Book : 5/4

A Yank at the Court of King Arthur

FICTION SHORT REPORTS

THE ACTS OF KING ARTHUR AND HIS NOBLE KNIGHTS by John Steinbeck/ Heinemann £6.50 pp 364.

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IN November 1956 John Steinbeck wrote to Elizabeth Otis, his literary agent: "I am going to start the Morte immediately. Let it be private between us until I get it done. It has all the old magic .... As long as I don't know what's going on in the world, I would like to have a try with this".

"This was Steinbeck's long held ambition to "bring to present-day usage" Sir Thomas Malory's fifteenth century romance, eLe Morte d'Arthur". Initially he intended to do no no more than revise towards a more easily comprehensible text: "not removing all the old forms, nor all the Malory sentence structure, but substituting known simple words and reversing sentences which even now are puzzling". His idea was simply to make the "magic" of Malory's stories accessible to "my own young sons, and other sons, not so young". He appointed Chase Horton to be "a kind of Managing Editor" for the enterprise and settled down to two years of sporadic research.

At the end of this volume, and arguably the most interesting part of it, are over 60 closely printed pages of Steinbeck's letters to Chase Horton and Elizabeth Otis. They chart not only his changing thoughts about, and later his progress with the project, but also his growing awareness of that agonising gap, which all artists feel, between vision and achievement.

By October 1958 he was "becoming less shy of it" and even asks himself: "Why not write it in American?" But by May 1959 he was writing, clearly in response to heavily negative reactions to his first draft: "I have had no intention of putting it into the twentieth-century vernacular any more than T. M. put it into fifteenth century vernacular ..... I wanted an English that was out of time and place .....".

All this uncertainty of aim and confusion of attitude shows in his text, the bulk of which was written in Somerset, England, in 1958-59. At times when Steinbeck was feeling "less shy of it", he allowed himself not only twentieth century American vernacular ("A little back-country necromancy in a pasture") but flights of invention, such as a passionate secret love scene between Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere, which are often quite at odds with Malory's conception of courtly love. At other times, feeling less secure, he followed Malory's text fairly closely, but always with embellishments, spellings out, underlings. In the process much of Malory's strange deadpan magic is lost, and the loss is not balanced by the addition of such heavy-handed platitudes as: "In the combat between wisdow and feeling, wisdom never wins".

Quite clearly Steinbeck, a serious artist with the highest standards of self-criticism, came to realise that he had not solved the problems of tone and of form: he abandoned the project after completing an uncorrected draft of only six of Malory's 21 "books", and would certainly not have wanted it published in this unfinished, unmodified state. And yet there is no indication at all, in the publisher's presentation of the book, that this is the case. A prospective buyer would think he was getting, for his £6.50, a finalised updated version of the whole of Malory. He'd have very good reason to complain.

Hunt the Slipper by Henry Cecil' (Michael Joseph £3.75 pp 151). Harriet divorces George after mysterious seven-year disappearance, but then he comes home claiming loss of memory. Is he telling the truth or has he been leading a Walter Mitty double life? This is Henry Cecil's last completed novel before his death and is written with his familiar skill and humour.

This Is the House by Deborah Hill (Peter Davies £3.95 pp 413). Orphaned girl is adopted by wealthy Quaker family and employed as servant. Her beauty, intelligence and charm gradually enable her to fulfil her grandiose social ambitions. A large scale, engrossing account of the founding of New England family dynasty.

The Rich Are With You Always by Malcolm Macdonald (Hodder & Stoughton £5.25 pp 483). Panoramic account of the Victorian railway era, circa 1840, told through lives of two families. The entrepreneurs-male builder and female wheeler-dealer join forces with the moralists-female crusader and secretly sex-obsessed husband. Big, boldly conceived and assured of devoted readership.

Woolworth Madonna by Elizabeth Troop (Duckworth £3.95 pp 124). Working-class mother escapes squalor of South London condemned home through fantasies about famous conductor, only to be taken up by journalist fascinated by her "real life" qualities. The alternating narrative technique clearly brings out their contrasting attitudes, but the woman's dream life is not convincingly integrated.

Harriet by Jilly Cooper (Arlington Books £2.95). A touch of token feminism, a dash of inverted snobbery, a few pungent comments on the changing face of society, and Jilly Cooper brings to this deceptively straightforward story of love and treachery her own idiosyncratic brand of social satire. Old values are reversed to make way for the new. A Heathcliff hero complete with house on the Yorkshire moors gets a divorce from his beautiful badwife who is banished in favour of an Oxford drop-out unmarried mother.

Morag's Flying Fortress by Jack Trevor Storey (Secker £3.75 pp 250). Complicated story, told, as it were, baskwards, of brainwashed victim of Flying Fortress crash — a Russian "sleeper" spy — shocked back to his senses by broken romance. Involved conundrum jumbles time, space identity in curiously enjoyable way — not a single dull page in the whole swirling, maddening often extremely enjoyable book.