

New England via W. P. A.

BY BERNARD DEVOTO

IT is not likely that future numbers of the American Guide Series will be much better than the New England section,* now completed by the publication of "Connecticut," except as they may profit in detail from mistakes made by the pioneers. It is certain that some will be inferior to them, in spite of the frantic efforts of the overworked Washington staff, because the quality and amount of literary intelligence available elsewhere is sure to be, sometimes, inferior. One may therefore generalize with some assurance about the results of the Writers' Project on the basis of these six state guides.

Briefly, then, these are fascinating and invaluable books, books which everyone who is interested in New England or who intends to do any touring there must be overwhelmingly grateful to have, books which can be read with great interest and which can be used easily and profitably as guides. But they fall considerably short of the ideal and even of the readily attainable. They are confused in purpose, sizable parts of them have little justification, they contain some matter which has neither relevance nor interest, and they make an unhappy number of small mistakes. Considering the difficulties under which they were assembled they are remarkable achievements, but a trained personnel working free of interference and toward a clearly defined end could have done a better job—and, if this is a relevant value, could have done it at a tenth or less than a tenth of the cost.

The story of the extemporized organization working under fierce pressure, of the seismic convulsions and reversals it suffered, of the various conflicts within



"Even the admirable local tours are less important than the cross-country itineraries." (Highway near Shelbourne, N. H.)

and the raids by public and semi-public officials from without, of political expedients and bureaucratic inertia—will make, if it is ever told frankly, a saga highlighted with tragedy and farce. Only a few aspects of it are relevant here, in explanation. To begin with, at least seventy percent of the people employed on the guides were writers only by aspiration or appointment. In effect, a writer was a candidate for Relief who could not be classified as anything else. Basically this was a tragic necessity of Relief and must be respected as such, though sometimes it was just a convenience of ward politics. (In one State headquarters—not in New England—a toilet overflowed one day and four journeyman plumbers on the editorial staff volunteered to repair it.) Few of these hastily commissioned writers had had any experience at gathering data or writing prose; many lacked intelligence; some were almost illiterate. Field workers thus dubiously qualified for the job poured in on branch and main headquarters millions of words of material—material whose value was microscopic and whose authenticity could

never be relied upon. The principal job, therefore, became one of editing—and the little groups of headquarters editors, understaffed, criminally overworked, harassed by constantly changing regulations from above and by innumerable kinds of local interference, have had one of the most painful tasks of which literature has any record. They had to check the millions of words, edit them, boil them down to a couple of hundred thousand—and in the end, they usually had to go out and do the work over again by themselves. Sometimes, even, a sort of flying squadron of more hard-boiled and more effective editors had to be brought in from Washington to do the job once more.

It is through this chink that the errors have crept in. No editors who had to work with such material in such circumstances could be expected to spot them all. Few of them are important—except than any error in any guidebook is important. It does not matter that Jamestown was not a permanent settlement, as "New Hampshire" says it was; that the Mormon Church was not founded at Nauvoo, as "Vermont" says it was; that George William Curtis did not write "The Easy Chair" for *Harpers Weekly*, or that that was not the title of his department. But even such small mistakes are unfortunate, and it is worse than unfortunate when a house is moved across the street, a marker misplaced, or a style of architecture misnamed.

Again, the guides suffer because Washington never quite made up its mind what kind of books it wanted. Apparently a lot of fine New Deal hopefulness colored the first intention with rose-madder, and there was some purpose of rendering

* MASSACHUSETTS: *A Guide to Its Places and People. The American Guide Series.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1937. \$2.50.
VERMONT: *A Guide to the Green Mountain State. The same.* 1937. \$2.50.
MAINE: *A Guide "Down East."* The same. 1937. \$2.50.
RHODE ISLAND: *A Guide to the Smallest State. The same.* 1937. \$2.50.
NEW HAMPSHIRE: *A Guide to the Granite State. The same.* 1938. \$2.50.
CONNECTICUT: *A Guide to Its Roads, Lore, and People. The same.* 1938. \$2.50.

Next  Week

THE CROWNING OF A KING

By ARNOLD ZWEIG

Reviewed by Stephen Vincent Benét

EAGLE FORGOTTEN

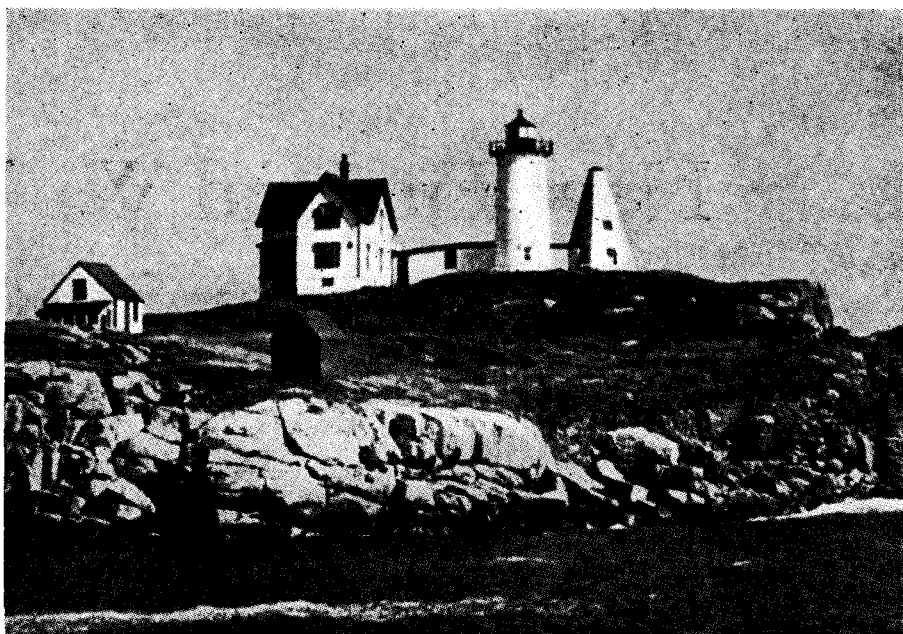
By HARRY DAVIS

Reviewed by John Chamberlain

a righteous judgment on the defects of American civilization. These would be not only guidebooks but a summons to a finer way of life. But public money was paying for them and so public officials like governors and mayors and semi-public bodies like the Chamber of Commerce promptly strangled this threat to local business. The result is sometimes a melancholy indecisiveness of assertion with neither color nor tang and with little relevance, aimless, subjective comment uninteresting in itself and inappropriate to a guidebook.

This shows itself in the introductory essays which make up from a fifth to a fourth of each volume. They are the conspicuous weakness of the guides, and, quite apart from frustrated righteousness, one doubts the value of such essays. "Vermont" is the most satisfying of these six guides—and its superiority would seem to be explained by the brevity of its introductory essays. How useful, how desirable, are such essays? The chapter on history in "Massachusetts" is an expert summary—but it is overlong, and who will read it, what is it useful for, what is it doing in a book like this? On the other hand, the chapter on literature in "Massachusetts" is capricious, biased, and frequently wrong—it would be interesting in a volume of *belles lettres* but if anyone reads it here he will be getting an odd form of federal bounty. Three of the guides have essays on "Folklore," a subject which would seem appropriate for treatment in a separate essay if any is, but the three contain little that is specific to their respective states or even to New England. The essays on flora and fauna are even more generalized. Those on architecture are usually good, and those on geology even better—and this fact suggests the best solution to the problem, if general summaries had to be introduced. Technical information should have been segregated and, as in "Vermont," should have been reduced to the useful minimum. Specific information should have been distributed through the tours, subjective interpretation should have been omitted entirely, and, if it was decided that more space must be used up, the chapter on Conservation in "Rhode Island" and the one on Sports and Amusements in "New Hampshire" should have been imitated and amplified.

In general, the writing is good—workmanlike, to the point, free of adjectives. Only a little lyric ecstasy appears, and most of that is in "Maine." The Chambers of Commerce are most active Down East, and they are abetted by the local crop of poets with bright lavender hair on their chests. But it is hard to praise the illustrations. Part of their failure was unavoidable under the conditions established, for the books had to be produced to sell at a low price. That meant gra-



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vure: but gravure means the loss of detail and the degradation or destruction of the middle tones. Gravure was unavoidable but also the guides yield to the current fashion of overcorrection, of photographing everything through a red filter on panchromatic plates. Take "Whipple House, Ipswich" and "The Connecticut Valley" in "Massachusetts" as examples. Worse illustrations can hardly be imagined. The greatest beauty of the New England countryside, its foliage, is brutally misrepresented when a pine tree in strong summer sunlight comes out snowy white against a dead black sky, and what is the value of an architectural photograph from which all the detail has been pinched out? It would have been better to give us only half as many photographs, or less than half, and to make them halftones; it would have been still better to take them through the lightest yellow filter or to dispense with filters altogether.

A guidebook, however, must stand or fall on its tours, and here, where the difficulties were greatest, these books score an unquestionable triumph. They are the justification of this unwieldy labor, intelligent, packed, and enormously usable. It is true that, since in New England the main direction of travel is from the south northward, one might quarrel with those itineraries that begin at the northern end, and somewhat less realistically one might argue that more tourists will travel from Boston or Hartford or Providence as a base than will travel toward them from elsewhere in New England. But any route must be followed in reverse by some of those who travel it, and it is neither difficult nor annoying to use these tours backward. I should have

liked some experimentation—perhaps a few main tours arranged with a double mileage-reading, going and coming, or a few set up in defiance of typographical conventions so that they might be more easily read in the car. But when so much has been accomplished it is ridiculous to complain, and a race of tourists who have had only Socony and local barkers to rely on can now rejoice in guidebooks that have what they want and will entertain them and inform them as well.

In each volume the cities and the larger towns have been segregated and treated at length. The coverage is always adequate and sometimes microscopic—"Rhode Island," with the smallest acreage to bother about, succeeds in giving Newport forty-two pages, which is one page more than Boston gets in "Massachusetts." The editing has been superb here and it is impossible to suggest a better division or arrangement. The "foot tours" are devised to cover all scenic and geographical interests, all places of historical or literary importance, and many industrial and commercial and educational landmarks. They are excellently supported by motor tours through the immediate vicinities. The subsidiary information about lodgings, restaurants, and transportation is as good as it can be made while public officials and commercial organizations are given the power of censorship. We are still leagues behind Baedeker and Michelin, and the stranger coming into town still has no way of finding out how much a good bed will cost him, where he can eat with reasonable security from ptomaine, or which hostelry serves a genuine *vin du pays* and which gets it from the Bronx. (To scorf-

(Continued on page 14)

Transplanted Family

PROMENADE. By G. B. Lancaster. New York: Reynal & Hitchcock. 1938. \$2.50.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

IT is rare that an author sets himself so large a canvas as has Miss Lancaster, and succeeds so well with a full-bodied historical novel. Her "Promenade" covers the lives of several generations of an aristocratic English county family transplanted to New Zealand, and deals in sweeping yet detailed fashion with the settlement and growth of New Zealand through all its vicissitudes of struggle with the native Maoris. The story begins in England in 1839 at Lovel Old Hall, with a "black Lovel," Peregrine, on the eve of marrying lovely Sally Vibart and taking her, her younger orphan sister, Darien, and members of his own family, to New Zealand. It follows the political career of Peregrine, and ends in New Zealand in the twentieth century, with Sally and Peregrine—"that stiff black rig"—both departed this life, and Darien an old lady who has lived vibrantly and fully. The research applied to the history of New Zealand has obviously been exhaustive; but to the very end Miss Lancaster's writing demonstrates her ability to stay the course without finding it at all exhausting. So can the reader, for the book is filled with dramatic episodes and living characters.

The Lovel women top the men in interest. First it is Sally, married off, while still justifying her nickname of "Sal-volatile," at the age of fifteen—and soon, in a strange land, becoming the mother of four children born to an excessively dominating husband. Then there is Darien, whose life is linked at times

throughout—though not in marriage—with Nick Flower the smuggler, actually a Lovel on the wrong side of the blanket. Her tawny hair remains the ensign of an unbroken spirit, and she develops a very worldly eye toward the main chance. One of Sally's daughters, Tiffany, carries on the line of fascinating Lovel women with a tragic love affair. At the end of the book it is Prue, one of Sally's granddaughters, who promises to continue the rebellious strain.

In the background of the Lovels' family history are young English officers, Maori chiefs, a pageant of colonials, statesmen, politicians, and planters: all these are woven into the web of New Zealand history, with its tale of blunderings by the English Colonial office and by well-meaning English Governors. At the end of the book, significantly enough, Hemi Fleete, who had loved and been refused by Tiffany, becomes a Maori Member of Parliament in New Zealand and some of his grandsons are fighting with other Maoris in the World War in Europe. The novel deals vigorously with the upsurge of new generations against the mandates of the old, but also, and mellows, with the morals and manners of an elder day. Sympathetic treatment of the family rebels and of the natives in the Maori War accompanies a keen relish for the atmosphere of the new land and all its aspects, from colonial politics and social life to gold-mining and sheep-raising.

To sum up, one might say that Miss Lancaster is the Galsworthy of New Zealand. Hers is also the saga of an English family, transplanted but not subdued. The present reviewer believes that she has created in the Lovel women portraits that will not fade for some time.



Norman Collins is more hard-boiled than Richard Harding Davis was.

Soldier of Misfortune

FLAMES COMING OUT OF THE TOP.

By Norman Collins. New York: Harper & Bros. 1938. \$2.50.

Reviewed by GEORGE STEVENS

VARIOUS reviewers, some of them in this paper, have from time to time lamented the decline of English fiction, pointing out the superior vitality of the younger American novelists to the British brothers. Possibly there are no Faulkners or Steinbecks in England, but there are some very good young novelists just the same; and what they have in common, more than anything else, is vitality. A casual list would include C. S. Forester, Arthur Calder-Marshall, C. Day Lewis, and certainly Norman Collins. Without representing a "school" or a "movement," these young men have abandoned the stream of consciousness and are bringing back the essential element of story-telling. It's time for a few cheers from the bleachers, and even from the press box.

"Flames Coming out of the Top" is a good story—a good, intelligent story, lean in structure, subtle in characterization, allegro in action. You might call it the story of the soldier of fortune, with a modern twist. Young Dunnett, who is promoted from a London clerkship to chase a bad debt in Bolivia, and who develops considerable resource and tenacity in the process, is a character who would have delighted Richard Harding Davis. Norman Collins is more hard-boiled than Richard Harding was, and he leaves the young man to his own devices, which is to say that he stacks no cards in his hero's favor. Dunnett gets the run-around from his customer, Señor Muras, and after a succession of wittily contrived parries and thrusts, he follows the fleeing Bolivian into the Chaco, where the Paraguayan war is raging.

At this point the story, which has up to now been both ironic and dramatic,



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