

# The Buzzards Above, the Cane Below: BIG SUGAR Seasons in the Cane ...

By Richard J. Margolis

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### BIG SUGAR

*Seasons in the Cane Fields of Florida.*

By Alec Wilkinson.

263 pp. New York:

Alfred A. Knopf. \$18.95.

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**I**N 1951, President Harry S. Truman's Commission on Migratory Labor examined farm worker conditions nationwide and concluded that what held the system together was human misfortune. "We depend on misfortune to build up our force of migratory workers," declared the commission, "and when the supply is low because there is not enough misfortune at home, we rely upon misfortune abroad to replenish the supply."

The cane cutters of south Florida — more precisely, of the south shore of Lake Okeechobee, some 60 miles west of Palm Beach — are a melancholy case in point. As Alec Wilkinson tells us in "Big Sugar," the growers there at first depended on black men recruited throughout the South to harvest their crops. But during World War II the economic circumstances of Southern blacks inconveniently improved. So the growers looked elsewhere for misfortune, and found an apparently inexhaustible supply in Jamaica and the surrounding islands. In consequence, "West Indians have cut the sugar cane crop in south Florida for more than forty-five years."

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Unlike sugar cane in Louisiana and Texas, most of the Florida crop is harvested by hand (the soil is too soft for machines), and it accounts for more than 40 percent of all the sugar cane grown in the United States. Miserly piecework wages plus generous Federal Government price supports have made many of the Florida growers rich. Mr. Wilkinson speaks of "the fine, fine, superfine living they have known with sugar."

A writer for *The New Yorker* and the author of "Moonshine: A Life in Pursuit of White Liquor," he started visiting the Florida cane fields in 1984, and over the next four years kept going back. From his catch-as-catch-can explorations Mr. Wilkinson has assembled a vivid collage of the cutter's world — the perilous work, the pitiable pay, the enforced isolation that borders on peonage. "The cutters live in camps maintained by the growers. . . . Some are surrounded by chain-link fences, a number have checkpoints, and all are off limits to outsiders."

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As an outsider himself, Mr. Wilkinson had a rough time piercing the cane curtain. Most of the workers shunned him. The Florida Sugar Cane League, which represents the growers, showed him public-relations films and told him to stay out of the fields.

He is engagingly open about his journalistic difficulties. In desperation, he latched on to a local ex-convict nicknamed Caveman, who took him to a dingy bar and introduced him to a man who possibly was a cutter. "While Caveman watched the pool players, the man talked, but it was hard for me to hear because of the noise in the bar and because he kept lowering his head and speaking to the floor. The only part I made out clearly was when he looked at me and said, 'And I'll tell you one more thing. . . .'"

Gradually, Mr. Wilkinson's shrewd eye and sympathetic ear managed to penetrate the mystery and the misery. We see the dangers that lurk in the fields, where "more than one in every three [workers] cuts himself or is cut by someone who has lost control of his knife, or wrenches his back, or suffers an attack of some kind in the heat, or steps in a rabbit hole and turns an ankle, or is bitten by fire ants, or pierces his eye or his eardrum with a sharp leaf of cane while bending over and grabbing a stalk."

In Jamaican voices we hear the quiet lilt of despair: "First camp I go to . . . I see a big man cry from the cold and they had to take him back to the camp. All day we breathing the soot and ash from the fields. Our lives one day shorter for each day we cut cane. . . . We live in captivity, we must obey our master, anything he say we have to do. For we it is rough. We have always a struggle. We are all of us under a sufferation."

Mr. Wilkinson's sharp vignettes are constructed from the bottom up. "If you go out to the fields and lie down for a while," he says, "you draw the attention of buzzards. Sometimes one passes so close that you can look him in the eye and see that he is looking at you."

What we do not get is a top-down view of the human buzzards — the big sugar corporations that reap the wealth in the wake of the whirlwind. Nor do we learn much about the ignoble alliance between Big Sugar and Big Government, which keeps the system going. For not only does our Government protect sugar prices, it also certifies the workers' miserly wages and monitors their execrable conditions.

As Mr. Wilkinson makes clear, the cutters are in no position to get out from under their "sufferation." Our own belated outrage remains their slim but best hope. □