

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11409-7 - John Steinbeck: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Joseph R. McElrath, Jesse S. Crisler and Susan Shillinglaw

Excerpt

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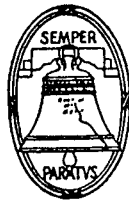
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CUP OF GOLD

A LIFE OF HENRY MORGAN,
BUCCANEER

*With Occasional
Reference to
History*

by
JOHN STEINBECK



ROBERT M. McBRIDE & COMPANY
NEW YORK

1929

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Will Cuppy.
 “*Cup of Gold.*”
 New York *Herald Tribune*,
 18 August 1929, “Books”
 section, p. 12.

Being a life of Henry Morgan, buccaneer, with occasional references to history, and a promising stab at a novel of adventure. Strangely enough, the tale lacks the color and spirit traditional to its genre, perhaps because the author has preferred to tinker with a realistic method—or maybe it was an oversight. Mr. Steinbeck lapses into pedestrian narrative at times, but even so, enough brave names and places are bandied about to hold the interest of most fans; and Mr. Steinbeck’s graceful manner lifts the yarn above the adventure groceries of this degenerate age. The tale tells of Henry’s boyhood in the Welsh glens, his sailing for the Indies at the age of fifteen, his slavery in Barbados and later triumphs on the Spanish Main, including the sack of Panama, the *Cup of Gold*, for love of the mysterious Ysobel, alias the Red Saint, and his respectable death years later as lieutenant governor of Jamaica.

“*Cup of Gold.*”
 St. Louis *Star*,
 1 September 1929, p. 11.

Henry Morgan, pirate, freebooter and lieutenant governor, whose greatest ambition was to sack “The Cup of Gold” in Panama, has, through the pen of John Steinbeck, presented his life story for the

readers of good fiction in one of the latest books from the Robert McBride Publishing Company. While most previous stories, whether historical or fictional of Morgan’s life, were written for the consumption of school boys, here is one that is decidedly not for juvenile perusal. For here is presented Morgan’s complete life (including his loves) dealing with every phase, whether real or legendary, of England’s most noted buccaneer. Here is seen Morgan in all his brutality, his ambition and his passion. One cannot help but thrill at the downright courage of the man, nor fail to sympathize with him at his disappointments. Morgan, for one of the few times in a life which has appeared many times on paper, is actually seen as a man. He was really human at times, loving all earthly pleasures and, according to the worthy Mr. Steinbeck, actually possessed ideals. He had a natural tendency for exaggeration which, one suspects, has been handed down to his most recent biographer, which is altogether excusable in as much as no claim is made to the historical accuracy of the book. *Cup of Gold* is thoroughly masculine and should find much favor with those male readers who used to delight in those bloody tales of piracy and rebellion.

“Morgan, the Pirate,
 Sails Raging Main.”
 Columbus *Ohio State
 Journal*, 15 September
 1929, “Magazine Section,”
 p. 3.

This is a romanticized story of Morgan, pirate, pillager, killer, lieutenant-governor

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of Jamaica and sacker of Panama, known to the world of that day as “the Cup of Gold.” From the time when Morgan was a lad on his father’s country acres until the day he died in his bed at Jamaica, the story takes him, through his slavery, his years as a buccaneer, his knighting by King Charles, and finally his death. He started with nothing save a love for far places; he took a brown-skinned slave for a mistress, and was defeated when he attempted a similar conquest of the Red Saint of Panama; finally, he married his orphan first cousin, then died like a gentleman.

There is little of fact or history here, although, as the author says, there is an occasional historical reference. The story is fiction, purely, and Morgan is perhaps a more romantic figure here than he was in real life. Some of his cruelties are softened, and under Mr. Steinbeck’s pen the buccaneer is at times a strange, abstract creature who knows neither love nor sorrow; who, dying, could not recall that he had any sins to confess or to repent.

There is enough of the biographical novel here to take away the shimmer of imagination, so that the net result is a meaty, pleasing yarn wherein action sets the pace and clever writing plays the tune.

F.H.M.
 “Morgan, Buccaneer.”
New York Evening Post,
 28 September 1929,
 Section M, p. 7.

This novelized “Life of Henry Morgan, Buccaneer,” written “with occasional reference to history,” somehow does not “come off.” It seems to fall between two stools

of style in considering the historical subject, the modern naturalistic and the period manner, and they do not harmonize. Yet there is much swing and movement to the narrative at times, and Henry’s many undesirable qualities are not camouflaged. Morgan was a cruel, orgiastic brute. And when the author makes him philosophize in his “don’t call it love” affairs with his women, Henry does not ring true. The actual record of his life shows he was no introspect. He looked into the wine when it was red, and into women’s eyes when he was ready for them. It is a question whether he ever looked into his own soul. Yet Mr. Steinbeck’s fantasy is enjoyable reading, with its highlighting of the sack of Panama, the West Indian “Cup of Gold,” even though we find it hard to believe that Morgan died thinking he “always had some rather good end in view,” in all his deviltries.

A.M.
 “The Reviewer.”
Stanford [Calif.] Daily,
 30 October 1929, p. 2.

There were once two Steinbecks, cousins. One of them came to Stanford and became President of the student body. The other came to Stanford and became a novelist.

Cup of Gold, by John Steinbeck, is a fanciful, rather weird, and sometimes historical novel concerning the life of one Henry Morgan, buccaneer, pirate, and member of the “Brotherhood” that caused so much trouble to Spain’s power on the seas during the sixteenth century. And Henry is the whole show. We see him first

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as a boy of fifteen, dreaming of life beyond the seas and eternally yearning for the wild adventurous life of men who did things. We leave him just as death is coming, and all the terrible deeds of his past life are passing by in bewildering confusion.

Cup of Gold is the picture of a dreamer—of a dreamer who eternally searched for some ephemeral happiness. Cities and countries richer than man ever dreamed of, fell before his armies. He had women, gold, ships, and power. But peace was not there and Henry Morgan was a lost soul looking for something he could never find. And thus he died.

All novelists have some sort of a philosophy and John Steinbeck is no exception. Says he, “All the world’s great have been little boys who wanted the moon; running and climbing, they sometimes caught a firefly. But if one grow to a man’s mind, that mind must see that it cannot have the moon and would not want it if it could—and so it catches no fireflies.”

It is not the plot in *Cup of Gold* that makes the book interesting, for there have been many such plots. And it is not the characters, for there have been many such in the minds of all writers. It is the vivid, complete, and truly introspective picture of Henry Morgan’s life and character that make the book a thing to be remembered. As one reads the book he feels as though he had experienced the same things in his own life. If you ever left the place in which you grew up, then you know how Henry felt that wintry morning he bid goodbye to the valleys of Cambria.

John Steinbeck is a Stanford man, a member of the class of ’24. Since leaving school he has spent his time traveling abroad and in this country, writing things when time allowed. *Cup of Gold* is his first attempt in the field of novel-writing.

Paul G. Teal.

“*Cup of Gold.*”

San Jose [Calif.] *Mercury-Herald*, 1 December 1929,
p. 7.

Henry Morgan, pirate of note and ruler of the Spanish main who was never defeated, as far as men knew, humiliated and repulsed by a woman, who used only a pin for a weapon.

Henry Morgan, a swashbuckler of power and might, envied by half the world, the most lonesome man that sailed the seven seas—

Henry Morgan, who chose a friend from his crew of adventurers and then killed the friend because he was afraid of his pity—

And lastly, Henry Morgan, “respected” citizen and overlord of Port Royal, who put former members of his crew to death on charges of piracy, with the excuse: “I do not hang you because you are pirates but because I am expected to hang pirates. I am sorry for you. I would like to send you to your cells with saws in your pockets, but I cannot. As long as I do what is expected of me I shall remain the Judge. When I change for whatever motive, I may myself be hanged.”

Cup of Gold seems everything that a novel, a history and a book of travel should be. It impresses the reader as containing all elements of literature clamped between two cloth-bound covers. There is pathos and horror in it and nobleness and smallness. There are descriptions of cities and islands and swamps. Its people are broad and narrow, strong and weak, clever and dull and all of these virtues and vices are bound up in Henry Morgan as portrayed by John Steinbeck, who, by the way, is a Palo Alto man.

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The tale follows the history of this famous pirate accurately. Not an action of his that is known or sufficiently rumored has been left out. And into this bit of history, which is far from dull even when recounted by the most drab of historians, Steinbeck has woven bits of scintillating beauty, incidents of stark horror, and has peopled all incidents with genuine human beings.

He begins with Morgan as a small boy in Scotland, merely an adventurous small boy who leaves home. Henry is indentured as a slave in Barbados, an island of the British West Indies. His master took an interest in the boy, taught him history and English and gave him access to a large library. Here the future buccaneer studied war. Everything he could find out about fights at sea he consumed—for young Henry had long determined to become a pirate. By way of assuring his future he soon became manager of his master's plantation and stole and laid aside enough money to set him up in the pirate business.

Because of his actual knowledge of sea warfare, his ability to handle men and his sagacity, Henry Morgan soon became the most successful pirate in the trade. Thousands of men flocked to his standard when he called.

The sack of Panama, the Spanish city known as the "Cup of Gold," was the high point in Morgan's career. The reason for this venture was the high point in his affairs of the heart—if he could be said to have a heart.

For Henry Morgan sacked Panama so that he might find a woman there. Her name was La Santa Roja—The Red Saint—and she was known the world over for her charm. And when Henry Morgan found The Red Saint she scorned him and jeered at him and defended herself with a pin until he left the city like a whipped cur.

Desire of The Red Saint put Henry Morgan on his way to Panama. He called for volunteers and an army of pirates responded. They knew that Morgan never failed. The destination was not announced until the pirates had landed on the beach that mouthed the swampy sloughs that led to Panama. The crew nearly revolted with dread at the thought of attacking the impregnable city. But they thought too of The Red Saint.

"There is a woman in Panama and she is lovely as the sun. They call her the Red Saint in Panama. All men kneel to her. She has stolen worship from the Blessed saints." This was the rumor of the Red Saint.

Barges were built and the army and supplies began their watery march toward Panama. Disease and fatigue harassed them but under the lash of Morgan's will they continued.

The city was taken easily and sacked. Morgan failed to find the Red Saint at first. She heard he was searching for her and came to his headquarters. He offered her marriage and she scorned him. He asked for her hand in the sweetest words he could remember.

"You forget only one thing, sir," she said. "I do not burn. You do not carry a torch for me and I hoped you did. I came this morning to see if you did. And I have heard your words so often and so often in Paris and Cordova. I am tired of these words that never change. Is there some book with which aspiring lovers instruct themselves? The Spanish men say the same things, but their gestures are a little more practiced, and so a little more convincing. You have much to learn. I wanted force—blind, unreasoning force—and love not for my soul or for some imagined beauty of my mind, but for the white fetish of my body," she told the pirate.

Her husband was soft and delicate, she said. She was tired of such men.

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Morgan, thinking this his cue, tried force. But The Red Saint was not interested. She repulsed his advances by stabbing a small pin in his face. She dared him to kill her. He hadn't the nerve. He was cowed. A woman had defeated the world's greatest pirate.

Infuriated Henry Morgan killed the first man that crossed his path—an epileptic whom he despised. Half crazed he returned to the palace of the Governor and sat amidst the gold that had been looted. His only friend entered. Morgan thought of the pity and comfort his friend would have for him when he explained his failure. Morgan couldn't stand the thought of that. He shot his friend through the heart.

But, nevertheless, Morgan finished things in a business-like way in Panama. He sold The Red Saint back to her husband for a great sum. He took the treasures back to the coast, piled them aboard his ship, made all but a few men drunk, then scuttled all ships but his and sailed away with the swag. His army wakened next day to face starvation. A few escaped but most of them died.

Morgan bribed British officials with some of his fortune and was knighted instead of being jailed. The government sent him to Port Royal where he judged and hung wrong-doers until he died.

W[ilbur] N[eedham].
 “Steinbeck's First.”
 Los Angeles *Times*,
 26 July 1936, Part 3,
 p. 8.

Here is a new edition of John Steinbeck's first book—practically a new book, since

it is doubtful if more than a handful of people ever read its microscopically small first edition. By now, those who like Steinbeck are aware of the fact [that], as Lewis Gannett puts it [in] his preface, “no two of his books have ever fitted in the same valise.” *Tortilla Flat* made him famous; but, stubbornly, he went on to write, not another amusing tale of the Monterey *paisanos*, but a dramatic labor novel, *In Dubious Battle*. His astounded readers are now treated to the spectacle of Steinbeck wallowing in gore and action, color and hard, brilliant romance.

Cup of Gold is a novelization of Sir Henry Morgan's life, from his birth in the Welsh glens to his Carib exploits and the capture of Panama and his death in Jamaica, written “with occasional reference to history.” It is a gorgeous story; but you may be sure Steinbeck has not handled it in any orthodox fashion. I hope its publication may lead many to discover, with further surprise, his two really great books: *The Pastures of Heaven* and *To a God Unknown*.

Joseph Henry Jackson.
 “A Bookman's
 Notebook.”
 San Francisco *Chronicle*,
 31 July 1936, p. 15.

This, first of all, is not a new book. It has been taken over by the present publisher from the firm that originally brought it out in 1929. On record (as they very well might be) as believing completely and thoroughly in Steinbeck's work, Covici-Friede wanted to be the publisher of all his books, and added this one to his

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others which they already have. His first novel, it never had a very wide public, and a great many who discovered him with *Tortilla Flat*, and have since read his *In Dubious Battle*, and perhaps his *To a God Unknown* and *Pastures of Heaven*, will be glad of this chance to get hold of it.

In the sentence immediately preceding this I spoke of *Cup of Gold* as a novel. The publisher calls it that, in his jacket-note, and perhaps it is. Mr. Steinbeck himself must have considered it more or less in that light when he wrote it, although it is subtitled *A Life of Sir Henry Morgan, Buccaneer, with Occasional References to History*. As a matter of fact, the book partakes a little of the nature of a biography and quite a good deal of the nature of fiction. Which is far from being a black mark against it.

As to the content of the book, it is just what it is called. There is no point in reciting an outline of it here. Morgan was a young man who knew very well what he wanted and went out and got it. Like most adventures he had a strong romantic streak in him, and perhaps just a dash of the mystic about his thought processes. At least, Steinbeck shows him that way, and it is as likely an interpretation as another. Whatever the reason, he was a curious and in many ways a significant figure. And as you follow his progress in this tale you find yourself admiring the man more than you should admire a gentleman of the ruthlessness and piratical makeup of Morgan. It is, at any rate, a story very well worth reading; one in which you will find all the adventure you could ask for, and all the color a book of its kind could possibly contain. On that ground alone it is a book you should read.

But the most interesting thing about it is that it was Steinbeck's first book.

In a preface to this new edition Lewis Gannett sketches Steinbeck's career briefly, but takes time to note how the characteristics that were later to be so notable in the author's work may be traced here at their beginnings. It is a youthful book, as Mr. Gannett says. But it shows very plainly where the youth who wrote it was headed. And I should like to quote for you something that Gannett says in this connection, something which indicates how well he has understood this point, and how well he understands Steinbeck and his writing altogether. This is how he concludes his preface: "Perhaps one may find, in this glowingly youthful book, in this story of young Henry Morgan—particularly in the boy's conversation, on the mountain-top with old Merlin—a sort of key to Steinbeck himself: 'Merlin searched the boy's face closely. "I think I understand," he said softly. "You are a little boy. You want the moon to drink from, as a golden cup; and so it is very likely that you will become a great man if only you remain a little child. All the world's great have been little boys who wanted the moon; running and climbing, they sometimes caught a firefly. But if one grow to a man's mind, that mind must see that it cannot have the moon and would not want it if it could—and so, it catches no fireflies."'"

And Mr. Gannett concludes: "Steinbeck still catches fireflies, as lovely and as various fireflies as any man writing in America today. By some rare magic he has united a child's heart, a child's seeing eyes, with a man's mind. I believe his fireflies to be among the most beautiful and most significant specimens in American literature today. The scientists have never solved the miracle of the firefly's 'cold light'; they can only assure us of its existence and perfection. Nor can critics do more than assure the reader that

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Steinbeck's magic, which anyone who reads must feel, is authentic magic."

It was no part of my intention to make Mr. Gannett, willy-nilly, write this review for me, but I see that he has done it.

Those are precisely the things that needed to be said about Steinbeck—or at least some of them. I shall add only that if you have discovered the charm in *Tortilla Flat*, if you have read *In Dubious Battle*, and appreciated the integrity which led its author to refuse to take sides in the extremely controversial matters about which he wrote in that book, if you have perhaps read either or both of his other two novels and realized—as you could hardly fail to do—that what Gannett says about Steinbeck's "authentic magic" is true, then you must get hold of this *Cup of Gold*. It is a story, yes; as rousing and adventurous a yarn as you will find anywhere. But in addition to that it is a perfect literary preview of the work of a man who has since become widely known for books so different that you would hardly believe the same stamp could be on all of them. Yet, as Mr. Gannett points out, it is. And since Steinbeck is without question the one most worth watching of any of the younger writers of the Pacific Coast—and certainly one of those anywhere in America of whom it may be said that they are going places—I am sure that no one who cares about this work will want to let pass this chance to see how he began.

Charles Marriott.
"Satire and Sentiment."
Manchester Guardian,
29 January 1937, p. 7.

... It is by no means unlikely that Sir Henry Morgan, the seventeenth-century

buccaneer, had a streak of mysticism, and Mr. Steinbeck has done well to exploit it in his "life," with "occasional references to history," to quote the sub-title. One feels, however, that either the references to history should have been more precise or else the general treatment should have been more free. As it is, the novel tends to fall between two stools, and the story "sags" rather badly in Morgan's sudden change from youth to maturity at Barbados, with an effect of a missing text which would not have occurred with more freedom in the treatment of the whole. Mr. Steinbeck's writing, too, is not quite the best for the purpose: he is too fond of phrases like "the sensuous sureness of her were tonic things"; all right for the author observing directly, but not so right for the boy's impression of the ship; any more than is "a pleasant hypnosis in the brain" for his experience at sea. But the story shows constructive imagination, it has moments of excitement, and the episode of Morgan's emotional defeat by La Santa Roja at Panama is very well managed.

"*Cup of Gold.*"
Times Literary
Supplement [London],
20 March 1937, p. 214.

Unfortunately, *The Cup of Gold* must be classified as fiction rather than biography, although Mr. Steinbeck makes more reference to history than his sub-title suggests. For he follows the known and traditional events of Morgan's life, inventing incidents, motives and somewhat unconvincing dialogue when he sees fit. He tells of his youth in Wales (without

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committing himself to name Llanrhymny, the Glamorganshire village in which the Morgans lived), his kidnapping in Cardiff (ascribed by Esquemeling to Bristol and denied by Morgan), his slavery in Barbados (also denied), and his subsequent career as a buccaneer.

The expedition to Panama, the “Cup of Gold,” is the climax of the book; but Mr. Steinbeck makes Morgan’s inducement not the gold of Panama but an attractive young woman named La Santa Roja. His luck did not hold with the Red Saint, and Mr. Steinbeck makes him meekly accept her refusal. He offers neither criticism nor explanation of Morgan’s conduct when he played his men the shabbiest trick in the annals of piracy by sailing off with the loot and leaving his companions in the lurch; but since he accompanies his hero to his death-bed he might, in one of his occasional references to history, have mentioned that nine years after being knighted and appointed Lieutenant-General of Jamaica Morgan was deprived of his office for outrageous conduct.

Charles Poore.
“New Editions of the
Week.”
New York Times,
15 September 1939, p. 27.

The astounding popularity of John Steinbeck’s magnificent novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, must by now have surpassed just about every one’s expectations. It continues to be the most popular book in America—even in States that have seen an effort or two to censor it.

Such efforts, of course, seem unusually odd at a moment when the complaints over the censoring of European news will no doubt make Americans extremely sensitive to any sort of censorship, whether native or foreign.

Two earlier books by Mr. Steinbeck have just appeared in new, inexpensive editions. One is *In Dubious Battle*, first published in 1936, and far more like the Steinbeck who wrote *The Grapes of Wrath* than the Steinbeck who wrote *Of Mice and Men*. The other is *Cup of Gold*, first published ten years ago, and perhaps sufficiently described in its subtitle as “The Amazing Career of Sir Henry Morgan, Buccaneer, With Occasional Reference to History.”

Checklist of Additional Reviews

P.D.M. “News and Views of Happenings in Book World.” Raleigh [N.C.] *Times*, 28 August 1929, p. 11.

Louise V. Wiegand. “Adventure Story of Stirring Days in Indies Related.” Salt Lake [City] *Telegram*, 8 September 1929, “Magazine” section, p. 1.

“Weekly Book Review and Book Gossip and Chat.” Quincy [Ill.] *Herald-Whig*, 22 September 1929, Part 1, p. 9.

First Reader. “The Reading Lamp.” South Bend [Ind.] *Tribune*, 6 October 1929, “Women’s Section,” p. 12.

Edwin Francis Edgett. “A Buccaneer on His Swaggers through Fiction.” Boston *Evening Transcript*, 21 July 1936, p. 13.

“*Cup of Gold*.” Washington [D.C.] *News*, 25 July 1936, p. 12.