

## DeMott/New Preface to *Steinbeck's Reading*/1

Accurately or not, I have come to think of *Steinbeck's Reading: A Catalogue of Books Owned and Borrowed* (1984) as the first part of a trilogy--the other two are my edition of Steinbeck's *Working Days: The Journals of The Grapes of Wrath, 1938-1941* (1989) and *Steinbeck's Typewriter: Essays on His Art* (1996). Even before this oddly hybrid reference book (which I worked on piecemeal throughout the 1970s) came out, I knew there was more to be said about Steinbeck's life and career, but I had no sense of the direction or shape that future work would take over the next dozen-plus years. In retrospect, however, if I am not being too precious in second-guessing myself, it appears that all three constellate themselves more or less around aspects of Steinbeck's creativity. Though embarrassed to admit it, most of us only have three or four good ideas in our whole lives. My run of good critical ideas was over a long time ago, but one of them was my belief that Steinbeck was more deeply immersed in the conjoined "reading and writing life" (Toni Morrison's phrase) than most of his earlier critics were willing to admit. Tracing out implications of Steinbeck's creativity, broadly considered, and following the trail of the figure in his carpet, so to speak, became a persistent theme and on-going process, extending from "The Interior Distances of John Steinbeck," an essay in *Steinbeck Quarterly* in 1979, through the aforementioned trilogy, and most recently to the introduction and notes for the 2008 Penguin Classic edition of *Sweet Thursday*.

Garland Publishing Company, whose days as a stand-alone independent humanities publisher are long gone, printed only about two hundred and fifty (perhaps five hundred at most) copies of *Steinbeck's Reading*, and for many years the book has been out of print. I have been asked frequently whether I have stockpiled or remaindered copies to sell, and I am sure inquirers were miffed when I said "no," but the truth is that in the past dozen years or so I have only owned three: my original publication copy, which is heavily annotated, and freighted with additional paste-ins, xeroxed reviews, interlinear markings, Post-it notes, and scribbled reminders to myself; one unmarked copy that I keep to round out my own personal book collection; and a copy that I recently gave as a gift to a close friend. Once in a while copies turn up for sale on eBay or in online or print book sellers' listings, with ridiculously inflated prices (up to \$250.00), but other than those infrequent commercial instances the book is very hard to come by. Given its scarcity, I am continually amazed at the frequency with which *Steinbeck's Reading* is quoted and/or referenced in Steinbeck scholarship, especially now in an age when generative criticism is not as fashionable as it once was. I've been told by many colleagues in our field that the book is an essential resource text; for that I am pleased to have aided and abetted the expansion of Steinbeck studies. As with the fly on the wagon wheel axle, I'd like to say, "What a dust I raise," but the fact is such clamor is all due to Steinbeck himself, who once claimed, "I guess there are never enough books."

I subsequently published two supplements to *Steinbeck's Reading* in the now defunct *Steinbeck Quarterly*, but since the publication of the second of those addenda in 1989 I have added nothing new to the record. I have watched with interest, however, as copies of books from Steinbeck's library have come up for sale in various venues. Many of them were already noted in *Steinbeck's Reading*, but occasionally new ones surfaced as well. San Francisco's PBA Galleries recently auctioned Steinbeck's copies of two of *The English Replicas* series: John Keats,

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*Poems 1817*, and John Keats, *Poems 1820* (both volumes were published in New York by Payson and Clark, 1927). Each book is signed by Steinbeck and dated 1933 on the front pastedown and each carries the ink stamp "This Book Belongs to John and Carol Steinbeck." The Keats volumes are especially noteworthy because no titles by the great British Romantic poet appear in *Steinbeck's Reading* or its supplements. If those volumes were inserted into the present inventory, they would be numbers 460a and 460b, respectively.

In April, 2007, I was a talking head on a Russian documentary about John Steinbeck co-produced by Olga Zhguenti and George Santulli. Olga and her small crew had come to the United States from Tbilisi, Georgia, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of Steinbeck's *A Russian Journal*. The two-hour long film was being underwritten by a competitive grant from the United States Department of State's Office of Broadcast Support, directed by Santulli. The setting that day was Steinbeck's Manhattan apartment at East 72nd Street. After my interview session was over and the camera stopped rolling, my hosts and I wandered around the apartment, marveling at the spectacular city views from the 34th floor and oohing and aahing at this and that intriguing Steinbeckian object and artifact before making our way into the small room that served as Steinbeck's study. I admit to a compulsive fascination about writers' studies, studios, and libraries--the places I imagine they sit down to their daily craft duties and where they do the work that keeps people like me busy for decades. It is probably dumb luck but I always seem to come away from such visitations with new insight and renewed enthusiasm for the bookish life.

Joyous Garde, Steinbeck's writing studio at his Sag Harbor house, is a good deal more famous, but this little nook held its own surprising charms and gifts as well, among them his Presidential Medal of Freedom awarded in 1964 by Lyndon Johnson. The framed citation reads: "A writer of world-wide influence, he has helped America to understand itself by finding universal themes in the experiences of men and women everywhere." On the same wall, hung at eye level, there was a framed reproduction of a daguerrotype of Abraham Lincoln. Someone in our group mentioned Steinbeck family lore they had recently heard--reputedly, the novelist kept that portrait near him whenever he was working. Steinbeck writing under the sign of Lincoln is an appealing trope; whether it was an urban myth or not seemed beside the point because the parts fit together so well. Lincoln's grave face as iconic metaphor for Steinbeck's democratic humanism resonated powerfully with all of us.

One corner of the room was occupied by a floor-to-ceiling bookcase whose shelves were well filled with books. Time was short, there were a bunch of us shoehorned into that cramped space, and so I only had time to take down one volume: Carl Sandburg's novel, *Remembrance Rock* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948). Inside, Sandburg had written, "For John Steinbeck, in Fellowship." (Were it entered in *Steinbeck's Reading*, it would be number 706a). The Sandburg connection was especially delightful because three weeks later I spoke on *The Grapes of Wrath* at an NEH Big Read program held at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois. As Knox was the site of the historic Lincoln-Douglas debates in 1858, and as Galesburg is the birthplace of Sandburg (himself a Lincoln biographer among other notable writerly achievements), the literary conjunctions were too fortuitous to be ignored and of course I made the most of them to my unsuspecting audience.

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*Steinbeck's Reading* appeared in December, 1983, a month before I began my acting directorship of San Jose State University's Steinbeck Research Center (as it was then known), where I remained for two of the most interesting years of my life before returning to my permanent teaching position at Ohio University. Sometime after that, Elaine Steinbeck told me an entertaining story about her husband: composer and lyricist Frank Loesser brought back a piece of stone from the Roman Coliseum and gave it to Steinbeck as a gift; Steinbeck, concerned about the removal of an antiquity, waited until the next time he and Elaine were in Rome and returned the stone to its rightful place. It's easy to understand the arc of such an action. In a sense, then, after twenty-five years, this book is back to roost in an appropriate place, for a number of titles listed here as belonging to John and/or Carol Steinbeck are now housed at the Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies.

I modeled *Steinbeck's Reading* on Merton Sealts' *Melville's Reading* (1966), but unlike Sealts, who eventually brought out a revised and expanded edition of his influential book (1988), I have no plans to produce a completely updated version of *Steinbeck's Reading*. However, knowing that it and its two supplements will have a renewed life in cyberspace, where it will be accessible and available to the worldwide community of Steinbeck students, readers, teachers, and scholars, is extremely gratifying and as timely as I could ask for at this moment.

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