'An ambitious and enjoyable take on America's story'
Times Literary Supplement

In America

Travels with John Steinbeck

Geert Mak

VINTAGE

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About the Book

In 1960 John Steinbeck and his dog Charley set out in their green pickup truck to rediscover the soul of America, visiting small towns and cities from New York to New Orleans. As Steinbeck said to a friend: 'I must see how the country looks and smells and sounds.' The trip became *Travels with Charley*, one of his best-loved books.

Half a century on, Geert Mak sets off from Steinbeck's home with his wife and his sat-nav, Sandy. Mile after mile, as he retraces Steinbeck's footsteps through the potato fields of Maine to the endless prairies of the Midwest, sits down to eat with farmers, workers, fishermen and teachers, stumbles across glistening suburbs and boarded-up stores, he searches for the roots of America and what remains of the world Steinbeck describes.

Part biography, part cultural history, *In America* asks how America has changed in the last fifty years: what's happened to Main Street, USA, and the American dream; and what do we, Europe and America, have in common in the twenty-first century?

About the Author

Geert Mak is a journalist and historian, and the internationally acclaimed author of *In Europe*, *Amsterdam* and *The Bridge*. He is one of the Netherlands' bestselling authors, has twice been awarded Historian of the Year and his books have been translated into more than twenty languages.

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International border
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Landmark
City

In memory of Edith and Louis Laub

In America

Travels with John Steinbeck

Geert Mak

Translated
from the Dutch
by
Liz Waters

Harvill Secker
LONDON

PART ONE

Sag Harbor

‘When the lights go on again all over the world
And the ships will sail again all over the world
Then we’ll have time for things like wedding rings and free hearts will sing
When the lights go on again all over the world.’

VERA LYNN

One

NO ONE COULD say exactly when the great celebration erupted. There were those who claimed it kicked off as soon as the war was over, straight after the Japanese surrender on 14 August 1945, when everyone danced in the streets and a Jewish refugee, Alfred Eisenstaedt of *Life* magazine, took the photograph of his life on Times Square: a sailor, delirious with joy, kissing a nurse on the lips.

These were the months when GIs returned from all corners of the globe, the years when people suddenly had money in their pockets. Even in America, luxuries had been scarce and rationed for years; now you could buy washing machines again, and radios, and the latest Chevrolet. General Electric flooded the country with luxury gadgets: food processors, toasters, floor-polishing machines, FM radios, electric blankets, and so on. These were all products promoted by that epitome of the television salesman Ronald Reagan, a popular actor whose work in advertising eventually taught him to sell himself, too. Traditional ideals were put on hold and 'selling out' became a catchphrase – you accepted a job that gave you no satisfaction because the pay was good. These were the months and years when British singer Vera Lynn touched American hearts with 'A kiss won't mean "Goodbye" but "Hello to love"'. Yes, that's when it started, with that kiss on Times Square.

Others say it was rather less romantic than that. It began right at the point when people had to pick up everyday life again. 'You should start your story with that brilliant

invention by the Levitts,' I was told. 'That's what really got it all going.'

Bill Levitt, his brother Alfred and their father Abraham were the first to mass-produce prefabricated homes, an invention no less significant than Henry Ford's assembly line in 1913. With an ingenious design and brilliant planning, Bill Levitt was able to build a simple, sturdy house for less than 8,000 dollars. The basic model, with its two bedrooms plus an attic, was just the thing for a young family. It was the Model T Ford of houses, sure, but a good bit of luxury was included all the same: the living room had a fireplace and a built-in television set; the kitchen was equipped with a fridge, a stove and a Bendix washing machine. For an extra 250 dollars you could have a car as well; the buyer of that package was all set for the future.

The Levitts erected their first houses in a huge potato field in Hempstead, twenty miles from Manhattan, in 1946. Within two years the place had become a town in its own right. By July 1948, 180 houses were being manufactured every week, and just three years later 82,000 people were living on the old potato field in 17,000 prefab dwellings. Most of those drawn to the brand-new Levittown were GIs, each with a generous discharge payment in his pocket. The ads didn't exaggerate; the instalment plan was generous: 'Uncle Sam and the world's largest builder have made it possible for you to live in a charming house in a delightful community without having to pay for them with your eyeteeth', 'All yours for $58. You're a lucky man, Mr Veteran.' The homes sold hand over fist.

In that strange, intermediate world between country and city, men and women forged countless alliances, exploring peace together. 'In front of almost every house along Levittown's 100 miles of winding streets sits a tricycle or a baby carriage,' a report for *Time* magazine noted in the summer of 1950. 'In Levittown, all activity stops from 12 to 2 in the afternoon; that is nap time.'

Levittown marked the start of the explosive growth of suburbia, a concept that stands for an entire culture, a specific kind of life and society. To countless GIs suburbia was the beginning of modern life, of ‘time for things like wedding rings’, a safe adventure that united all newcomers. These were young families no longer fearful of getting into debt: avid consumers since they possessed almost nothing; children of poor Irish, Italian, Jewish and other immigrants convinced that all their dreams for the future were about to come true. Levittown and communities like it nurtured a social change that was to turn traditional America on its head: the start of the move to the suburbs, the end of the old city and the old countryside.

Another beginning, an elderly American once told me, was the advent of new cars. For him it all started with the cars, or rather their colours. He traced it back to the autumn of 1954, when he noticed people thronging in front of local car showrooms. Something extraordinary was going on. Models had always been different each year, but consistently solid and square, usually black or dark green. Suddenly a completely new generation was on gleaming display – wider and softer than ever.

I’ve looked at the advertisements for that year. The earthy colours of previous decades were replaced by pastels, pinks and pale blues. The Chevrolet Bel Air and the Pontiac Star Chief, with their Strato-Streak V8 engines, were available in ‘Avalon Yellow’ as well as ‘Raven Black’. The new models had rounded, panoramic windscreens and, in the case of the new Cadillac, a strange rear end with tail fins like a fighter plane. Sales soared, rising by thirty-seven per cent between 1954 and 1955 alone. People were no longer so concerned about technology and durability; it was more about shape and style. A new era truly has dawned, was the feeling those cars gave you.

At some point in that decade, American society changed abruptly in tone and mentality. Instead of being preoccupied above all with survival, it became a consumer society. A world of toil was transformed into a world of enjoyment.

Domestic interiors were still full of things from the 1930s and 1940s, but amid the brown furniture and crocheted rugs a different lifestyle was emerging, with all the features of the old austerity but a cheerful sense of amazement as well. ‘What sort of fairyland is this we suddenly find ourselves in?’ was the general mood.

These were the years of what became known as the ‘baby boom’. The birth rate shot up by almost fifty per cent and stayed high until the end of the 1950s. In 1957, at the peak of the boom, 123 in every 1,000 women gave birth – a figure unprecedented in American history – and all those children were brought up in far greater prosperity than their parents had known. ‘There never was a country more fabulous than America,’ wrote British historian Robert Payne after a visit in 1949. ‘She bestrides the world like a colossus: no other power at any time in the world’s history has possessed so varied or so great an influence on other nations . . . Half the wealth of the world, more than half the productivity, nearly two-thirds of the world’s machines are concentrated in American hands; the rest of the world lies in the shadow of American industry.’ It was the American Century, and so it would remain.

A few more statistics, which speak for themselves. At the start of the twentieth century, the average life expectancy for white Americans was barely fifty, and for black Americans it was roughly thirty-five. Americans spent almost twice as much on funerals as they did on pharmaceuticals; half a century later, the reverse was the case. By then, average life expectancy was around seventy, the black population included.

National income rose by close to a third in the 1950s. In 1956 American teenagers had a weekly income of ten dollars and fifty-five cents, more than the disposable income of the average household in 1940. The middle class – that segment of the population able to spend money on non-utilitarian products – accounted for almost half of all American households.

On the face of it, life was God-fearing and respectable. Almost sixty per cent of American families owned their own homes, an unprecedented figure. The divorce rate was remarkably low, at 8.9 couples per thousand all told in 1958. According to Gallup polls, in 1940 a third of American adults went to church every week; by 1955 the proportion had risen to around half. To the 'happiness question', more than half of all Americans answered 'very happy' in 1957. Never had there been so much quantifiable happiness, and never would there be so much again.

Anyone wishing to be catapulted back into the America of those years should take a look on YouTube at the home movie *Disneyland Dream*, filmed in the summer of 1956 by enthusiastic amateur filmmaker Robbins Barstow, who recorded his family's experiences year after year. He did so in such an entertaining and original manner that his films have gradually become classics.

In *Disneyland Dream*, the family – father, mother, and three children aged between four and eleven – enters a competition sponsored by the then-new Scotch tape. The winners are to be treated to a trip – by airplane! – to the recently opened Disneyland in Anaheim, California. Lo and behold the youngest child, Danny, wins first prize with the indomitable slogan: 'I like "Scotch" brand cellophane tape because when some things tear then I can just use it.'

Excitement all round, and the Barstows' neighbours step out into their front gardens to wave the family off. Then comes the thrilling nine-hour flight to California aboard a

TWA Super Constellation, with room for no fewer than sixty-four passengers. Next we see the simple funfair of the original Disneyland. At the hotel, the Barstows are jubilant that the chic swimming pool is open to them. Yes, the days when such luxury was reserved for the stylish elite are over. The family deals with its budgetary constraints by not eating in restaurants but picnicking outdoors.

There is no hint of any doubt or cynicism. Every minute of the movie is filled with sun, innocence and boundless enthusiasm. It's true, Barstow says at the end, Walt Disney is right: Disneyland is 'the happiest place on earth'. The entire family is 'forever grateful to Scotch brand cellophane tape' for the experience.

The closing chorus of this charming cantata to America comes through loud and clear: from now on we all belong together, and anyone can make it in these new times.

We Europeans heard that tune from afar. To the children of small-town Europe, America was a dreamland with a freewheeling lifestyle, fragments of which occasionally blew across the ocean. Shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, I stayed with a family in Armenia. For years the girls had collected empty Chanel and Lancôme perfume bottles. The bathroom was full of them. Somewhere deep inside those bottles, the aroma of the rich West still lingered. That's exactly how we European children of the 1950s experienced America: through a few glossy magazines, or toy cars made of soft but tough plastic – even the steering wheel was of astonishing quality – or a free copy of *Donald Duck* that fell through the letter box one autumn day, featuring a lottery with a thousand wristwatches (a thousand iPads in today's youth economy) to give away. Not to mention the content. Donald Duck as a teacher. The nephews squash an ice cream onto their weary uncle's forehead. Wasting a whole ice cream without a second thought!

At some point, from that same America, packets of green-and-white powder arrived that a housewife could instantly transform into a pan of soup. ‘California’, the concoction was called. ‘California,’ we whispered. California. In the provincial town where I grew up, we lugged the cabbage, lettuce and potatoes we’d grown on our allotment past several new factories on the Marshallweg, a road named after a general who, as I understood it, had paid to set up all those manufacturing companies: America! With our pocket money we bought flat packets of chewing gum, beautifully wrapped, that included a picture of a movie star – we collected those – and it all smelled strange and rosy: America! On short-wave radio an army station crackled into the room, with an announcer who might start talking right over a swing band: America! Lionel Hampton came to the Netherlands in September 1953 and his saxophonist lay on his back onstage and carried on playing. Hampton abandoned his vibraphone to play drums for a while and to do an improvised dance to ‘Hey-Ba-Ba-Re-Bop’. *De Gelderlander*, our provincial newspaper, wrote: ‘How vast must be the emptiness of those hearts that have lost any longing for values more exalted than those of Negro moaning.’ But the audience, unaccustomed to any of this, went wild: America!

The high point of this whirring, pale-blue era was 1960. The average American earned more than 5,000 dollars a year; a newly built house cost 12,500 dollars, a car 2,600, a pair of shoes 13, a litre of gasoline 6.7 cents.

The tail fins on the new Cadillac Eldorado were the largest and sharpest ever seen. In April, the world’s first weather satellite was launched. In the Philippines, the Japanese government tried in vain to coax the last two Japanese soldiers out of the jungle – they refused to believe the war was over. Xerox put the first commercial photocopier on the market. Chubby Checker started a new dance craze, the

twist. Frank Sinatra, cigarette in hand, stood and sang in a short film called *Music for Smokers Only*, taking a drag at the end of each line: ‘I get no kick from champagne . . .’

National Airlines was the first company to fly jets from New York to Miami, in barely three hours, charging fifty-five dollars a ticket. The construction of the Interstate Highway System, the largest motorway network in the world, had been in full swing for four years.

The mechanical cotton picker had taken over the South. The arrival of air conditioning allowed housebuilders to throw up suburbs even in the desert. The countryside moved to the city, the overcrowded inner cities moved to suburban avenues, the black South moved to the factories of the North.

On 9 May – Mother’s Day – the first contraceptive pill, Enovid, was declared safe and approved for sale. Dr John Rock, champion of the pill, rejoiced that humanity’s rampant sex drive would finally be stripped of its consequences: ‘The greatest menace to world peace and decent standards of life today is not atomic energy but sexual energy.’ The Cold War resumed at full intensity after an American U-2 spy plane was shot down over the Soviet Union. War hero Dwight D. Eisenhower was still president; it was his last year in office. The election campaign was a neck-and-neck race between man of the people Richard Nixon and rich kid Jack Kennedy.

Nineteen sixty is the year in which this story begins.

Two

THIS BOOK IS an account of two journeys: one undertaken in 1960 and the other in 2010. The eyes that looked at America in 1960 were those of the writer John Steinbeck and his dog Charley. Together they travelled around the country in a green GMC pickup truck called Rocinante. It was named after Don Quixote's horse because everyone had decided this was a similar kind of expedition: a foolish, elderly knight setting out alone to free the country of savage, dangerous windmills. The eyes of 2010 are my own.

In 1960 John Steinbeck was a fairly tall, greying man of fifty-eight. His face, as he writes, had been marked by time with 'scars, lines, furrows and erosions'. He had a moustache and a beard, and he felt happiest in working clothes: short Wellington boots, khaki cotton trousers, a hunting jacket, and a faded-blue British naval cap. He'd been given that cap during the war by the captain of a torpedo boat that was itself torpedoed shortly afterwards. As could be said of countless other men, remnants of the war years were lodged in all the cracks and seams of Steinbeck's existence.

He was married to Elaine Anderson, a cultivated Texan lady who bore a certain resemblance to Lady Bird Johnson, wife of the influential senator and future president. The two women were good friends. When Lady Bird became a public figure, Elaine shopped for her regularly and even bought her clothes, since they had precisely the same measurements. John and Elaine spent most of their time in Sag Harbor, an old fishing port on the east coast between the crocodile jaws of Long Island, two hours north-east of New York City.

In those days, Sag Harbor was a small manufacturing town, a blue-collar place. Bulova had a watchcase factory there, Grumman built aircraft, and on the shore were several shipyards. At one time, in around 1840, it had been among the world's roughest whaling ports. In the Old Burying Ground, dating back to 1767, are the graves of the town's first inhabitants: fighters in the American Revolution, French merchants, Portuguese sailors, and Irish and English whalemen. There are tales of the crews of some ships not daring to go ashore at Sag Harbor: the countless bars and brothels presented too much of a risk.

It was also one of the richest of ports, as is clear to this day from the opulent rustic villas, built in the nineteenth century, which stand among the trees just outside the centre of town. They feature large balconies and verandas, Greek pillars, leaded windows, and no end of other ornamentation. Most of the houses have been taken over and restored by rich New Yorkers in recent years, but in 1960 a good many were in a neglected state.

In 1955 the Steinbecks bought a small house in the town. It soon became John's favourite place. He wrote four books and countless letters there, fretted about the state of the world and about his life, suffered a crisis and pulled himself out of it again. Their house stood, and still stands, on Bluff Point, a green slope leading down to an arm of the Atlantic, surrounded by stately old oaks, with its own jetty for the boat Steinbeck had always dreamed of owning. From the house you look out across the lawn, then over the calm water of the bay as far as the town and the harbour.

John's life followed an established pattern: up early, drive to Main Street with Charley beside him in the passenger seat to fetch the mail, buy a paper, drink coffee in the fishermen's bar, Black Buoy, and purchase a few items at Bob Barry's hardware store. Steinbeck was crazy about all things technical. 'Tools, mechanisms, he couldn't get enough of them,' old friends of his told me. 'Fitting out that

camper, Rocinante – that was precisely the kind of thing he enjoyed.’ Then it was home to write, and in the afternoon down to the harbour again for a few drinks with Barry and other friends at the bar of the Upper Deck.

The rugged John and the distinguished Elaine were the perfect match. Friends say they differed fundamentally on only one point: Elaine loved New York; John hated it. For him there was only one city: San Francisco. Sag Harbor was the ideal compromise. John had a circular writing pavilion built at the edge of the garden, and for Elaine a tiny swimming pool, although it was soon appropriated by the ducks. The place was small but comfortable, pleasant and peaceful.

It’s not hard to see why Steinbeck instantly fell for Sag Harbor. He was a child of the other ocean: of the west coast, of California. He grew up in Salinas, the centre of a prosperous agricultural district in the middle of the state, some two hours south of San Francisco. His mother was an ambitious and cultivated schoolteacher, his father a quiet adventurer of the kind you often find out west, accustomed to making his own way in difficult circumstances. In his personal affairs Steinbeck’s father was none too happy, almost drowning in worry about money and family matters, yet his son always carried his picture with him, and a character like him pops up in all of Steinbeck’s books. ‘He was a man intensely disappointed in himself,’ John later wrote about his father.

Steinbeck attended a handful of lectures at Stanford – on marine biology – but soon left, determined to educate himself in real life. He failed in New York, returned to California and camped with a friend called Toby Street over two long winters, looking after an empty summerhouse on the shores of Lake Tahoe, surrounded by wilderness. He then lived for years beside the ocean in Pacific Grove, half an hour from Salinas, close to the stinking sardine industry on the piers of Monterey.

There he got to know Ed Ricketts, a marine biologist who earned his living by collecting every imaginable kind of sea creature for university laboratories. Ricketts' own lab was the centre of an intense social life, with many friends, especially girlfriends, and enormous quantities of cheap drink. Ricketts became the best friend Steinbeck would ever have, the older brother who taught him to accept himself, with all his pretensions and shortcomings.

In those years John started writing a series of short novels that became famous all over the world, including the Eastern Bloc: *Tortilla Flat* (1935), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), *The Red Pony* (1937), *Cannery Row* (1945) – which featured Ed Ricketts in the romantic role of 'Doc' – and *The Pearl* (1947). The stories were mostly set in California, and they were always about simple lives and hard-won happiness, about fate and the tenacity of survivors.

He had a good feel for titles. The two real classics among his books are *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), a novel about the miserable fate of those driven from their land in the Midwest by the great drought of the 1930s, and *East of Eden* (1952), an almost biblical drama about a struggle between two brothers that was loosely based on his own family history in Salinas.

The Grapes of Wrath had a particularly far-reaching influence. Steinbeck's description of the hardships faced by the victims of the Dust Bowl and how they were exploited by their fellow Americans was fiercely attacked in the right-wing press. In his native region he was unable to show his face for years. At the same time, no one could escape the book's tough message. In the words of playwright Arthur Miller: 'The Joads [the central characters] became more vividly alive than one's next-door neighbor, and their sufferings emblematic of an age. His picture of America's humiliation of the poor was Steinbeck's high achievement, a picture which for a time challenged the iron American denial of reality.'

To literary historians, Steinbeck's work is an important link in the chain that is the American storytelling tradition, in which the ordinary man is central, which started with Mark Twain and Walt Whitman and continues to this day. Steinbeck consistently refused to follow the literary fashion for understatement and hidden narratives. A dialogue must sparkle with life.

He was always a storyteller. As E. L. Doctorow wrote, 'Steinbeck's genius was to perceive a story that would accommodate all the chaos and almost universal misery of America in the 1930s.'

John married three times. His first wife was his childhood sweetheart Carol, his second a failed actress, Gwyn, with whom he had a turbulent relationship in the war years and who bore him two sons, Thomas and John. Steinbeck regularly toured the European front lines as a correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune*, and towards the end of their marriage Gwyn tormented him time and again with the 'confession' that John Jr was not really his son. The issue even became the central theme of the play *Burning Bright*. It was nonsense; the likeness between father and son was all too obvious in later years, but at the time Steinbeck could not be completely certain.

He saw the boys regularly, spent endless holidays with them, but somehow the relationship between father and sons was always problematic, both close and distant at the same time. All the same, as he once wrote to a friend, there was a 'deep and wordless love' that filtered through 'from both sides of the barricade'.

The couple divorced when Steinbeck was in his mid-forties and Gwyn skilfully fleeced him. Poor and embittered, he withdrew to the old family home in Pacific Grove. Men and women ought to avoid one another, he decided in those days, 'except in bed', the only place 'where their natural

hatred of each other is not so apparent'. Within a year he had met a new love, Elaine.

Steinbeck led a double life. He lived part of the time in Manhattan, in a brownstone at 209 East 72nd Street. He would suddenly disappear, said his friends in Sag Harbor. He might be in New York, or perhaps abroad. 'Elaine kept those lives strictly separate,' they said. He was large and small at the same time: himself while in Sag Harbor, and a public figure in that damned New York and the rest of the world. In photographs, especially in his later years, John looks like an intractable, rather surly man, clearly convinced he is right. The image that emerges from his letters, which were eventually published, is very different – that of a man who, despite all his success, continually doubted himself and the value of his work, an obsessive writer who nevertheless felt insecure about his achievements. 'The great crime I have committed against literature is living too long and writing too much, and not good enough,' he wrote in 1958 to his friend Elia Kazan. 'But I like to write. I like it better than anything. That's why neither theatre nor movies really deeply interest me.'

He was not after fame and immortality, although they came to him along the way. At heart he was a solitary craftsman, a word-carpenter. He rarely, if ever, performed in public. When an interviewer asked how he saw himself as an author, he had no answer: 'I have never looked upon myself as an author – I don't think I have ever considered myself an author. I've considered myself a writer, because that's what I do. I don't know what an author does.'

He grew to become one of the most famous of American writers. By the time he was forty, his status was impregnable; every new book from his pen was an event. Within a month of its publication in 1942, his novel about the occupation of Norway, *The Moon is Down*, had sold half a million copies. In the late 1950s, based on the number of

books sold and titles translated, he was number three in the world.

He was also seriously underrated. ‘Once I read and wept over reviews,’ he wrote in 1954. ‘Then one time I put the criticisms all together and I found that they canceled each other out and left me nonexistent.’ That was indeed the standard pattern. He was either praised to the skies for his beautiful use of words, his brilliant storytelling and his humanity, or reviled for his supposedly filthy and despicable language (by the right) or his sentimentality and cartoonish characters (by the left).

He never did make much of an impression on the more academic critics, a fate he shared with other fine storytellers. In the 1930s, when he came to fame with tales of tramps, prostitutes and poor migrant labourers, he was quickly dismissed as too ‘proletarian’ and too much of a ‘realist’. Later his work was thought too naive and above all too romantic, a verdict that has echoed down the decades. ‘The extraordinary thing about John Steinbeck is how good he can be when so much of the time he’s so bad,’ Robert Gottlieb opined in the *New York Review of Books* as recently as 2008.

Yet Steinbeck, both at home and abroad, remained an exceptionally popular writer, year after year. ‘I have seen my father dolefully staring up at me from strange wastebaskets, his likeness celebrated on fifteen-cent stamps,’ wrote his son John Jr in his own inimitable style. ‘In a drunken or drugged state I have seen his name fly by me on papers in the wind, and bumped into statues of him while innocently looking for a quiet, private place to vomit.’

What the literati failed to see was Steinbeck’s great value as a chronicler of his time. He was hugely successful at reaching the audience he had in mind, and his readers recognised themselves and their world in the tales he told. He managed to express, in words and stories, exactly what they were feeling.

Steinbeck is still very much with us, in a way that few living writers can match. ‘Want to learn about the plight of unemployed workers during the Great Depression? Head to Amazon.com and order John Steinbeck’s Depression-era epic *The Grapes of Wrath*,’ wrote columnist Ezra Klein in September 2011. Lyrics by The Band, a rock group that reflected the lives of ordinary Americans like no other, were inspired by Steinbeck. The elegant Penguin mass-market paperbacks of his work still sell in their hundreds of thousands every year, reprint after reprint after reprint. His books remain required reading at countless American schools. ‘Reason for your visit?’ the Chinese-American passport-stamper at San Francisco airport asked me in the summer of 2010. ‘Archival research.’ ‘Into what?’ ‘John Steinbeck.’ His face lit up. ‘Ah, *Of Mice and Men*, I wrote a paper about that.’

In later life Steinbeck increasingly doubted the quality of his work, Elaine and his friends would recall. Every time he published a book he was subjected to fierce attacks, often by prominent reviewers. For all his solitude, these criticisms affected him deeply – it began to seem as if in his heart he believed the critics were right. He’d often wondered why no writer ever survived the success of a bestseller. Only later, he said, did he understand it. ‘One gets self-conscious and that’s the end of one’s writing.’

By the 1950s he had an impressive oeuvre to his name, but he questioned all that success: Am I really worth this? Do I really mean anything? The subject of his writing was ‘restless America’, but he was himself a prime example of it – always searching, always wrestling with his own thoughts. Then again, he was able to drown all that out with a form of bluster.

John ‘seemed to want to expand himself physically’, Arthur Miller wrote in his memoirs, ‘to present a strong and able and heartily Western image’. In a commemorative

volume of recollections of John Steinbeck, Miller paints a wonderful portrait of the man as he knew him. In the 1950s Steinbeck was world famous, he was a ‘celebrity whose life was filled with famous friends and the powers that come with fame’. Close up, however, Miller was surprised by Steinbeck’s insecurity, sensitivity and shyness – especially since he was so celebrated, and so outspoken in his opinions.

He’d read a great deal of philosophy, knew his literary classics and, others say, was a popular guest at dinners held by Miller and his then wife, Marilyn Monroe. Marilyn and John had a deep respect for each other. She saw in him the True Artist, and she made a tremendous effort to be entertaining and intelligent; he saw a Star, with a sexy glamour from which even a man as gnarled as he couldn’t possibly shy away. Yet John’s heart clearly lay elsewhere. There was something simple about him, and according to Miller he became truly enthusiastic only when talking about life on the land or in a small town. ‘As a native New Yorker, I couldn’t help seeing in John a grownup country boy,’ Miller wrote.

The spirit of the times worked against Steinbeck as well. The late 1950s were years of an excessive patriotism inconceivable to us today. The contest with the Soviet Union was at its height and Steinbeck, who had started his career as a progressive writer, clearly felt caught between the beliefs that had once defined his life and the now-dominant mentality. Arthur Miller wrote: ‘To be honest about it, I often felt Steinbeck, in the last part of his life, was feeling much of the time like a displaced person, rather than a cosmopolitan at home anywhere. But it is a very rare thing for an American writer to stay at home.’

Steinbeck did indeed continue to travel, mainly in Europe and Mexico. He also took refuge in a kind of spiritual exile. Each year he spent months in Europe, rented a magnificent house in Paris, continually complained about money worries

while at the same time driving around in a Jaguar, and wrote about Spain, France, Ireland and Italy for *Collier's*, *Saturday Review* and the travel magazine *Holiday*. Gradually, however, he was shutting himself up in the Middle Ages, writing *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights*, an ambitious attempt to make *Le Morte d'Arthur*, the classic fifteenth-century history by Thomas Malory, accessible to a broad contemporary audience.

He had already engaged in a failed attempt to write an American version of *Don Quixote*, called *Don Keehan* – no, the name Rocinante was not plucked out of thin air. But with *Arthur* he went further than a simple reworking. He identified with the fifteenth-century author as if hoping to become a contemporary Malory. He was seeking a completely new way of telling the story, of making it fit the modern world, although in fact the development of the story wasn't the most important thing. In the words of his biographer, Jackson Benson: 'He was in love with the magical evocations of the language, the sense of being in history that the sound and the sight of the words conveyed.'

In February 1959, John and Elaine rented a humble farm cottage in Somerset, in England's West Country, to enable him to work in the closest possible proximity to his medieval heroes and heroines. From his study he looked out over rolling hills and ancient oaks, with 'nothing in sight that hasn't been here since the 6th century'. There was a Roman fort nearby, which he believed might actually be Camelot, Arthur's mythical castle. In those months he rewrote the medieval story completely, reconstructing it, as it were, for use by modern Americans.

It became one great lump of kitsch, the same kind of kitsch as all those fake-medieval cathedrals and castles scattered across Europe and America. His agent and confidante Elizabeth Otis did what a good agent and publisher should, and told him the bitter truth: this doesn't

work, this won’t do, it lacks the poetry and rhythm of the original, there’s no life in it.

He continued working on the book all summer, and then he stopped. Tellingly, he abandoned the project at the point when his great hero, Lancelot, finally falls for Arthur’s wife, the beautiful Guinevere, and betrays everything: his lord, his religion and his oaths of allegiance.

To a drinking buddy, journalist Joe Bryan, he wrote: ‘A man must write about his own time no matter what symbols he uses. And I have not found my symbols nor my form. And there’s the rub.’ Deeply disappointed, he sailed back to America in October 1959.

Illustrative of Steinbeck’s impasse was the interior of that writing pavilion in Sag Harbor. In his biography, Jackson Benson describes it in detail: an easy chair in the middle with tables and bookshelves around it, a stunning view, instruments for the boat strewn about as well as things for the garden, news clippings, notes, gardening books, history books, dictionaries, dog books, boat books – the most diverse things. He’d sorted it all into ingeniously arranged drawers and other systems of storage with labels such as ‘Matters of Rubber’ and ‘Extraordinary Things’.

Benson writes that Steinbeck had created the ideal workplace. But the work itself did not return from England with him. He had lost it somewhere along the way.

At this point Steinbeck was fifty-seven years old. He’d always been a healthy, robust man, but after the failure of his Arthur project he started to ail. He became ill, even having a mild stroke in December 1959, and took a short holiday to consider how things stood. ‘We are getting to the age when the obit pages have a great deal of news,’ he wrote to his older buddy Toby Street. Elaine and he had always been heavy drinkers; now they tried to limit their drinking to weekends.