

Book Reviews



The Essential Criticism of John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men. Ed. Michael J. Meyer. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2009. 364p. alk. paper, \$55 (ISBN 9780810867338). LC 2008-051372.

John Steinbeck's 1937 novella *Of Mice and Men* is one of the most popular works of American literature and also one of the most widely studied. Although deemed a failure by Steinbeck himself, this brief fable about two itinerant California ranch hands went on to win largely favorable reviews, selection by the Book of the Month Club, and successful transformation into a play and three movies. *OMAM* (as it is commonly referred to) is required reading in many schools and colleges, making George and Lenny familiar figures to generations of American youth.

Michael J. Meyer, the editor of this collection of criticism, is adjunct professor of English at DePaul University and North-eastern Illinois University, coeditor of *A John Steinbeck Encyclopedia* (Greenwood, 2006), and author of *The John Steinbeck Bibliography, 1996–2006* (Scarecrow, 2008). It is not immediately clear that the world needs another anthology on this topic. A number of critical introductions to *Of Mice and Men* already exist, not to mention guides in the Cliff's Notes and Barron's series. General collections of Steinbeck criticism also tend to include a few essays on this work. For example, *The Short Novels of John Steinbeck: Critical Essays with a Checklist to Steinbeck Criticism* (Duke, 1990) contains the articles by Spilka, Goldhurst, and Loftis reprinted in Meyer's new collection.

Perhaps Meyer's goal was to bring the history of Steinbeck criticism up to the present day. He provides brief commentary on critical approaches decade by decade; annotated bibliographies of important studies; articles and book excerpts; and three new critical essays (on English Romanticism, the theme of loneliness and

isolation, and use of musical intertextuality). An appendix lists online sites replete with suggestions for lesson plans, learning activities, writing assignments, vocabulary, and historical background.

Harried or jaded teachers looking for new material are clearly an intended audience for the book. As Meyer says, "In each new analysis, readers will find creative ideas for approaching a novel that is over seventy years old."

Initial reviews of the novel were above all descriptive and evaluative. *Of Mice and Men* was seen by most reviewers (including Eleanor Roosevelt) as a confirmation of Steinbeck's artistic promise, a vivid, expressive, and compassionate story of simple people struggling for happiness. Mark Van Doren's negative review in *The Nation* was a notable exception. The question of sentimentality was raised early on. Some found the plot contrived and the characters lacking in free will.

As Steinbeck's reputation grew in the following decades, scholarly and biographical criticism began to appear. Critics were particularly interested in Steinbeck's use of myths and symbols, as well as the psychology of the characters. By the 1960s and 1970s, *OMAM* was a canonical work; synthetic treatments such as those in the Twayne series began to be published. The text served as a mirror on which new critical interpretations were reflected: the curse of Cain, the play-nov-elette form. As the decades rolled along, repetition began to set in, but new topics such as race, mental health, eugenics, and gender were introduced in the 1990s.

All of Meyer's selections are interesting and worth reading for their own sake, but the whole truly is greater than the sum of its parts. Why is it that this particular work has become entrenched in the school curriculum, and why are

so many interpretations and judgments possible? Is it the fact that *OMAM* is a play in narrative form, consisting almost entirely of dialogue? Is it because of the range of characters, including the two leads but also the ranch owner, his son Curley, Curley's young wife, a black hand, an idealized cowboy, and others? Certainly the novel allows schoolchildren to study the Great Depression and the plight of the homeless and dispossessed, but there is more to it than that. *Of Mice and Men* has attained something like the status of folklore, and the characters live outside the text, in the classroom and the imagination.

Despite some confusing layout, and proofreading lapses (see p. 7 for missing words), the book could be of practical use to teachers and students, even though abundant material is available through open access on the Web. There is something to be said for the chronological approach, which provides a history not only of Steinbeck criticism, but of American culture.—*Jean Alexander, Carnegie Mellon University.*

Jacob Soll. *The Information Master: Jean-Baptiste Colbert's Secret State Intelligence System.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009. 277p. alk. paper, \$65 (ISBN 9780472116904). LC 2008-051142.

In recent years, historians of early modern Europe have increasingly turned to the theme of information in society as a historiographical framework for their research. This "informational turn" has begun to yield a number of studies on how information institutions (such as libraries, archives, museums) and practices (including the collection, organization, communication, and utilization of information) contributed to the social, economic, political, and cultural processes that shaped the contours of life in European societies between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. One topic that has attracted considerable scholarly attention is the administrative and political use of

information in early modern European states. The intersection of information practices, governmental administration, and political purposes provides the thematic backdrop for the book under review, in which Jacob Soll, an associate professor of history at Rutgers University and specialist in the political and cultural history of early modern France, presents a wide-ranging and richly documented study of how one of Louis XIV's most prominent ministers, Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619–1683), harnessed a number of information institutions and practices into a "state information system" to support the administrative apparatus and absolutist ambitions of the French state under the Sun King.

Born into a merchant family and trained in the mercantile arts, Colbert entered into state administration at an early age and rose to prominence in the 1650s as financial manager for, and administrative factotum to, Cardinal Mazarin, the chief minister of France. From 1661 until his death in 1683, Colbert was a leading member of Louis XIV's council of state: serving as minister of finance, trade, industry, and the navy, he came to control virtually all aspects of government administration apart from military affairs. He proved to be an effective minister, putting in place policies designed to rationalize state administration, strengthen the position of the state vis-à-vis local governments and religious authorities, develop French domestic industry and commerce, promote French mercantile activity abroad, and advance the arts and sciences in France. Colbert's effectiveness as an administrator was due not only to a remarkable capacity for work and considerable skill in the art of wielding political power, but also, as Soll argues, to his adeptness at obtaining, managing, and deploying the information he needed to make policy decisions and carry out his many-sided political program. Indeed, a primary thesis of the book is that, by integrating a wide array of information sources, institutions, and practices into his administrative system,