

## PREFACE

“He read constantly all his life—he gobbled up books—all kinds of books—but there is no collection—no record, anyway—of what he read.”

—Elaine Steinbeck (31 January 1979)

*Steinbeck's Reading* began innocently enough in 1968 as a random list of book titles and authors' names which Steinbeck mentioned in his own works. These entries formed the basis for my impression that the act of reading was more important to Steinbeck's imaginative life than had yet been ascertained. Later, with the appearance of his posthumous *Journal of a Novel* (1969), *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters* (1975) and *The Acts of King Arthur* (1976), my impression gained more substantial footing, and I set out to compile a more comprehensive record of Steinbeck's reading than those which already existed in critical books by Harry Moore, Peter Lisca, Joseph Fontenrose and Richard Astro. In tracing the wayward course of Steinbeck's reading—from the obvious references in his published writings, through the frequent allusions and references in his unpublished manuscripts and letters, then to the actual books he owned or borrowed, and finally to the information provided by his family, friends and associates—I have arrived at last at a clearing in the forest, a place which is both an end and another beginning.

Even after several years of concentrated effort, especially from 1979 to 1982, this catalogue only approximates the total number of Steinbeck's books. It is not a literal transcription of the titles in Steinbeck's personal library, because no such single *cumulative* collection ever existed, apart from the “designed library” of reference books he accumulated in his late years. In fact, until 1950, when he became settled after his third marriage, Steinbeck's fairly nomadic life, his tendency to borrow books from public libraries and from friends, and the aftermath of his

two previous divorces mitigated against the creation of a large permanent library (and for that matter, against an accurate inventory as well). Thus, although *Steinbeck's Reading* includes over 900 entries and covers the entire span of his career, it should be considered a reconstruction of his library only in the most liberal sense; that is, besides listing books he actually owned, it is also comprised of and relies heavily on those titles which he read, borrowed, studied, referred or alluded to, or otherwise had available, particularly through Ed Ricketts and Chase Horton. While I have marshalled all of the relevant information accessible through ordinary resources, systematic research and even serendipitous means, a definitive assembly is—at this time anyway—an elusive goal.

Beside the obvious problems involved in contacting everyone with accurate knowledge of Steinbeck's reading interests, several other factors have limited the scope of this catalogue. First, library borrowers' cards have disappeared. For example, the Salinas and Pacific Grove (California) libraries, the Stanford University Library, and the Sag Harbor (Long Island) Library—all favorites of Steinbeck—have no records of his borrowings. Second, publishers' invoices, which list books Steinbeck ordered against his accounts, have been lost or destroyed. By his own admission, Steinbeck frequently obtained books through Pascal Covici, first from Covici-Friede Publishers, then from Viking Press. One such document has survived, but the Covici-Friede files were reportedly lost after the firm went bankrupt in 1938, and a search of Viking Press files failed to reveal any others. Third, many of the books Steinbeck owned have been dispersed. This was especially true after his divorces (from Carol in 1943, and from Gwyn, who kept *all* of his books, in 1948), and in the fifteen years since his death (Elaine Steinbeck has not made a "shrine" of his later library, and in fact has generously donated many of his books). Unlike Hemingway, who prepared rather scrupulous inventories of his personal libraries, to my knowledge Steinbeck never made such inventories, nor did he list books individually in his divorce settlement papers. While I have tracked down a fair number of his books which were sold by Gwyn and his sons during the 1970s and early 1980s, the sad fact is that most have gone unrecorded. (As late as 1957, Stein-

beck still lamented the difficulty of replacing his collection of "Classics," especially the books he had inherited from his grandfather and father.) To compound matters, some areas of Steinbeck's reading cannot be adequately documented yet. For example, just how much more of his own friends' work he read (John O'Hara, Arthur Miller and John Dos Passos come immediately to mind), will remain a mystery until more primary sources of information are available. Again, unlike Hemingway, whose library holdings were the subject of numerous brief reports and photographs, Steinbeck's penchant for privacy seems to have abrogated the possibility of eye-witness accounts. In a recently discovered photograph of his library—the only one I have seen—the camera's focus is on Steinbeck's children playing in the foreground; only a few titles—*Plays for High Holidays*, *The Complete Poodle*, *The Standard Book of Dog Care*, *Encyclopedia Britannica* (14th edition), *Pear's Cyclopaedia*, and *The Living Bible*—are visible.

From there, one could conjecture about the books sent to him for review (which he rarely did), or given to him as complimentary copies (which he reputedly gave away). And then one can imagine a tally of those items he mentioned only in passing: reference works (atlases, desk encyclopedias, foreign language dictionaries, gazettes, thesauruses); books on hobbies (unspecified editions of the Audubon Field Guides, Bowditch's *Practical Navigator*, Walton's *Compleat Angler*, as well as contemporary books on gardening, cooking and sports); periodicals (*Atlantic Monthly*, *Century*, *Esquire*, *Life*, *Look*, *National Geographic*, *New Yorker*, *Saturday Evening Post*); catalogues of Sears, Roebuck and Montgomery Ward; and of course various editions and versions of the Bible (King James and Revised Standard). Considering all these, plus fugitive anthologies and titles in the classics, history and science, surely his ideal "library" would number in the thousands.

Catalogues of writers' libraries vary widely in format and scope. Those which are based on first-hand observation are especially impressive in cumulative numbers of entries or in attention to bibliographical particulars, but they are often limited in regard to commentary. One feels the sheer weight of this or that writer's books, but not always the presence of an active reader. I have departed from that general trend by annotating entries

wherever possible with Steinbeck's comments (keeping in mind the Steinbeck Estate's strict requirements on fair usage), and by expanding the range and usefulness of this catalogue with an interpretative introduction, pertinent explanatory notes, and a bibliography of primary and secondary sources.

I hope what remains will be enough to accomplish two ends: first, to illuminate an important aspect of this complex and enduring artist; and second, to counter fashionable notions about the paucity of Steinbeck's intellectual background and the limits of his literary tastes. "Reading," Steinbeck found in his copy of *The Essays of Francis Bacon*, "maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man." Bacon's statement properly reflects a triad of values Steinbeck tried to keep central in his life for nearly fifty years. This catalogue is concerned chiefly with the first of those propositions, but it also suggests that, for Steinbeck, the first was often linked to the third. *Steinbeck's Reading*, then, is both an invitation to amplify and to refine the basic list presented here, and a guide to chart a neglected area of Steinbeck studies, notably the degree to which his reading influenced his own writing. A great deal of work remains to be done; if this catalogue helps that process go forward, it will have served its purpose.

RD  
Athens, Ohio  
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