



Cultural Trends

The cultural history of California during the early decades of the twentieth century was distinguished by several writers of great scope and power. As a cultural region, California was fast becoming one of the most dynamic and promising of any area in the United States.

Robinson Jeffers

California's greatest poet was born in 1887 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where his father, William Hamilton Jeffers, was a distinguished professor of biblical literature in a Presbyterian theological seminary. At the age of 5, Robinson Jeffers began to learn Greek and Hebrew. His father was a liberal theologian who taught him to read the Bible as literature rather than divine revelation.

When the boy was 16, the family moved to Pasadena. He attended Occidental College and then began graduate work at the University of Southern California, where he fell in love with Una Call Kuster, a student who was 2 years older than he and who was the wife of another man. Eight years later Una Kuster finally obtained a divorce, and she and Jeffers were married. At about the same time, the young couple chanced to discover Carmel.

Jeffers immediately recognized the place where he would do his life's work. In the mountains of the Carmel coast, he saw "people living amid magnificent unspoiled scenery essentially as they did in the Idyls or the Sagas, or in Homer's Ithaca. Here was life purged of its ephemeral accretions. Men were riding after cattle, or plowing the headland, hovered by white sea-gulls, as they have done for thousands of years." On the point of land between the lovely little bay and the mouth of the river, with granite carried up from the beach with his own hands, he built Tor House and Hawk Tower, a separate study.

In 1916 he published *Californians*, a volume of poems written in conventional poetic forms, but soon afterward, instead of rhyme and meter, Jeffers developed forms directly imitating nature. Also unconventional were the starkly tragic themes of the long narrative poems that began with *Tamar* (1924) and *Roan Stallion* (1925). *Tamar* Cauldwell, daughter of a rancher at Point Lobos, commits incest with her brother, and the whole family perishes when an insane aunt sets fire to the house. In *Roan Stallion* a part-Indian woman named California transfers her affections from her white husband to her horse. When her husband is being trampled by the stallion in the corral, though she could save his life by killing the horse with a rifle, she deliberately holds her fire until after her husband is dead.

With the publication of these poems in the middle of the 1920s, the work of Jeffers immediately found a place in the upper levels of American literary reputation. *The Women at Point Sur* (1927) was much less enthusiastically received, for its theme was even more shocking to most readers than were the themes of the earlier narratives, though its story was told with equally compelling power and beauty of poetic form and metaphor. Barclay, a minister, after losing his son in World War I, denounces his church, becomes insane, goes to live as a boarder on an isolated ranch, and founds a new religion in which he is God. Then he rapes his own daughter. In addition, the plot includes episodes of child murder and suicide.

Jeffers described his own philosophy as "inhumanism," though he used the term in his own very special sense. He rejected humanism because it overemphasized the rational, the urbane, and the civilized and because it attached too much importance to human consciousness—the characteristic of human beings that seemed to set them apart from nature. Jeffers's poems sought to explore the unconscious, the realm of humanity's "felt nature."

During the depression of the 1930s, Jeffers's popularity and reputation sharply declined. The themes of his long poems, however, continued to be unrelentingly harsh. They dealt with adultery, murder, madness, and suicide. Jeffers had no sympathy with the complaint that his poems were full of tragedy and violence. These were the themes of Sophocles and Shakespeare, he pointed out, and they were not out of place in a century in which two world wars had killed 100 million people, and a third threatened to exterminate all the rest. "The Inquisitors," published in *The Double Axe and Other Poems* (1948), described three hills in the coast range, squatting like giant Indians to examine the pitiful remnants of human beings after a nuclear holocaust.

Robinson Jeffers died in 1962, at 75. He has not had, and is not likely to have, any successful imitators.

John Steinbeck

As clearly as Robinson Jeffers was California's most important poet, John Steinbeck might be said to be its most important novelist. Steinbeck's early writing had as distinctive a relation to the Salinas Valley and Monterey as did Jeffers's poems to