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John Steinbeck, *The Good Companion: His Friend Dook's Memoir*
(review)

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John Steinbeck, 1950s.

REVIEWS

*John Steinbeck, The Good Companion:
His Friend Dook's Memoir*

Carlton A. Sheffield.

Edited and notes by Terry White.

Introduction by Richard H. A. Blum.

Berkeley, CA: Creative Arts Book Company, 2002.

224 pp Paper \$14.95

Reviewed by Robert DeMott

Some of us have been around long enough to remember the first appearance of the late Carlton Sheffield's generous and self-effacing memoir of his former Stanford University roommate and lifelong friend. *Steinbeck: The Good Companion*, its complete original title, was published in 1983 by the fledgling and penurious American Lives Endowment (chaired by Richard Blum) in an egregiously edited, photocopied, 8 1/2 x 11 inch, perfectbound format, covered with hand-lettered, flame red poster board. It looked like something a child might assemble for a grade-school English project in the days before personal computers and desktop publishing.

This new Creative Arts Book Company edition is far handsomer in format and far more presentable in graphic design than the original edition. Despite being plagued by inadequate proofreading and copyediting, which has resulted in a number of typos and errors, it is an altogether more pleasing piece of bookmaking than the 1983 version. With the addition of a

drastically revised introduction by Richard Blum, a reorganization of some of the contents (including newly created chapter divisions and headings), and 42 explanatory endnotes by editor White (an English professor at a Kent State University regional campus), the memoir now seems more like a proper book than a Xeroxed hodge-podge. And yet, caveat emptor: even this new, cleaned-up version's editorial apparatus and methodology are flawed. In the interest of accuracy, a few problem areas are noted here.

White's scholarship, as evidenced in the endnotes, is superficial and routine, even glib in places, and while potentially useful to an uninitiated reader, for one with respectable competency in Steinbeck studies the notes are minimal at best and misinformed in places. White does not appear deeply conversant with the available range of discourse or resources on Steinbeck (nor for that matter, deeply familiar with Steinbeck's own work). For instance, his comments regarding Steinbeck's spiteful reaction toward Hemingway (note 7, page 202) grossly overstate the case by ignoring Steinbeck's later positive statements on Papa, as further investigation in readily available resources would have shown. White's confusion of "Fletcher" (note 17, page 205) for marine scientist and author W. K. Fisher also could have been easily cleared up. He depends throughout on Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten's edition of correspondence, *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters* (1975), seemingly unaware of that edition's severely compromised and problematical text, which includes often ruthlessly excised and hence distorted Steinbeck letters. On pages 146–151, White mistakenly follows the Steinbeck/Wallsten edition in transcribing Steinbeck's 21 June 1933 letter to Sheffield, when in fact had he followed Sheffield's original version in the 1983 text, he would have almost exactly duplicated Steinbeck's original letter, housed at Stanford University, which is only rarely broken into paragraphs. If any section of Sheffield's memoir needed annotating for its readers, it is the section devoted to Steinbeck's effusive explanations of his discovery of his "Phalanx theory." And yet here on this extremely important matter, White is almost entirely silent.

The deeper problem arises, however, when other aspects of the 1983 and the 2002 editions of Sheffield's memoir are compared. In the former, Sheffield supplied—at Richard Blum's

instigation—a Coda that briefly summed up his relationship with Steinbeck. In the 2002 edition, for some inexplicable reason, the Coda has been moved to the front of the book, retitled “Letter to Jawn from Dook,” and deliberately recast in a familiar, folksy point of view as though it were a letter addressed directly to John Steinbeck (pronouns have been changed from “he” to “you”). No rationale is offered for this violent distortion. The opening line in the original version, which reads, “He was the best friend I ever had,” has been modified to read, “You were the best friend I ever had” (xxi). Whether this prestidigitation was done by Blum or White cannot be determined from the text’s available evidence, but as editor of record of the volume, White must take responsibility for this gross affront. In other places, too, sections of the original Coda have been excised without explanation, as for example this important final paragraph: “It is now a friendship in memory and one that has been a major influence on my life—for the good, both in providing me with confidence and a companion whom I could love and respect.” In yet other places, Sheffield’s language has been mysteriously revised or changed, again without one shred of editorial comment or rationale.

While those alterations are grievous and uncalled-for liberties with Sheffield’s original text, a greater—and more unconscionable—interpolation occurs when four short paragraphs of jarring dialogue between Sheffield and Steinbeck regarding Jews at Stanford University (where they were both enrolled) have been added to the text (xxii). According to the interpolated version, Steinbeck and Sheffield decided to room together at Stanford because both objected to their assigned roommates: Steinbeck was paired with a Jew and Sheffield was paired with someone who, judging from his name, might have been Jewish as well. These lines are nowhere to be found in the original 1983 text, which itself was produced directly from Sheffield’s typescript. Because there is no scholarly rationale or biographical justification for this scurrilous addition, one can only speculate about why and how it was inserted

Carlton Sheffield

and who was to blame for its fabrication. Given Blum's undisguised hostility toward Sheffield that surfaces in his introduction, it isn't too much to guess that Blum himself may have concocted the added dialogue to show that both men were far less saintly than Sheffield's memoir purports. But this is speculation on my part. Readers are urged to judge the case for themselves, however, by comparing the White-Blum account with the corresponding information in Jackson Benson's 1984 biography, *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, Writer* (48) and in Jay Parini's 1995 *John Steinbeck: A Biography* (33), neither of which mentions the presence of Jewish roommates. If Professor White had done his own editorial homework, which in this case would have meant proofreading both versions of the text against each other to identify discrepancies, he might have unmasked this particularly unsupportable and generally uncharacteristic exchange. Instead, White seems to accept the added anti-Semitic dialogue. His note, unfortunately, does not clarify the matter (199).

Later, White has Sheffield signing off on the last page of his memoir from "Woodside, California" (194), when in fact Sheffield lived and wrote in Los Altos Hills. White misinterpreted the byline under the frontispiece photograph of Sheffield that opens his 1983 version of the memoir. The line reads, "Carlton 'Dook' Sheffield, June 1980. Photograph by Ann Duwe for *The Country Almanac*, Woodside, California." The scene in the photograph, however, is indisputably the interior of Sheffield's Los Altos Hills bungalow at 27520 Arastradero Road.

Editorially, then, this is a disappointing and suspect production, and its gaffs are aided and abetted by Richard Blum's introduction, which is at its best pretentious and arrogant and at its worst downright supercilious and hostile. Blum scores a few good points, especially in his recognition that "for Steinbeck aficionados and scholars, Dook matters" (x). And yet the deeper agenda of Blum's introduction is suggested by this selection:

The original foreword I wrote to the ALE 1983 edition is itself a pretty bad piece of work: saccharin, pretentiously folksy, phony as a \$3 bill, uncritical, damn near hagiography, and gutless to boot. Dook

and I *were* friends but much more ambivalently than that foreword would ever have allowed you to guess. I was a whipper-snapper kid of a writer, Stanford lecturer, roustabout criminologist, half-assed politician, whatever...I claimed to have responded to Sheff's sometimes bitterly sarcastic criticism of my stuff as though he were entirely right in his disdain. He well might have been....Even later, when a book or two came out which now and then a critic allowed as okay, Sheff was anything but interested or complimentary....There was a double side to him...that held back pride and appreciation and replaced it with scathing criticism. At the very least Steinbeck had spoiled him for work such as mine. (xi-xii)

It seems plausible to say that publication, at long last in legitimate format, of the deceased Sheffield's memoir wasn't really the point of this book at all. The real point, perhaps, besides cashing in on the Steinbeck centenary, was to give Blum a chance to settle his long-standing score with Sheffield. "I did like him," Blum states, "and yet also, mostly later, simultaneously not" (xii). His introduction seems to spring from Blum's "mostly not" days. If it proves anything, it proves that with a friend like Blum, Sheffield didn't need an enemy.

Whatever the ups and downs of Sheffield's friendship with Steinbeck, the two men were ultimately good for each other. Sheffield was a strong resource and spur to Steinbeck's writing at a crucial early moment in his career, and Steinbeck was well served by Sheffield as a friend and conservator. Thankfully, even the questionable efforts of White and Blum do not harm the basic integrity and significance of Sheffield's generous and trustworthy memoir, still the only full-length, eyewitness account of its kind in the entire Steinbeck archive.

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