

The Green Corn Rebellion: 1935 novel about an episode in the American class struggle

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29 January 2013

The Green Corn Rebellion, by William Cunningham, republished by University of Oklahoma Press, 2010, 256 pp.

The writing of fiction directly relevant to the class struggle is something of a lost art, and even when looking to the past we must scour the libraries and bookshelves among obscure works to find examples. While many readers are familiar with Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906), or *Oil!* (1927), which became the basis for the film *There Will Be Blood* (2007), other novels of social struggle are more difficult to track down.

William Cunningham's *The Green Corn Rebellion*, first published in 1935, gives a fictionalized account of an August 1917 uprising in Oklahoma by black and white tenant farmers and Native Americans against conscription during the First World War.

The revolt, although stillborn, is significant and speaks to the level of radical opposition to the status quo in America at the time. According to a note from the Oklahoma Historical Society by Nigel Anthony Sellars, who has written extensively about the event, "While antiwar sentiments fueled the Green Corn Rebellion, it actually grew from long-standing grievances many tenants held against local landowners, businessmen, and state and local authorities. The farmers were particularly angered over the growing control of land by small numbers of wealthy landholders who often resorted to rampant land speculation and outright fraud to obtain property."

Concrete details of the rebellion are scant. A 1922 article in the Socialist Party-aligned publication *The New Day* recounted that the rebels numbered about 150 and were armed with "pistols and squirrel rifles and ancient shotguns in the main," occupied a hilltop on John Spears' farm in Seminole County, Oklahoma and raised a red flag along with the American. The rebellion crossed three Oklahoma counties: Seminole, Hughes and Pontotoc. Across Seminole County bridges and oil pipelines were burned or destroyed with explosives and telegraph lines cut. Railcars were commandeered and checkpoints set up. However, the rebels collapsed quickly. They were overcome by a group of about

50 men from nearby towns, men the rebels knew and were reluctant to shoot.

William Meredith Cunningham (1901-1967) grew up in Oklahoma and came under the influence of socialism like his father—a follower of socialist leader Eugene V. Debs—had before him. *The Green Corn Rebellion* was his first novel. The same year that book came out, Cunningham was appointed state director of the Oklahoma Federal Writers' Project by the Works Progress Administration, part of Roosevelt's New Deal, a post he held for two and one-half years. Like his successor in the job, novelist Jim Thompson, Cunningham was presumably close to or in the Communist Party. He later moved to New York City, where he worked for TASS, the Soviet news agency, from 1940 until 1948.

The Green Corn Rebellion follows the life of tenant farmer Jim Tetley, who lives in poverty, debt and endless toil and dreams of somehow escaping. When Jim's father-in-law comes in contact with Socialist Party agitators, the family is steered towards participating in the impending rebellion.

Cunningham treats the human relationships as Jim carries on an adulterous affair with his sister-in-law throughout the first half of the book. This is a semi-conscious attempt on Jim's part to find some sort of new morality. While the treatment of personal issues of this sort is interesting enough, the author passes up the opportunity to place the relationship problems caused more directly by poverty at the forefront of the story.

Some peripheral characters are called in to shore up the story in this regard, with children dying from illness and money made from moonshining, but the main focus in terms of the relationships remains on the love "quadrangle" formed by Jim, his brother Ted, Jim's wife and her sister. An unfortunate side effect of this focus is to remove the economic concerns that pushed the tenant farmers to insurrection and supplant the conflict with a love story.

The book is written in a flowing vernacular and is not very detailed at times, as if it were a folk story. Words like "quirt" and phrases like "pouring leather" may be unfamiliar to the modern urban reader, but having a folk story written

in complete colloquial style is valuable in that we are placed in the rebellion in the terms through which the rebels themselves understood it.

As prose, the novel's language is perhaps not exceptional, but that seems to be the point here: to transmit to the reader the struggles of a sharecropper and why he would have taken up arms in a manner and language the sharecropper would have understood. To be too eloquent would not have suited the characters, subsistence-farming sharecroppers. In this regard, *The Green Corn Rebellion* has many literary weaknesses, although in terms of its target audience and aims, these might also be viewed as strengths. The novel preserves a semi-historical account of the experience of rural America in a form that allows it to be readable to that same stratum. Transmitting such suppressed histories of American social struggle in a digestible form is a laudable undertaking.

The characters are recognizably human, although some become caricatures. Ted has been crippled after a disease and refuses to bathe out of self-loathing. It is reminiscent of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, a character made evil by his deformity or co-equal to the latter. Certainly more pitiable is Jim's father-in-law Mack, whose heart is broken both by the affair conducted by Jim and Jim's evasion of legal consequences by enlisting in the army.

It is easy to be sympathetic toward the characters at points and dubious of them at others, and those reactions already indicate that Cunningham is up to something more than transparent one-dimensionality. The reader finds the impoverished tenant farmers overwhelmed by the Socialist Party representative's car and nearly consumed by urban awe during their trip to Oklahoma City. Sometime later they comfortably set about cutting telegraph poles and burning bridges, after inevitable initial hesitation.

The volume is valuable for Sellars' introduction as well, which, along with his article "Treasonous Tenant Farmers and Seditious Sharecroppers: The 1917 Green Corn Rebellion Trials," provides an in-depth analysis of the conditions that led to the uprising, such as the rate of tenancy and the effects of land speculation on the farmers.

Land speculation saw the price rise from \$6.50 per acre in 1900 to \$22.49 per acre in 1910, an increase of 246 percent. This was combined with a rise in tenancy from 47,250 farms out of 108,000 in 1900, to 104,137 farms out of 190,192 in 1910. Of farms that were operated by their owners, "36,036 were heavily mortgaged."

In other words, the vast majority of farmers in Oklahoma (which became the 46th state in 1907) were either in severe debt or owned no land at all. Renters paid landlords in cash or kind, although most often in kind, in the form of crops. Sellars asserts that this amounted to a form of surplus value and at another point criticizes the Industrial Workers of the

World's reluctance to organize the tenant farmers because they weren't wage workers.

Matters were exacerbated by the banks' usurious practices, some of them charging astronomical rates of 2,000 percent. The tenants could never escape debt, nor could the small-scale farmers. Although such practices were outlawed, the laws were a farce because if a farmer attempted to take action against the illegal operations, the bank would blackball him and he could not obtain any more loans in the area. This practice is referred to in Cunningham's novel.

The failure of the Green Corn rebels contrasts sharply of course with the success of the Bolsheviks, under quite different conditions in Russia, later in that same year. The Oklahoma rebels are subdued without their having fired a shot in anger (one tenant farmer was killed and many were jailed, some to long prison sentences), and Jim is finally conscripted under pressure from his brother. As Jim reads a newspaper while boarding a train, we find reference to Lenin and Trotsky, whose appearance interests Jim greatly even though his battle is seemingly over.

The Green Corn Rebellion moves quickly, but it makes many fine points. The novel establishes the conditions under which social upheaval takes place. The oppressed sharecroppers were certainly ready, more than ready for action. In their jubilation, they comment that they weren't sure why they didn't overthrow the government every year. But although the conditions of poverty and indebtedness were severe, the farmers were cut off from the working class, ill-coordinated in their actions and unprepared for what they faced. They could be easily suppressed when they discovered that the ruling class they were fighting would be represented by people known to them.

With all its limitations, Cunningham's book sheds light on an explosive and fascinating episode in the American class struggle.



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