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Robert Eustis Morsberger

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John Steinbeck and the Critics

John Ditsky.

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Reviewed by Robert E. Morsberger

As a prominent Steinbeck scholar for more than thirty years and a former member of the editorial board of the *Steinbeck Quarterly*, John Ditsky is particularly well qualified to write a critical survey of sixty years of Steinbeck criticism. Ditsky confines his survey to scholarly works in English, regretfully omitting the substantial work done by Japanese critics, who have been prominent in the International John Steinbeck Society. He also leaves out magazine and newspaper articles and reviews, most of which, especially in *Time*, were dismissive of Steinbeck despite his Pulitzer and Nobel Prizes. Aside from Harry T. Moore's pioneer book in 1939, which of course covers none of the work after *The Grapes of Wrath*, there were only two scholarly articles about Steinbeck in the decade before Peter Lisca published the next book-length analysis of the author in 1958, including Steinbeck's work of the previous two decades. "With the arrival of Peter Lisca," notes Ditsky, "the days when John Steinbeck was at the mercy of newspaper and magazine critics had ended."

In the 1960s, there were four more book-length analyses of Steinbeck (by Warren French, F. W. Watt, Joseph Fontenrose, and Lester Jay Marks) plus two casebooks and a Barron's *Simplified Approach to Steinbeck*: "Grapes of Wrath." But in the next three decades, Steinbeck criticism expanded enormously. Ditsky has done a prodigious amount of reading, examining 104 books and monographs. He seems to have read them all, for his survey analyzes them all in varying degrees of detail.

Unlike the mean-spirited opposition to Steinbeck from political opponents and academic ideologues who condemn him largely unread or at least without providing any supporting analysis for what amounts to little more than name calling, Ditsky is good-natured in his critiques, even of critics with whom he sometimes disagrees. He is not one of those critics who "start with assumptions of what a correct philosophy is and judge Steinbeck's fiction to be faulty because he does not agree with them." Ditsky, of course, is a major Steinbeck critic in his own right and sometimes offers his

own insights while commenting on those of others. But instead of trying to fit Steinbeck into any preconceived framework, critical bed of Procrustes, or inflexible ideology, he approaches each Steinbeck book on its own terms and is particularly good at finding overlooked merit in some of the postwar books that many critics who otherwise admire Steinbeck have seen as signs of the author's decline but that Ditsky sees as evidence of postmodernist flexibility and change.

By the same token, Ditsky admires critical independence of mind and welcomes new Steinbeck critics as they enter the field—Robert DeMott, Louis Owens, Mimi Gladstein, Jackson Benson, Roy Simmonds, John Timmerman, Robert Hughes, Michael Meyer, Susan Shillinglaw, and others. By now, he says there are three generations of them. New approaches usher in “a newly confident era of Steinbeck scholarship.” Steinbeck critics tend to become friends from encountering each other at dozens of Steinbeck conferences at home and abroad—to join what biographer Jackson Benson has called the “Steinbeck roadies,” and while they do not always agree, their disagreements are offered in friendly fashion, free from intellectual venom. Sometimes there is friendly sparring, and Ditsky, a poet as well as a critic, throws in boxing metaphors, having critics “weigh in” with their interpretations. As Steinbeck critics react to and learn from each other's work, a more complex critical understanding develops, and some prolific critics like Lisca and French have revised some earlier opinions accordingly.

In 1966, Tetsumaro (Ted) Hayashi and Preston Beyer founded the John Steinbeck Society, which has since become international, and founded *The Steinbeck Quarterly*. Under the auspices of Hayashi and Richard Astro, the first Steinbeck conference was held at Oregon State University in 1969. Ditsky and I made our own first appearances there. The proceedings were published in a book that Ditsky admires as a model of its kind. The enormously energetic Ted Hayashi became such a prime mover in Steinbeck studies that Ditsky devotes an entire chapter to him. Hayashi was indefatigable in coming up with new projects for books and monographs on Steinbeck and recruiting contributors to write for them. Largely thanks to his repeated invitations, Ditsky, myself, and many another scholar who at first had no idea of becoming Steinbeck specialists have gotten hooked. In addition to editing the *Quarterly* for nearly a third of a century, Hayashi also edited or co-edited a dozen books on Steinbeck and fifteen volumes in the *Steinbeck Monograph Series*, plus

a briefer *Steinbeck Essay Series* and a bibliography series, many of which introduced new Steinbeck scholars. Hayashi was notable in encouraging and publishing the work of graduate students, who went on to further scholarship. Ditsky notes that “Hayashi...carried on as though an implacable critical enemy did not exist, and in the end, his instincts proved him right.”

Returning to his chronological survey, Ditsky finds merit in the anecdotal narratives of Steinbeck friends that might otherwise be thin, and despite the shortcomings that he finds in some critical and biographical books, he is fair in appraising the authors’ accomplishments. He prefers criticism that may find patterns but is free of theoretical and prejudicial reading and does not try to impose external critical references. His own enthusiasm for Steinbeck is always evident. He even writes admiringly of the aesthetics of the printing and binding of some books. He also indicates the type of readership or students that some works are aimed for and which books and monographs are partly outdated and/or difficult to find. Ditsky writes in a graceful and often witty prose, sometimes throwing in his own anecdotes and recollections of Steinbeck conferences at Corvallis, Tuscaloosa, Salinas, Lowell, and Hawaii.

Some “blinkerer bullyboys of the Eastern Establishment,” as Ditsky calls those academics who condemn Steinbeck by mere name-calling, without offering any substantial criticism or even an indication that they have read more than a title or two, would like to revoke his Nobel Prize, to exclude him from the American literary canon, and have even argued that the Library of America should shut up shop or at least reconsider its entire basis, after it included three volumes of Steinbeck. But he remains one of the most widely read serious American authors, and Ditsky’s thorough and insightful survey of the last century’s substantial body of Steinbeck criticism will be invaluable both to his general readers and his current and future scholars.

ROBERT E. MORSBERGER *has edited John Steinbeck’s screenplay Viva Zapata!, published numerous chapters in books of Steinbeck criticism and articles on Steinbeck in literary journals, presented many papers at Steinbeck conferences, and been on the editorial board of The Steinbeck Quarterly. Among his other publications are James Thurber, Lew Wallace: Militant Romantic (in collaboration with Katharine M. Morsberger), Commonsense Grammar and Style, and Swordplay on the Elizabethan and Jacobean Stage.*