

Interview Article:

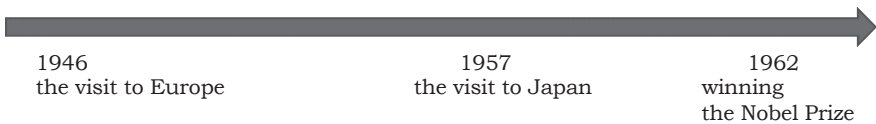
Steinbeck, Sweden, and Dos Passos

Fredrik Tydal (Stockholm School of Economics)
and Aya Kubota (Bunka Gakuen University)

When I, Aya Kubota, was writing a book review of *My Life with John Steinbeck* by Gwyn Conger last year, I found an interesting part in the memoirs. Steinbeck and Gwyn left for Europe in October 1946, for Steinbeck “was scheduled to go to Norway to receive the Liberty Cross from King Haakon for *The Moon is Down*” (142). Although the visit to Europe is well known, I was ignorant of Steinbeck’s attachment to Sweden.

Although Gwyn wanted to return to New York to celebrate Christmas, Steinbeck said, “I don’t want to go home. I want to buy a farm in Upsala. Send for the children, and we’ll have them here in the spring.” Gwyn remembered Steinbeck had had “several drinks” (144) before saying this; however, the knowledge of Steinbeck’s favoritism was inspiring to me. Did Steinbeck’s sixth sense foretell he would return to Sweden to receive the far greater award in 1962?

I decided to interview my Swedish friend, Fredrik Tydal, mainly regarding how Steinbeck was perceived in Sweden. Dr. Tydal is a Dos Passos researcher and the current president of the John Dos Passos Society. He has also published in *Steinbeck Review* and given presentations on Steinbeck. I hope this will be an enjoyable light reading for Steinbeck scholars and his readers.



Question: What do you think of Steinbeck’s attachment to Sweden in 1946? He insisted on staying there, which is completely different from Steinbeck’s attitude shown in Japan in 1957. Of course, he was not in good shape while in Tokyo, and we know of his hatred of the summer heat and dislike of raw foods; however, it seems that the writer really wanted to leave Japan, where he was “more highly esteemed than in the U.S.” (Hosoi 2) in those days.

While it is difficult to know what went on in Steinbeck's mind, I think he might have had an emotional connection to Scandinavia as a whole. He first visited the region in 1937, making stops in Sweden and Denmark on his way to the Soviet Union. Only three years later, in 1940, both Denmark and Norway were occupied by the Nazis. As we know, Steinbeck's response to the situation was *The Moon Is Down*, which suggested that he had great concern for the region. His commitment was later recognized at the highest level, as he was awarded the Liberty Cross by King Haakon VII of Norway. Psychologically, one could say that Steinbeck's emotional investment in the Scandinavian cause was thus reciprocated, strengthening the connection he felt.

As for his attachment to Sweden specifically, it is a somewhat more challenging question. We do know that he had a very good friend in Bo Beskow, whom he first met on his visit in 1937 and then always found the time to catch up with on each subsequent stay in Sweden. Politically, Steinbeck may also have been attracted to Sweden's social democracy and its welfare state. We should keep in mind that Steinbeck visited both Sweden and the Soviet Union on the 1937 trip, which might have presented an opportunity for him to compare different socio-political and economic systems. In that light, the middle way between socialism and capitalism represented by Sweden might have appealed to him – especially since his impression of the Soviet Union on that first trip does not seem to have been a favorable one.

Question: It is well known that Steinbeck's bad health condition caused Dos Passos to make a speech in his place in Tokyo. Apart from it, Steinbeck's first impression of Dos Passos, which he had on the flight coming to Tokyo, was that Dos Passos was "an angel" (Carr 514). Why do you think Steinbeck called him that?

Dos Passos was a very polite and friendly man: his mother was descended from Virginia aristocracy, so there was a certain touch of the Southern gentleman in him. Dos Passos also enjoyed friendships with many fellow authors of the time: he was closest to those of his own generation, like Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, but he was also well acquainted with older colleagues like Theodore Dreiser and Upton Sinclair. So, it was not surprising that Dos Passos could get along well with Steinbeck, despite the comparatively short time they spent together during the Japan tour.

At that point in their respective careers, there were also some similarities between Dos Passos and Steinbeck, which may have furnished some common ground. They had both been radical writers to varying degrees in the 1930s, but now they were both facing criticism from some commentators for growing conservative. In response, the two authors both invoked their long-standing commitment to individualism, which they saw as the best guarantee for liberty in the face of constraining collective ideologies. “I believe in and will fight for the right of the individual to function as an individual without pressure from any direction,” Steinbeck wrote in 1954 (90). Expressing similar ideas, Dos Passos argued in 1959 that the central theme of his writing has always been the same, defining it as “man’s struggle for life against the strangling institutions he himself creates” (“Looking Back on U.S.A.” 237).



Steinbeck and Dos Passos in Japan, 1957 (Photo: UPI, with thanks to the Dos Passos Estate)

Question: Did Dos Passos refer to Steinbeck or his works?

Dos Passos mainly moved in East Coast literary circles, and it seems that he did not become acquainted with Steinbeck's work until it became nationally popular in the second half of the 1930s. In fact, the earliest reference to Steinbeck in Dos Passos's correspondence could suggest a slight jealousy: in a letter to his agent in October 1937, he notes that *Of Mice and Men* had sold 187,000 copies up to that point, while his own *The Big Money* had only sold 20,000 copies in the same period (Carr 380). However, the context reveals that the reason he brings up this discrepancy is to criticize his publishing company for not doing a better job of promotion. But the sales figures are still revealing: while Dos Passos was a favorite with the critics in the 1930s, he was not as much of a popular sensation as Steinbeck.

Later, in 1968, Dos Passos commented that *In Dubious Battle* was his favorite work by Steinbeck, and added that he found it neglected: "It's truly excellent," he said. "But for some reason, it's never mentioned." In the same interview, Dos Passos stated that he also liked *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, which is not surprising considering that he shared with Steinbeck an interest in travel writing ("An Interview with John Dos Passos" 282).

Question: When the Nobel Prize in Literature went to John Steinbeck in 1962, how was it received among Swedish people? Were his works more popular than those of other American writers in your country in those days?

Steinbeck is undoubtedly seen in Sweden as one of the major twentieth-century U.S. writers, though he has always been more of a popular than a critical favorite. When he was awarded the Nobel Prize, the choice was questioned by some influential domestic critics – Arthur Lundkvist called it "one of the Academy's greatest mistakes" – but it both solidified and strengthened Steinbeck's status among ordinary Swedish readers and in society at large, in a way that had not been the case for previous American laureates such as Sinclair Lewis and Pearl Buck. The perspective of the Swedish Academy is interesting to consider as well: the records of their deliberations are sealed for 50 years, so their reasons for choosing Steinbeck were not available until recently.

What the documents show is that there were no strong preferences for the 1962 award. Often, the members of the Academy debate the candidates vigorously, but that year, they did not seem overly excited about any of

them. It is shown that Steinbeck's only real contender was the British poet and novelist Robert Graves. However, the Academy felt that Graves's work was inferior to that of Ezra Pound, and that the prize could not be given to an English-language poet as long as Pound was still alive – and giving it to Pound himself was out of the question, for ideological reasons. Another candidate up for discussion had been Danish writer Karen Blixen, but she had died during the year, making her ineligible; the prize cannot be awarded posthumously.

This, however, should not give the impression that Steinbeck was a mere choice by elimination. Rather, the Permanent Secretary of the Academy, Anders Österling, was impressed by *The Winter of Our Discontent*, which had been published the year before. With that novel, Österling wrote, Steinbeck had “after signs of decline reclaimed his position as a socially conscious truth-teller with a steadfast creative focus on what is genuinely American, for better or worse.” As the decision drew closer, Österling made the case that Steinbeck was “an authentic realist fully equal to his predecessors Sinclair Lewis and Ernest Hemingway,” thereby placing him in the requisite Nobel-worthy company (qtd. in Schueler, author's translation).

Question: Do they produce Steinbeck's plays, such as *Of Mice and Men*, at theaters in Sweden? Do Swedish people have many occasions to watch movies based on Steinbeck's works?

Today, Steinbeck remains a household name in Sweden. *Of Mice and Men* is regularly staged around the country, and the book itself is often read in high schools. Many know *East of Eden* and *The Grapes of Wrath* from their film adaptations, the latter of which is sometimes screened for high-school students in lieu of reading the novel. Every year, Swedish libraries conduct a survey of the most popular Nobel Prize-winning authors, based on the number of books checked out. Normally, the most recent laureate is also the most popular. In 2018, for instance, Kazuo Ishiguro topped the list, since he had won the prize the previous year. But in these surveys, Steinbeck is almost always in the Top 3, demonstrating the timeless appeal of his work among Swedish readers.

Works Cited

Carr, Virginia Spencer. *Dos Passos: A Life*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004.
Conger Steinbeck, Gwyn. *My Life with John Steinbeck*. Montgomery, Powys,

- UK: Lawson Publishing Ltd., 2018.
- Dos Passos, John. "An Interview with John Dos Passos." *The Major Nonfictional Prose*. Ed. Donald Pizer. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988. 276-92.
- . "Looking Back on U.S.A." *The Major Nonfictional Prose*. Ed. Donald Pizer. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988. 235-37.
- Hosoi, Totaro. "American Writers Who Attended the Pen International Conference." Tokyo: Rikkyo Newspaper, 10 Sep. 1957.
- Schueler, Kaj. "Till slut återstod bara Steinbeck." *Svenska dagbladet* 2 Jan. 2013.
<https://www.svd.se/till-slut-aterstod-bara-steinbeck>.
- Steinbeck, John. *America and Americans and Selected Nonfiction*. New York: Penguin, 2002.