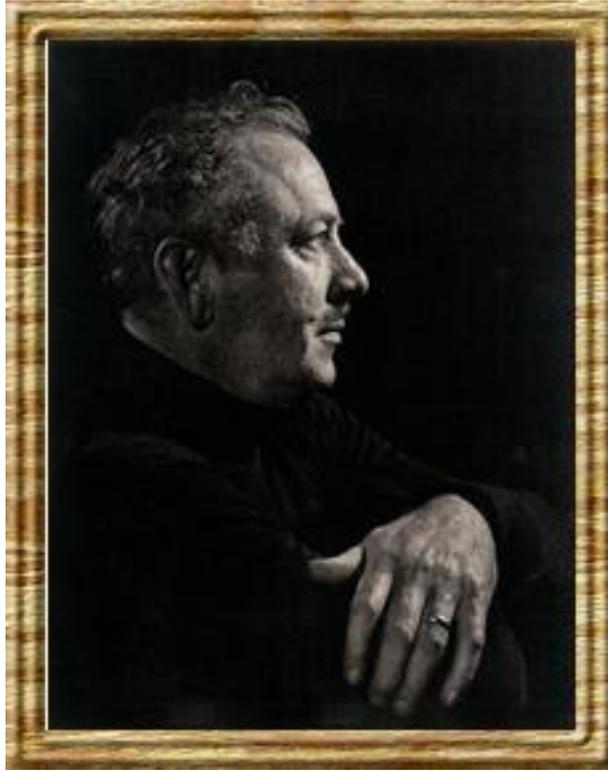


# Sir John of Steinbeck



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Excerpt from *Deep California:  
Images and Ironies of Cross  
and Sword on El Camino Real*

Appreciation of the connection between a myth and my life seems simultaneously to make me more attuned to the myth's unity and to help me understand how moments in my life which otherwise might seem accidental or fragmentary belong to the whole. Indeed, we may thus come to recognize the mythos, the plot, the connecting thread, the story of our life.

— Christine Downing

Into every life a little mythology must fall; and the more influential the life, the more evident its central fable. "Depth psychology began," remarked Dr. Downing of the Pacifica Graduate Institute, "when Freud wrote to Fleiss: 'I am Oedipus.'" Jung was so entranced with Faust that he traced his ancestry to Goethe: in the mythic sense, Jung was Faust, with his library as an alchemical laboratory, his shadow a Mephistopheles, Philemon his guide, and Sabina Spielrein his Gretchen. The story of a life is not complete without some appreciation of this mythic self, this storied key archetype around which more personal events organize themselves like a halo of filings around a magnet.

In terms of a guiding story or personal myth, John Steinbeck quite obviously was Lancelot.

Like the world's most famous knight, so dubbed by Arthur on St. John's Day, Steinbeck was a loner and only boy raised among women, with a distant father and Ma Joad for a mother. His first published story was "A Charming Fantasy," his first novel *Cup of Gold*, his patron lake the Salinas River. The first book he loved as a boy was the last book he wrote about: *Morte d'Arthur*. He hated the provincialism of a boyhood kingdom too narrow for his wide but impressionable intellect, so he ran away from Salinas to Stanford.

To an eye entranced by externals into mistaking them for milestones, Steinbeck's young life could be read as the text of a rather threadbare knight-errant unclothed in the armor of responsibility. Between 1919 and 1925, he attended Stanford when he felt like it, apprenticing the while at various trades, usually as a laborer. He did one stint at the Spreckels ranches and picked up a bit of Spanish from the men he swapped jokes with.

From his Irish mother he had learned that places have meaning; from Edith Mirrielees, his short-story instructor at Stanford, he learned to write clearly, to eliminate fancy words, and to regard his creations as worthy of publication. At the New York American he worked his way up to reporter before being fired by the Hearst-owned newspaper. Some who encountered his drifter's sunburned taciturnity wrote him off as a big-boned, gray-eyed, florid-faced loser. "He'd walk across the street to talk to a bum he knew," stated biographer Jackson Benson, "but he wouldn't tip his hat to get on the right side of the right people." Little did anyone suspect (except perhaps his writing mentor) that by wandering around the coast taking nothing too seriously, he was actually gathering story material: places, faces, idioms, histories, anecdotes, memories, out-of-the-way ideas.

After "A Charming Fantasy" (*The Smokers Companion*, 1927) and *Cup of Gold* (1930) emerged *Tortilla Flat* within days of his father's death. But already his successes were for some metaphysical reason his publishers' failures: after printing one of his books, the publisher always went bankrupt. Even so, Steinbeck was on his reluctant way, word by word and sentence by sentence, out into the merciless public eye.

Many a public figure secretly feasts on the very fame they complain about. Steinbeck genuinely loathed publicity. His friends knew of his proneness to stiffness and shyness around strangers long before the reading public discovered him, but once it had, he went into a perpetual state of hiding. He ducked out of photographs and dodged offers to speak publicly or be interviewed, but it wasn't only shyness at work. He feared that the American worship of personality would subtract attention from where he wanted it: on his writing, not on him.

Steinbeck married Carol, his muse, companion, proofreader, and means of financial support, in Glendale before a judge, and right in the middle of an argument. He had fixed three flat tires on his way to date his future wife; on their search for a home on El Camino Real their Buick gave up the ghost. After living with a poltergeist in Tujunga they moved northward to thickly forested Pacific Grove on the Monterey peninsula. It was on the peninsula that Steinbeck met his lifelong friend Ed "Doc" Ricketts.

If anything, the obvious differences between the two—one a writer, the other a marine biologist; one of Lancelotian girth, the other lean and compact; Arthurian gallantry versus “the concupiscence of a rabbit”—served merely to spice the flavor of their rich ongoing conversations. The primary internal difference was this: Ricketts had an existential and painfully Steppenwolfian longing to go home, or Home, whereas Steinbeck was home. The dialog sweetened into an occasional trio when Joseph Campbell, destined to be the world’s most noted mythologist, moved in next door to Ricketts.

In 1936, George West, chief editorial writer for the *San Francisco News*, asked Steinbeck to write a series of articles on migrant farm labor. To prepare for them, he toured the San Joaquin Valley with ex-clergyman Eric Thomsen, and in 1938, he saw Visalia with Tom Collins, another former man of the cloth. He was appalled. The poverty, the neglect, the hunger and misery, and the heartrending needlessness of it all made him so angry that he needed two years to calm down enough to write about it. The fruit of his outrage, named by his wife, who typed it and appreciated the title’s double meaning, was grown and harvested in six short months: *The Grapes of Wrath*.

There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all our success. The fertile earth, the straight tree rows, the sturdy trunks, and the ripe fruit. And children dying of pellagra must die because a profit cannot be taken from an orange.

When it was done, he was sick for another six months.

The resulting uproar did not die down until Eleanor Roosevelt’s positive assessment of the novel meant it was acceptable to read. Steinbeck was branded a Commie, an atheist, a bad American, a hater of California by people frightened by what he had revealed. Compilers of criticisms seldom acknowledged it for what it was, a well-researched work of literary fiction, and none were aware that the author had lived with those who suggested its most wrenching themes. In Visalia Steinbeck had worked in the rain alongside flood-besieged migrants and fallen asleep in the mud from exhaustion. How could he not? The realm and its citizens were in peril.

Speaking about Steinbeck’s critics, who included conservatives who soured on *Grapes* as well as leftists who hated everything after it, Benson remarks:

What they could not forgive him was not that he denied God, the more typical naturalist’s sin, but that he denied the relative importance of man. Not to see man at the center of the universe struggling with good and evil, but instead, to see him through non-teleological glasses as a special kind of animal that may survive only if he adapts was for some readers as unthinkable and heretical as Galileo was in respect to the dominant opinions of his day.

Steinbeck’s reply to Professor Blake Nevius’s criticism of the author’s “lack of realism” is worth pondering. The real issue was not his use of illusions, Steinbeck maintained, but his refusal to use the moralistic and simplistic good-versus-evil illusions favored by so many critics. In psychological terms, Steinbeck is bearing witness—bearing very Californian witness—to the

layer of fantasy behind what passes for objectivity. For him it is not a matter of fiction-or-reality, but of which fictions cast roving beams of light over the most emotionally lived territory.

Having penned his greatest book, Steinbeck turned to a more enjoyable field: marine biology. One result was the wartime *Log of the Sea of Cortez* from notes he wrote aboard the 76' boat Western Flyer on a trip to Baja while the crew of the rented vessel talked philosophy, fished, got off course, got on again, befriended Mexicans in Baja, winked at girls in bars, drank innumerable gallons of beer, and occasionally collected samples for Ed Ricketts, that having been the trip's stated objective.

Steinbeck met Gwyn through a mutual friend while painfully separated from his wife. The young singer teased and flirted with him to ease his obvious depression. When this did not help, he sat listening as Ed played records to soothe him.

As might have been predicted, our hero's subsequent wedding to his alluring Guinevere was little short of disastrous. He dreamed the night before that he lost both wedding rings, only to find the next morning that Gwyn had actually lost hers. The minister was drunk, and Steinbeck's new mother-in-law made no secret of despising him. It probably hadn't helped that like the Round Table Knight and his queenly love, Steinbeck and Gwyn had shrouded their romance in secrecy.

How do the angels reason of our love?  
And those blest spirits that are gone before,  
Who, now rejoicing in their place above,  
Walked with us on this melancholy shore  
Of life, years, years ago; will they forgive  
In us such earth-born folly?

Before long a research quest for information for his war books and films gave him an excuse to leave Gwyn behind at home for longer and longer intervals. She responded manipulatively as well as mythologically by pretending to be pregnant. Nevertheless, Steinbeck went in with charging patrol boats at the Salerno invasion coordinated by the destroyer *Knight*. In the intoxication of battle he threw down the gauntlet by removing his reporter's badge and buckling on a sidearm.

In 1948 Ed Ricketts was crushed by an oncoming locomotive while driving over the railroad tracks near his laboratory. Nothing less than a locomotive could stop him, Steinbeck was later to remark. He needed only one more blow to maximize his misery, and disenchanted Gwen immediately obliged: she told him she wanted a divorce. Steinbeck retreated to Pacific Grove and took his pain outside to the roots and trees he tended around his house.

Lancelot had been loved by two Elaines: the daughter of King Pelles and mother to Galahad, and the Lily Maid of Astolat who died of passion for him. For Steinbeck one sufficed: stage manager Elaine Scott. Unfortunately, this daughter of an oilman was married, but unhappily so, and she broke up with her husband in 1949. The new couple moved east of California to New York, where Elaine had solid show business connections, and Steinbeck got to work on *East of Eden*.

They married at his publisher's home in a happy, relaxed, and informal ceremony; and in fact, the perpetually stern and forbidding Steinbeck became more happy and relaxed himself.

He also enjoyed Sag Harbor. It was, at last, an exchange he could feel good about: vengeful Associated Farmers thugs waiting in Los Gatos to frame him on a phony rape charge given up for friendly neighbors, a loving wife, and a famous white-haired Jewish scientist named Einstein, who was relieved to have a companion instead of a competitor. With his hands Steinbeck built himself a writing studio he named Joyous Garde and equipped his keep accordingly. The director's chair in which he sat typing throughout the day bore the proud label Siege Perilous.

The HUAC hearings of the early fifties sickened him. Let those self-righteous bullies intimidate others into silence; he would speak against them. On behalf of his friend Arthur Miller, Steinbeck was forthright:

We have seen and been revolted by the Soviet Union's encouragement of spying and telling, children reporting their parents, wives informing on their husbands. In Hitler's Germany, it was considered patriotic to report your friends and relations to the authorities. And we in America felt safe from and superior to these things. But are we so safe or so superior? ...I feel profoundly that our country is better served by individual courage and morals than by the safe and public patriotism which Dr. Johnson called "the last refuge of scoundrels."

He then proceeded to list the kinds of people who would no longer be allowed by such "patriotism" to visit the United States: Socrates (for corrupting minors), Pericles (consorting with hookers), Sappho (homosexuality), Francois Villon, Joan of Arc.... *The Winter of Our Discontent* gained new appropriateness for him given Nixon's kingly first name, but, as when Camelot itself was falling to its enemies, the gallant defense of Arthur had come too late to prevent the playwright's wounding by the blacklist.

Given his rather shy demeanor and his reputation for having led a tumbled personal life, it was easy for some to overlook the sword-steel core of chivalry to which Steinbeck aspired. He could be fun to drink with and amusing to listen to, but when a drunk approached during a party on a cruise and suggested that Elaine had been sleeping with half the crew, the normally pacific Steinbeck settled the matter in good knightly fashion by promptly beating the shit out of him.

It surprised few, then, when Steinbeck announced his new project: he would translate Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* into contemporary English.

On the surface this appeared a less complex project than writing a novel or making a film. The Arthurian tales had already been written in Middle English, ably so. They only required reinterpretation. Which meant a bit of research. Which meant a more thorough acquaintance with Malory. Which meant the perusal of hard-to-find editions. Which meant....a block. A solid one.

Steinbeck knew what it was to get stuck in mid-stream on a tired horse. All his large works had required periods of conscious inactivity while the back of his mind scaffolded up the stages of the writing to come. This was different. It was not a wait for a nod from the Lady of the Lake, it

was an impassible wall, a moat without a drawbridge, and it meant several years of confounding starts and stops on *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights*.

It became difficult to tell the restless and guilt-ridden Lancelot from his chronicler, and for his chronicler most of all. To break out of his block would have required breaking out of the legend he lived, and this he could not do. The Grail castle of the *Acts* remained locked shut to the man whose favorite virtue, gallantry, had withered in a spiritually barren world bereft of the ideals of Camelot. For all his visions of the floating Chalice of Chalice, Lancelot could not pass the door to the chapel where the holy vessel slept. So it would be with Steinbeck, who had sensed as much while watching the sun rise in Rome. He would never complete the quest.

When he returned to New York from Somerset, a small heart attack deprived him of consciousness while he lay smoking. On an intuition Elaine went upstairs and found him ablaze. She quickly put out the fire and got him to the hospital. The injuries were minor, but he came home convinced of a link between his accident and his problems with his work. Battle-seasoned Lancelot would have felt no differently, and would have agreed heartily with his literary counterpart that “to be alive is to have scars.” According to one tradition, after laying down for the night in the Grail chapel, Lancelot had been singed by lightning and paralyzed for days.

The valiant knight repulsed at the gate might enter more quietly at the rear. Therefore Steinbeck lay aside the *Acts* to write *The Winter of Our Discontent* in a deliberately imposed state of willful isolation. So hermitlike was his confinement to Joyous Garde that when asked how his novel was coming, he silently held up little signs to announce the number of pages written that day. Only to Elaine would he read portions of the manuscript. She hated it, the first draft anyway, sensing perhaps that the more he tried to escape the legendary into the present, the more his language suffered as its terms of endearment plunked off the page like clinkers. His agent, his friends: nobody seemed to like the unwanted piece.

Nor was *The Winter of Our Discontent* made glorious summer for the stunned New Yorker by his critics, whose outspoken attacks on him for not writing another *Grapes of Wrath* overshadowed any joy he might have felt at seeing the new novel published. He never wrote another. He was tired. Worse, he was, at last, disillusioned.

The walls are stout—the garners  
Are full—and week by week,  
In vain by force or famine  
To win that tower they seek:  
But day by day Sir Launcelot  
With gibe and jeer they taunt—  
And traitor hail, and bordeller,  
And hoot him recreant!

So he traveled, parked his knightly nicknamed truck “Rocinante” long enough to see the manuscript for *Travels with Charley* into print, and infected his truant teen boys with his love of books and theater. One morning he switched on the TV to catch the news on the Cuban missile crisis and heard himself declared a winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature.

For once the writer allowed himself the full draught of his pride, for himself as well as his calling. "Literature is not promulgated by a pale and emasculated critical priesthood singing their litanies in empty churches," he stated in an electrifying acceptance speech that belied his initially cynical comparison of winning "this prize business" to that of taking the throne as Lettuce Queen of Salinas. Elaine was ecstatic.

So, in a more political fashion, was President Kennedy. He recommended that Steinbeck visit Russia as part of a cultural exchange program of writers meeting writers. Steinbeck agreed and brought along his wife as well as a relatively new talent: Edward Albee. He had doubts about his liege lord Kennedy, but a Presidential order was a Presidential order. Upon seeing a Russian theater group rehearsing a Marxist reinterpretation of *The Winter of Our Discontent* Steinbeck bellowed, "Do you mean to tell me that you sons of bitches have not only stolen my book, but you have stolen my book and made a play of it?"

When Kennedy was assassinated, Jacqueline asked Steinbeck to write a biography of her husband. He did not turn her down at the time, but he never got around to it either. It was not his kind of Camelot, not even after President Johnson draped him with the Medal of Freedom. Maybe his Camelot was called California, which is why evoking ancient England only brought him back in spirit, again and again, to Salinas, Monterey, and his beloved pine-crowned peninsula, places which his son Thom, another novelist, said he had never entirely left behind.

Research at Alnwick Castle and the resulting synchronistic discovery of an obscure Arthurian document there marked his final attempt to come to terms with the mythology that for a lifetime had locked him onto an impossible quest and now, unfinished, the story unended because unplumbed, would fate itself to a close in what time remained. In giving up on the Acts without vertically exploring their iron grip on himself, he resigned himself, however unconsciously, to acting them out horizontally instead. Externalized deeds of uncritical impulse would now supplant the chance for myth-defusing interior dialog.

And so he rode forth to another war correspondent tour of duty, this time in Vietnam, posing with a gun and flying around in helicopters. He loved being with the men in the field no matter how much his feelings changed about the war itself—and they never had been constant, with his naturally "everyman" soul loathing the bloodshed and hypocrisy even as his warrior's heart reveled in the adrenalized risks of combat. When angered pacifists at home denounced him as a hawk, they were right, but only about one side of him.

Ever the hero, Steinbeck slipped a disc while helping a Chinese laborer cart a stack of beer. The back fusion operation went smoothly but was shadowed by a long chain of illnesses. The most serious hit as a stroke on Memorial Day. The doctor suggested a bypass for the ailing writer's badly clogged coronary arteries, but Steinbeck told him to go home and read the Book of Ecclesiastes. He knew, and to pass the time as he lay dying in a dolorous New York tower, he planted some seeds in the window box.

As the winter solstice neared he spent an afternoon reminiscing with Elaine. It had been a wonderful life, he told her. She lay down with him, and he murmured something about hearing

the sound of distant drums, or maybe it was bagpipes; and with that, twilight deepened suddenly into dusk.

And still asleep, and fast asleep,  
His visage open laid,  
Within the quire of Joyous Garde  
Sir Launcelot lies dead.

Elaine made sure his ashes were returned where he wanted them: to California, which though pummeled and plowed and paved abideth forever.

“What I feel so strongly—I said this to you, but I have never recorded it—is that there is more to a man than a writer, than being a writer....and I feel that John, the last years of his life, that he became a full man.” So spoke Elaine Steinbeck to her husband’s biographer in an extemporaneous epitaph—and in loving tribute to a gallant span of creative service in this vale of loam and tears.

Thus endith the tale of Sir Jehan Stynebec de Montray,  
Knyght-errant emonge the Tymeless Order of the Table Rounde;  
Borne in Californie, he hath travelled far,  
Fely to hyghe and lowe alyke, and passynge good wryter  
As ever were in those dayes, and  
Closyng them at the syde of faithful Elayne.  
Lowsed of his bondys,  
God gyvve hym sleep welle and peaceable.

Explicit