p. 59.

vigilantes, finance companies, and the administration of law and order. The story was a daring attempt to present the case of the exploited transient workers to the nation. Labour unions, in 1936, generally were not considered to be beneficial, and there was still a strong feeling that supply and demand should regulate wages. In an agricultural economy where the demand was great for only short periods, it was relatively simple to encourage a greater influx of labourers than was required and then cut wages. This was an accepted practice, and Steinbeck was one of the very few who raised any objection.

Although the sympathies of John Steinbeck were with the labourers and small farmers, he attempted a certain impartiality. While he berated the owners, his treatment of the strikers was not flattering. They were drawn as coarse, greedy, short-sighted, and cowardly; even their leaders were not heroic. He made his points by telling a story which, while it was not factual, could have happened. Many similar instances did occur. The story provided no blueprint for reform; it did not even finish the strike. Whether or not the strike proved successful was unimportant; Steinbeck's intention was to display the

facts as they were. The story was straight-forward, progressing logically to its inevitable conclusion, suggesting that man is nothing in himself, but only becomes significant as part of a group.

Men always like to work together. There's a hunger in men to work together (...) Most of the time they're suspicious, because every time someone gets 'em working in a group the profit of their work is taken away from them; but wait till they get working for themselves.<sup>9</sup>

Steinbeck did not advocate centralization of agriculture, however, for he believed that the profits of mass production would pass to urban shareholders, while the lives of the workers would be demeaned in the process. He was a firm believer in the dignity of the workingman. He emphasized in a later novel the natural bond between life and productive property, and the need for a piece of land to give dignity to a man.

Everybody wants a little bit of land, not much Jus' som'thin' that was his. Som'thin' he could live on and there couldn't nobody throw him off it.<sup>10</sup>

Jim Nolan, one of the Communist organizers, in In Dubious Battle, reflects this desire for dignity and security

---

9 John Steinbeck, Op. Cit., p. 43.

10 John Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men, Viking Press, New York, 1937, p. 83.

when he tells his companion:

I was scared I'd get caught like my mother and my old man - two-room flat and a wood stove. Christ knows I don't want luxury, but I don't want to get batted around the way all the kids I know get it.<sup>11</sup>

The second social novel, The Grapes of Wrath was wider in scope. It dealt not only with the problems of the migrant families in California, but also with the dust-bowl conditions in Oklahoma which drove them West. It contained the same cast of villains as In Dubious Battle; banks, farmers' associations, police, vigilantes, American Legion - the whole agricultural system. Steinbeck used the trials and tribulations of one family to draw attention to the exploitation of fellow Americans. Everyone in the United States knew that there was a dust-bowl, and that thousands of families were leaving it for greener fields. Steinbeck made this situation personal. He reduced the thousands of families to one - the Joad family, and by describing their adventures he was able to bring home to his readers that here was a real and shocking problem.

Steinbeck was familiar with all phases of the problem, and in this novel he touched on such subjects

---

<sup>11</sup> John Steinbeck, In Dubious Battle, p. 27.

## WRITER OF PROTEST

36

as the home, the family, the community, motherhood and fatherhood, as well as the political and economic atmosphere. The Joad family was forced by the dust-bowl conditions to borrow from the bank. When continuing conditions made repayment impossible, they were "tractored out" of their Oklahoma home and joined the great trek to California where jobs had been advertised. Complete at the beginning, the family almost immediately begins to lose members. and is altered somewhat with each loss. The situation in California was clearly illustrated as the Joads encountered border patrols, migrant shantytowns, strike-breaking, police brutality, native hostility, the greed of the landowners, and the only bright spot, a government camp. They experienced the whole gamut of agricultural oppression, and John Steinbeck exposed it for all to see.

He was particularly shocked by the use of brute force with pick-handles, tear gas and shotguns. His descriptions of such incidents were sharp and brutal. He did not, however, depict all the migrants as helpless victims; some of his more important characters were dangerous men. Tom Joad had killed once, and was to kill again, while the ex-preacher, Casy was not altogether a man of peace. Unlike the actions of their oppressors,

however, it is noteworthy that the violence of these heroes is in self-defence, or the defence of their friends.

The deputy, sitting on the ground, raised his gun again and then, suddenly, from the group of men, the Reverend Casy stepped. He kicked the deputy in the neck and then stood back as the heavy man crumpled into unconsciousness.<sup>12</sup>

It was mentioned earlier that John Steinbeck had joined a group of "Okies", made the trek West with them, and then worked beside them in California. He obviously had a deep sympathy for these poor unfortunates, as well as an empathy. In The Grapes of Wrath he again expounded his theory of the group being superior to the individual.

I lost my land (...) I am alone and bewildered. And in the night one family camps in a ditch and another family pulls in and the tents come out. The two men squat on their hams and the women and children listen.... Keep these two squatting men apart (...) for here "I lost my land" is changed; a cell is split and from its splitting grows the thing you hate - "We lost our land." The danger is here, for two men are not as lonely and perplexed as one.<sup>13</sup>

Although the Joad family twice joined other families, at the novel's end it is alone and disintegrating. As in In Dubious Battle, there is no neat ending. The

---

12 John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 361.

13 Ibid., p. 206.

situation is unresolved, the future unknown and uncertain, and no solution is offered.

The Grapes of Wrath and In Dubious Battle were not Steinbeck's only contributions. Between the appearance of these novels he wrote an article which could have served as a synopsis for The Grapes of Wrath. It described the plight of the dust-bowl refugees in California, and quoted facts and figures to support the author's indignation.<sup>14</sup> As in the two social novels, there was no question where his sympathies lay. It was particularly evident that, in The Grapes of Wrath at least, he was able to transmit this sympathy to his readers, for "Joad" became so much a part of the vocabulary of the United States that it could appear in the titles of associated social writings without explanation.<sup>15</sup>

Both social novels aroused much criticism, however. In Dubious Battle was assailed as Communist propaganda and did not achieve wide popularity, possibly because it was too close to the truth. The Grapes of Wrath, on the

---

<sup>14</sup> John Steinbeck, "In Dubious Battle in California," in The Nation, Vol.143, No.11, September 12, 1936, p. 302-304.

<sup>15</sup> Carey McWilliams, "What's Being Done About The Joads?" in The New Republic, Vol.90, No.1294, September 20, 1939, p. 178-180.

## WRITER OF PROTEST

39

other hand, was an instant success and aroused storms of protest from Oklahoma to the Pacific Ocean. It established Steinbeck's reputation as the greatest American writer of protest of his generation. In order to determine whether the reputation was deserved, a detailed study of the two social novels is considered to be necessary.

## CHAPTER 1V

## IN DUBIOUS BATTLE

John Steinbeck obtained the title for his first social novel, In Dubious Battle, from Milton's epic:

Innumerable force of Spirits armed,  
 That durst dislike His reign; and, me preferring,  
 His utmost power with adverse power opposed  
 In Dubious battle on the plains of heav'n,  
 And shook his throne. What though the field be lost?  
 All is not lost; th' unconquerable will,  
 And study of revenge, immortal hate  
 And courage never to submit or yield,  
 And what is else not to be overcome;<sup>1</sup>

In In Dubious Battle is a story about a strike against organized growers by a relatively unorganized group of transient fruit-pickers. The strike was seen through the eyes of two Communist agitators, and, as the story unfolded, John Steinbeck exposed for all to see, the unbelievably deplorable conditions of farm labour in California. It is proposed to first summarize the story, then to observe the institutions and situations to which Steinbeck objected and to relate his descriptions to actual occurrences, and lastly to demonstrate how his characters illustrated the evils inherent in the system. Of this novel, Steinbeck wrote, "I guess it is a brutal

---

1 John Milton, Paradise Lost, Book 1, lines 101-109.

## IN DUBIOUS BATTLE

41

book, more brutal because there is no author's point of view."<sup>2</sup>

The two Communist organizers, Jim Nolan, and his mentor, Mac, had been sent to the Torgas Valley to organize a strike among the apple-pickers. Mac described the situation to Jim, who was to accompany him for field training:

Now when the apples are ripe the fruit tramps come in and pick them (...) Now these few guys that own most of the Torgas Valley waited until most of the crop tramps were already there. They spent most of their money getting there, of course. They always do. And then the owners announced their price cut. Suppose the tramps are mad? What can they do? They've got to work picking apples to get out even.<sup>3</sup>

When the two agents arrived in Torgas they checked their list of sympathizers, and called on Al Anderson, a big-hearted young man who owned a lunch wagon. As they ate the free meal, Mac elicited the information that Al's father had a small orchard nearby. The pair next went to the clearing where the migrant workers were camped, and Mac immediately won their confidence by delivering the daughter-in-law of London, the leader, of her first

---

<sup>2</sup> Lewis Gannet, "John Steinbeck: Novelist at Work", in Atlantic Monthly, Vol.176, No.6, December, 1945, p. 58.

<sup>3</sup> John Steinbeck, In Dubious Battle, New York, Covici-Friede, 1936, p. 21.

## IN DUBIOUS BATTLE

42

child. Although Mac lacked the experience he claimed, he explained his actions to his pupil, Jim, "We've got to use whatever material comes to us (...) 'Course it was nice to help the girl, but hell, even if it killed her - we've got to use anything."<sup>4</sup>

At the big farm where the pickers began to work, they were credited with so much per bucket, and, in lieu of money, could use this credit to purchase food at the company store at inflated prices. The store was beside the long building which housed the workers, and near it was the single water faucet for the entire group. The workers here were angry about the recent cut in pay, but there was no serious strike talk. In the evening London, Jim, and Mac drove to a nearby orchard to meet Dakin, a friend of London, who led the workers there. London was ready to follow Mac's lead, but Dakin had more worldly goods than most workers, as he owned a new truck, a fine tent, and camping equipment, and he was not eager to strike. The two Communists had answers to all his objections, hwwever, so against his better judgment, he agreed to try to influence his group to join London's in a work stoppage.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

## IN DUBIOUS BATTLE

43

The next day an elderly worker fell from a rickety ladder and broke his hip. Mac immediately used this incident to arouse the workers, and he arranged that London be elected chairman of a strike committee. While the latter was organizing his committee, Jim and Mac drove to Mr. Anderson's small ranch to see if he would allow the strikers to camp on his land. Jim got a lesson in Communist diplomacy when Mac pretended to be enthusiastic about Anderson's beloved dogs in order to ingratiate himself to the old man, then used information forwarded to him by his Party headquarters, to draw from Anderson the admission that his property was mortgaged to the Torgas Finance Company. By offering to pick Anderson's apples, and thereby enabling him to clear his mortgage, Mac got the desired permission. He knew that the powerful growers would ruin Anderson for aiding the strikers, but according to his code, "We've got to use anything."<sup>5</sup>

The book's most interesting and unusual character, Doc Burton, now appeared on the scene. He was a medical doctor, who, though not a Party member, aided the cause with free professional services. Burton's main interest was to watch how men operated as a group, and to try to

---

5 Idem.

## IN DUBIOUS BATTLE

44

fathom why the group acted the way it did. Mac needed him now to lay out a sanitary camp at Anderson's, so that the local health authorities would not have an excuse to evict the strikers. By this time, Jim and Mac had been recognized as Communist organizers, and the vigilantes ordered them to leave the Valley. These vigilantes were ordinary citizens organized by the growers to intimidate striking workers, and Steinbeck was particularly angered by their brutal methods. First bribery was tried, then threats. Just after the move to the Anderson farm, Mac and Jim tried to enlist the sympathies of the deputies guarding the camp and were captured. Instead of heading for jail, however, the deputies planned to hand the pair over to the Vigilance Committee for a beating, or worse. Mac and Jim managed to escape and returned to the camp.

The following day, a large group of the strikers marched into Torgas to meet a train-load of "scabs", men brought in to pick the fruit and thereby break the strike. The strikers lacked spirit, however, and were being intimidated by the shotguns and tear gas guns of the police. When the "scabs" arrived, Joy, a battered little veteran of Communist activities, was with them, and he attempted to bring the "scabs" over to the side of the strikers. Suddenly, he was shot down by a vigilante

## IN DUBIOUS BATTLE

45

firing from a second-story window. The striker's reaction left Mac elated, and frightened the police. The men moved forward en masse, picked up the bloody little body, and carried it back to camp, where Mac prepared to put it on display.

We got to use what we can. This little guy was my friend. Y'can take it from me he'd want to get used any way we can use him. We got to use him (...)  
We got to get public opinion.<sup>6</sup>

The tempo of the strike had now increased. Mr. Anderson reported to Mac that Al's lunch wagon had been burned and that Al had suffered a broken arm and six fractured ribs as a punishment for aiding the strikers. The old man blamed Mac and Jim for all his troubles. Mac had used everyone selfishly for his own ends, but now for the first time, he showed his feelings.

It's a heavy weight, Jim. That poor guy. The lunch wagon looks bigger than the world to him. I feel responsible for that (...). I wish I didn't get this lost feeling sometimes.<sup>7</sup>

Jim showed no emotion, however, and later, when "scabs" picking apples were brutally beaten by the strikers, he looked on impassively. He did show anger as the strikers ran when fired upon, and when he was hit he gloried in

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

## IN DUBIOUS BATTLE

46

his wound. While Jim did not worry about the injured "scabs", Mac was not so callous, "It's terrible, but it's the only thing to do if they won't come over".<sup>8</sup> More violence occurred when vigilantes burned Dakin's truck and took the enraged leader to jail. The strikers were now low in food; Doc needed medical supplies; and the men were losing interest in the strike. Mac used Joy's funeral as an occasion to whip up enthusiasm. He said of Joy, "He didn't want nothing for himself."<sup>9</sup>, and his speech succeeded in arousing the strikers. After the funeral the new president of the Fruit Growers' Association arrived and tried to arbitrate. When his meagre offer was refused, he threatened the strikers with legal action and force of arms.

The next blow was the burning of Anderson's barn, with the loss of his crop and his two dogs. Doc Burton disappeared at the same time, probably kidnapped. Mac was genuinely moved by the fire. "God, I wish it hadn't happened. Poor old man, it's all his crop."<sup>10</sup> Jim made no comment, but when Mac, in a temper, encouraged a

---

8 Ibid., p. 133.

9 Ibid., p. 164.

10 Ibid., p. 190.

## IN DUBIOUS BATTLE

47

striker to burn down a grower's house in retaliation, Jim criticised him sharply for allowing his emotions to replace his self-control. A boy with a rifle was captured by the strikers and accused of starting Anderson's fire. Although the youth's hands were tied behind his back, Mac beat him thoroughly and coldly. When asked whether he felt sorry for the lad, Nolan replied, "No, he's not a kid, he's an example."<sup>11</sup> Mac suffered remorse, but Jim was completely unfeeling; he now turned on Mac, and told him that he was unfit to control the strike because he couldn't control his feelings. Jim now began to give the orders, and although London was surprised, even he obeyed, and led out a party to smash barricades.

Anderson complained to the authorities that the strikers were trespassing, and the strikers were given until dawn to disperse, otherwise one hundred men armed with hand grenades would drive them away. Mac, realizing Jim's worth to the Party, attempted to get him to leave, but without success. The men were now too dispirited to resist, therefore, Mac considered the strike a failure.

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

## IN DUBIOUS BATTLE

48

He and Jim were lured into an ambush, on the pretext that Doc Burton was hurt. Jim was killed, and Mac took the faceless corpse back to the camp, where he started a speech to inflame the men to further resistance. "Comrades! He didn't want nothing for himself."<sup>12</sup>

John Steinbeck, in In Dubious Battle objected generally to the exploitation of the migrant fruit-pickers, but there were specific abuses to which he drew particular attention. One of these was the custom of the large growers to encourage an influx of surplus workers in order to depress wages. Early in the story, when Mac was briefing Jim Nolan on the situation in the Torgas Valley, he told how the big owners waited until all the fruit tramps had arrived and then announced a wage cut. A factual report on the Wheatland Riot in California revealed that the grower responsible for the strike which touched off the riot, had,

(...) intentionally advertised for more workers than he needed in order to force wages down (...) Over half the workers were destitute and were forced to cash their checks each night (...) Local Wheatland stores were forbidden to send delivery wagons to the camp, so that the workers were forced to buy what supplies they could afford from a "concession" store on the ranch.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 250.

<sup>13</sup> Carey McWilliams, Factories in the Field, Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1939, p. 159.

## IN DUBIOUS BATTLE

49

In this case the fact was worse than the fiction, for there was no mention of the growers in In Dubious Battle advertising for help.

The labourers' camp described in the book offered much better accommodation than many to be found in California at that time, even though there was only one water faucet for the use of all the workers. In the Imperial Valley in 1934, for instance, a commission of inquiry from the National Labor Board found,

(...) filth, squalor, an entire absence of sanitation, and a crowding of human beings into totally inadequate tents or crude structures built of boards, weeds, and anything that was at hand.<sup>14</sup>

This same commission reported other conditions remarkably like those described so vividly by Steinbeck in his story of the apple-pickers' strike. His strikers in the Torgas Valley found all the power of the community against them. The sheriff and all his deputies were there to protect the growers' interests; the strikers were intimidated; and, as the camp superintendent said, "You know vagrancy is anything the judge doesn't want you to do."<sup>15</sup> In the Imperial Valley,

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>15</sup> John Steinbeck, Op. Cit., p. 93.

## IN DUBIOUS BATTLE

50

The Commission found that Constitutional rights had been openly disregarded by the law-enforcement agencies in the Valley; that the right of free speech and assembly had been wholly suppressed; that excessive bail had been demanded of arrested strikers; that the State Vagrancy Law had been prostituted; and that a Federal Court injunction had been flouted (...) the growers were paying less than a starvation wage.<sup>16</sup>

Much of the action in In Dubious Battle revolved around occasions of organized brutality to the workers. At the beginning of the story, Jim Nolan told about being beaten by police; Mac had had his arm broken and his home burned by American Legionnaires acting as vigilantes; and little Joy had been beaten so often that his mind had gone. As the tale developed, more and more examples of the illegal use of force were quoted. Threats were made to the strike leaders; Al Anderson was beaten and his lunch wagon burned; Jim and Mac barely escaped harsh treatment by a Vigilance Committee; Dakin lost his truck; and Anderson had his barn burned. The final act of violence was the murder of Jim Nolan, which ended the story, if not the strike.

Now that is a lot of violence for one short book, but farm labour conditions during that period were far from peaceful. Although the growers themselves were well

---

16 Carey McWilliams, Op. Cit., p. 225.

## IN DUBIOUS BATTLE

51

organized into such formations as the Associated Farmers of California, and the California Fruit Growers' Exchange, any attempt on the part of the workers to organize was resisted stoutly. In 1936 in the town of Madera, during a strike of cotton-pickers, a mob of vigilantes organized by the Associated Farmers, raided the strike headquarters, and then disrupted a meeting in the public park. This association had conducted a state-wide campaign to organize the farmers with the result that they had refused to continue to renew contracts with the Fruit and Vegetable Workers' Union.<sup>17</sup> Citizens' associations, organized in military fashion in corps and squads headed by officers, had been established in every county in California.<sup>18</sup> When the lettuce-workers in Salinas attempted to form a union, the Mayor conscripted every able-bodied male for riot service. All assembly of three or more persons had been forbidden, and the strike pickets had been driven from the streets with clubs and tear gas, yet the Mayor still feared a riot. A prominent San Jose lawyer, named

---

<sup>17</sup> "The Shape of Things", in The Nation, Vol.143, No.13, 26 September, 1936, p. 351.

<sup>18</sup> Edward Robbin, "The General Staff Takes Charge", in The Nation, Vol.143, No.18, October 31, 1936, p. 520.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

## IN DUBIOUS BATTLE

52

Aram, representing some of the arrested strikers, stated: "City police and state highway patrol are directed by a civilian committee acting as the provisional head of a dictatorship."<sup>19</sup> Similar action was taken during a strike of Mexican workers in Orange County, when their attempt to organize was crushed by "vigilantes, night-riders, and strike-breakers"<sup>20</sup>. That all of these vigilantes were not dedicated defenders of hearth and home is demonstrated by an editorial in the Los Angeles Evening News, one of the few papers which reported factually on the strike:

Be it known that the "heroic band of vigilantes, twenty-eight in number, who last Friday with clubs and tear-gas bombs stole upon a peaceful meeting of 150 Mexican fruit-pickers in Placentia, fell upon the dumbfounded workers without warning, smashed jaws and cracked heads, dispersed the group save for one striker smashed into unconsciousness and left lying on the ground, were exactly this:

Twenty-eight Los Angeles bums, recruited from streets and beer-halls through a detective agency and paid eight dollars a day by the citrus growers to foment violence and terrorize the striking Mexican pickers.<sup>21</sup>

While the treatment received by the strikers was

---

19 Idem.

20 Frank Stokes, "Let the Mexicans Organize", in The Nation, Vol.143, No.25, December 19, 1936, p. 730.

21 Idem.

## IN DUBIOUS BATTLE

53

brutal, that handed out to Communist agitators was worse. In July, 1934, "Mob hysteria and vigilante terrorism"<sup>22</sup> broke in San Jose, where thirteen suspected Communists were removed forcibly from their homes, beaten with pick handles and banished from the city.<sup>23</sup> The lead of a newspaper article of July 20 told part of the story:

Armed with bright new pick-handles, their faces grim, eyes shining with steady purpose, a large band of "vigilantes" comprised of irate citizens, including many war veterans, smashed their way into three communist "hot spots" here last night, seized a mass of red literature and severely beat nine asserted radicals.<sup>24</sup>

This is the treatment which Jim and Mac could have expected had they not escaped from the deputies outside Anderson's farm.

In addition to suffering bodily harm, the strikers and their sympathizers suffered damage to their property. An article, also published in 1934, stated in part:

Literally thousands including many non-combatants, have been gassed, had their skulls cracked, been trampled upon, and shot. Countless

---

<sup>22</sup> John Terry, "The Terror in San Jose", in The Nation, Vol.139, No.3605, 8 August, 1934, p. 161.

<sup>23</sup> Idem.

<sup>24</sup> Idem., quoted from the San Jose Mercury Herald, July 20, 1934.

## IN DUBIOUS BATTLE

54

homes have been entered. Private property has been ruthlessly destroyed.<sup>25</sup>

Fights between strikers and non-strikers are not uncommon in labour disputes, but the events in California were particularly brutal, and all the force and law were on one side. In In Dubious Battle two men, Joy and Jim, were murdered, while Jim and one striker were shot while fighting with "scabs". The use of firearms by vigilantes was widespread in California. In the Imperial Valley, in 1935, "4000 gun permits had been issued during the summer"<sup>26</sup>, while in 1936, when Mexican strikers were brought to trial in Orange County, "sub-machine guns, shotguns, rifles and revolvers were openly displayed in the courtroom."<sup>27</sup> During this strike in Orange County, guards, armed with rifles and shotguns, patrolled the fields to protect strikebreakers, "and the sheriff instructed these guards, mostly high-school and college youngsters to shoot to kill."<sup>28</sup> The growers had, in addition to State-highway patrolmen, and special deputies, commissioned "bands of men, armed with tear gas and

---

25 Lew Levinson, "California Casualty List", in The Nation, Vol.139, No.3608, August 29, 1934, p. 243.

26 Carey McWilliams, Op. Cit., p. 239.

27 Ibid., p. 250.

28 Idem.

## IN DUBIOUS BATTLE

55

shotguns to conduct open private warfare against citrus strikers."<sup>29</sup> This was no display of arms merely to intimidate the strikers. There were many occasions on which these weapons were used. At Pixley, California, in October 1933, as a group of workers was leaving a meeting at the Union Hall,

a large number of cars drove up, men stepped out, and posted themselves behind the cars. Suddenly the union building was riddled with rifle fire (...) Two workers were killed and several more wounded; and at Arvin, a near-by community, another worker was murdered the same day.<sup>30</sup>

This type of killing occurred again and again throughout the agricultural area of California. At Stockton, a citizens' army of some fifteen hundred men attacked three hundred strike pickets with tear gas and rifle fire.

Fifty workers were injured; the body of one striker was riddled with buckshot from his mouth to his abdomen. More than a hundred tear-gas bombs were hurled at the picket line by State-highway patrolmen alone, and the list of injured (all strikers) assumed the proportions of a wartime casualty list.<sup>31</sup>

The action in Steinbeck's Torgas Valley seems mild compared to what actually took place in California's strike-torn agricultural areas.

---

29 Ibid., p. 251.

30 Ibid., p. 221.

31 Ibid., p. 259-260.

## IN DUBIOUS BATTLE

56

In Dubious Battle told a tale of a strike as seen through the eyes of two Communist organizers. While many readers condemned the book as Communist propaganda, the Communists themselves were cool towards it because its agitators did not adhere completely to the "party line". "A New York editor(.) wrote a three-page report indicating points at which Steinbeck's Communist organizer diverged from the orthodox party line."<sup>32</sup> Whether Steinbeck's Communists were orthodox, or not, their methods of work followed the local California pattern. From 1929 on, the Communist Party tried to organize the agricultural workers in California. The method sounds familiar to readers of In Dubious Battle.

A small group of organizers was sent into the fields. Their strategy was to follow the spontaneous strikes. Wherever a strike was reported, or wherever a strike was rumored, they would appear and attempt to organize the workers.<sup>33</sup>

Four such organizers began a strike among the cotton-workers in the San Joaquin Valley, in 1933, which spread to embrace the whole Valley, and affected some eighteen thousand workers. It is not known whether Steinbeck used this strike as a pattern, but the

---

32 Louis Gannett, Op. Cit., p. 57.

33 Carey McWilliams, Op. Cit., p. 214.

## IN DUBIOUS BATTLE

57

similarity is evident. The cotton pickers rented a forty-acre farm to establish their camp of five thousand men, women, and children.

Streets were staked off; guards were established at the entrances (...) sanitary conditions were carefully supervised (so-as to prevent the health authorities from intervening - a favorite strike-breaking device) and committees of workers were set up to govern the camp.<sup>34</sup>

In In Dubious Battle the villain behind the scenes was the Growers' Association, which was run by the Torgas Finance Company. It told the growers what to pay their workers, and it set the price of the produce. In California, the instigator of most of the strike violence, and the most rabid foe of labour organization was the Associated Farmers of California. Originating in Imperial County, the movement spread throughout California. It was determined at an early convention,

(...) that the finances for the organization would unquestionably have to come from the banks and utility companies (...). At this meeting it was decided that farmers should "front the organization, although the utility companies and banks would exercise ultimate control."<sup>35</sup>

In addition to setting wage rates and marketing prices, the Association provided deputies for strike duties. It

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 220-221.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 232.

maintained an espionage system with cards and photographs of all known "dangerous radicals"<sup>36</sup>, and distributed this information to peace officers and Association branches. This was the reason that Mac and Jim could be recognized so readily by the citizens' committee on their way back from Anderson's farm.<sup>37</sup> From its origin in 1933, the Associated Farmers used force to subdue the workers. In Salinas in 1933, Imperial Valley in 1934, Santa Rosa in 1935, Orange County in 1936, and Stockton in 1937; the results have been described earlier and are aptly summarized in an article entitled Gunkist Oranges:

The wave of violence, launched by the Associated Farmers in 1934, swept on into 1935 and 1936, with organized vigilante groups crushing one strike after another.<sup>38</sup>

This, then, was the farm labour situation in California prior to the publication of In Dubious Battle. The large-scale growers had organized to prevent their workers from forming unions so that a living wage might be obtained. The growers were committed to the use of force to keep the transient workers in a state of servitude.

---

36 Idem.

37 John Steinbeck, Op. Cit., p. 83.

38 Carey McWilliams, Op. Cit., p. 249.

and they followed a course of violence and lawlessness. Their lawlessness, however, was legal, at least in the State of California. The local sheriffs and justices did as the Associated Farmers demanded; State police and their deputies co-operated in strike-breaking; the State Legislature was dominated by the growers' lobby<sup>39</sup>; and when one governor, attempting to mediate in a strike, was told to mind his own business, he did.<sup>40</sup> This concentration of force on the one side left the other side practically defenceless. When the State Relief agencies agreed to cut off relief during harvest periods in order to provide a surplus of labour, the pickers had to work or starve.

But what of the force of public opinion? It was true that many of the small growers (like Anderson in In Dubious Battle) were sympathetic to the workers, because they, too were being exploited. They were powerless, however, for the large growers controlled both the market and the source of labour. Then surely, that self-appointed defender of freedom, the press, must have been aware of the situation. It was, but except for rare exceptions, the newspapers were all on the side of the growers. When

---

39 Ibid., p. 239.

40 Ibid., p. 260.

## IN DUBIOUS BATTLE

60

they set new low wage rates, the Pacific Rural Press called them "big-broad-minded men"<sup>41</sup>. The San Francisco Examiner of October 2, 1933, carried the headline "Night Raiders Call Farmers to Battle Reds".<sup>42</sup> During a strike at Corcoran, the local newspaper announced that the workers must return to work, or "be jailed, deloused, and defilthed, and finally, deported."<sup>43</sup> The Calexis Chronicle of January 12, 1934, reported "mobilization of the American Legion Reserve - to keep down the rising tide of strike sentiment"<sup>44</sup>, and the Brawley News of January 11, commended the American Legion for its readiness to go to the bat.<sup>45</sup> Such slanted reporting turned public opinion away from the strikers, and encouraged erstwhile respectable businessmen to join vigilante groups. The horror was that they appeared to enjoy striking down defenceless workers.

There were a few voices raised in condemnation of such treatment of human beings in this, the twentieth

---

41 Ibid., p. 192.

42 Ibid., p. 219.

43 Ibid., p. 223.

44 Ibid., p. 226.

45 Idem.

## IN DUBIOUS BATTLE

61

century. Carey McWilliams, Chairman of the State Immigration and Housing Commission has been quoted at length, and a handful of other writers also complained in print, and have been noted here. To avoid any possible prejudice, the articles written by John Steinbeck have not been used to substantiate the incidents described in In Dubious Battle, but in view of the other evidence gathered, his articles do not appear to be necessary here. Every event about which Steinbeck wrote had happened, and happened in the twentieth century.

In Dubious Battle was Steinbeck's great contribution to the cause of the oppressed workers. Where the rest of the country had been unconcerned about the plight of migrant workers, and unsympathetic about Communist activity, the readers of In Dubious Battle saw the events in California in a new light. They saw Communists who "didn't want nothing for themselves" trying to better the lot of free American citizens who were being treated worse than slaves. Unfortunately, while this was Steinbeck's best book to date, it was not a particular success with the reading public. Perhaps it was too realistic. It described a national tragedy which a nation chose to avoid seeing.

## IN DUBIOUS BATTLE

62

John Steinbeck told his tale of brutality by describing the development of Jim Nolan from an uncertain youth, looking for a meaning in life, to a cold, calculating, dedicated Communist. At the same time, his mentor, Mac, deteriorated from a power-hungry, bloodthirsty man, who "can't waste time liking people"<sup>46</sup>, to a remorseful, emotional type, who required his pupil's support and approval in order to carry on. Although Steinbeck had said that "there is no author's point of view"<sup>47</sup>, his viewpoint was presented by Doc Burton. He, like Steinbeck, did not believe in Communism, but he did believe in the dignity of man. Steinbeck's point of view which he denied existed, seemed to be that, insofar as the workers are concerned, in union there is strength. Men like to work together, and "group-man" can conquer all his difficulties.

The characterization in this book is strong, although the characters were not described in nearly the same detail as the locale. The actions of all the characters were authentic, both individually and collectively, and the mob scenes were particularly effective. Even minor characters like Mr. Anderson, his son Al, Dakin, and London's daughter-in-law Lisa, run

---

46 John Steinbeck, Op. Cit., p. 82.

47 Lewis Gannett, Op. Cit., p. 58.

## IN DUBIOUS BATTLE

63

true to what one would expect, while poor little Joy was in a class by himself. It was significant that Mac gave the same epitaph for Joy and Jim. "He didn't want nothing for himself".<sup>48</sup> They would both have been happy to know that a martyr's death was the reward for serving the Cause. Jim Nolan was the hero - pure, with no bad habits; a man who substituted Communism for religion, while his partner, Mac, inadvertently destroyed almost everything he touched. He destroyed first, his home, then, in rapid succession, Joy, Al Anderson, Mr. Anderson, Dakin, Doc, and finally Jim, and in so doing, managed to use them all selfishly. As Jim said to him, "You protect me all the time, Mac. And sometimes I get the feeling you're not protecting me for the Party, but for yourself"<sup>49</sup>. Jim is the strongest character in the book, and Doc Burton realized his strength. But Doc disappeared before he could penetrate Jim's defences. He was the only one who might have tempered Jim's idealism, and it was ironic that Jim died, believing that he was aiding Doc.

Steinbeck told his story of the plight of the migrant workers without identifying any of the ordinary

---

48 John Steinbeck, Op. Cit., p. 164 and p. 250.

49 Ibid., p. 246.

## IN DUBIOUS BATTLE

64

labourers. The ones he brought to the fore, London, Dakin, and Sam, weren't typical. The typical ones remained, significantly, in the shadows.

Some men sat in the doorways and looked out at the dusk (...). The women carried cans and cooking pots to fill at the faucets. In and out of the dark doorways children swarmed, restless as rats.<sup>50</sup>

They were a shadowy people, not to be seen as individuals. Their power lay in their group value - as a mob they were irresistible.

Although not widely read, In Dubious Battle was a critical success, and won Steinbeck the California Commonwealth Club's gold medal. It remains today, the finest strike novel written in America.<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately for the migrant workers in California, it did not achieve the world-wide attention that was to accrue to Steinbeck's other great social novel, The Grapes of Wrath, but a modern reader might well echo Steinbeck's appraisal, "It is a good book. I believe in it."<sup>52</sup>

---

50 Ibid., p. 50.

51 Peter Lisca, "John Steinbeck: A Literary Biography", from Steinbeck and His Critics, compiled by E.W. Tedlock, Jr., and C.V. Wicker, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1957, p. 10.

52 Lewis Gannett, Op. Cit., p. 57.

## CHAPTER V

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

While In Dubious Battle is a short, brutal story of a single episode narrating the activities of two Communist labour organizers, The Grapes of Wrath is a long, moving saga of a whole people, expressed through the adventures of one family. The title of the earlier novel was found in Paradise Lost; that of the later one was taken from The Battle Hymn of the Republic<sup>1</sup>, ("He is tramping out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.") The original reference is Biblical - "And the angel... gathered the vine of the earth and cast it into the great winepress of the wrath of God."<sup>2</sup> Steinbeck liked the title,

(...) because it is a march, because it is in our revolutionary tradition, and because in reference to the book it has a large meaning.<sup>3</sup>

The meaning was that the workers, angered by their treatment, were storing up grapes of wrath, which Steinbeck

---

1 Julia Ward Howe, The Battle Hymn of the Republic, Copyright Owners Carl Fisher, Inc., New York.

2 Revelation, 14:9.

3 Lewis Gannett, "John Steinbeck: Novelist at Work", in Steinbeck and His Critics, compiled by E.W. Tedlock, Jr., and C.V. Wicker, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1957, p. 34.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

66

feared would erupt into a massive revolt.

It is fervently hoped that the great group of migrant workers so necessary to the harvesting of California's crops may be given the right to live decently, that they may not be so badgered, tormented, and hurt that in the end they become avengers of the hundreds of thousands who have been tortured and starved before them.<sup>4</sup>

The Grapes of Wrath is the story of the mass-migration of "dust bowl" refugees from their bank-foreclosed farms to the green fields of California. These dispossessed people came in thousands from the states of the Middle West; three or four generations with all their worldly goods crammed into ramshackle cars or second-hand trucks. John Steinbeck told the whole, sad story of their hopes, their courage, and their subsequent disillusionment in what they had expected to be a land of milk and honey.

In order to bring the situation to the hearts as well as the minds of the American people, he told the tale in terms of one family, the Joads. To encompass all of the "Okies", however, he used a system of interchapters. Between each chapter of the narrative of the Joad family, Steinbeck interposed a short chapter or two which served to relate the Joads' situation to that of their fellow-

---

<sup>4</sup> John Steinbeck, "Dubious Battle in California", in The Nation, Vol. 143, No. 11, 12 September, 1936, p. 304.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

67

migrants as a whole. By themselves, these interchapters would have constituted a social tract and would have had no more effect on the situation than the other articles written on this same subject. By tying each interchapter in to a corresponding chapter in the narrative, he established a sort of cross-reference between a small, personalized group, the Joad family, and the whole mass of "dust bowl" refugees. While Steinbeck encouraged the readers to identify themselves with the Joad family, the message in these interchapters reinforced the message implied in the narrative and, because of the factual presentation of the former, brought home the realization that these shocking conditions actually did exist.

It might be expected that the recurrent interruption of the narrative by these interchapters would impair the continuity of the plot of The Grapes of Wrath. There is, however, no significant unifying plot in the story. It is a tale of trials and tribulations, but nothing is solved, and no conclusion is reached. The remnant of the Joad family is left, at the ending, in a precarious position, with no inkling of what its future might be.

When the Joads were "tractored-out" of their farm in Oklahoma, the family was a large, well-knit unit. Grampa and Gramma lived with Pa and Ma Joad and their children,

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

68

strange Noah, sixteen year-old Al, twelve year-old Ruthie, and ten year-old Winfield. Tom, the second eldest son, was in prison for killing a man in a brawl, and pregnant Rose of Sharon was living with the family of her husband, Connie. Tom Joad, just out on parole, arrived home to find the house vacant, and his family at Uncle John's, preparing to move to California. Ma was now happy, for her beloved family was complete. She subscribed to Willy Feely's code, "Fust an' on'y thing I got to think about is my own folks."<sup>5</sup> The family was proud in its poverty, and proud of being Joads. This attitude was understandable, for in their difficulties they had received little consideration from strangers. The Bank forced them from their land; buyers in Sallisaw gave them only a fraction of what their belongings were worth; and a used-car dealer overcharged them for the truck they bought to take them to California.

Jim Casy, a former itinerant preacher, was permitted to accompany the Joads on their journey, but he was not accepted fully, for, as Ma said, "the preacher wa'nt no kin."<sup>6</sup> The family began to dwindle almost as soon as the

---

<sup>5</sup> John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, New York, Viking Press, 1939, p. 75.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 195.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

69

trek began, when Grampa died the first night on the road. Here the Joads got a lesson in cooperation and friendship from their new neighbours, the Wilsons. Grampa died in the Wilsons' tent; he was wrapped in the Wilsons' blanket; and his epitaph was written on a page of the Wilsons' Bible. When Ma spoke of repayment, she was gently rebuked by Sairy Wilson, "We're proud to help (...) People needs to help."<sup>7</sup>

Ma was the "citadel of the family"<sup>8</sup> although Pa was the titular head. She is the dominant character in The Grapes of Wrath, and she asserted this dominance with a jack handle when the family wanted to separate during a breakdown. "All we got is the family unbroke (...) I ain't gonna see us bust up."<sup>9</sup> The family continued to disintegrate, however, in spite of Ma's determination. Noah was next to go. He wandered off as soon as the family arrived in California, and Granma died while crossing the desert. Ma was under a great strain, but all she said when she first saw the beautiful California

---

7 Ibid., p. 192.

8 Ibid., p. 100.

9 Ibid., p. 231.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

70

countryside was "Thank God! The fambly's here."<sup>10</sup>

Although the Joads had received repeated warnings that labour conditions in California had been misrepresented in the handbills which had convinced them to emigrate, their first view of Hooverville, a migrant camp, came as a shock. A young labourer, Floyd Knowles, explained to Tom that many growers deliberately sought more workers than were required, in order to obtain cheap labour.

They send out han'bills all over hell. They need three thousan', an' they get six thousan'. They get them men for what they wanta pay. If ya don' wanta take what they pay, goddamn it, they's a thousan' men waitin' for your job.<sup>11</sup>

Knowles hinted at organized resistance to this exploitation, but that evening became involved in a dispute with a labour contractor. He, Tom, and Casy fought with a deputy sheriff, but Casy remained to take the blame so that the other two could escape. The family now prepared to leave Hooverville, and discovered that Connie had deserted Rose of Sharon. The others went without him, and drove to a camp operated by the Federal Government for migrant workers.

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 311.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 335.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

71

This federal camp at Weedpatch was the only decent place that the Joads found in California. Run by the occupants with a minimum of supervision, it permitted them to regain their self-respect. As Ma expressed it, "Why, I feel like people again."<sup>12</sup> Lack of work forced the Joads to leave Weedpatch, and their next employment was picking peaches. Housed inside a fenced compound, they discovered that they were being employed as strike-breakers. Tom, unable to keep out of trouble, sneaked out of the camp to talk to the strikers. He found that their leader was Jim Casy. Casy and Tom were attacked by vigilantes, who killed Jim. Tom seized a pick handle and beat down Casy's assailant, killing him. He escaped, although his face was badly battered. Tom, now a fugitive, wanted to go away. "I can't go puttin' this on you folks."<sup>13</sup> Ma wouldn't hear of this, because she needed his help to hold the family together.

Al - he'sa-hankerin' an' a-jibbetin' to go off on his own. An' Uncle John is jus' a-draggin' along. Pa's lost his place. He ain't head no more. We're crackin' up, Tom. There ain't no fambly now.<sup>14</sup>

---

12 Ibid., p. 420.

13 Ibid., p. 536.

14 Idem.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

72

With Tom hidden under the bedding, the Joads left the peach ranch and moved into the cotton country. They found shelter in a boxcar, while Tom hid out in a nearby culvert. All of Ma's efforts failed to hold the remnant of the family together. Ruthie gave Tom's secret away, and he had to leave, with the intention of following in Casy's footsteps as a labour organizer. Rose of Sharon's baby was born dead, and Al decided to marry and leave the family. Ma realized that she had attempted the impossible, and that one unit cannot live within itself. She told Mrs. Wainwright, the mother of Al's fiancée, "Use ta be the fambly was fust. It ain't so now. It's anybody."<sup>15</sup>

As a flood forced the families from their box car, Ma, Pa, Uncle John, Rose of Sharon, and the two children left Al and sought higher ground. In a barn where they found shelter, a man was dying of starvation. His son said that his father needed milk and asked Ma if she had any money to buy some. Her answer was "Hush. Don' worry. We'll figure somepin' out."<sup>16</sup> Ma's solution, which she wordlessly proposed to Rose of Sharon, was to have the girl breast-feed the starving stranger. The

---

15 Ibid., p. 606.

16 Ibid., p. 618.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

73

transition from family selfishness to universal sympathy was complete, and the story has ended.

The saga of the disintegration and development of the Joad family is not monumental. The occasions on which they experienced the circumstances that appalled John Steinbeck are not numerous, but by relating these conditions to the Joad family, Steinbeck was able, in the informative interchapters, to elaborate and emphasize his arguments.

For instance, Tom Joad got most of his information about the family's difficulties with the bank and the Shawnee Land and Cattle Company from a neighbour, Muley Graves. The whole story as it applied to the "Okies", generally, was given in interchapters one and five. Chapter One described the drought and dust conditions which followed, and Chapter Five described the impersonality of the absentee owners and the monstrous personality of the bank.

A bank isn't like a man. Or an owner with fifty thousand acres, he isn't like a man either. That's the monster.<sup>17</sup>

When this monster forced the tenants to vacate their farms because they failed to keep up their rental payments, the

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

74

exodus to California began. Prior to 1935, no record of immigrants was kept, but between 1935 and 1940, some 285,000 were, like the Joads, checked in by plant quarantine inspectors at the border. It was estimated that forty-two percent came from Oklahoma.<sup>18</sup> The reasons why they all chose to come to California are not hard to find.

When the harvest is on, the base wage for agricultural workers on California farms is \$2.10 per day with board, as compared to \$1.00 in Oklahoma (...). These figures are from the U.S. Bureau of Agricultural Economics. Cotton pickers in California's St. Joachim Valley are paid 90 cents per 100 pounds. In Oklahoma the pay is 65 cents a hundred.<sup>19</sup>

These figures were meaningless, however, if work was not available, nor did they reflect the much higher cost of living in California. Relief payments were also much higher in California (\$51.00 average per family as compared to \$21.00 in Oklahoma)<sup>20</sup>, but eligibility was contingent on one year's residence. Since many migrants had earned less than \$200.00 annually at home,<sup>21</sup> they were

---

18 Frank J. Taylor, "California's Grapes of Wrath", in The Forum, Vol.102, No.5, p. 235.

19 Ibid... p. 233.

20 Idem.

21 Idem.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

75

well off in California if they could establish the required time of residence in one county. The transient nature of their work made this extremely difficult.

The Joads apparently knew none of these statistics, for they had been attracted to the promised land by a handbill advertising for workers. Mr. Frank J. Taylor said that only two such cases of this type of advertising had been unearthed,<sup>22</sup>but,

Throughout the first quarter of the century, the farm-industrialists actively engaged in the business of recruiting, by advertisements and solicitation, Eastern and Middle Western families to "migrate", i.e. to come West and work during the harvest. No work was guaranteed; the conditions of employment were grossly misrepresented; and no provision whatever was made to house or to care for the thousands of immigrants recruited in this manner.<sup>23</sup>

John Steinbeck, by using the Joad family to represent the Oklahoma migrants, aroused a storm of protest in that State. The Honourable Lyle Boran, Congressman for Oklahoma, stated in the Congress of the United States:

(...) for myself, for my Dad, for my Mother, whose hair is silvery in the service of building the State of Oklahoma, I say to you, and to every square-minded reader in America, that the painting

---

22 Ibid., p. 238.

23 Carey McWilliams, Factories in the Field, Boston, Little, Brown & Company, 1939, p. 97.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

76

Steinbeck made in his book is a lie, a black and infernal creation of a twisted, distorted mind.<sup>24</sup>

Miss Catherine Maloney, of Coalgate, Oklahoma, offered a quick reply in much less flowery prose:

If Boran read The Grapes of Wrath, which I have cause to believe he did not, he would not label John Steinbeck a damnable liar. John Steinbeck portrayed the characters in his book just as they actually are.<sup>25</sup>

Miss Maloney's statement was corroborated by the Head of the Department of Sociology at Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, who reported:

I have been asked quite often if I could not dig up some statistics capable of refuting the story of The Grapes of Wrath. It cannot be done, for all the available data prove beyond a doubt that the general impression given by Steinbeck's book is substantially reliable.<sup>26</sup>

In spite of the outcries of enraged Oklahomans, there was no denying that displaced farmers had left the State by the tens of thousands. Their first impression of California must have been similar to that of Ma Joad, when the policeman at Needles told her, "We don't want you goddamn Okies settlin' down."<sup>27</sup> Not only did local

---

<sup>24</sup> Martin Staples Shockley, "The Reception of The Grapes Of Wrath in Oklahoma", in American Literature, Vol.15, March 1940 to January 1944, p. 358.

<sup>25</sup> Idem.

<sup>26</sup> Idem.

<sup>27</sup> John Steinbeck, Op. Cit., p. 291.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

77

police want to keep the migrants on the move, but the Los Angeles Police staffed some sixteen border patrols at locations hundreds of miles outside that city.

Throughout November and December, 1935, and January, February, March and April, 1936, some 125 policemen stationed at these various points of entry stopped all cars that looked as though they might contain "unemployables" and turned them back.<sup>28</sup>

This drastic step, which backed up the flow of refugees as far as El Paso, Texas, was taken without any regard of constitutional rights or provisions, but it served to check the influx of refugees for the time being.

The Joad's next experience with the conditions to which Steinbeck wished to draw public attention, was in the Hooverville outside of Bakersville, California. Hoovervilles, in general, were described in an interchapter, Chapter Nineteen; where it was stated, "there was a Hooverville on the edge of every town."<sup>29</sup> This situation was admitted by one of Steinbeck's severest critics,

Outside nearly every agricultural community, from El Centro on the Mexican Border to Redding near the Oregon line, is a shantytown or squatter camp. These are frightful places in which to live,

---

28 Carey McWilliams, Op. Cit., p. 310.

29 John Steinbeck, Op. Cit., p. 319.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

78

devoid of adequate sanitation, often without pure water.<sup>30</sup>

and it was in the Joads' first Hooverville that Floyd Knowles told Tom how the growers had a habit of advertising for more workers than they needed. This had actually occurred at Nipomo, in 1937, and again in 1938, when,

(...) labor contractors, licensed by the State of California, had been permitted to advertise in Oregon newspapers for "Thousands" of pea pickers, promising work "for the season". In response to these appeals, 2000 workers assembled, only to discover, of course, that there was work for about a third of their number.<sup>31</sup>

When Floyd objected to the efforts of a labour contractor to recruit workers without stating the wages, or without producing his license, he was marked as an agitator. After he and Tom escaped from the deputy, leaving Casy to take the blame, Floyd predicted that vigilantes would return to burn out the camp. During a citrus strike in 1936, "workers' camps were bombed and raided"<sup>32</sup>, and during one raid, in 1934,

(...) a force recruited from the Sheriff's Office, the local police, the State Highway Police and vigilantes obtained in the towns, under the command of "County Health Officers", raided the camp of the

---

30 Frank J. Taylor, Op. Cit., p. 233.

31 Carey McWilliams, Op. Cit., p. 312.

32 Ibid., p. 250.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

79

strikers. The shacks in which the workers were living were burned to the ground, and the workers driven out with tear-gas bombs. Over 2000 men, women and children were forcibly evicted from the camp and the arrests continued. A baby in the camp died as a result of the bombing.<sup>33</sup>

In both Oklahoma and his native California, John Steinbeck was accused of exaggeration and malicious lying. From actual reports, it appears that if he was guilty of anything, it was of understatement. In Chapter Nineteen it was told that a child had died from under-nourishment. In 1937,

Fifty babies, the children of migratory workers, died of diarrhea and enteritis in one county in a single season. Children were reported dying in Tulare County at the rate of two a day, with 90 per cent of the mortality being among the children of migratory workers. In one ditch camp, 27 out of 30 children examined were found to be defective through malnutritional diseases.<sup>34</sup>

Chapter Twenty-One is an interchapter describing the hostility which awaited the migrants in California. The natives feared the hungry thousands, and rationalized to justify their hostility.

These goddamned Okies are dirty and ignorant. They're degenerate, sexual maniacs. These goddamned Okies are thieves. They'll steal anything. They've got no sense of property rights.<sup>35</sup>

---

33 Ibid., p. 224-225.

34 Ibid., p. 317.

35 John Steinbeck, Op. Cit., p. 386.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

80

Steinbeck outlined the manner by which the great owners got all the property into their hands and squeezed the small owners, and he stated his belief, "And the companies, the banks worked at their own doom and they did not know it."<sup>36</sup> He believed that open warfare could be averted only if the growers realized that they were ruining themselves in the long run, and only if they took immediate steps to provide living wages and decent living conditions for their workers. He could not see that the interests of the two groups should of necessity be disparate. Slaves and horses were cared for when not working, why not fellow Americans?

Weedpatch Camp, where the Joads went after leaving Hooverville, seemed unbelievably pleasant in comparison. Jim Rawley, the camp manager told Ma that he wasn't the boss,

The people here worked me out of a job. They keep the camp clean, they keep order, they do everything. I never saw such people.<sup>37</sup>

This implied that the "Okies" were not dirty degenerates, but a decent people who would live decently if given the

---

36 Ibid., p. 387-388.

37 Ibid., p. 415.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

81

opportunity. At the time that The Grapes of Wrath was written, there were nine such Farm Security Administration Camps, and an innovation, a mobile-camp unit. This latter was under the supervision of Tom Collins, to whom Steinbeck dedicated his novel.<sup>38</sup> (The other dedication, "To CAROL who willed this book" referred to Steinbeck's first wife, Carol Henning). The FSA camps were much like the Weedpatch camp which Steinbeck described, and they provided decent accommodation at practically no cost. There was, as Steinbeck pointed out, much opposition to these camps by the growers. In 1935, at a special conference in Los Angeles, they went on record to demand;

1 (...) the camps to be so limited as to accommodate not more than three hundred people and to be located on private property. 2. (...) that the facilities be as meagre as possible so as to emphasize the transient nature of the shelter, e.g. tents, not houses. 3 (...) that the supervisor of each camp be under the control of a local committee of growers, and 4. that the camps be strictly regulated so as to prevent the spread of subversive ideas (...) and they were also insistent on the point that legal residence in a particular county could not be acquired by transients registered at the camps.<sup>39</sup>

Had the growers had their way, their control over the

---

38 Carey McWilliams, "What's Being Done About the Joads?", in The New Republic, Vol.90, No.1294, 20 September, 1939, p. 179.

39 Carey McWilliams, Factories in the Field, p. 298.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

82

camps and the inmates would have been absolute. As in The Grapes of Wrath, the local townspeople were often in favour of the federal camps, but the Associated Farmers consistently opposed them. John Steinbeck, who had lived in one,<sup>40</sup> saw them as an example of what could be done for his poor "Okies".

The Joads would have been happy at Weedpatch, but there was no work, and they lacked food. Chapter Twenty-Five, another interchapter, is devoted to the case of migrants starving in the midst of plenty. It was here that Steinbeck hammered home his message. The Joads were merely hungry, but some of the mass of migrants were starving.

There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all our success. The fertile earth, the straight tree rows, the sturdy trunks, add the ripe fruit. And children dying of Bellagra must die because a profit cannot be taken from an orange. And coroners must fill in the certificates - died of malnutrition - because the food must rot, must be forced to rot.<sup>41</sup>

With a rhythm that is almost Biblical, Steinbeck wrote

---

<sup>40</sup> Peter Lisca, "John Steinbeck: A Literary Biography", in Steinbeck and His Critics, compiled by E.W. Tedlock, Jr., and C.V. Wicker, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1957, p. 13.

<sup>41</sup> John Steinbeck, Op. Cit., p. 477.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

83

his refrain, and he wondered how long this could go on,

(...) in the eyes of the people there is the failure: and in the eyes of the hungry there is a growing wrath. In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage.<sup>42</sup>

The Joads spent a month in Weedpatch, during which time Tom alone had five days work, at reduced wages. Winfield was ailing, and Rose of Sharon lacked milk when her time was approaching. The family left the federal camp and unwittingly found work as strikebreakers at the Hooper Ranch, where they were held in a fenced compound. Hired to pick peaches at five cents a box the wage was cut to two and one-half cents as soon as the strike was broken. This Hooper Ranch was similar to the Balfour-Guthrie Company at Brentwood, California, where, during a strike in 1935, a substantial fence surmounted by barbed wire was built around the workers' camp, and the entrance was guarded at all times. The president of the local unit of the Associated Farmers averred that "Obviously the fence and guard were there to keep the lawless element out, not to keep the contented workmen in."<sup>43</sup>

---

42 Idem.

43 Carey McWilliams, Op. Cit., p. 237.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

84

The camp run by Hooper Ranches, Incorporated, was less comfortable than Weedpatch, although a great improvement over Hooverville. At least there were houses, "fifty little square flat-roofed boxes, each with a door and a window."<sup>44</sup> There was no running water, and skimpy toilet facilities, while the company store overcharged the inmates. When Tom Joad pretended to want a bath, he was told that there was a hose by the water tank, but when he asked for warm water, the guard grunted, "Hot water, for Christ's sake. Be wantin' tubs next."<sup>45</sup> One of the California growers would have agreed with the guard. He believed that baths were ridiculously expensive and unnecessary. "He urged his colleagues to run a pipe to the side of the tank and cap it with a tin spray."<sup>46</sup> This was in 1917, but there were camps in 1934 where there was no water at all.

The murder of Casy, while a shock to the Joad family, would not have shocked anyone familiar with the labour violence in California. Examples of this sort of

---

44 John Steinbeck, Op. Cit., p. 503.

45 Ibid., p. 515.

46 Carey McWilliams, Op. Cit., p. 173.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

85

killing were given in the preceding chapter of this thesis. Tom Joad now took Casy's burden on his shoulders, and told Ma that the migrants must organize and he was going to help them. In a moving scene, where Ma loses her favourite son, Tom says,

I'll be ever'where - wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there (...) An when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build - why I'll be there.<sup>47</sup>

With the disappearance of Tom, the story, as a social protest is practically over. The following chapter, Number Twenty-Nine, is the last of the interchapters, and the second-last chapter in the book. It is complementary to Chapter One, which described the drought in Oklahoma. This interchapter described how the rainy season in California affected the migrants, when there was no work for three months. The tribulations of the Joads pale in comparison to the descriptions of the suffering of the migrants in general:

In the barns, the people sat huddled together; and the terror came over them, and their faces were gray with terror. The children cried with hunger and there was no food.<sup>48</sup>

---

47 John Steinbeck, Op. Cit., p. 572.

48 Ibid., p. 591.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

86

and,

They splashed out through the water, to the towns, to the country stores, to the relief offices, to beg for food, to beg for relief, to try to steal, to lie. And under the begging, and under the crying, a hopeless anger began to smolder. And in the little towns pity for the sodden men changed to anger, and anger at the hungry people changed to fear of them. And Sheriffs swore in deputies in droves, and orders were rushed for rifles, for tear-gas, for ammunition. Then the hungry men crowded the alleys behind the stores to beg for bread, to beg for rotting vegetables, to steal when they could.<sup>49</sup>

This ghastly scene ended on a note of hope. The rains ceased, and "tiny points of grass came through the earth, and in a few days the hills were pale green with the beginning year."<sup>50</sup>

Twelve of the seventeen interchapters struck directly at the deplorable treatment of the "Okies", while the other five provided a general background. They all tended to bind a rather loose narrative together, and gave to a rambling story real social significance. Steinbeck cleverly changed the rhythm as he moved from narrative to interchapter; the latter with the short staccato sentences often sounds like poetry. He would make a point, re-present it in a slightly different manner,

---

49 Idem.

50 Ibid., p. 592.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

87

and then reinforce the original point with a fresh approach. By relating the incidents in the interchapters so closely to the adventures of the Joads, the impact of his message was overpowering.

As most of the criticism of The Grapes of Wrath arising in Oklahoma and California dealt with Steinbeck's veracity in describing the atrocious conditions which he had attributed to these States, each of the circumstances which he deplored has been related here to a similar situation which actually existed. The literary critics, however, were more selective in their treatment of the book, and one of their most frequent references was to the weakness of Steinbeck's characterization.

The main interest of this thesis in the characterization in The Grapes of Wrath is, of course, how well the characters presented the social message. For that reason, such minor characters as Grampa and Granma, Uncle John, Noah, Connie Rivers, and even Al Joad, can be ignored. They helped the story move, but they remained outside the social problem.

Ma Joad was a magnificent character, of whom the late Eleanor Roosevelt said, "somehow I cannot imagine thinking of 'Ma' without at the same time thinking of

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

88

the love 'that passeth all understanding'.<sup>51</sup> As the "citadel of the family"<sup>52</sup> all the troubles fell upon her, and for the sake of the family she dared not break under them. She witnessed the loss of her home, the loss of the grandparents, the gradual breakup of her beloved family, but she remained steadfast throughout.

We're Joads. We don't look up to nobody.... We was farm people till the debt. And then - them people. They done somepin to us. Ever' time they come seemed like they was a-whippin' me - all of us. An' in Needles, that police. He done somepin' to me, made me feel mean. Made me feel ashamed. An' now I ain't ashamed. These folks is our folks.<sup>53</sup>

At the end of the story it is Ma who is still the driving force in the Joad family. She, alone, is unbowed. Ma Joad might have epitomized all the wives and mothers among the migrants. The rest of the family could become discouraged but she refused to give in. When Pa wanted to remain in Weedpatch, it was Ma who forced the action. "I ain't watchin' this here fambly starve no more."<sup>54</sup>

At the Hooper Ranch it was Ma who put the officious store-

---

51 "Red Meat and Red Herrings", in The Commonweal, Vol.30, No.25, October 13, 1939, p. 563.

52 John Steinbeck, Op. Cit., p. 100.

53 Ibid., p. 420.

54 Ibid., p. 479.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

89

keeper in his place, and at the same time illustrated another method by which the "Okies" were exploited. She represented the indomitable courage of a downtrodden people.

Old Tom Joad, head of the family at the beginning of the book, rapidly stepped down to a minor role. Inferior in all ways to his formidable wife, he was willing to work if he could find it, but unlike Ma, he was easily discouraged. He represented the selfish, ignorant type of migrant that was easy to exploit. He was prepared to accept a wage cut without argument. As he expressed it, "Well, what the hell can I do? I can't starve so's you can get two bits."<sup>55</sup> But he was no fool. He could feel the tension in the air, in the work camps in California,

They's change a-comin'. I don' know what. Maybe we won't live to see her. But she's a-comin'. They's a res'less feelin'. Fella can't figger nothin' out, he's so nervous.<sup>56</sup>

He only regained stature when he got his fellow migrants to co-operate to build the dike, but when the dike collapsed, so did Pa's fortitude, and only Ma's prodding

---

55 Ibid., p. 463.

56 Ibid., p. 471.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

90

could keep him going. She did this deliberately, for she believed, "If you can take an' make 'im mad, why, he'll be awright."<sup>57</sup>

Young Tom, the hot-headed parolee, was an important character, who, unlike his father, refused to be pushed around. His reaction, when he first saw the deserted Joad farm, was, "I wonder Pa went so easy. I wonder Grampa didn' kill nobody (...) an Ma ain't nobody you can push aroun' neither."<sup>58</sup> Here appeared the suggestion that they were all up against something more powerful than themselves. Tom had spent four years in McAlester prison, and had acquired more experience there than he would have had he remained on the farm. It was he who first queried the veracity of the handbills before the family left Oklahoma, and it was he who prevented Pa from repeating the story told by the disillusioned "Okie" returning from California. It was Tom, again, who insisted on hearing about the "Promised Land" from a returning migrant, at Needles. By the time he met Floyd Knowles at Hooverville, Tom, at least, knew what the family was up against. His reaction was typically violent, but Floyd talked him out

---

57 Ibid., p. 481.

58 Ibid., p. 64.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

91

of hasty action. When Floyd struck a deputy, Tom helped him, although such action jeopardized his newly-won freedom, but he couldn't just stand by and do nothing:

(...) if it was the law they was workin' with, why, we could take it. But it ain't the law. They're a-workin' away at our spirits. They're a-tryin' to make us cringe an' crawl like a whipped bitch. They're tryin' to break us.<sup>59</sup>

Again, it was Tom who took a ditch-digging job at twenty-five cents an hour, because the Farmers' Association wouldn't let Mr. Thomas pay his help thirty cents.<sup>60</sup> Tom was instrumental in preventing the deputies from entering the federal camp at Weedpatch; he was a born agitator, who refused to be ground down by his oppressors. He had to escape from the Hooper Ranch to see why the people outside the fence resented the entry of the Joads and their fellow-workers. When Casy urged Tom to arouse the other workers on the ranch, Tom described the situation:

Never seen so many guys with guns. Don' know if they'll even let a fella talk. An' folks don' pass no time of day. They jus' hang<sup>n</sup> down their heads and won't even give a fella a howdy.<sup>61</sup>

Tom implied here, that the strike-breakers on the Hooper

---

59 Ibid., p. 381.

60 Ibid., p. 402.

61 Ibid., p. 523.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

92

Ranch were more brow-beaten than even his erstwhile companions at McAlester Prison. When Tom killed Casy's murderer, he chose to take over Casy's mission to organize the workers.

I been thinkin' a hell of a lot, thinking about our people livin' like pigs, an' the good rich lan' layin' fallow, or maybe one fella with a million acres, while a hundred thousan' good farmers is starvin'. An' I been wonderin' if all our folks got together.<sup>62</sup>

The readers never discovered whether Tom was successful in getting all the "Okies" together, but John Steinbeck was successful in making the readers "think about our people livin' like pigs an' the good rich lan' layin' fallow"<sup>63</sup> Tom represented the militant "Okie"; one of the ones who were harbouring the grapes of wrath.

Tom's friend, Jim Casy held a position in The Grapes of Wrath similar to that held by Doc Burton in In Dubious Battle. He provided Steinbeck with a mouthpiece; someone in the narrative who could propound the author's philosophy. At one time a tent-revivalist who preached for money, Casy had become less mercenary and preached for nothing, but he was still not satisfied. When Tom

---

62 Ibid., p. 571.

63 Idem.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

93

met him he had given up preaching, but he decided to accompany the Joads, because,

(...) maybe there's a place for a preacher. Maybe I can preach again. Folks out lonely on the road, folks with no lan', no home to go to. They got to have some kind of home.<sup>64</sup>

Casy, like Steinbeck, believed in people working together, and saw in such co-operation, the answer to the migrants' problems.

I got to thinkin' how we was holy when we was one thing, an' mankin' was holy when it was one thing. An' it on'y got unholy when one mis'able little fella got the bit in his teeth an' run off his own way, kickin' an' draggin' an' fightin'... But when they're all workin' together, not one fella for another fella, but one fella kind of harnessed to the whole shebang - that's right, that's holy.<sup>65</sup>

Casy was no charlatan, sponging from poor, ignorant people in the name of religion. His prayer over Grampaw demonstrated that. He "wouldn' pray for a ol' fella that's dead."<sup>66</sup> He kept his prayers for the living. He was a rather fine character; a godly man with all the faults of the un-godly, but he possessed a deep insight, and a deep compassion for his fellows. He, more than any of the others, saw the whole picture. When he

---

64 Ibid., p. 76.

65 Ibid., p. 110.

66 Ibid., p. 197.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

94

and Tom were working on the Wilsons' car at the roadside, it was he who counted the hundreds of loaded cars "all a-goin' west"<sup>67</sup>, and it was he who observed, "it's like they was runnin' away from soldiers. It's like a whole country is movin'".<sup>68</sup> When Tom suggested that the Joads permit Casy to go with them, he said, "Talks a little wild sometimes, but he talks sensible."<sup>69</sup> Casy was talking "sensible" when he observed, there by the roadside,

They's stuff goin' on that the folks doin' it don't know nothin' about - yet. They's gonna come somepin outa all these folks goin' wes' - outa all their farms lef' lonely. They's gonna come a thing that's gonna change the whole country.<sup>70</sup>

Apart from Pa's restless feeling of a change in the air, Casy was the only one of the group who foresaw impending disaster resulting from the mass migration, and he felt it before California was ever in sight. The part he was to play in the strife was presaged by his act of self-sacrifice in remaining with the fallen deputy in Hooverville, to take the blame for Floyd and Tom. This was more than an attempt to repay the Joad family for their kindness,

---

67 Ibid., p. 235.

68 Ibid., p. 236.

69 Ibid., p. 138.

70 Ibid., p. 237.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

95

for, as he was driven away between two guards, "On his lips there was a faint smile and on his face a curious look of conquest."<sup>71</sup> Casy had found that there was a place for a preacher - as a labour organizer.

John Steinbeck, in The Grapes of Wrath, brought characters into the story, and then, after keeping them for a while, pushed them out of the narrative. Such interesting people as Muley Groves and the Wilsons were examples, while those potentially fascinating characters, Granpaw and Granma died early in the story. Steinbeck maintained that life was like that, with people arriving on the scene and departing therefrom without notice. Casy now dropped from sight, except for a short, final appearance during the strike at the Hooper Ranch when he reappeared as a strike leader. While in jail he had found that most of the people he had met were there because they had stolen things which they needed, "It's need that makes all the trouble."<sup>72</sup> He also discovered that one way to get action was for all to yell in unison. This is, of course, a variant of the theme, "let's all work together." Casy tried to convince the workers inside

---

71 Ibid., p. 364.

72 Ibid., p. 521.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

96

the ranch to join the strikers, but Tom discouraged him with the reply,

Think Pa's gonna give up his meat on account a other fellas? An' Rosasharn oughta get milk. Think Ma's gonna wanta starve that baby jus' cause a bunch a fellas is yellin' outside a gate?<sup>73</sup>

This is in direct opposition to Casy's (Steinbeck's) belief that the only solution to the "Okies" situation was in co-operation and a united front. Casy, with his usual understanding, appreciated the Joad's position, but he still maintained his own. He admitted to Tom that it was no fun to fight alone, when even those for whom he fought turned against him, but,

(...) you do what you can. An' the on'y thing you got to look at is that ever'time they's a little step fo'ward, she may slip back a little, but she never slips clear back.<sup>74</sup>

Both he and Ma shared an optimism for the future, but it was a future that Jim Casy would never see.

Rose of Sharon was not a particularly important, nor a particularly lovable character as she whined her way selfishly through the book. She was, however, selfish for the sake of her unborn child, and her one unselfish act on the final page, symbolized the hope for the future.

---

73 Ibid., p. 524.

74 Ibid., p. 525.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

97

Although it was denied vigorously by Californians, many mothers like her were delivered unattended, and still-born babies were common.

In cases of childbirth, prenatal care was reported as almost unknown, and the presence of a doctor at the time of delivery was described as quite exceptional. (...) Many women said that they had lost babies for three and four successive years.<sup>75</sup>

The role of Rose of Sharon was to draw public attention to such needlessly barbaric conditions.

John Steinbeck was criticized for the characterization of nearly everyone who appeared in The Grapes of Wrath. Two characters, however, were rarely mentioned in this regard. These were Ruthie, the twelve year-old daughter, and Winfield, her ten year-old brother. While their contribution to arousing concern for the plight of the "Okies" was insignificant, except insofar as they demonstrated its effect upon the children, they were the most vividly drawn characters in the book. Far from being sweet, lovable siblings, they quarrelled incessantly, and as the story progressed, their behaviour grew worse. "Winfiel' - what's he gonna be this-a-way? Gettin' wild, an' Ruthie too - like animals", Ma complained.<sup>76</sup> They

---

75 Carey McWilliams, Op. Cit., p. 318.

76 John Steinbeck, Op. Cit., p. 556.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

98

were alive, and most accurately portrayed. It may have been that the environment of the Joads was too distant ~~from~~ that of most of Steinbeck's readers for any real empathy to develop, but here were two members who would be recognizable to anyone familiar with the ways of children. Therein, it is submitted, lay their real value to the story. They formed the link between the meagre existence of the Joads, and life as the readers knew it. The children formed the link between the readers and the Joads, and the interchapters formed the link between the Joads and all the persecuted migrant families in California.

The Grapes of Wrath was an immediate success. In bringing the Pulitzer Prize of 1939 to John Steinbeck, it polled thirty-nine out of forty-eight votes for the award of the best book of the year,<sup>77</sup> and in the first six months of publication sold a quarter of a million copies<sup>78</sup>. Most libraries reported long waiting lists for their copies, but the book was banned by the Kansas City Library, and the Associated Farmers of Kern County, California, attempted to outlaw its sale as "not only a smear on the good name of Kern, Cal., but on the good

---

<sup>77</sup> Saturday Review of Literature, Vol.22, No.3, May 11, 1940, p. 5.

<sup>78</sup> "Red Meat and Red Herrings", Op. Cit., p. 562.

## THE GRAPES OF WRATH

99

name of agriculture generally."<sup>79</sup> It was banned, also, by the Buffalo Public Library,<sup>80</sup> and, in East St. Louis, Illinois, the Library Board ordered that three copies of the novel be burned.<sup>81</sup> In New York, on the other hand, it was assigned as reading in sociology at the College of the City of New York.<sup>82</sup>

At the beginning of the chapter it was noted that, in discussing the title, The Grapes of Wrath, John Steinbeck had mentioned that it had a large meaning. He had believed sincerely that the banks and the large growers were sowing the seeds of their own destruction, and that the migrants were being aroused to mass resistance against their brutal oppressors. He prophesied disaster. This prophecy might well have come true, but the Second World War produced a rise in food prices, created a labour shortage, and brought badly-needed industry to California. The fact that "the grapes of wrath" were not gathered for the vintage, detracts nothing from what may well remain as America's most outstanding social novel.

---

79 Idem.

80 The Publishers' Weekly, Vol.136, No.7, August 12, 1939, p. 453.

81 The Publishers' Weekly, Vol.136, No.22, November 25, 1939, p. 994.

82 Idem.

## CONCLUSION

It has been established that the conditions under which the migratory farm workers in California existed prior to the Second World War were almost beyond belief. John Steinbeck demonstrated that they were not beyond description. Although the most violent criticisms of his two novels concerned the validity of the conditions which he described, ample coroboration has been produced to confirm that Steinbeck wrote the truth.

In the two social novels under consideration, John Steinbeck attacked different facets of the same problem. His first attempt, In Dubious Battle, although one of the finest strike novels in American literature, did not achieve wide popularity. The Grapes of Wrath, on the other hand, was tremendously popular, and drew world-wide attention to America's shameful problem. The difference in the reception accorded these two novels of migrant workers is due to Steinbeck's methods of presentation. The story of In Dubious Battle is told by means of the actions of two Communist labour organizers. The actual people whom they are trying to organize, the migrant workers, are never brought forward. Except for a few non-representative leaders, the mass remains in the

## CONCLUSION

101

shadows. Nearly all the activity and all the violence revolve around the two organizers. The readers never get to know the ~~down~~trodden multitude, nor do they appreciate their grievances.

In The Grapes of Wrath, however, the oppressed workers are seen clearly through the adventures of one family. Although the Joads were meant to represent all the migrant families, they were not the type of family which would be familiar to most readers. To ensure an empathy between the readers and the Joads, John Steinbeck drew clearly the two children, Ruthie and Winfield, whom anyone would recognize as typical youngsters. The other migrants whom the Joads met, both on the way and in California, such as the Wilsons and the Wainwrights, are also clearly sketched. There are no shadows here. Even the casual characters like Lisbeth Sandry, and the members of the Ladies' Committee of Sanitary Unit Number Four are described in detail. This clarity of presentation encouraged the readers to visualize what was occurring, and permitted them to feel the abuses to which the migrants were subjected. In order to ensure that the whole sordid episode was not rejected as "just another story", John Steinbeck inserted the powerful, factual interchapters which left no doubt in anyone's mind.

## CONCLUSION

102

that, while the Joads might be fictional characters, the conditions which they encountered were far from fiction. These conditions were familiar to the tens of thousands of migrants for whom John Steinbeck had so much compassion.

While Steinbeck considered that the banks, utility companies, and large owners were preparing their own downfall by failing to provide decent living conditions and a subsistence wage to the migrant workers, it was no part of his position as a writer of social reform to provide the solution. Nor did he. Steinbeck presented the whole unpalatable story, and left the solution to those responsible. Results were not long in coming. In September, 1940, a Congressional Committee held hearings in Oklahoma to investigate the problems of migratory workers,<sup>1</sup> and, in the same year the Farm Security Administration, the body responsible for the migratory workers in California, was the only relief agency to get a larger appropriation from Congress than had been recommended by the Bureau of the Budget.<sup>2</sup> Although it

---

1 Martin Staples Shockley, "The Reception of The Grapes of Wrath in Oklahoma", in American Literature, Vol.15, March 1940 to January 1944, p. 356.

2 "Red Meat and Red Herrings", in The Commonweal, Vol.30, No.25, October 13, 1939, p. 562.

## CONCLUSION

103

it is impossible to determine how much of the improvement is due to Steinbeck's social novels, California today is one of the more enlightened States insofar as farm labour legislation is concerned. Minimum wage rates are specified for women and children; farm labour camps are regulated by law regarding sanitation, housing, location and construction; safety standards are laid down for vehicles used to transport workers; and a form of workmens' compensation is in effect.<sup>3</sup>

John Ernst Steinbeck was a success as a social reformer. He saw conditions which he deplored; he, almost alone, spoke out against them in a fictional protest; he aroused world-wide attention to the problem; and his writings resulted in the adoption of reform measures. While there are other writers of social protest in the United States, John Steinbeck is the present leader in that field, and he will not be surpassed easily.

---

<sup>3</sup> Farm Labor Fact Book, United States Department of Labor, 1959, Washington, D.C., p. 97-100.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Costigan, Howard, "The Maverick Far West", in The Nation, Vol. 149, No. 5, July 29, 1939, p. 123-126.

A bitter article deploring the fascist tactics of the Associated Farmers and their vigilantes, who cried Communism whenever labour trouble was imminent. A short but very effective report on the activities of an organization to which Steinbeck objected.

Gannett, Lewis, "John Steinbeck: Novelist at Work", in Atlantic Monthly, Vol. 176, No. 6, December, 1945, p. 55-60.

Excerpts from Steinbeck's letters to his literary agents. They provide an illuminating insight to the author's opinions and beliefs. They also reveal his deep personal concern for the conditions of the migrant workers.

Halman, Hugh, "A Narrow-Gauge Dickens", in The New Republic, Vol. 130, No. 23, June 7, 1954, p. 18-20.

What started a review of Sweet Thursday, developed into a comparison of Dickens and Steinbeck as social writers. It is much too short to do more than propose a provocative suggestion. Interesting.

Levinson, Lew, "A California Casualty List", in The Nation, Vol. 139, No. 3608, August 29, 1934, p. 243-245.

A short description of the brutality shown workers in the class war in California. It exceeds anything that Steinbeck described but it is a good example of the conditions which he deplored.

McWilliams, Carey, Factories in the Field, Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1939, 334 p.

A factual work by the one-time Commissioner of Immigration and Housing for the State of California. It gives the history of labour exploitation and actual examples of the conditions which Steinbeck described so vividly. This is a most valuable book which was written by a government official, and covers the subject of migrant labour thoroughly.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

105

McWilliams, Carey, "The Joads on Strike", in The Nation, Vol. 149, No. 19, November 4, 1939, p. 488-489. An eyewitness account of conditions during a strike of cotton pickers. It corroborates further the events which Steinbeck described.

-----, "What's Being Done About the Joads?", in The New Republic, Vol. 90, No. 1294, September 20, 1939, p. 178-180.

This article describes the efforts of the Governor of California to enact legislation to provide camps for migrant labourers, humane relief measures, and co-operative farms for migrants. An interesting, though possibly biased, report.

Robbin, Edward, "The General Staff Takes Charge", in The Nation, Vol. 143, No. 18, October 31, 1936, p. 520.

This article written three years before The Grapes of Wrath, describes events in Steinbeck's home town of Salinas, when the forces of law and order handed over their powers to a self-appointed dictator in order to break a strike. It describes the vigilantes, whom Steinbeck wrote of with such contempt. A short, valuable article.

Shockley, Martin Staples, "The Reception of the Grapes of Wrath in Oklahoma", in American Literature, Vol. 15, January 1944, p. 356-360.

A cross-section of comment on The Grapes of Wrath from newspapers and public figures in Oklahoma. Spirited, and sometimes unwittingly humorous, the reactions were largely unfavourable, but the support given Steinbeck is impressive. Interesting and of some value to this study, since most of the reference material deals with California.

Steinbeck, John, In Dubious Battle, New York, Covici-Friede, 1936, 250 p.

This is Steinbeck's great strike novel.

-----, "In Dubious Battle in California", in The Nation, Vol. 143, No. 11, September 12, 1936, p. 302-304.

This bitter article outlines the history of labour oppression in California and exposes actual conditions which were later to be incorporated into The Grapes of Wrath. A valuable insight to Steinbeck's motive in writing his second social novel.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

106

Steinbeck, John, "Jalopies I Have Cursed and Loved", in Holiday, Vol. 16, No. 1, July, 1954, p. 45 and 89.

A light-hearted article about the automobiles of Steinbeck's youth which explains the intimate knowledge so well displayed in The Grapes of Wrath. Of no other significance.

-----, The Grapes of Wrath, New York, Viking Press, 1939, 619 p.

Steinbeck's greatest novel.

-----, "There's Always Something To Do In Salinas", in Holiday, Vol. 17, No. 6, June, 1955, p. 58 and 153-155.

A description of the author's home town, the uncultered society, and the usual oppression of the workers. Valuable, in that it demonstrates that Steinbeck had experience of what he later described in his social novels.

Stokes, Frank, "Let the Mexicans Organize", in The Nation, Vol. 143, No. 25, December 19, 1936, p. 730-732.

A significant article by a large grower, and member of the California Fruit Growers' Exchange, who not only agreed with Steinbeck, but exposed the brutal methods used to exploit the workers. An unbiased report from the side of the exploiters.

Taylor, Frank J., Jr., "California's Grapes of Wrath", in The Forum, Vol. 102, No. 5, November, 1939, p. 232-238.

This writer attempted to rebut all of Steinbeck's charges in The Grapes of Wrath, by producing statistics. In his enthusiasm he trapped himself several times by his own reports. A lengthy, extremely biased report that is valuable because it often inadvertently admitted what it intended to deny.

Tedlock, E.W., Jr., and Wicker, C.V., Compilers, Steinbeck and His Critics, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1957, 310 p.

A large anthology of criticisms of Steinbeck's works often from the point of view of his philosophical or moral approach. The biographical data is important where it helps the reader to understand Steinbeck's agricultural background. Of limited value, but considerable interest.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

107

Terry, John, "The Terror in San Jose", in The Nation, Vol. 139, No. 3605, August 8, 1934, p. 161-162.

A report of violence and kidnappings during a labour strike, where vigilantes, supported by local law enforcement agencies harried the strikers from county to county. It also stresses the biased newspaper reporting. A further proof of the validity of Steinbeck's charges.

United States Department of Labor, Farm Labor Fact Book, Washington, D.C., 1959, 151 p.

A statistical report providing more up-to-date information on migrant farm labour in the United States.

Whipple, Leon, "Novels on Social Themes", in Survey Graphic, Vol. 28, No. 6, June, 1939, p. 401-402.

A criticism of The Grapes of Wrath, in which Mr. Whipple agreed with Steinbeck and considered him to be a social writer of significance.

Publisher's Weekly, Vol. 136, No. 7, August 12, 1939, p. 453.

A report of the banning of The Grapes of Wrath in Buffalo. Valuable in demonstrating the strength of feelings aroused by the book.

Publisher's Weekly, Vol. 136, No. 22, November 25, 1939, p. 994.

A report of the burning of The Grapes of Wrath in St. Louis, Illinois. Another example of high feelings.

"Red Meat and Red Herrings", in The Commonweal, Vol. 30, No. 25, October 13, 1939, p. 562-563.

A collection of reviews of The Grapes of Wrath from various sources, providing a variety of reactions. A valuable source as it gives a cross-section of opinion.

"Steinbeck: Critical Thorns and a Nobel Laurel", in Newsweek, Vol. 60, No. 19, November 5, 1962, p. 65.

A current review of Steinbeck on the occasion of the award to him of the Nobel Prize for Literature. The review is significant as it illustrates the difficulties which Steinbeck has always encountered with critics.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

108

"The Shape of Things", in The Nation,  
Vol. 143, No. 13, September 26, 1936, p. 351.

Another report of the anti-labour activities of  
the Associated Farmers and their vigilantes. Further  
proof of Steinbeck's objections.

ABSTRACT OF

John Steinbeck as a Social Reformer<sup>1</sup>

John Steinbeck was born in 1902, in Salinas, which is in the centre of agricultural California. His two great social novels, In Dubious Battle, and The Grapes of Wrath, describe the unbelievably shocking conditions to which American migrant labourers were forced to submit prior to the Second World War.

A short biographical sketch of John Steinbeck was produced in the first chapter of this thesis in order to demonstrate that Steinbeck had seen and experienced the conditions which he described so vividly in these two proletarian novels.

The second chapter explained how the unique characteristics of California land tenure and the diversity of its crops produced a demand for a large, transient labour force. It told how the successive groups of foreign workers had been exploited, and how the same tactics were used when the influx of American refugees from the "dust bowl" states occurred in the 1930s. The

---

<sup>1</sup> Winston Maxwell Jessup, master's thesis presented to the Department of English of the University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ontario, September 1963, vii-108 p.

## ABSTRACT

attempts of the workers to organize were narrated, as well as the violent methods used by the growers to suppress these attempts.

A comparison of Steinbeck with Dickens was made in Chapter Three, followed by an examination of the former's attitudes towards the conditions which he described in In Dubious Battle and The Grapes of Wrath. The organizations and institutions which he attacked were mentioned here - the growers' associations, the American Legion, the vigilantes, the biased newspapers, and the corrupt forces of law and order.

Steinbeck's excellent strike novel, In Dubious Battle, was considered in Chapter Four. The story was summarized; then the situations described therein were related to similar events which had actually happened in California; and lastly, the characters were assessed for their value in illustrating the abuses mentioned in the book.

The Grapes of Wrath was examined in the fifth chapter, and it was considered that its great success was due, largely, to the method of presentation used by Steinbeck. He used a single family to represent all the "Okies" who had come to California, and he related the trials and tribulations of the Joads to those of all of

ABSTRACT

the oppressed, by a series of interposed, explanatory interchapters.

The difference in the popularity of the two novels was explained in the Conclusion, and it was considered that some much-needed reforms resulted from the furore raised over The Grapes of Wrath. It was decided that John Steinbeck was a success as a social reformer because he saw the deplorable conditions of the migrant workers; he was appalled, and spoke out against the situation in print to a large audience; and his objections to the frightful treatment of the workers aroused the national conscience and resulted in a great improvement in farm labour conditions in California.