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BOOKS

REFUGEES FROM THE DUST BOWL

THE GRAPES OF WRATH
By JOHN STEINBECK

FACTORIES IN THE FIELD
By CAREY McWILLIAMS

Reviewed by Prof. William Huse

It is a fortunate coincidence that these two books were published within a few weeks of each other. Dealing with the same general material—migratory farm labor in California—they furnish an interesting contrast between the method of the novelist and the factual analyst. Furthermore, they supplement each other. Mr. Steinbeck is concerned with the human values of a single family, while Mr. McWilliams supplies the background which makes the vicissitudes of that family understandable in terms of social and economic forces.

Perhaps it is more than coincidence that is responsible for the almost simultaneous appearance of both these books. They may be symptomatic of a rapidly increasing awareness of the migratory labor situation as one of the most urgent problems which confronts the state of California, and a concern over finding a real solution.

Whoever has seen on the highway an ancient automobile stalled or wheezing uncertainly along, its sides hung with battered household effects, and an incredible number of people stowed among bedding-rolls, has seen the subject of Mr. Steinbeck's novel. He introduces us to the Joad family while they are still in Oklahoma. Dispossessed by drought and mechanized farming, they join the horde of westward migrants. Three generations of them load their meager possessions into an ancient truck and start for California. They look forward to a promised land where there will be plenty of work in the orchards or in the cotton or vegetable fields, and where they will be able eventually to realize their modest utopia of a cottage with screens and land of their own to work.

The first section of the story, which describes their preparations for leaving Oklahoma and the start of their westward trek, has a grotesque, earthy humor which is reminiscent of Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* and *God's Little Acre*. But as the family proceeds westward, the tone becomes more somber; and their story is one of increasing tragedy as their hopes are cruelly disappointed and the family group disintegrates.

The values that Mr. Steinbeck finds in them are first of all courage, and next to courage a common humanity which unites them in sympathy and generosity with others as unfortunate as they. Their courage is best exemplified in Ma Joad, who refuses to give up hope even in the face of the most staggering disappointments; their humanity, in their willingness to share whatever they have, however meager, with anyone in distress.

As brief a review as this cannot convey the power of individual scenes, the range and vividness of character presentation, or the passionate sincerity with which Mr. Steinbeck unfolds this saga of social injustice. But in spite of the unquestionable power of the story, it has, to my mind, the defect which is almost inevitable in

propaganda fiction. Such fiction, if it is to engage our sympathies, must present its problems in terms of specific human beings. But at the same time, the activities through which its characters move must be sufficiently representative so that they convey a whole general situation. The result is that the characters tend often to lose their reality as individuals and become symbols of larger forces or relationships. This defect appears most strikingly, I think, in the preacher who accompanies the Joads on their hejira; and it certainly is responsible for the pathos of the last episode.

Complex Forces

The complex of social and economic forces which is to blame for the plight of the Joads and their thousands of fellow-refugees from the dust-bowl is the subject of Mr. McWilliams' analysis in *Factories in the Field*. A long interest in the problem of migratory labor in California, and his experience as California Commissioner of Immigration and Housing give weight and authority to his analysis. His fundamental thesis is that the migrant hordes from the Dust Bowl present only a further and more acute manifestation of a problem which has been a characteristic of California economy since the middle of the 19th century. The problem is caused, he believes, by large-scale land-holding in the state, which has made farming essentially an industrial enterprise, with a labor problem like that of any other large industry, only more difficult because of the seasonal nature of the work.

Hitherto, the problem has never been really acute because it has mainly involved aliens — Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Hindus — who were relatively powerless to resist repression and exploitation. But with the coming of the dust-bowl emigres, Mr. McWilliams points out that the expedients of the past will no longer suffice. For one thing, there are far larger numbers of people to be dealt with. But more important, they are Americans. Trying to ignore them by asserting that they are of inferior stock is as futile as trying to dispose of them by denying them relief. And they are not likely to submit indefinitely to the terrorism of local vigilantes and the denial of their constitutional rights. In Mr. McWilliams' view, the only solution must come through eliminating the cause of the whole migratory labor problem — that is, by breaking up large landholdings and de-industrializing California agriculture.

Whatever the ultimate solution, both of these books under discussion perform a valuable service. Mr. Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* has already had, at a very conservative estimate, over half a million readers; he has made them aware, in a dramatic and forceful fashion, that an urgent problem exists. With public opinion thus mobilized, the way is prepared for such analyses as *Factories in the Field*, which are essential if any humane, equitable solution is ever to be found.