

Review: The Western Flyer: Steinbeck's Boat, the Sea of Cortez, and the Saga of Fisheries

By Kevin M. Bailey

Reviewed by Ryder W. Miller

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The Western Flyer from University of Washington Professor Kevin M. Bailey tells a fascinating tale of the Pacific. The Western Flyer was chartered by Nobel Prize winning author John Steinbeck and others for a scientific study of invertebrates to be found in the Sea of Cortez. Accompanying Steinbeck on this oceanic expedition in 1940 was his first wife, Carol Henning and Edward Ricketts, a famous marine biologist and co-author, and others. One can read *The Log of the Sea of Cortez* (by Steinbeck and Ricketts) to get a fuller sense of this scientific and philosophical adventure which made contributions of thought to deep ecology, marine biology and Holism.

Bailey recounts this chapter and tells of this journey, but when it was over, the boat was put to other uses. One gets a good sense of the successes and failures of Pacific Coast fisheries in subsequent years. The sardine fisheries collapsed which led to a change in the Monterey Bay area. The Western Flyer was also used to fish perch, king crab, and salmon, making its way up and down the west coast. Some of these fisheries failed, and the boat was subsequently damaged and forgotten. It has since been found and repaired. At the time of the writing, it was debatable what the fate of the boat would be with the possibility of it being used as a historical landmark for Steinbeck's birthplace Salinas, California. The website [SteinbeckNow](#) reports that it has since been bought and will be restored and used for marine education in Monterey Bay.

This book is a great supplement for those who want the full story of the Pacific and its fisheries. Although it is slim, it is also an easy primer to get a general sense of what transpired. Ricketts and Steinbeck were some of the early voices to argue that we were damaging the ocean by over fishing and therefore it is a useful environmental book. The book also relates interesting things about the life and times of John Steinbeck who was a witness to the demise of the sardine fisheries in Central California. This tale is similar to the tale recounted in *The Grapes of Wrath* where mismanagement and exploitation led to the demise of common natural resources. The book does a good job of showing that this problem was faced by other fisheries in the Pacific as well.

The Western Flyer is accessible and academically researched, but at times, it is also emotional and poetic. As such, it would be a great supplemental book for those who want a fuller understanding of the history of the Pacific fisheries. It is also a rare book about a boat and as such belongs in collections of maritime history with the Lusitania

and the Titanic. It is timely for those interested in Steinbeck and Ricketts, with readers likely to gain new insights into the expedition that made the Western Flyer famous 75 years ago. There are great photographs which evoke a sense of a bygone era.

The book is interesting reading for the non-scholar or scholar out of their subject who is caught in the wide net of the book's coverage. As such, it can be for the independent scholar as well as the non-major, and interdisciplinary course. The book is not fun or humorous, but it is profound and solemn, telling of an expedition that was ahead of its time.

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