

book @ bedtime

In the second instalment of **David Grove's** journey through socially conscious novels, he examines John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.

I was a teenager when this novel was published in 1939. It made a deep impression on me. *The Grapes of Wrath* recounts the struggles of a single family of tenant farmers thrown off their land during the great depression of the 1930s and forced to join the proletarians seeking casual work in California. During the capitalist era millions of tenant farmers all over the world have faced a similar trauma.

Like Tressell's, Steinbeck's words are full of anger at the profit system and the way it pits people against each other. Californians, fearing for their jobs, call the immigrants Oakies, just as other victims are today labelled Pakis. Steinbeck's compassion is for all humanity; the exploited and those forced to exploit or cheat them. Like the farmer's son who becomes a tractor driver for a big landowner and drives his machine over the family home, because it's a job, and jobs are scarce.

Unlike *The Ragged*

Trousered Philanthopists, *The Grapes of Wrath* doesn't describe the socialist alternative. But there's a vision of a better future when the Joad family get a pitch in a Federal government camp. There the migrant folk have established their own organisation to welcome newcomers, manage their common affairs, and police the community.

The book has an unusual pattern. Every other chapter gives an impressionistic, almost poetic, account of some aspect of the geographical, economic and social background, showing the havoc wreaked by capitalism. The alternate chapters concentrate on the Joad family's struggle to cross half a continent in a decrepit vehicle, and to re-establish their lives in a strange environment. So political generalisation is at once turned into intense personal experience.

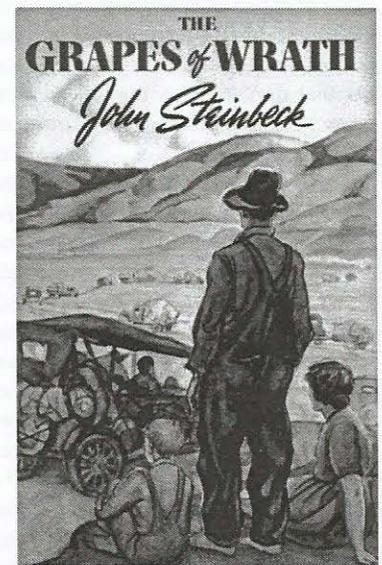
The epic story is told entirely from the family's point of view, so vividly that we share their ignorance,

surprise, anger, despair, hope and determination. The three generations are fully rounded characters, displayed in all their strengths and weaknesses. The form is historical but the content will be contemporary so long as capitalism survives to torture humanity.

Tom Joad, the eldest son, slowly learns from bitter experience that he must struggle not against individuals but against the system itself. When he has to leave the family after tangling with authority, he says farewell to his mother in words of commitment and solidarity: *Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beating up a guy, I'll be there. An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build – why, I'll be there.*

It's Ma who holds the family together, conquering her own fears and doubts to keep up their morale and support Tom.

He has gleaned much from the preacher, the only



important character outside the family, who turns from talking religion to talking communism without any need to change his moral stance. *Got a lot of sinful idears – but they seem kinda sensible.* That remark sums it all up.

If you're moved by *The Grapes of Wrath*, get hold of another Steinbeck novel *Dubious Battle*, written in 1936. This is no literary masterpiece but it's more overtly political than the later book. It's concerned entirely with trade union struggles. It shows how the sort of state violence inflicted on British miners in 1984-85 has been the common experience of militant workers in the USA.