The Dag Hammarskjöld–John Steinbeck Correspondence

Introduction by Carl F. Hovde

This correspondence between Dag Hammarskjöld and the American novelist John Steinbeck, like that between Hammarskjöld and Djuna Barnes, published in Development Dialogue *(1987:2), further documents Hammarskjöld's impressively wide knowledge of the arts. It is equal testimony to some basic concerns of Steinbeck, who in 1953 was encouraged in his impulse to approach Hammarskjöld by their mutual friend, the Swedish painter Bo Beskow. Jackson J. Benson's biography of the novelist demonstrates Steinbeck's feeling that in the modern world moral leadership was much needed and in short supply. This view was important in Steinbeck's admiration for Hammarskjöld, and also for Adlai Stevenson, who had been a candidate for the Presidency against Eisenhower in 1952 and 1956 and who was appointed Ambassador to the United Nations by President Kennedy in 1961.*

Steinbeck sensed in both men a rare combination of integrity and the capacity for public leadership. He felt strongly that the world needed more visible models of rectitude and energy, and this view underlies the longest and perhaps the most revealing of these letters for Steinbeck's moral attitudes—that of November 5, 1959—proposing that the United Nations honour a small number of people in recognition of their extraordinary services to humankind trusting that their accomplishments and advice would benefit the world's only supranational authority.

John Steinbeck (1902–1968) is best known for the novel The Grapes of Wrath *(1939), which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1940, but he wrote many other works including* The Moon is Down *(1942), whose subject was the Norwegian underground resistance to the German occupation in World War II. In 1962 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.*

Carl F. Hovde is a specialist in American Literature, and Professor of English Emeritus at Columbia University, where he served as Dean of Columbia College 1968–1972, and is Chairman of The Lionel Trilling Seminars. He has been particularly interested in the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, in the poetry of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, and in the fiction of Herman Melville, Henry James and William Faulkner. In addition to his teaching at Columbia, he has taught in Brazil, Germany and Sweden.

As in all interesting correspondence, an absorbing question is the nature of the attraction between the people involved. The Dag Hammarskjöld–John Steinbeck correspondence indicates little of Hammarskjöld's feelings about this relationship, though his interest in Steinbeck is perfectly in tune with his wide concern for the arts. It was natural that he would welcome the opportunity to meet a well-known writer—Steinbeck was one of a good many artists whom Hammarskjöld came to know as friends. Hammarskjöld himself had a strong artistic nature, of course: the meditations in *Markings,* the poems, the translations, his keen interest in music and the visual arts, the photographs of professional quality—all these were the expression of a sensibility for which art was a great pleasure because a basic need. Steinbeck joined a circle of friends which included among others the English sculptress Barbara Hepworth, the French poet Saint-John Perse, the American novelist Djuna Barnes, the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber and the Swedish painter Bo Beskow.

We are learning more about Hammarskjöld's aesthetic sensibility and his relationships with artists as more of his correspondence is published, the most important to date being that with Saint-John Perse. If one looks at Hammarskjöld's letters to Steinbeck on the one hand, and those to Saint-John Perse on the other,[1] the different personal associations are partially reflected in the fact that Steinbeck initiated the exchange with Hammarskjöld, while it was Hammarskjöld who first wrote to Saint-John Perse. Hammarskjöld and the French poet rapidly proved to be kindred spirits, something borne out in the length and richness of the correspondence.[2] Both were poets as well as men of affairs: well educated, culturally sophisticated, and multilingual. Steinbeck was of a different cut. Never importantly in public life and usually impatient with formality, he was well read but largely self-educated after desultory schooling; though he came to know some Spanish, he, like most Americans, commanded only his own language. Though he and Hammarskjöld did not become really close, they certainly liked each other. Both had a large capacity for friendship, and Steinbeck's admiration for Hammarskjöld's world leadership was balanced by the Secretary-General's love of literature and his respect for all artists who practised their craft seriously.[3]

Steinbeck and Hammarskjöld were brought together by their mutual friend Bo Beskow whom Steinbeck had known since the winter of 1936–37. It was in late 1952 that Hammarskjöld first got in touch with Beskow to ask that he do a portrait of himself. The work started the following spring, shortly before Hammarskjöld was appointed Secretary-General of the United Nations; Beskow later went on to do the mural for the Meditation Room of the United Nations building.

If there is not much evidence here of Hammarskjöld's considered opinion of Steinbeck, Steinbeck's views of Hammarskjöld are much more clear, not only in the letters but by implication through the themes and characters of Steinbeck's fiction. On Steinbeck's part one factor was no doubt the initial interest that anyone would have in someone recently named as chief officer of the United Nations. The letters make clear that after Beskow had introduced them, Steinbeck wished to know Hammarskjöld better: the invitations, the notes, the gift of cigars show him to be attentive. Given Steinbeck's wide reputation by 1953, it was of course a developing relationship between two well-known people, and a mutual interest was natural.

But there was more than this in Steinbeck's regard for Hammarskjöld: he felt a deep admiration for a man in a position of great authority, who brought to that office a temperament and character for which Steinbeck often looked but which he too seldom found—that of the natural leader, the truly moral man who could instinctively be trusted to put the public good before everything else. Steinbeck's published letters show that there was another man about whom he felt this way—Adlai Stevenson, the unsuccessful candidate for the Presidency in 1952 and 1956. Steinbeck came to know Stevenson, but even before that he contributed to the 1952 campaign as a speech writer for some of Stevenson's supporters. After the defeat in 1952, Steinbeck wrote to Stevenson with a sense of lost national opportunity reserved only for a major leader denied: 'I hope you will have rest without sadness. The sadness is for us who have lost our chance for greatness when greatness is needed.'[4]

For Steinbeck, and for many others in America, Stevenson and Hammarskjöld shared qualities which made people react to them in similar ways. They were both very visible public leaders, and people saw in both an absolute honesty, an integrity so transparent that they in this way seemed simple in a rare way. Much of the personal commentary about both figures is striking in this regard—they seemed to combine great ability and great goodwill in a measure that made them stand out from ordinary humanity.

Not that Steinbeck admired only figures of this kind. He had a large capacity for friendship, and his fiction is populated with many characters in whom he found much to like. In his own life, the biologist Edward Rickerts was probably his most cherished personal association beyond his family, but Rickerts was not a public leader as Stevenson and Hammarskjöld were. Steinbeck's special admiration for them rested on his conviction that potentially or actually they brought together high office and complete dedication to the welfare of humanity.

Stevenson was of course denied the opportunity to lead the United States, but Hammarskjöld had held high office long enough to fulfil his promise in a way that the world greatly admired. Like the American President John Kennedy, Hammarskjöld died an untimely and tragic death, but unlike Kennedy he had been in office long enough to make a large difference in the world.

The 'good man' is a figure who appears often in Steinbeck's fiction, and the good man who is also a natural leader appears from time to time. In the 1937 novel *Of Mice and Men* there is a particularly clear example. The character is a ranch hand, a mule driver of no cultural sophistication, but 'there was a gravity in his manner and a quiet so profound that all talk stopped when he spoke. His authority was so great that his word was taken on any subject, be it politics or love. This was Slim, the jerkline skinner ... He might have been thirty-five or fifty. His ear heard more than was said to him, and his slow speech had overtones not of thought, but of understanding beyond thought.'[5]

Steinbeck, like so many others, sensed a similar authority in Hammarskjöld and the most interesting letter in the correspondence reinforces this impression. In that of November 5, 1959, Steinbeck suggests to Hammarskjöld that the United Nations establish a number of honorary positions to be held by a small number of people in recognition of extraordinary service to mankind. The crucial point, however, is that he sees these people not only as recipients of a world-class honour, but as a group of advisors whose experience and wisdom could have a meaningful role in world affairs through the United Nations.

As the letter makes clear, the idea is in harmony with one of Steinbeck's greatest literary loves—the body of legend in Arthurian romance. He once reported that the gift of a book of Round Table stories first fired his love of literature when he was young, and his last major literary ambition, which he was unable to carry out, was a retelling of the Arthurian stories for modern readers. He devoted much energy to gathering materials about the relevant texts and historical context, and he lived for eight months in England in large part to gain a feeling for the ambience.

As a writer Steinbeck is noted for his sympathetic portrayals of ordinary people, who do not necessarily have much education or sophisticated taste, and his affection for medieval romance might seem at odds with his own nature, out of harmony with his popular and occasionally populist work. The contradiction is only apparent, however, for he was never unaware of the need for moral order, and this recognition was all the more intense because

he often saw the modern world as a place that was not only fascinating but increasingly dangerous. The Arthurian tales provided a view of an ordered culture in which the leaders were in principle committed to high ideals, and if in the stories some of the characters fell short of their own standards, Steinbeck felt that they were judged through their narrative fates. In a late letter Steinbeck argues that the knight Galahad achieves what Lancelot does not because of his moral superiority. And despite the fact that Steinbeck has often been criticised for scenes of violence in which he seems as author not to take a moral stand, he was in fact never without a view, either overt or implicit, on what a worthy life was like.

His proposal to Hammarskjöld of the panel of wise advisors, or 'peerage', reflects his affection for the relatively ordered moral life in the Arthurian tales. It is only to exaggerate his view somewhat to see him thinking of Hammarskjöld as a kind of modern version of a noble knight, *primus inter pares* among a group of distinguished people whose accomplishments and advice would be taken into account by the world's only supranational authority.

Steinbeck's letter was acknowledged by Hammarskjöld but not really responded to, no doubt because of the increasingly hectic pressure of work. But there is no doubt that Steinbeck's proposal arose from a vision of a world in which talent and wisdom would be the determinants of rule, and the idea took shape because of Steinbeck's faith in Hammarskjöld's dedication to the public good.

Steinbeck was of course aware that such leadership can be sorely tested. An exchange in the letters comments on the anti-UN propaganda which followed the murder of Patrice Lumumba, first Prime Minister of the Congo. Both Steinbeck's letter of February 20, 1961 and Hammarskjöld's response on February 28 point to the killing as both evil and stupid, and to the lies about it invented to sully the UN's reputation. Steinbeck raised the question of motive by asking who would profit from the killing, but Hammarskjöld remained objective even under personal attack: 'No one, in the long pull, will really profit from Lumumba's death; least of all those outside the Congo who now strain to do so but should one day confront a reckoning with truth and decency... .' Hammarskjöld's fortitude and evenhandedness were among the traits Steinbeck most admired, and his high regard made Hammarskjöld's death later that year all the more shocking. Two days after the plane crash of September 18 which took the UN leader's life, Steinbeck expressed profound grief at the news in a note to a friend, and a few days later wrote in similar vein to Adlai Stevenson, the other public figure he much revered.[6]

When a year later Steinbeck learned that he was to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature and was in touch with Bo Beskow about the arrangements in Sweden, he asked that Beskow take him to Hammarskjöld's grave: 'If I could find some lavender, I would like to leave it there', he wrote, a gesture which he described as 'important not for him but for me'.[7]

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The manuscript letters have been transcribed from photocopies, not from the originals. Steinbeck was not an accurate typist, and obvious errors have been silently corrected. The copies of Hammarskjöld's letters do not indicate where they were written, but the location is almost certainly New York. Interpolations are in square brackets; editorial uncertainties are in curved brackets.

In the letter section references are made to the following publications: Benson, Jackson J., *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, Writer,* Viking, New York, 1984; Steinbeck, Elaine, and Wallsten, Robert (eds), *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters,* Viking, New York, 1975; and Urquhart, Brian, *Hammarskjold,* New York, 1972. In the notes these are referred to as 'Benson', 'Steinbeck Letters' and 'Urquhart'. See also Parini, Jay, *John Steinbeck, A Biography,* Heinemann, London, 1994.

Notes

1. Little, Marie-Noëlle, 'Alexis Leger, Dag Hammarskjöld, Correspondance 1955–1961', in *Cahiers Saint-John Perse,* Gallimard, Paris, 1993.
2. See also Marie-Noëlle Little's interesting Introduction.
3. See, for example, Hammarskjöld to Leger August 30, 1956, and Little's note, *Correspondance,* p. 108.
4. Letter of November 7, 1952, in Steinbeck, Elaine, and Wallsten, Robert (eds), *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters,* Viking, New York, 1975, p. 461.
5. Steinbeck, John, *Novels and Stories 1932–1937,* Library of America, New York, 1994, p. 821.
6. Letter of September 19, 1961, to Elizabeth Otis, and on the 23rd to Stevenson, in Steinbeck, Elaine, and Wallsten, Robert (eds), *op. cit.*, pp. 715–16.
7. Letter of November 1, 1962, in Steinbeck, Elaine, and Wallsten, Robert (eds), *op. cit.*, pp. 747–48.

New York
June 8, 1953

Dear Mr. Hammarskjöld,

I have heard so much that is good and pleasant about you from Bo Beskow.* Also, by good fortune, I heard your acceptance speech.** But that is not the point of this letter. If you would be pleased with a small New York garden, a glass of beer and non-political conversation, it would be pleasant to us to offer these. It would entail no social, political, snob or even religious pressure. I asked Bo whether you might like this and he said he thought you might.

Yours very sincerely,

John Steinbeck

New York
July 8, 1953

Dear Dag Hammarskjöld,

I hope you will enjoy these little cigars as much as I do. We are grateful to you and your friend for a very pleasant evening. Please believe that this is your house.

Sincerely,

John Steinbeck

New York
July 27, 1953

Dear Dag Hammarskjöld,

I am pleased that you liked the little cigars. I get them at the club '21' on west 52nd Street. It is the only place I know where I can get very small cigars of very good quality. Our businessmen seem to believe that a cigar is good in direct relation to its size and that they somehow become bigger men if their cigars are bigger.

I still have no word from Bo. Do you?

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* Steinbeck met Beskow in New York in the winter of 1936–37. Beskow painted three portraits of Steinbeck. (Benson, p. 817.)
** As the newly installed Secretary-General of the United Nations, on April 10, 1953.

One of my reasons for writing is this. Toward the end of March of next year, Elaine* and I will take off for Europe to be gone perhaps until the following Christmas or even longer. At that time we shall rent this house. It occurred to me that it might be a good house for one of the smaller groups of UN representatives or for one of the people with a family, It is a pleasant house and one in which it is a pleasure to live and to entertain on a small scale. It has three bedrooms besides servant's room, four baths. I don't think you saw the upstairs but there is a library, a drawing room and bar on the second floor, two bedrooms on the third and a large bedroom on the fourth. We should like to rent it completely furnished and to people who would use it as we would use it. Knowing the shortage of such places in New York, you may perhaps think of someone who would like to have it.

We hope to see you again before too long,

Sincerely,

John Steinbeck

August 7, 1953**

Dear John Steinbeck,

After I got your letter I have made a short trip to Europe. That is the main reason for my delay in sending you a reply,

No, I have not heard anything from Bo. I guess I will write him one of these days, His mother died some time ago and, of course, he may be in Stockholm again on family business which does not give him too much time for other things.

It is quite possible that I may find some people of the right kind for your house during the time you indicate. I will tell people here about it and see what comes of it.

One of these days I would like to call you up in order to hear if Mrs. Steinbeck and you would care to come and have dinner with me.

Kind regards,

[Dag Hammarskjöld]

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* Elaine Anderson Scott Steinbeck, John Steinbeck's third wife.
** Addressed to 206 East 72nd Street, New York 21.

New York*

Dear Mr. Hammarskjöld,

What a very pleasant dinner. Thank you for asking me. Mrs. Steinbeck regrets greatly that she was not able to be there. You have quite a unique apartment for New York.

Later in the season I hope you will come to dinner in my garden again. I am developing a new field of cookery. And when you want to see Silk Stockings, please let me know. With a little notice I will have house seats for you.

I have not written to Bo. Hard to know what to say.

Thank you again for a very pleasant evening.

Sincerely,

John Steinbeck

New York
April 13, 1955

Dear Mr. Hammarskjöld,

It was a very pleasant luncheon on the 4th of April with very pleasant people. I hope I shall be seeing them again and yourself, of course.

I have now written a mildly insulting and loving letter to Bo Beskow. He would not be impressed with the authenticity of my letter unless it were mildly insulting, but I do hope that he is happy and that he finds some measure of peace, although this would probably kill him, as you know.

Elaine has finally returned from Texas and is very happy to be home and as soon as the weather becomes a little more dependable, we hope that you can come to have dinner in our garden. We can assure you that there will be no protocol, but plenty of 'first glue'.

Thank you again for a pleasant luncheon.

Yours very sincerely,

John Steinbeck

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* Undated; the musical review Silk Stockings opened in 1955: score by Cole Porter, book by George S. Kaufman et al.

New York
February 13, 1957

Dear Mr. Hammarskjöld,

I have been reading the daily accounts of your most difficult path, and while I know few of the intricacies and pitfalls, I know enough of them to be aware of how brilliantly you have carried on a work which must often seem impossible and insoluble.

My heartiest congratulations to you, although it is ourselves who ought to be congratulated for having you there.

In June we go from Florence to Sweden. Bo is meeting us at Malmö and we go hence to Skåne to drink red wine and dance around the midsummer pole and afterward to drive, the four of us, about the country, to walk among pines and to talk nonsense all night on the beach. I wish you could be with us then. There would be a rest and a change from the rat maze and the tantalizing cheese of this past year. Perhaps Bridge of Swords would be the better simile.

At any rate, Bo sends to you his regards and his respects, and so do I.

Yours sincerely,

John Steinbeck

17 February, 1957*

Dear Mr. Steinbeck,

I was happy to get your letter of 13 February with its kind greetings and encouraging words.

Indeed, you have been very much in my thoughts. It is ridiculous that, living a few blocks apart, greetings should be transmitted between us via Stockholm, and I felt that as soon as my situation became a little bit more reasonable, I should make an attempt to get in touch with you directly. Although I am more than happy to look forward to the possibility of meeting you and Bo in Skåne, I would certainly feel that we should try and get together before then.

You talk about a travel plan including Florence and Sweden. May my secretary give you a ring and find out for how long you are likely to be here in town? You would give me a very great pleasure indeed if Mrs. Steinbeck and you would come over one night together with a couple of my friends.

[Dag Hammarskjöld]

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* Addressed to New York.

New York
February 20, 1957

Dear Mr. Hammarskjöld,

In reply to your letter of February 17, we sail for Naples on March 25 on the old Saturnia and we're looking forward to it.

I hope that it is true that you will be with us in Skåne this summer and I know it would steam Bo up no end.

With your permission, I am going to ask my publisher to send you a new little book of mine which comes out in March, called *The Short Reign of Peppin IV.* I think it might give you a bit of amusement in these troublesome times. It has a serio-comic, satiric approach, not important nor serious, but fun I think.

Thank you again for your very kind letter.

Yours,

John Steinbeck

March 16, 1957*

Dear Mr. Steinbeck,

First of all, warm thanks for your letter and for your enchanting 'Fabrication' which has delighted me while waiting for cables on the short reign of the UN. I had really hoped to be able to arrange one evening while we were still both in New York, but events have taken the lead and here I am, forced to rush out to the Middle East after days which have given me no chance to follow my own personal wishes.

Thus, these lines, in conveying to you my warm thanks for your kindness, are just an expression of regret for missed opportunities here and the hope that we will be able to join around mid-summer at Bo's and my places in Skåne.

With all good wishes,

[Dag Hammarskjöld]

* Addressed to New York.

Sag Harbor*
August 7, 1957

Dear Dag Hammarskjöld,

I am very glad you have been able to persuade the Melancholy but Charming Swede to leave his haunts of coot and hern for your glass menagerie on the East River. It was good and time he escaped. And I do hope he gets the commission.** It would do wonders for him and I think he is a very significant artist. His growth has been constant during the twenty years I have known him.

Will you please put the enclosed letter in his hands when he arrives. I am staying in the country resting up from my recent invasion of Europe. I hope you can drive out with Bo and Greta. We may not be able to furnish anything as exciting as the funeral of the murderous mole, but I can fire a twenty-one gun salute from my pier and I can take you fishing in my little seaworthy boat. We have a tiny cottage here and a little pier on our own bay. I have often wanted to invite you out here to shuck off the slings and arrows for a little time. It is very restful and I think you would like it.

We went through the harrowing days of your expected arrival in Skåne, with Oscar Longneck running up every hour with a new telegram. There hasn't been such excitement in Skåne since Harald Bluetooth. And then we had to miss your arrival. Perhaps that was just as well. The emotional strain might have been too great.

If you can come out here we might vary the Beskow ritual of burying things. We might dig something up. Captain Kid's treasure is still somewhere on Gardiners Island,*** and failing that we might dig up some clams or oysters, surer and in the long run, probably better.

Again I can't tell you how pleased I am that you have pried the Beskow out of his ivory Sweden. He may not know how much he needs a change, but I do.

I hope to see you soon and meanwhile the felicitations of Elaine and of me.

Yours,

John Steinbeck

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* A shore community near the eastern end of Long Island, with access to the open ocean through Gardiners Bay.

** The commission was to paint the mural in the Meditation Room at United Nations Headquarters. Beskow completed it that year. In 1961 he painted the mural in the Dag Hammarskjöld Library at the United Nations.

*** Long in the possession of the Gardiner family, the island lies off eastern Long Island. Legend has the famous pirate's treasure there.

August 8, 1957*

Dear John Steinbeck,

The feelings you express in your welcome letter are fully shared by me. It was high time to get our friends out and I think that the renewed contact with this part of the world, as well as the rather challenging task, will do both a lot of good.

I am also happy because it gives me such a splendid opportunity to get in touch with you again. It was too bad that our roads did not cross in Skåne, but I guess that Sag Harbor will make up for what I lost, because I would certainly be most happy to come out to your place with Bo and Greta as soon as I can get away. Let me get in touch with you again after their arrival when we know more about the time-table.

I guess that they will stay here a couple of weeks. I will be very happy if, during that time, Mrs. Steinbeck and you could come back for one night so that we could have an evening together at my place; it has its inconveniences in the summer, but the air-conditioning puts up a wind surpassing even that which you have from the Atlantic.

Anyway, I was happy to hear from you. I will give your letter to Bo and I will get in touch with you again early next week.

With best hopes for the future both in Sag Harbor and on Manhattan,

Dag Hammarskjöld

* Addressed to Sag Harbor.

Dag Hammarskjöld

Portrait painted by Bo Beskow 1953 (by courtesy of The Swedish Central Bank)

August 8, 1957*

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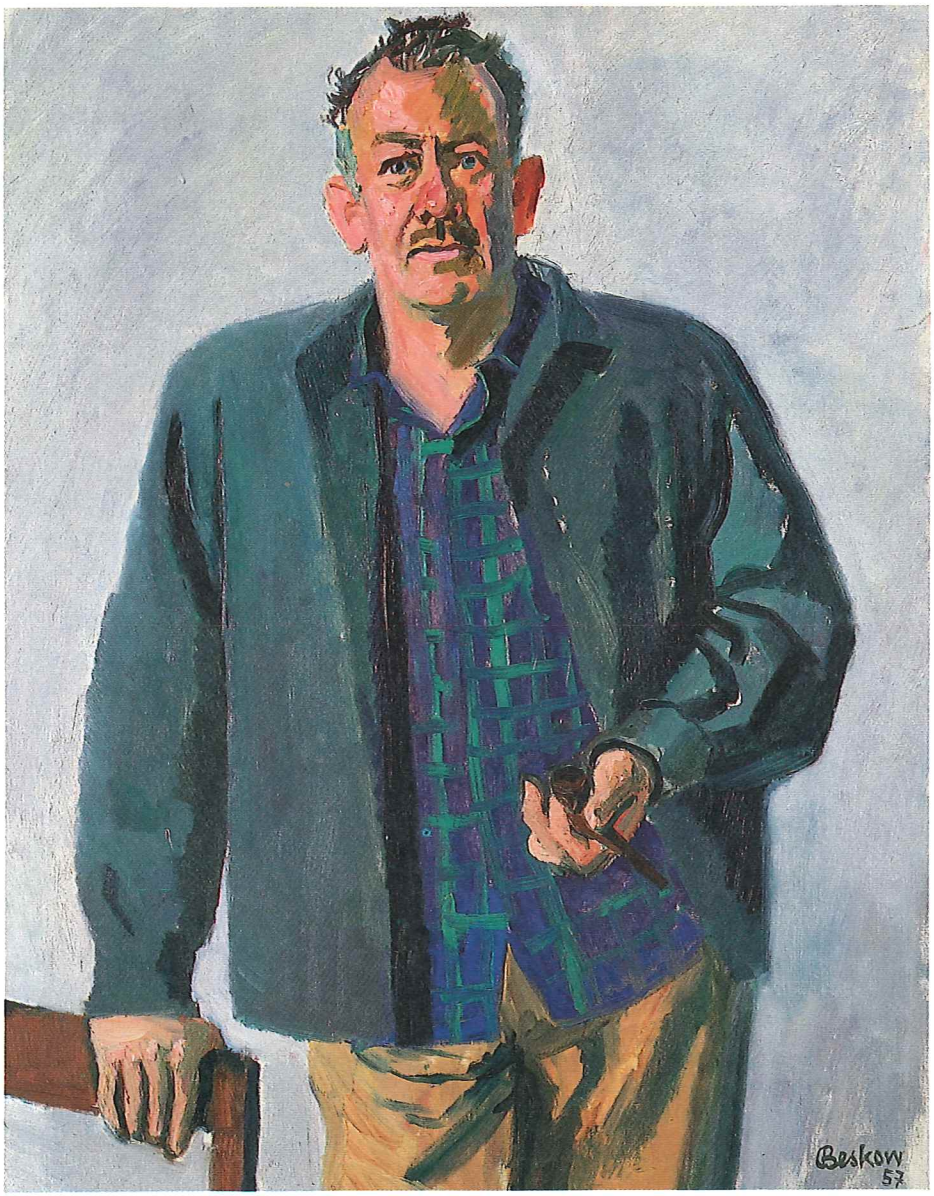
Portrait painted by Bo Beskow 1953 (by courtesy of The Swedish Central Bank)



John Steinbeck

Portrait painted by Bo Beskow 1957 (by courtesy of Greta Beskow)

February 8, 1958

Dear Dag,

I haven't yet thanked you for sending me your *Linnaeus Tradition and Our Time.** I took it down to the Caribbean with me where I could read it at leisure and I must say I have liked it very well.

I have loved Linnaeus for a long time not only for the sharp and poetic observation which you bring out but also for some gigantic protean taxonomic jokes which still make earnest and humorless zoologists squirm with unease.

It was good to see your own mind at work with the good and unsticky clay. Your address brings me back to the lovely prose of Charles Darwin in the ecstatic observations of the Cruise of the Beagle.

I have been away a great deal lately and I read that you have also. Now we will stay home for a while. I have mountains of books to read out of which I hope to produce a lordly and smouldering mole hill.

We hope to see you before too long,

Yours,

John

New York
February 13, 1958

Dear Dag,

The UN called me yesterday about going to the Near-East to do some kind of definitive work on a film about the refugee situation there. There is nothing I would rather do. I was sad that I had to refuse.

Not only am I in some highly concentrated work which has been put off too long, but Elaine has to go to the New York Hospital for some long needed surgery and will be there for about two weeks. Not a dangerous operation except that surgery is always serious and if it is close to home it is double double serious.

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* Dag Hammarskjöld's speech to the Swedish Academy on 20 December 1957, translated from the original Swedish by the Swedish journalist Sven Åhman.

There are far too many things to do, things one wants to do and can't simply because there are too many. I just wanted to tell you that I would, under normal circumstances like to do this job more than I can say. I think it is important to do. So little is understood about the situation. I don't really understand it myself and consequently would stand to learn and perhaps to transmit what I learned.

But that is out for the present. I would not like to be away during this time and there will be a period of recuperation during which I will be needed here. And I suppose that one's basic feeling of duty lies with one's own. I am not brave enough to feel otherwise.

This letter is by way of explanation, in case my refusal has been brought to your attention. But naturally I am pleased to have been considered as competent to do the work.

Yours, as always,

John

February 18, 1958*

Dear John,

Thank you for your note of the 13th. I was most distressed to hear of your wife's illness and I hope everything is progressing well. Obviously, you have no alternative but to stay near at hand.

I am happy to learn at any rate that you were attracted by the proposal. Certainly, from our point of view, there could have been no better choice.

I hope we will find an opportunity to get together soon, but I would like to wait until Mrs. Steinbeck is well again.

[Dag Hammarskjöld]

* Addressed to New York.

New York
November 5, 1959

Dear Dag,

With all of your problems, I should imagine a letter from me, particularly a long letter, might be a terrifying prospect, but I feel it necessary to write it, and there is no one to send it to except you. On the surface what I have to say may sound silly, even childish, but I think its soundness to be established as you think of it, and it is not nearly so silly as many of the things with which we are preoccupied. I hope you will give it your friendly attention.

For the last eight months I have been living in Somerset in a cottage not unlike yours in Skåne, a tiny place set in a meadow. I have been finishing three concentrated and fifty casual years of research in the English middle ages. I only returned to New York last week. Meanwhile I have been reading of your non-sedentary life. It is long since I have heard from Bo. I don't know whether he is angry with me or preoccupied with his new baby. I did read that you got a long two-day vacation in Skåne.

I arrived at home for the culmination of the TV Scandal.* Except as a sad and dusty episode I am not deeply moved by the little, earnest, cheating people involved except in so far as they are symptoms of a general immorality which pervades every level of our national life and perhaps the life of the whole world. It is very hard to raise boys to love and respect virtue and learning when the tools of success are chicanery, treachery, self interest, laziness and cynicism or when charity is deductible, the courts venial, the highest public officials placid, vain, slothful and illiterate. How can I teach my boys the value and beauty of language and communication when the president himself reads westerns exclusively and cannot put together a simple English sentence.

I know your feeling and your devotion because we have often discussed them, and I think you know my fervent wish that the UN grow in power and stature. But we have also discussed the necessity that this be a long and a slow process. Very gradually it must become more desirable to be a member of the UN than to be a citizen of Texas. This does not mean that Texas need suffer except in exclusiveness. It is equally desirable to cease to be solely a Slovak or even a Swede except as a matter of sweet and strong sentiment.

As you know, I have studied government with an ecological eye. It is an organism like other organisms, having its traits, its tendencies and its weaknesses. It must have certain qualities or diagnostics to qualify as government at all. Two of those qualifying functions the United Nations does not have—the ability to enforce and the ability to reward. Without those it is a castrate organism and it is about one of those facets that I am writing this long and perhaps boring letter.

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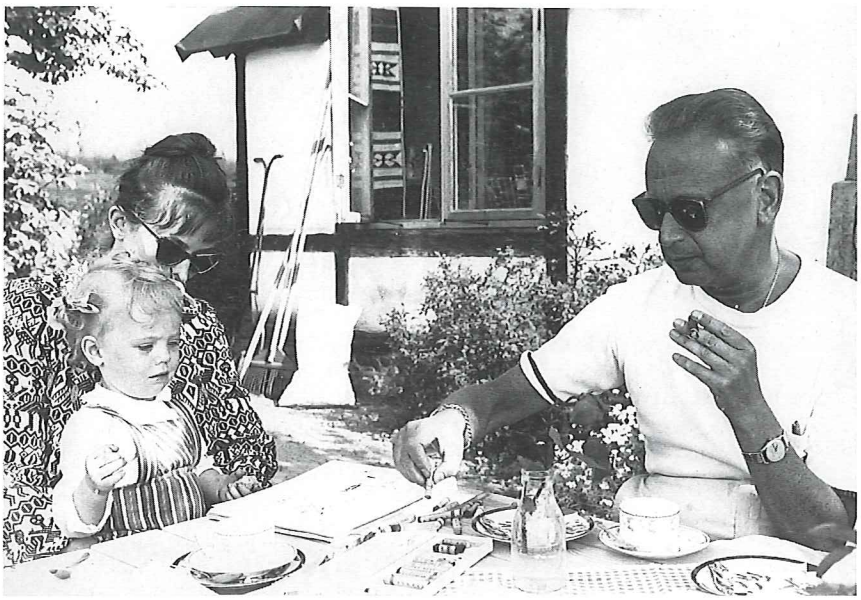
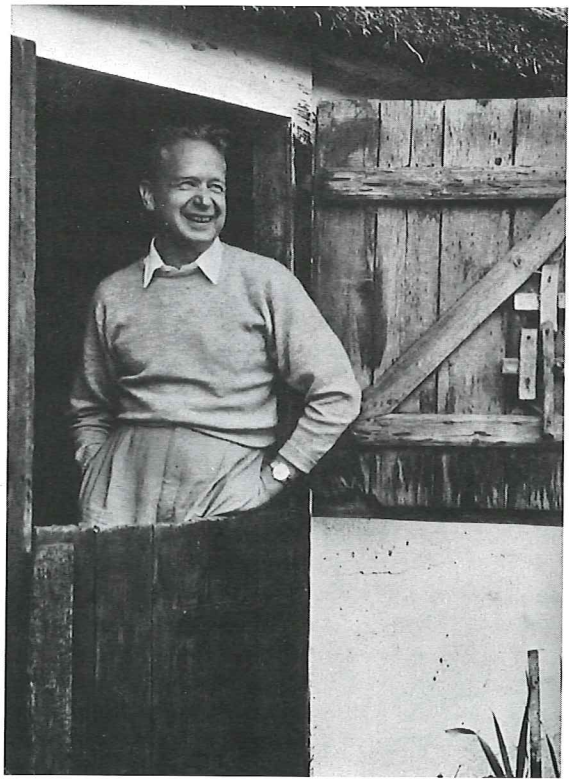
* It was discovered that the most popular 'quiz show' on television, a program on which contestants won cash prizes for answering factual questions, was corrupt: the chief winner was given the answers in advance.



Dag Hammarskjöld at Rytterskulle, Hagestad, the summer house of the Beskow family, drawing with his goddaughter Maria Beskow (1959).

John Steinbeck and Bo Beskow together at Rytterskulle, Hagestad (1957).

John Steinbeck at the maypole celebrating Midsummer at Rytterskulle, Hagestad (1957).



Dag Hammarskjöld at his summer house, Hagestad.

Many ugly things have been said about feudal government by people who don't know much about it. There were evils as there are in our system but it should be remembered that medieval authority lasted for a very long time—longer in fact than ours seems about to last if the tendencies toward extinction continue. Feudal authority on all levels had the right and the power to punish and to reward. Leadership surrounded itself with the strongest and most effective members of the community and kept them loyal through fear and gratitude and to a certain degree through trust in the strength of the bond.

The nobleman enjoyed certain privileges but he also bore a heavy burden of responsibility. The system may not have been all good but it had its points. When we destroyed it or placed it on the open market for cash, we substituted nothing to fill the vacuum in certain areas.

Men do not work for money or women or Cadillacs. These are merely the magnets for admiration, respect or envy. I don't know why I am reading you a lesson in government when you know much more about it than I do. But I did feel it necessary to fill in this preface. Now I will get to my specific suggestion.

Let us put force aside for the moment and deal with that other arm of authority—reward. Rewards like punishments have a twofold purpose. They acknowledge a service and they make service desirable to the thus far unrewarded. We have reduced rewards to simple money and that is only a go-between. I know that you are not afraid of words so I may as well plunge into this.

I propose that the United Nations establish a nobility, limited to the lifetime of the recipient and conferred only on those men and women who have provably contributed to the knowledge, beauty, understanding and wellbeing of the world at large. I submit that neither money nor pressure should be able to open the door to this chamber. From now on I shall leave out the suggest and submit and think and presume and put it straight.

The ones so honored should bear a title and it should be used so that it becomes associated with the name. I think for example of Dominus or Domina, shortened to Dom. and having the double emphasis of Master, together with the older meaning—one who builds and defends a house. Don't forget that the original meaning of knight was servant.

This peerage should be very small in numbers, not over a hundred. It should include men like Salk, Einstein, Casals, Picasso, Shostakovich, Bunche, the healers, the builders, the creators but only after they have built and created, writers, artists, scientists, creators whose work has not been undertaken primarily for profit but the result of which is a better world and a healthier, happier, more aware people. Politicians should be passed over unless, like Ralph Bunche, their product is peace.

This group should *not* be self-perpetuating like the academies for such organizations tend to become cliques or birds of a similar feather. Candidates should be submitted to a screening committee of the United Nations but the honor should only be granted after a vote in the General Assembly. Unanimous vote should not be required, since any alive and inquisitive man is bound to have made some enemies or aroused some envy.

This peerage should have a definite status under the United Nations, and also a function. Any proposal having to do with the arts, letters, sciences, education or welfare in general, matters of ethics, aesthetics, philosophy or plans for extending knowledge through group action should be submitted to this house of experts for its opinion, and its decision should only be as binding as it is wise and should never be accepted without vote in the General Assembly. But the house should be endowed with great prestige. The Domini should be set apart and above other men as their work or contribution has been greater than that of other men.

Now an empty title is valueless and this one would have to have enormous and unique value. However the rewards should not be financial.

The Nobel Committee gives money while the resulting publicity sells books and in the case of scientists probably causes promotions in their academic habitat. I submit an even greater reward, a snob award, and that after all is the only basic reason for any kind of reward. The Domini should be considered above reproach so that while keeping and valuing their national status they should be accepted as honorary citizens by all the nations that have voted for their elevation. They should be immune from customs and immigration regulations or the laws of duration of sojourn. It is implied by their position that they will break no law nor outrage no custom. By their very nature they would not—their nature as individuals. They should have an exalted position in the sense of protocol ranking with or above ambassadors. Dom Pablo Dom Jonas Dom Albert should be made household words known and respected all over the world.

Since they would only be elevated *after* they had performed their service they would not be a young group and consequently not subject to the naggings of ego ambition or greed. It should in effect be the highest court of honor for service to the world.

Now if this seems a fairytale dream consider the advantages
1. It would have great snob appeal and this is an excellent thing if aimed in a good direction.
2. It makes it more desirable to be a member of the World rather than a citizen of Little Rock.
3. Since the house would be composed of eminent men it would be of great value to the UN.
4. As the highest honor in the world and preferably the most coveted, it is possible that kids would find it more desirable to contribute than to accumulate.

5. It would help to destroy insularity and balkanization, since it would cut across all boundaries both in membership and in freedom.
6. With the power of reward in its hands the United Nations would greatly gain in prestige.
7. It would be very cheap at a time when there is little money available. The peerage should under no circumstances receive any money. In fact that should be one of their chief prides—that it is a completely clean honor. Their pay would be in the currency of respect, honor, and open admiration, which is after all what most people want although they go about it in less admirable ways.

No money should be given to the Domini except perhaps transportation and maintenance when they are called into session. For by their very nature the candidates would not be rich men. They should be paid only with honor and respect. They may not be interested in this, but we could finally tell our children that there is a reward for goodness and for integrity. That an honest and true man is not a fool.

What I am suggesting is that the United Nations create a new kind of Noblesse. A Noblesse of the mind. A Peerage of the Spirit. This proposal would give the United Nations a weapon it does not have, a sharp and subtle weapon that could be used to advantage against the armies of the small, the mean and the greedy.

There it is, Dag. What do you think of it? Of course it presents difficulties but nothing to compare with the spiritual anarchy and despair in which we drown.

I'd love to see you with your coat off and your feet up. We might even sing and dance about the Frog who has no ears nor wings but he can jump-jump-jump.*

Remember how good I am at that around the Midsummerpole?

Yours as always with respect and affection,

John

* The Frog Dance refers to a Swedish children's song-dance, popular when parents take their small children to dance around the midsummer pole. The children show that the frogs have neither ears nor tails.

November 9, 1959*

Dear John,

I was delighted to get your long revolutionary letter to which, in due time, when I have had time to think matters over, you will have my full reaction by letter or, preferably, orally some evening when you may find it possible to have a quiet dinner at my place. Let me get back to the matter when I return from my forthcoming trip to Laos.

My first and superficial reaction to your letter is not concerned with the idea itself, but with one crucial difficulty which it presents. Are not just the people whom you would like to see honoured those who are most likely not to wish to be honoured? Anyway, we shall have to talk about this and other aspects of your idea.

A bientôt and with kindest regards,

Dag Hammarskjöld

December 12, 1959**

Dear John,

I have been planning and planning and planning to have a quiet discussion with you one evening regarding your Domini and Dominae, but destiny, in the shape of United Nations affairs and various social engagements, has not been helpful. Now I am off on a six weeks trip to Africa next week, and that does not give me much hope that we could get together before Christmas. However, things will, I think, get better after my return in February. May early Spring see us together, 'singing and dancing' about the jumping Frog.

With kindest regards,

Dag Hammarskjöld

P.S. I saw your picture in Karsh'*** 'Faces of Greatness'. It is a striking study, but makes me regret again that Bo's pictures of you have not been shown in the States.

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* Addressed to New York.
** Addressed to New York.
*** Karsh of Ottawa, a prominent Canadian portrait photographer.

New York
December 15, 1959

Dear Dag,

I have your letter of Dec. 12, and the spring will be much better for me also. I have had a weakening illness.* Indeed I only got out of the hospital a few days ago. In the springtime I will be much more agile to do the Frog Dance.

I do hope you will be able to get to Sweden for Christmas. This of all holidays draws one to his rootland, where dear and remembered things can spring to life again for a little time, the time when almost meaningless words become tempered with sharp and deep emotion.

I never send Christmas cards. Will you please consider this an abiding wish for your good health and contentment and also an expression of gladness that you are there.

If you should see Bo, please convey to him and to Greta my affection and my contrition that I have been so neglectful.

And in the spring we will surely get our feet up. The purpose of the Domini is not designed for the pleasure of the receivers of that title, but to make a better and more valuable contribution desirable.

Greetings,

John

TDDE BLOOMFIELDHILLS MICH OCT 3 455 P EST

DAG HAMMARSKJÖLD

ATTN MISS ALM

NAR JAG TANKER PA MULLVADEN FRON SKANE VIL JAG ERBJUDA SAMMA ARA TILL MULLVADEN FROM MOSKVA AFFECTIONATELY

JOHN STEINBECK**

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* On December 3 he had suffered a mild stroke, and spent a week and a half in the hospital. (Benson, p. 863; Steinbeck Letters, pp. 655–56.)

** For unknown reasons, this cable was sent in Swedish by Steinbeck to Hammarskjöld. In English translation, it would read: 'When I think of the mole from Skåne, I should like to offer the same honour to the mole from Moscow.'
The background to the mole story, which appears in Steinbeck's letters of 7 August 1957, 10 October 1960 and 20 February 1961 must have been told by Beskow to Steinbeck. In his book *Dag Hammarskjöld. Strictly Personal. A Portrait* (1969), Beskow tells about Hammarskjöld's sympathetic interest in his struggles with the moles in his Skåne garden during Hammarskjöld's visit to Sweden in July 1955. The painting which Beskow refers to, 'The Mole's Funeral', he gave to Hammarskjöld on his 50th birthday. Beskow comments that Hammarskjöld in his letters to Beskow could symbolically refer to the moles' undermining activities.

October 5, 1960*

There are many moles around. With patience we will dig them up in order to properly dig them down again. We should meet soon for consideration of strategy.

Kindest regards,

Dag Hammarskjöld

Somewhere in Wisconsin
October 10, 1960

Dear Dag,

Elaine put your very kind wire in my hands. I am wandering slowly about looking at and listening to my own country. I have a truck with a camper top, am self-contained and alone and completely unrecognized. I ask no questions, just listen. I don't know what I will find—maybe nothing but it had to be done. I was working with memory and that's good but largely inaccurate.

From my listening to people on farms in bars at stores and in service stations I am sure of only one thing. If you were running for our presidency, the other candidates would not stand a chance. I have never known such an effect as you have caused. And if the going is rough on the East River, and it is, let me assure you that you are the one hope of the people I have been hearing.

This transcends all party and even individual self-interest.

I wish I could see you now even to make you laugh a little but I must edge on in my snail shell. I've been too long away from my own rootlets.

As you know, in our isolationist middle west there has been doubt and reluctance about the value or desirability of the UN. Well that is all changed now. The Moscow mole has out clevered himself. Perhaps he has no better eyesight than other moles.

My wishes go with you and those wishes multiply daily. You even make it seem that the mole buries himself.

With the best,

John

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* Addressed to Steinbeck in New York.

Sandy Lane Hotel
Barbados, British West Indies
February 20, 1961

Dear Dag,

I am asking my daughter to put this in the hands of Miss Alm because I want it to come exclusively to your hand.

The news filters through down here. The moles seem to be very busy in the garden, a complicated labyrinth of burrows and holes and yet designed for one purpose quite obvious I think. I congratulate you on standing firm. But I have watched the news hoping a question would be asked—not a charge—simply a question, one which would be asked by any village policeman and yet it has not been asked in the UN.

When a murder has been committed by a person or persons unknown the first question asked is—who stands to gain by this death—who profits by it? In the case of the killing of Mr. Lumumba,* the United Nations not only could not profit from it but is certain to be embarrassed by it. The Western Democracies, while they may not have favored his policies, can only be injured by his violent death. One must look then for a person or group to whom his murder has value, a nation which can use and is using the murder as a weapon with which to carry out a plan of disruption it has not even tried to conceal. This murder must be embarrassing to you, to the United Nations, to the United States and the other nations which have stood behind you and your actions and policies. To have connived at or condoned this death would be a stupidity beyond belief. This is no charge that the Moscow mole is implicated in the killing although the past does not preclude such a supposition. But the mole did leap upon it and use it as a propaganda weapon in a direction toward which he was committed. I respectfully submit to you that this question should be asked in the Council or Assembly.

Who stands to profit by this murder and who has instantly seized upon it as a means to a previously announced end? Perhaps Mr. Stevenson** could ask this question. Not being able to reach him with certainty of privacy from here, I have not suggested it to him. Perhaps you might care to.

Meanwhile, our hopes and good wishes are with you.

Yours,

John Steinbeck

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* Patrice Lumumba, first Prime Minister of the Congo. His murder, probably on January 17–18, brought bitter accusations against Hammarskjöld and the United Nations' role in Africa. (Urquhart, pp. 500–01; and especially 506 and following.)

** Ambassador Adlai Stevenson, the permanent representative of the United States to the UN at the time.

February 28, 1961*

Yours of 20 February has come to hand, and I note that one cannot escape the Congo's tentacles even down in Barbados. They clasp us tightly enough here.

Your approach to the Lumumba tragedy—his murder was, in Talleyrand's words, 'more than a crime, it was a major stupidity'—is unique; no one in these parts, at least, has suggested it, and it invites thought. I suppose there are many possible answers to the question you pose, but I incline to the conclusion that *no* one, in the long pull, will really profit from Lumumba's death; least of all those outside the Congo who now strain to do so but should one day confront a reckoning with truth and decency. There may be immediately some propaganda exploitation of this blunder; indeed, we have been seeing it in staged bursts in many parts of the world, but to what avail, really, and even those efforts have required unbridled distortion. It is, I imagine, at its earliest that the big lie shines brightest; does one ever endure? Events in the Congo move quickly and, it seems, so far always badly or in bad directions; memories, even of ghosts and legends and certainly of synthetic martyrs, are short and everything soon gets swallowed up in the confusions, frustrations and sheer imbecilities of that arena.

In any event, your goodwill and good wishes mean much—more than ever, in times such as these.

[Dag Hammarskjöld]

* Addressed to Steinbeck in Barbados. This letter was in large part printed in Urquhart, p. 506.

May 20, 1961*

Dear John,

What a delicious and delightful book you sent me with 'continuing faith'.** And what a fine piece of craftmanship showing with effortless ease how we are, all of us, in the face of all those compromises which we fool ourselves into calling small. And what an encouraging meeting for all your friends with an author to whom the basic decencies are basic realities and who, therefore, makes the reader feel a little bit cleaner and want to be a lot cleaner than before meeting the mind back of this story.

From this you see that you gave me a great pleasure and some very fine hours when you sent me your book. I also am happy for your generous and friendly thought in giving it to me.

I look forward to seeing you and Mrs. Steinbeck in a few days. I hope we shall have a very relaxed evening together—although I might feel like telling you about a few of the things *I* see happening and which really make continuing faith as necessary as it makes it difficult.

Dag Hammarskjöld

New York
June 1, 1961

Dear Dag,

We had such a specially good evening with you on Thursday last. It picked us up no end to see you again. You really are a perfect host—with such exquisite judgement in bringing stimulating people together. We thoroughly enjoyed the relaxed air and the good talk.

And the superb dinner which I'm still dreaming of!

Thank you so much for including John and me.

Our united admiration and affection.

Elaine

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* Addressed to New York.

** This was Steinbeck's novel *The Winter of our Discontent,* published in April 1961, and which Dag Hammarskjöld considered to be a 'near masterpiece'.

Sag Harbor
August 17, 1961

Dear Dag,

After our short discussion at your dinner, I am sad that we couldn't pursue the subject in private. However, you have been very busy, and I came out here to complete a book.

We are sailing for England Sept. 8 on the Rotterdam. I am taking the boys aged 15 and 17 on a long trip around the world. We plan to be away ten months, will move by every kind of conveyance and very slowly. It seems to me the best present I can give these boys. Even if they do not know it at this time, the world will stay with them.

But I have another purpose in writing this letter. I think you know my feeling about you personally and about the United Nations. If there is anything I can do during this slow journey of a private or public nature that would be of service to you, I would gladly undertake it.

I know you have access to expert and official information in all areas but I have also found that the unofficial and inexpert point of observation and research is sometimes of value by its very indirection and lack of preconception.

I shall be in New York between August 26th and Sept. 8. If you can think of a non herculean labor to be performed, please let me know. What strata I do not penetrate, my sons will.

Yours in the faith,

John

August 19, 1961*

Dear John,

I was delighted to hear from you with a letter interpreting again in such deeply encouraging words your approach to shared worries and hopes. The greatest service that you could render us all would be to bring out, with all your mastery of form, in an ever simpler way and with increasing limpidity, the spirit for which you are a representative for and among your friends. If you permit me to be terribly preposterous, I would say that I hope that you will manage to make the architecture of your work, and its unavoidable ornaments, so invisible or translucent as to make your strong inner light shine forth and illuminate the simplest of human relations and the simplest of human characters. You have done so several times already but I believe that you could do it now in an even more definitive way—and that we need it.

I am happy for your sake, and for that of your boys, that you will go on this world trip, but I regret it personally—we have not seen much of you here—and I regret also if that would lead to a long interruption in your work. However, you are certainly right that nothing could, without their knowing it, be more of an experience for the future for your boys. Let us hope that neither Krushchev, nor anyone of those others who have the same mistaken view of their place in life, interferes with such sound plans.

I am happy for your kind offer to do whatever I might feel you could during your world trip. Off hand I could not mention anything in particular, but in a general way there is quite a lot which somebody with your position and background can achieve. Could we not talk it over when you get back to town? I would love to have an evening alone with you if you would care to come. Please get in touch with me on your return to town so that we can make an arrangement to meet before your departure.

[Dag Hammarskjöld]

* Addressed to Sag Harbor.

September 5, 1961*

Dear John,

It was a great pleasure to have you with me the other night. Enclosed I send you the book by Buber,** in which I recommend you to read the first paper 'Dialogue' and the last 'What is Man?'

I further send you letters to the five gentlemen on whom we agreed. If there is anything you would wish to change in the letters, please let me know before your departure.

With all good wishes for your trip and rich experience both for yourself and for your family.

Dag Hammarskjöld

New York
Sept. 7, 1961

Dear Dag,

A good and rewarding evening for me. I am grateful for your friendship, and your letters are flattering.

I shall take advantage of your invitation to keep you informed. The best of all news is your assurance that you are strong and well.

I am including a remembrance for Miss Platz*** who has been so kind,

We sail on the Rotterdam tomorrow at noon.

Ave but no vale.****

Yours,

John

* * *

* Addressed to New York.

** Martin Buber (1878–1965), *Between Man and Man* (first English edition 1947). Hammarskjöld admired Buber, and was working on his own Swedish translation of Buber's *Ich Und Du* while on the aircraft whose crash took his life. (Urquhart, p. 587.)

*** Hannah Platz, Hammarskjöld's secretary.

**** Hammarskjöld's death on September 18 was a severe blow to Steinbeck, expressed in two letters from London: to his agent Elizabeth Otis, September 19; and to Adlai Stevenson, September 23. (Steinbeck Letters, pp. 715–16.)

In his letter to Dag Hammarskjöld August 17, 1961, Steinbeck indicated that during his forthcoming ten months journey around the world, he would be glad to be of whatever service he could be as an 'unofficial and inexpert' observer of events and developments. In response to this offer, Hammarskjöld wrote a number of letters of introduction to Heads of State and Heads of Government whom he thought Steinbeck might wish to call upon, namely the President of the United Arab Republic, Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Prime Minister of Israel, David Ben Gurion, the Vice-President of India, Dr S. Radakrishnan and the Prime Minister of Burma, U Nu. He also addressed one of the letters to Professor Martin Buber in Jerusalem, which is reproduced below.*

5 September 1961

Professor Martin Buber,
c/o Hebrew University of Jerusalem
JERUSALEM

Dear Professor Buber,

As my friend, John Steinbeck, is going to visit your country, I wish to send with him my warm personal greetings.

Of course, he is in no need of an introduction. Such an introduction is provided by 'The Grapes of Wrath', 'Of Mice and Men', and most recently by 'The Winter of our Discontent', not to mention his other works.

He is, as you will know, one of those observers of life in our generation, who feel that its survival will depend on our ability to know ourselves and to stick to basic human values with the will to pay what it may cost.

I know that you may have no time to receive him, but I also know that he would be very happy if you could—and so would I.

With kindest regards,

Dag Hammarskjöld

* The text of all five letters of introduction is identical.