



Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California

Kevin Starr

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In "Endangered Dreams," Starr begins with the rise of radicalism on the Pacific Coast, which erupted when the Great Depression swept over California in the 1930s. Starr captures the triumphs and tumult of the great agricultural strikes in the Imperial Valley, the San Joaquin Valley, Stockton, and Salinas, identifying the crucial role played by Communist organizers; he also shows how, after some successes, the Communists disbanded their unions on direct orders of the Comintern in 1935. The highpoint of social conflict, however, was 1934, the year of the coastwide maritime strike, and here Starr's narrative talents are at their best as he brings to life the astonishing general strike that took control of San Francisco, where workers led by charismatic longshoreman Harry Bridges mounted the barricades to stand off National Guardsmen. That same year socialist Upton Sinclair won the Democratic nomination for governor, and he launched his dramatic End Poverty in California (EPIC) campaign. In the end, however, these challenges galvanized the Right in a corporate, legal, and vigilante counterattack that crushed both organized labor and Sinclair. And yet, the Depression also brought out the finest in Californians: state Democrats fought for a local New Deal; California natives helped care for more than a million impoverished migrants through public and private programs; artists movingly documented the impact of the Depression; and an unprecedented program of public works (capped by the Golden Gate Bridge) made the California we know today possible.

Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California Details

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David says

While still outstanding, Starr's third volume wasn't as strong as his first two. Oddly, he repeats himself many times throughout this book, sometimes spending pages describing essentially the same incidents he had already written about several chapters prior. Perhaps his book could have been more tightly edited. Starr moves away from the "great man" style of historical writing he used in the first two volumes, and it's also possible that the transition to a more mosaic approach came with some growing pains. Nevertheless, I enjoyed reading this book just as much as the prior two. Starr's optimistic tone never seems to flag throughout the book even as he describes the depths of the Great Depression. Part of the reason is the Depression didn't hit California as hard as other states--particularly the Midwestern South (Oklahoma, Missouri, parts of Texas) from which the "Okies" migrated in the tens of thousands. As a reader, I also got a sense that Starr tremendously enjoyed writing about the great civic projects that came from this era. Specifically the Hoover Dam and the Golden Gate Bridge, which he compares to The Parthenon. Somewhere as we get toward the closing volumes of Starr's magisterial works, I imagine his optimism may turn pessimistic. But for now, Starr exudes infectious enthusiasm for the state he loves.

Grant says

Kevin Starr's history of California during the Great Depression is an extraordinarily researched and detailed work. It is part of his massive "Americans and the California Dream", an encyclopedic, multi-volume history of California. Much of the book focuses on the titanic struggles between Labor and Capital that took place during this period. I had some familiarity with this material, but I had no idea of how many and how hard fought the Labor struggles of this period were. Starr's account of the General Strike in San Francisco is quite riveting. The longshoremen, with the support of other unions, briefly shut down the whole city. When one reads how hard working people fought for their rights, it is tragic to see how unions have been undermined in our own time. Another aspect of the 30's that this book focuses on is the vast number of public works projects that were put into place at that time, mainly, although not entirely, as a result of The New Deal. Once again, as we see how our infrastructure has fallen into such disrepair in our own time, one can't help reflecting that this country and the state of California had a better sense of priorities then.....I will say that I found this book a bit slow going because it is so dense with fact and detail.

Gregory Crouch says

The title tells you what to expect, and Starr delivers. I learned much about the Golden State's leaden years. My biggest gripe is Starr's organization of material -- which he delivers thematically, rather than chronologically, so the book keeps circling back to the start of the decade (and to origins long before 1930) as Starr picks up each successive thread, which makes it difficult to appreciate which events occurred concurrently. It strikes me that history is best told chronologically, the way it is lived. That complaint aside, I find myself pretty fascinated with some of the great events of the decade: the longshoreman's strike in SF in 1934, the labor wars in agriculture, the decade's left/right battles, the migrant crisis, the construction of the great bridges and dams and irrigation projects, Upton Sinclair's EPIC gubernatorial campaign (Ending

Poverty in California), none of which I knew much about. California is a fascinating place.

Spiros says

Kevin Starr's magisterial history of California during the Great Depression begins with a brief summary of the history of organized (and disorganized) labor in California from statehood through the '20's. This sets the stage for his account of the polarization which would come to characterize life in the Golden State in the '30's, between the forces of labor and their intellectual allies on the one hand, and the forces of capital, supported by the inherent conservatism of what the depression left of middle class California on the other hand. Starr sees in this dichotomy a mimesis of the Communist/Fascist struggle which gripped Europe through the '20's and '30's, and shows that California was not too far removed from playing out a small scale version of the events soon to grip Europe.

What eventually brought California back from the brink was the assimilation of the despised Okies into the fabric of the state, and, more spectacularly, a series of mostly federally funded public works that would literally change the face of the state and make possible California's leading role in the wartime economy which was just around the corner.

In writing of Carey McWilliams, Starr praises him as "a skilled writer possessed of style, rhetorical force, moral vision, and socio-historical imagination." He might just as well be describing himself.

Marie Harms says

I read this because I recently re-read John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. This book, written in 1996, explores many of the themes, people and places in *Grapes of Wrath*. Reading this added depth to my understanding of the Great American Migration.

Marcus Lundberg says

The first 200+ pages is a history of the struggle of the labor movement in California, and I was looking for a bigger picture. As an example, I would have like to know more about migration to California, where the immigrants ended up and how/if they got assimilated. In this book there is little room for poor people unless they had a union member card...

The second part of the book is a more general overview of the the historic events that formed California during the depression, and I really liked that part of the book!

carl theaker says

The Starr falls a bit with this episode.

Volume 4 should be re-titled 'Labor Relations in California 1849-1940',

which the author as much admits in the preface, but that wouldn't be match the title theme, and oh yeah tack 'Dreams' on the end.

All historians like a setup, though here covering the labor movement from the mid 1800s to 1930 takes a good percentage of this book (60 of 354 pages). I was eager for the Depression tales.

In the setup the IWW-Wobblies, of whom I've always had a sympathetic impression- fightin' "the Man" and all, don't come off any better than the establishment in helping the lot of the workers.

Digging in with the agricultural strife Starr starts a drift to the political left feeling his way through the pea picking fields. The two camps are starkly divided in Starr's analysis, the Communist workers and the fascist growers allied with the powers that be.

Naturally one feels for the 'Grapes of Wrath' Okies and others pouring into the state however Starr, usually never at a loss for statistics, rarely gives any background as to why the growers often treated the workers poorly or paid the low wages.

- was it just to make a buck? were the growers making jillions or just getting by?

- how many farmers were under foreclosure?

- what would the market pay for the crop? afterall, it was the depression for everyone.

- if one did pay more, would they lose out selling their crop ?

- no matter the pay, there would still be hundreds of thousands of unemployed, what would the unions do with them?

Initially Starr alludes to dark events as 'like those that will take place in Eastern Europe 10 years from now' but he soon directly labels the growers and authorities as brownshirts and Nazis while throwing in a few comparison concentration camps.

Somehow the Union Communist leadership is always well-intentioned and benevolent. He does say they are often Moscow trained though he never connects that those trainers recently successfully starved 6 million Ukrainians to quiet their dissidence in a much like California state in the sense of an agricultural powerhouse.

He does make it halfway through the book before comparing a low-level geriatric, populist leader to Hitler. I was waiting for the Death Starr to show up at any moment.

Moving to the big dock strikes centered in San Francisco the establishment take on the role of the the Cossacks, so at least there, the scene feels aligned correctly.

During the fascinating chapter on author and super socialist Upton Sinclair's near successful run at the Govenorship, Starr gets frothy enough that he seems like he's running the election campaign. Part way through the politics, several of Sinclair's tenets are described as fascist-like, so it appears Starr is going for the crossover vote?

Holy boy, I kid you not Chapter 6 is entitled 'The Empire Strikes Back', and I was only kidding previously. Though it takes another chapter before he actually compares an LA farmer want-to-be-politician to Darth Vader.

So far we're only missing the Blue Meanies. Maybe they'll be in the '60s book?

With the labor strife covered, Starr goes straight for awhile describing the Depression literature, such as the 'Grapes of Wrath' and the vast public works projects that came to symbolize Depression Era California.

Though while describing the monumental feat of the construction of the Hoover Dam, Starr seems to lapse into an Abercrombie and Fitch advertisement as he muses on the possibility of a gay sub-culture among the five thousand, sweaty male workers because they took off their shirts and wear Levis in the 120 degree desert heat. An oddly inserted speculation.

This volume was published 23 years after the first 1973-96, and hey we all change. Perhaps he gained tenure in this time and has taken up a cause, his writing would be more rewarding if he kept the objectivity in his writing. We'll see, on to the 1940s!

John says

See title. A true-life counterpoint to Depression era literature like "Grapes of Wrath." Chapters on Steinbeck and his contemporaries are quite interesting.

Richard says

Should be required reading for every Californian (and for those who love the state). See Starr's other works in this series.
