A Political Companion to John Steinbeck
edited by Cyrus Ernesto Zirakzadeh and Simon Stow
Reviewed by Molly Schiever

Published as part of the Political Companions to Great American Authors series, A Political Companion to John Steinbeck examines Steinbeck's political beliefs and the reflection of these convictions in his writings. Unlike other Political Companions in the series, notes editor Simon Stow, this collection of fourteen essays also considers Steinbeck's activism and his influence both during his lifetime and after. As Stow maintains, “Steinbeck was a staunch critic of capitalism but despised its state-centered alternatives; he championed community but feared the mob; he embraced his nation's wars but mourned their cost; he celebrated American ingenuity but criticized the society it created; he advocated for humanitarian intervention but recognized its costs to indigenous peoples; he sought solace and insights in nature but lamented the cruelties it inflicted on humanity” (9).

In organizing the essays, Stow and his fellow editor, Cyrus Ernesto Zirakzadeh, have divided their volume into four parts: Steinbeck as social critic, the cultural roots of his political vision, his place in American political culture, and, finally, the question of whether or not he was an ambivalent American.

Part I charges right into the fray with a provocative question about Steinbeck's most famous work. "Revolutionary conservative or conservative revolutionary?" Zirakzadeh asks, arguing that the author of The Grapes of Wrath, while “relentlessly attacking the ideological defenses of laissez-faire industrialization and growing concentration of capital, reaffirms a nostalgic view of preindustrial America and contributes to negative stereotypes of industrial wage earners” (19). The book's call for wholesale economic change, Zirakzadeh argues, rests on socially conservative grounds.

Bright. His theatrical efforts, she states, “constitute an attempt to harness the political power of the stage: to add an active political dimension to some of his most politically minded works” (78).

In the final essay in Part I, “Steinbeck and the Tragedy of Progress,” Adrienne Akins Warfield discusses The Pearl, in which Steinbeck considers the negative effects of modernization and knowledge divorced from human relationships and ethical concerns. She then contrasts the pearl diver’s story with that of The Forgotten Village, in which education is portrayed as a beneficent force.

Part II examines Steinbeck’s cultural roots and his expression of social criticism by means of traditional American myths and nature’s conflicts and complexities. In “Group Man and the Limits of Working-Class Politics,” Charles Williams discusses In Dubious Battle and delves into Steinbeck’s phalanx theory. Williams states that “rather than seeing his account of group man as removed from and in conflict with the political commitments revealed in In Dubious Battle, we ought to recognize that Steinbeck’s anxieties over the dangers of group man shaped his sympathies for workers and the downtrodden and that this orientation persists in his later writing” (121).

In “The Indifference of Nature and the Cruelty of Wealth,” Michael T. Gibbons focuses closely on The Grapes of Wrath, arguing that Steinbeck “saw the progressive refashioning of human life as rooted in a complex relation among individuals, nature, and the prevailing social and economic institutions” (147). Gibbons states that Steinbeck saw nature as “a set of forces that is largely indifferent to and often obstructs the possibilities of human and social life.”

Part II closes with “‘The Technique of Building Worlds’: Exodian Nation Formation in John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath,” in which Roxanne Harde asserts that Steinbeck used the biblical text of Exodus as a pattern for his novel’s narrative. Thus she maintains that Exodus foreshadows the novel, “shapes the formation of the Okie nation, and offers a model of prophecy” (172). Harde concludes by tracing Exodian typology into contemporary revisions of Steinbeck’s American Exodus in The Grapes of Wrath.

“Steinbeck in American Political Culture” is the title of Part III, and there are four essays in this section, each examining Steinbeck’s influence on other American artists. First, James R. Swensen’s “Focusing on the Migrant: The Contextualization of Dorothea Lange’s Photographs of the John Steinbeck Committee” surveys the famed photographer’s photos of the John Steinbeck Committee to Aid Agricultural Organization. While noting that Steinbeck himself played a “largely titular” role on the committee,
Swensen observes that the author’s name gave importance and weight to this committee formed to “provide the necessary support, financial and moral, to help agricultural workers in California build a strong union” (192).

The second essay, Marijane Osborn’s “Participatory Parables: Cinema, Social Action, and Steinbeck’s Mexican Dilemma,” explores filmed adaptations of The Forgotten Village, The Pearl, and Viva Zapata. Osborn states that Steinbeck originally conceived the three Mexican stories as films dealing with colonialism. Viva Zapata—directed by Elia Kazan, with Marlon Brando as Zapata and Anthony Quinn as Zapata’s brother—remains an American film classic, one which “adds, or enhances, the racial nuance that the white Marlon Brando achieves with his brilliant portrayal of the half-Indian Zapata as Indian” (327).

The third piece in this section, Lauren Onkey’s “‘Not Afraid of Being Heroic’: Bruce Springsteen’s John Steinbeck,” discusses Springsteen’s many connections to Steinbeck, most notably his 1995 album, The Ghost of Tom Joad. As Springsteen has written, “What I always loved about Steinbeck’s work was that it wasn’t afraid of being heroic and that he risked, he hung his ass out there . . . for you, for me” (248). Onkey argues that engaging with Steinbeck has given Springsteen “a way to reconceive the latter part of his career, again to mix mass success with political writing” (263).

Part III concludes with Zirakzadeh’s “Retelling an American Political Tale: A Comparison of Literary, Cinematic, and Musical Versions of The Grapes of Wrath.” As Stow states in the introduction, his fellow editor finds that the film version of The Grapes of Wrath offers “a constructive role for government in reestablishing the conditions under which social justice and capitalism can flourish simultaneously”—an interpretation quite different from the “more ambiguous depiction of government action in the novel” (13).

A Political Companion to John Steinbeck concludes with “John Steinbeck: Ambivalent American?” Part IV’s three essays examine Steinbeck’s relationship to his country. In “Patriotic Ironies: John Steinbeck’s Wartime Service to His Country,” Mimi R. Gladstein and James H. Meredith look at Steinbeck’s numerous attempts to enter military service in World War II—attempts thwarted again and again by government suspicion about his true political sympathies. “His was a complex kind of patriotism,” Zirakzadeh and Stow observe, “not easily pigeonholed, as it contained a critical streak and existed alongside a more universal and ecological view of humankind than is traditionally associated with the potentially parochial characterization of patriotism” (293).
The final two essays, Robert S. Hughes’s “John Steinbeck’s Shifting View of America: From Travels with Charley to America and Americans” and Stow’s “Can You Honestly Love a Dishonest Thing? The Tragic Patriotism of The Winter of Our Discontent,” discuss Steinbeck’s final works, examining the writer’s ambivalence about his native country. Hughes finds that in Travels with Charley “the occasional mood swings, depression, and loneliness that colored his highly impressionistic view give way in America and Americans to steadier observations and more thorough analyses” (319).

Steinbeck’s final novel, The Winter of Our Discontent, Stow argues, “offers a tragic vision of America that, while critiquing the nation, nevertheless draws on a particular kind of love of country that it not only depicts but also seeks to engender in the reader” (325). Here Stow sees Steinbeck as “hopeful but not optimistic about America.” While acknowledging that the odds were against him, Steinbeck remained “an engaged artist whose work aims at bringing the country he desires into being” (342).

In his introduction Stow points out that attacks on workers, unions, and workers rights continue today. Thus John Steinbeck “could not be more important. He remains a dangerous writer, hostile to political cant on both the Left and the Right, and therefore an author whose political vision remains worthy of our attention” (15).

Molly Schiever is a free-lance writer and editor in Toledo, Ohio. Former editor of the University of Toledo Press, she also served as a reporter and daily make-up editor for Toledo’s The Blade newspaper.