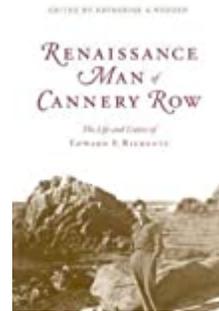




Katharine A. Rodger, ed. *Renaissance Man of Cannery Row: The Life and Letters of Edward F. Ricketts*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002. liv + 283 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8173-1172-8.



Reviewed by Lynn Downey (Levi Strauss & Co. Historian, San Francisco)

Published on H-California (January, 2004)

The Other Man from Monterey: Edward F. Ricketts

The Other Man from Monterey: Edward F. Ricketts

There are not many people in this world who are remembered both for their own work and for being a character in a famous novel. Not many actually deserve this recognition, but Ed Ricketts was certainly one of them. The reason can be found in the book *Renaissance Man of Cannery Row*, a collection of Ricketts's surviving letters edited by Katharine A. Rodger, a Steinbeck Fellow at San Jose State University.

Ed Ricketts is best known as the inspiration for the character of "Doc" in Steinbeck's classic *Cannery Row*, and he might also have inspired "Slim" in *Of Mice and Men*, Jim Casy in *The Grapes of Wrath*, and Lee in *East of Eden*. But he is best revealed fictionally as Doc, and this will be apparent to those familiar with the novel as they read this marvelous collection of letters. What Rodger's book does best, however, is to fill in the other side of the story, the life of the man himself and why he inspired the novelist. He was a scientist, philosopher, and writer who made contributions to our knowledge of the marine life of Monterey Bay that are unequalled.

In the introduction which begins the book, Rodger summarizes the philosophy of the thinking man we will meet as we read this all-too-small collection of letters. These 134 previously unpublished letters only cover the period 1936 to 1948 because all other work was lost in a fire that destroyed Ricketts's lab and home in 1936, and he died suddenly in 1948, just short of his fifty-first birthday.

"Renaissance man" seems inadequate to describe the breadth of interests and expertise that Ricketts demonstrated throughout his life and which these letters spell out so well. "Muse" might also be another appropriate word, as he influenced such disparate men as Joseph Campbell, Henry Miller, and John Cage, in addition to Steinbeck, his great friend. He talked philosophy with Campbell, sex with Miller, music with Cage, and everything with Steinbeck, and all were the better for it, both professionally and personally. His own biological work also benefited from philosophies that transcended science. This perhaps explains why his handbook to local marine life, *Between Pacific Tides* (1939), remains in print today.

A biographical essay precedes the letters and provides useful context to what will follow. Rodger fleshes out the chronology of Ricketts's life with clear and detailed explanations of the philosophies that formed his core. This is especially useful since many of the letters are replies to those of his friends and colleagues whose original correspondence is not included here.

Born in Chicago in 1897, Ricketts's intelligence was noticed quite early by his family and classmates, but it was never anything that he held over the heads of lesser mortals. At age ten his family moved to South Dakota, where his interest in wildlife was kindled, and in high school he began to see connections between disciplines that others generally missed. He never finished college, but chose to travel the country to learn on his feet. In 1922 he married Anna Barbara Maker, known as Nan, and in the next year Ricketts and a friend founded Pacific Biological Laboratories in Pacific Grove, California, which supplied biological specimens to scientists and schools. He fathered three children—Edward Jr., Nancy Jane, and Cornelia—but permanently separated from Nan in 1932. By this time he had met John Steinbeck and the two had become friends and intellectual partners. In the 1940s Ricketts supported the war effort in the army by using his scientific skills, and at the time of his death in 1948 was planning a trip to the Queen Charlotte Islands with Steinbeck. The letters begin after the short biography, and are divided into five chronological sections, corresponding to important way stations in Ricketts's life after the 1936 fire. "1936-1938" starts with the aftermath of this disaster. He pulled his life back together with the help of friends and continued both his biological and philosophical work (apparently) seamlessly. In the "1939-1940" section we see more of his personal life unfold and also get to enjoy his letters to Joseph Campbell, whom he had met in 1932. *Between Pacific Tides* was published in 1939 after years of wrangling with Stanford University Press. In March of 1940 the famed expedition to the Sea of Cortez took place, followed by a trip to Mexico City. During "1941-1942" we see more of his relationship with his children, his correspondence with Henry Miller, and also more of Joseph Campbell. *Sea of Cortez: A Leisurely Journal of Travel and Research*, the book he and Steinbeck wrote together, was published in early December 1941, but its appearance unfortunately collided with the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Ricketts joined the army in 1942 and worked as a lab technician at the Monterey presidio.

In "1943-1945" Ricketts left the military and worked

as a chemist for the California Packing Corporation, making significant comments in his letters about the decline in the local sardine population. When Steinbeck published *Cannery Row* in 1945, Ricketts achieved local and international immortality as the inspiration for the character of Doc. He took the downside of fame with typical good humor. As "1946-1948" unfolds, a feeling of doom begins to take over, as we know that Ricketts is going to die prematurely but he does not, and the next-to-the-last line of his final extant letter is hard to read without great emotion: "Everything else is pretty much the same" (p. 273).

Ricketts's tragic death should not be what readers take away from this book. What is most important to remember—and what is striking about this collection—is the sense of joy in daily life that permeates the letters, despite his personal setbacks. He said it himself in a letter to his daughter Nancy in 1946. "To contribute one's share of fun and happiness to the world is certainly important. Actually, a real duty, especially during these hard times" (p. 239). Ricketts obviously had fun in his life, and the letters are occasionally hilarious. "One thing you can say about writing to a person who never answers letters: you get a prompt and efficient answer" (p. 185).

He was one of the lucky ones who truly lived according to his own personal philosophy. Among these were concepts which he called "non-teleological thinking" and "breaking through." Simply put, these are the concepts of being in the moment and experiencing transcendence/connection with the universe through the unnameable which appears through words, paint and music. Perhaps it is also joy, as this flows through his letters like the tides he loved.

Rodger is a thoughtful and unobtrusive editor. Her introduction and biography give us the background we need so we can just dive in and enjoy Ricketts's own voice. Most of her editorial comments simply provide background on people or events so we can understand a letter's content. My one complaint is about form: these comments are not physically set apart from the letters in a way that helps the reader move from one to the other. More than once I found myself in the middle of an editorial remark before I realized where I was.

I knew very little about Ricketts before I read this book, but I am now intrigued enough to seek out other biographical works and more of Ricketts's writings. Katharine Rodger's book gives readers a taste of an extraordinary life and leaves us thirsting for more.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-california>

Citation: Lynn Downey. Review of Rodger, Katharine A., ed., *Renaissance Man of Cannery Row: The Life and Letters of Edward F. Ricketts*. H-California, H-Net Reviews. January, 2004.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8719>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.