

The Green Corn Rebellion

William Cunningham

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Like the “Okies” immortalized in John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*, the impoverished Oklahoma farmers in William Cunningham’s 1935 novel understand that unchecked capitalism leaves the rich as bloated as the flies feasting on the cattle manure in Jim Tetley’s barn. Jim and his father-in-law Mack join many of their neighbors in a poorly planned socialist revolution that, although offering hope for a better future, does not foresee the improbability of rifle-bearing farmers overcoming the superior organization and military might of the United States. Naively, Jim and his fellow travelers instead reject rac-ism and patriotic rhetoric to defy bankers who “quit loaning money to Socialists” and “Kaiser” Wilson’s signing of the Selective Service Act that will draw more heavily from their ranks than from the sons of wealthy capitalists.

The Green Corn Rebellion, named for an annual Native American ceremony, occurred in early August, 1917, and this novel depicts the desperation of those dog days. Believing that dynamiting bridges and power lines invite death by hanging, men who have always felt helpless nevertheless find treason preferable to shooting “Huns” overseas. However, after waiting for two days behind homemade fortifications for their orders to join a river of compatriots, the rebels are instead confronted by an armed posse that includes Jim’s older brother and many others they have known all their lives.

In addition to its political acumen, this novel offers a variegated set of characters, many of whom deepen Jim’s insights into the entrenched injustices of the sharecropping system. Jeannie, his pregnant wife, is unable to see that no amount of hard work will let them “get ahead,” and his memories of a brutal lynching spur conversation with Bill Johnson, a “colored man” who is forced to eat a live mouse by a sadistic racist bent on withholding his pay.

However, Jim is no saint. His disaffection contributes to his affair with Happy, Jeannie’s younger sister, and her suicide mirrors the loss suffered by those punished for participating in the rebellion. Cunningham reminds readers that personal choices are deeply influenced by the political context in which they occur, making it hard either to blame or exculpate Jim, his brother, or even the murderous sheriff Sam Gladson. At the same time, Mack’s tall tales about a chiropractically-challenged horse and antics involved in keeping his back straight can be read as both the humor they are surely intended to be and as another level of commentary about life in a ruthlessly repressive society.

Nigel Sellars’ historical foreword introduces readers to Jim’s world and makes a convincing argument for why this novel deserves to be read now.

ELIZABETH BREAU (September / October 2010)

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