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Jay Parini, Robert J. DeMott, Susan Shillinglaw

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ELAINE STEINBECK, 1914-2003

JAY PARINI, ROBERT DEMOTT,
AND SUSAN SHILLINGLAW

JAY PARINI—I remember getting a call one night from Elaine Steinbeck about fifteen years ago. We had many friends in common, and they had given her a recent book of mine. She called to ask if I would consider writing a biography of her husband, John Steinbeck, to be published first in England in connection with a relaunching of all Steinbeck titles at Heinemann. I explained that I'd never written a biography of anyone and didn't know if I could manage it. "Oh, you can do it, honey," she said, in that Texas drawl of hers, which she exaggerated for effect when it suited her. We agreed to meet over lunch in New York when I was next in town.

Like nearly everyone who ever met her, I fell in love with Elaine at first sight. She was immensely bright and talkative, feisty and full of stories, thoroughly delighted by the cards dealt her by the gods. In particular, she still could not get over her good fortune in having met and married John Steinbeck, her second husband. (Her first was the Hollywood actor, Zachary Scott, by whom she had a daughter.) We hit it off at once, and I agreed to try to write this book, which Heinemann would commission. Elaine explained that she would set up interviews for me, providing a long list of telephone numbers of friends to call. Through her, I encountered dozens of people who knew John Steinbeck and loved him, and I learned a great deal about the Steinbeck world through countless conversations with Elaine herself.

We worked closely over the next year or two, frequently talking on the phone, often having lunch or dinner. She read drafts and made comments. When my family and I moved to England in 1993, as the manuscript was almost finished, she said, "Oh, good! I get to spend some time in England! It's my favorite place

in the world." Sure enough, she soon booked herself into the Connaught, one of the grandest hotels in the world, where she was well-known to the staff. She came up to see me in Oxford right away, and we continued our conversations. She continued to read draft after draft of my biography, commenting on passages with a meticulous eye for detail. Her prodigious memory was always available to me as I worked, a living archive.

My book (Elaine always called it her book) was rushed into print to meet the deadline at Heinemann, rather too hastily for my taste. (I spent another six months revising the book for my American publisher, Henry Holt, fixing errors and typos, clarifying passages.) Elaine, however, was full of enthusiasm for the book and set up a launch for the biography at the American Embassy, where she seemed to know everyone. In the spring of 1994, we traveled to Paris together, where we repeated on stage a public conversation about Steinbeck that had initially taken place at the Littleton Theater on London's West Bank. I was dazzled, as always, by the liveliness of Elaine's mind, the facility of her speech, and her general presence of mind on stage. She had been, of course, a theater person from the outset, having served as stage manager for *Oklahoma!* in 1942. She still seemed to know everyone in the theater, in London and New York, and they all cheered her on.

It was a relief to get over the hump of the biography and to settle into a more normal relationship with Elaine. I talked to her frequently on the phone over the next six or seven years, until age began to take a toll on her memory. We often had dinner at a little restaurant around the corner from her apartment on the upper East Side. Her energy and love of good talk never relented. Indeed, she seemed only to speak with greater intensity as the veil of age began to shroud her.

Elaine Steinbeck was a woman of immense passion, someone who loved life and, in particular, her own life. She never ceased to talk of John, to relate anecdotes, to thrive on discussing his work. A wide circle of friends who loved John Steinbeck and his writing gathered around her, including Bruce Springsteen and Gary Sinise. Her friends in the Hamptons, such as film director Anthony Harvey and playwrights Terrence McNally and Edward Albee, adored her company. She lived at the center of a dazzling group of talented people. I believe that for them, as for me, her presence remains a living one. I often hear her voice in my head, and I miss her terribly.

ROBERT DEMOTT—At her husband's funeral in 1968, Elaine Steinbeck urged attendees and well-wishers to "Remember him." Her words became the unofficial motto of the John Steinbeck Society. Now, 35 years later, we say the same of her.

Many of us have our favorite memories of Elaine. Mine was of an evening in August, 1992, at the storied Pine Inn in Carmel, California, when Elaine, who had been attending Steinbeck Festival XIII in Salinas, entertained a small group at a festive 78th birthday dinner. It was one of those moments, rare enough in anyone's life, when I felt that there was no where else on earth I'd rather be. Everything sparkled, especially Elaine, whose night it was, and who—effortlessly, as was her way—made all of us feel not just welcome and comfortable at her table, but like cohorts in a jeweled conspiracy to make the moment more than merely an occasion of the here and now. I'm sure John's spirit was hovering over us, she claimed in a letter a few weeks later. Very fine time, lovely time, I scribbled that August night in my journal.

I have similarly fond assessments of all-too brief times in her company in New York, Louisville, Key West, and Nantucket. Each is resonant with its own memory of her youthful vibrancy, her wit, her sociability, her sense of humor, her candor, her engaging story telling, and her capacious intelligence. Dramatist Lanford Wilson said that the only thing about Elaine that would surprise him is if she didn't know something. I felt that way about her too. Elaine was more than a great ambassador for her husband's career and reputation. She possessed her own multifaceted brilliance that was in itself astonishing and irresistible.

Moreover, Elaine Steinbeck was one of those singular people whose talent it was always to make you seem better or more worthy than you really are. I have only known four other people with that power in my entire life. It wasn't that she brooked or fostered self-delusion, but that she awakened a sense of life and possibility in you that might have otherwise remained unrealized. Her genius—no other word will do in this regard—was for generosity. I should know: I was on the receiving end of her beneficence more often than I can count in the past 25 years. She opened doors, smoothed paths, offered encouragement, ran interference, and otherwise repeatedly and graciously aided and abetted my efforts. And yet my own experiences with Elaine are probably not so different from those of many other scholars in this field, including Dick Astro, Don Coers, Ted Hayashi, Brian Railsback,

and Sue Shillinglaw, who will undoubtedly have their own praiseful stories to tell.

As far as I am concerned, however, the most remarkable thing about Elaine Steinbeck was that she never once told me what to write about her husband, or censored or even edited what I had written. I'm with you all the way on Library of America, she wrote when preparations were afoot a few years ago for volumes 1 and 2, *Novels and Stories, 1932–1937*, and *The Grapes of Wrath and Other Writings, 1936–1941*. Her generous support and willing trust are fits I cherish and hope always to honor. For me, they sum up everything I value about Elaine Steinbeck. My life—our lives—in the community of Steinbeck scholars will be permanently diminished by her passing.

SUSAN SHILLINGLAW—“Honey, it's not car-mel. It's car-a-mel.” Elaine, my daughter, and I were having lunch together in New York City, and a nine-year old's exotic dessert choice—fresh donuts with caramel sauce and ice cream—occasionally Elaine's correction. She had the grace and humor to instruct a child gently and unforgettably; neither Nora nor I will forget “car-a-mel.” For me, that little scene captures Elaine's sophistication, generosity, humor, and clarity.

I first met her at that charmed 1992 conference in Nantucket, “Steinbeck and the Environment,” where planes plowed through fog to land, and the assembled 80-odd felt delighted to be together on solid ground—and to have Elaine in our midst at the opening dinner. She greeted me that first night with the warm enthusiasm that was always hers—Elaine was possibly the most charismatic woman I've ever met. Throughout those three packed conference days, she was also a trooper, attending every session, remarking on papers, and going on the bus with us to “Footlight Cottage,” where Steinbeck, one foggy summer in 1951, wrote part of *East of Eden*.

From that Nantucket evening on, Elaine and I were friends. I sometimes visited her in New York, twice in Sag Harbor. Looking through my files I found a little article I started to write about a memorable 1998 visit to help her sort John's files. She'd called me in a kind of panic, “Honey, I just have to organize these files. I promised John. Will you come to New York and help me?” What an invitation.

The doorman stands attentive. “They aren't allowed to sit down,” Elaine complained later, promising the attendant that she'd ask the manager again

for stools. "They should be allowed to sit, really."

The lobby of 192 E. 72nd Street is spacious, elegant, with Japanese paintings hanging against marble. The elevator, recently refurbished, flies to the 34th floor. Elaine greets me at her door, as always. John wanted to buy the penthouse, she told me once, but it had already been sold. "Once when we returned from a trip we had all this luggage from four months abroad. John said, 'If we moved to an apartment across the street [then being built] then we wouldn't have to carry all this luggage up four flights of stairs.'" So after 14 years in the house on 72nd St., they moved.

The apartment is large, filled with light, a glorious view of the city seen through windows on two sides. As I enter, Elaine takes my coat, as always, and hangs it in what always strikes me as a remarkably tidy closet, her mink holding court. To the right of the door hangs a large abstract painting: "John bought it in Paris. It hung in the old house," and Elaine didn't think it had a place in the apartment, where they moved in 1964. "The day Andy was born. I told Waverly not to go into labor on that day, when we were *moving*."

To the left is the spacious living room. "Why, most of the furniture Zack and I had...that couch. Why it's years old! And the chairs...John and I bought the dining room table." As was my impression of the Sag Harbor home, I'm struck by a kind of solidity in the arrangement of Elaine and John's New York apartment. They lived with memories of their lives; they didn't redecorate often. "Zack and I bought these wall cases," she adds, cases filled with their books.

Over the couch hangs a lovely painting given them by the mayor of Jerusalem. I love looking at art on walls. A map, framed. A painting by a friend of Thom's. "Thom was always very good with his hands." There is a bookcase near the door: "We had this in Sag Harbor painted a different color, filled with John Steinbeck books... Of course the room wasn't pink when John was here."

The living room is set up for conversation, as is the alcove off the kitchen where Elaine and I always sit, near the Nobel Prize. "There's so much to sort,"

she tells me on this visit. And there is. It takes us two days, and I go back to California with a suitcase full of photos and letters and typescripts that Elaine generously donates to the Center.

Tired, emotionally exhausted after sorting, she tells me, "I could die tonight, really. In my sleep. I've done what I promised John I'd do. And I've had a great life."

Indeed, a charmed life in so many ways.

Elaine's generosity to the Center simply overwhelmed me, then and earlier. Occasionally boxes would arrive with something she'd found—the Pigasus stamp, John's signature stamp, the typescript for *The Acts of King Arthur* in an Abercrombie and Fitch box. It was she who helped bring Bruce Springsteen to San Jose State University in 1997 to give a benefit concert, a concert she attended. He sang "Red-Headed Woman" to her. And after that she kept Bruce's photo on her dresser.

Whenever I saw Elaine, I wanted a tape player to run nonstop. The best stories were always at restaurants, uncommon moments when taping wasn't appropriate. So I'd write:

We went to a party one night, John and I, and we thought it would be a small party. It turned out to be a very large party, and John was unhappy. "Get me out of here," he told me. So I walked around the edge of the crowd to tell the hostess thank you. And I looked over and through the crowd and saw John, looking down. "Oh no," I thought. "I've got to get him out of here." I walked over and there he was, talking to Truman Capote! He was having a wonderful time.

And so was Elaine, I'm sure.

Over their bed in the New York apartment were two stunning, two-foot high, carved wooden cherubs:

We stopped by a road in Spain; they were tearing down a church. "What are you going to do with those angels?" John asked. "Sell them in Madrid," they responded. "How would you like to sell them now?"

I like to think of those angels when I think of Elaine.