

ANALYSIS

In Dubious Battle (1937)

John Steinbeck

(1902-1968)

“*In Dubious Battle* might be called proletarian, though Steinbeck was too individual to be so baldly classified. He had been assigned by a newspaper to write articles about transient labor camps in California. What he learned furnished him the materials for the most absorbing strike novel of the decade. A straightforward though slightly romantic narrative, it was less popular than *Of Mice and Men*.”

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(Macmillan 1921-68) 364

“Jim Nolan, a young man whose ‘whole family has been ruined by this system,’ joins the Communist party in San Francisco. He meets Mac, who ‘knows more about field work than anybody in the state.’ Dick, a ‘bedroom radical,’ and Joy, an agitator who has been ‘smacked over the head too much.’ When Mac is ordered to Torgas Valley, where a strike of fruit pickers is expected, Jim accompanies him to be trained. At Torgas they meet Al Anderson, a ‘sympathizer,’ and go to the camp of the fruit tramps, where Mac wins the gratitude of the leader, London, by assisting at the birth of his daughter’s child. When the strike begins, Mac advises London concerning methods and finds a camping place for the 1000 strikers on the farm of Anderson’s father. Mac summons Dick, who provides supplies, and Dr. Burton, a ‘fellow traveler,’ to take charge of the sanitation. The orchardists unsuccessfully attempt to bribe and intimidate London and his fellow chairman Dakin, but the morale of the strikers is maintained.

Strikebreakers arrive from the city, and Joy, who has accompanied them, is killed by a vigilante’s bullet. This is the first of the misfortunes, which Mac impersonally turns to use, including the stoppage of food supplies, the shooting of Jim and other pickets, newspaper attacks, unrest and espionage, and the destruction by vigilantes of Anderson’s crop. Burton and Dick disappear, Al is injured, Dakin is arrested, and the strikers are driven off the farm and warned of an armed attack. After being wounded, Jim grows in assurance and practically assumes leadership until he is led out of camp by a ruse and brutally murdered. In desperation, Mac places his friend’s corpse on a platform and harangues the men: ‘Comrades! This guy didn’t want nothing for himself’--”

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 362

“Steinbeck said, ‘My information for this book came mostly from Irish and Italian Communists whose training was in the field, not in the drawing-room. They do what they can under the circumstances.’ This is the kind of orientation to which Steinbeck addressed himself throughout the 1930’s, the period of his best known novels. His remarkable, almost uncanny ability to meet the intellectual and emotional needs of a depression-trained reading public contrasts vividly with the work of those novelists who, with almost missionary zeal, were trying to influence the public mind. He was ‘ideologically inadequate,’ in the view of the New York leftist intellectual. *In Dubious Battle* was not in line with ‘orthodox party principles.’ That is probably what saved it from being just another strike novel, although just what orthodox party principles were was an unanswerable critical question.

Steinbeck, in this story of a fruit-pickers’ strike in Torgas Valley, had tried to see the strike as the material of a novel. In its boldly simple outlines, he was able to exploit in full measure the dramatic and intellectual possibilities of this depression-sponsored social fact. Steinbeck had supposed that the strike involved several matters: a mass of men who, though pliable and maneuverable, did have a certain reserve

of unpredictable reactions; a hard, practical party organizer, who was a genius at adjusting and exploiting the day-by-day behavior of such a group; a neophyte, whose education in strike tactics and party spirit should take place rapidly and with melodramatic effect; finally, an impartial observer, to take the place of the ideological mouthpiece usually found in strike novels. This last must be a scientist interested in being active during the strike for what he called 'objective reasons,' but practically necessary to the strike as well.

All of these he provided; and the major strategy was to develop the activist and emotive essentials of the strike in terms of them all. The men have first to be unified, and it is here that the genius of Mac, the party organizer, is revealed; they have to be held in line as well, and in the course of their being held firm, the dramatics of psychological opportunism are exploited. Nowhere else are the facts of violence and death so skillfully interwoven with the rest of the design of the strike novel. The facts of 'ideological death' have become more and more important in modern fiction; eventually they have come to serve a novelistic view of the modern world quite thoroughly dissociated from leftist strategies as such. The deaths of Joy and Jim in *In Dubious Battle* are a starkly simple literary examination of this kind of strategic sacrifice. In the nature of their self-effacement they lead to Malraux's cyanide capsules in *Man's Fate*, and ultimately to the purely mechanical deaths of the aviators of Randall Jarrell's poetry....

The major development of this novel's strike theme is to be found in the several discussions among the three men who view it wholly or partly from an intellectual point of view. Doc Burton is of course almost wholly committed to that point of view. He 'wants to see,' he explains; he wants to examine group man as a biological organism. It is a lonely life, this task of looking at group man objectively, resisting the temptation to share in its passionate outbursts of strong emotion, for fear of losing the priceless weapon of the objective view.... In the balanced opposition of intellect and purpose of these three men lies the value of this novel as a useful literary expression of the strike theme. It was this pattern of ideological checks and balances which surprised most critics who had in this decade expected such facts as a strike produces to yield to a single interpretation, or at least a sustained complex of views. Steinbeck was not to repeat this accomplishment in his fiction, for taken as a whole, his novels reveal the deficiencies of a homespun philosophy, in which the suggestions made are vitiated and confused by a 'hausfrau sentimentality' and a naïve mysticism.

The two principal influences upon this point of view are the land itself—it is a special kind of land, a California valley—and the biologist's laboratory. The land itself served as a test of persons; it helped to classify people: those who loved the land with what sometimes amounted to pagan worship, and those who exploited it. This is a division not too uncommon in modern American fiction, but it is a very significant one for Steinbeck's. It led, in short, to the kind of oversimplification of issues (when issues had finally forced themselves upon Steinbeck's attention) which is in part sentimentality and in part a basic democratic earnestness and sincerity. Were it not for Steinbeck's amateurish interest in the biologist's laboratory, it might have led simply to still another American novelist in the Whitman-Sandburg literary tradition. Steinbeck's curiosity about the behavior of small animals substantially reduced the intellectual content of his novels as it reduced the emotional plane on which his tragedies occur."

Frederick J. Hoffman
The Modern Novel in America
(Regnery/Gateway 1951) 160-63

"*In Dubious Battle* (1936) is a novel about a Communist-led strike, but it greatly disappointed Communists by its failure to hew to the party-line."

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel:
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century
(Holt 1952) 445

"*In Dubious Battle* is a strike story, Steinbeck's bitterest and most partisan narrative, and at the same time one of his most powerful novels. Jim Nolan, a young employee of a San Francisco store, is beaten by the police while innocently watching a radical demonstration and as a result is fired from his job; bitter, he joins the Communist Party. He is introduced to Mac, an organizer, who is to be his mentor in Party work. Mac, hard-bitten, cynical, and realistic, is militant Marxism personified; he welcomes trouble and

bloodshed because they will provoke the class hatred he can manipulate for Party purposes, and he cynically finds ways to use the deaths of Party comrades for propaganda purposes.

The central action of the novel is a strike among itinerant apple-pickers ('fruit tramps') in the fictional Torgas Valley. Before the Party cell comes from San Francisco to organize them, the pickers have little class consciousness and passively accept their cut in wages. Mac and his comrades succeed in persuading them to strike, but brutal violence and destruction are involved: a man is killed during a riot over the arrival of strike-breakers, the lunch-wagon of a Party sympathizer is burned and he is beaten, several men including Jim are shot in a battle with the strikebreakers, and Anderson, a farmer who has agreed to let the striking pickers camp on his land, is ruined financially when vigilantes burn his barn containing his entire apple crop. Mac secretly encourages this violence, since he knows it will build up the hatred needed to solidify the working class in the Valley as well as in the rest of the country.

The strike is a failure; the pickers are reduced to starvation, some of them are shot, and as the novel ends Jim Dolan is killed by vigilantes who ambush him through a ruse. But Mac's purposes have been served; his main interest has not been in the plight of the Torgas Valley pickers but in the Party's long-term plans for revolution, which are best served when workers are martyred and a strong class feeling is stirred up. A doctor, Burton, serves as a philosophical commentator and spokesman for the intellectual class in the novel, and thus perhaps serves as Steinbeck's mouthpiece.

The attitude of the author, however, is ambiguous; *In Dubious Battle* is at first glance a piece of Party propaganda, yet the Party tactics are often seen to be foolish, irrational, and gratuitously destructive. Communist criticism did not approve of the novel, probably because it shows so many human weaknesses and passions in consecrated Party workers; and it is likely that this cool reception helped to turn Steinbeck away from Communism toward other and more moderate forms of liberalism. The style of *In Dubious Battle* is violent, coarse, and forceful; the climactic ending, in which Mac, carried away by anger, harangues the crowd in an effort to use Jim's murder for propaganda purposes, is especially well done."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 232-33

"One of the more important books to come out of the proletarian movement and Steinbeck's first successful novel, *In Dubious Battle* deals with a fruit strike in a California valley and the attempts of the radical leaders to organize, lead, and provide for the striking pickers. Perhaps the most important, although not the central, character is Doc Burton, an uncommitted sympathizer who helps the strikers and is concerned with seeing things as they exist, without labels of good and bad attached. The strike fails, and Jim, one of the two leaders, is senselessly killed. The title of the novel is taken from Milton's *Paradise Lost* and refers to the 'dubious battle' of Satan and his angels with the hosts of heaven."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 513

"John Steinbeck's strike novel, *In Dubious Battle*—it was his fourth novel—appeared in 1936. The central characters of the book are professional Communists, Mac, a veteran in the field, and Jim Nolan, a younger man who comes to the Party because his 'whole family has been ruined by this system,' and the novel still has considerable interest as an account of the organization of the itinerant fruit-pickers in California. On the face of it, it is a story of Radical heroism, of the illiterate and oppressed restored to their dignity as men by their own efforts and by those of dedicated revolutionaries, of Nolan's increasing stature as a clear-eyed and ruthless organizer, and of his murder by vigilantes; it ends on a note of fervent rhetoric, with Mac addressing the strikers at night, Nolan's corpse illuminated by a lantern beside him....

As one reads the novel now, however, one realizes not only its occasional naivete—Mac and Nolan are two-dimensional figures of proletarian heroism endowed with an almost boy-scout simplicity of motive and action—but also its essential ambiguity. It emerges quite plainly in the dialogue of Dr. Burton, the fellow-

traveler whom Mac brings in as medical officer of the striking fruit-pickers' camp. As a character, Burton scarcely exists but he is, as it were, the reflective centre of the novel, and it can scarcely be doubted that his values are Steinbeck's. It is Burton who says to Nolan: '...you've got something in your eyes, Jim, something religious. I've seen it in you boys before,' and to Mac: 'You're the craziest mess of cruelty and...sentimentality, of clear vision and rose-coloured glasses I ever saw.' Burton, in other words, sees through the Communists, and though he may admire and every perhaps envy their single-mindedness, which to him is almost simple-mindedness, he has no illusions about the final issue of their struggle.

Why, then, is Burton risking his life and his reputation working with Communists at all? Challenged by Mac, he replies: 'I don't believe in the cause, but I believe in men... I guess I just believe they're men, and not animals.... His attitude is much more that of a kind of scientist, perhaps an anthropologist working in the field. He is a man with theories about life, about group-man as a new species, of which strikes are a manifestation.... This...biological unanimism...seems to lie behind all Steinbeck's work and that goes far toward explaining its nature and where it succeeds and where it fails. This biological unanimism has obvious affinities with Whitman's notion of 'the en-masse' and...Emerson [and] his notion of the over-soul.'

Walter Allen
The Modern Novel in Britain and the United States
(Dutton 1965) 161-62

Michael Hollister (2015)