

A Gross of Great Paintings

A TREASURY OF ART MASTERPIECES, from the Renaissance to the Present Day. Edited by Thomas Craven. New York: Simon & Schuster. 1939. 590 pp., with 144 plates. \$10.

Reviewed by OLIVER LARKIN

THIS book is the result of a gigantic enterprise. Twenty specialists from the staff of Condé Nast worked in the galleries of Europe and America to reproduce one hundred and forty-four masterpieces, some of which had never before been photographed in color. A fifty-five foot scaffolding was built to reach the Michelangelo frescoes in the Sistine. The "Treasury" weighs eight pounds, contains six hundred pages, and constitutes indeed "the most comprehensive" project of its kind "in recent publishing history."

Thomas Craven's introduction, and his brief essay on each of the paintings reproduced, will provoke the layman's interest through a gift for the vigorous and trenchant summing-up of a personality or a school which is, or should be, the envy of more richly informed and more profoundly thoughtful critics. There are misleading over-simplifications: for example, the use of the term "deadly realist" to describe John Sloan; and students of the later Renoirs will scarcely dismiss them as "overblown creatures of unsightly bulk and floridity" which "need not detain us."

But the pictures themselves are the main attraction. Their value to those who cannot live with the originals, as Harry Wehle points out in his foreword, lies in the fact that they "can bring us the ideas of the great masters,—reduced in scale perhaps, tuned down as it were,—but complete enough . . . to make these masterpieces in a sense our own treasured possessions." The publishers' own rather Barnumesque blurb that the paintings "are here displayed in all their glory, with their full investiture of visual splendor" implies an ideal which is simply incapable of realization. Pending further research and refinement of processes, small color plates must, for the perfectionist, range from non-flattery through various degrees of misrepresentation to outright libel. At best, the reasonable can ask only a skillful approximation to the original, a print which will indicate the color-relations in a painting without falsifying those tonal aspects, included in the color or relatively independent of it, which give bulk to modeled forms and depth to spaces,—

aspects which, in some cases, are more adequately conveyed by a black-and-white photograph which faithfully translates light-dark contrasts and the clarity of contours.

It goes without saying that a Vatican fresco by Raphael cannot be reduced in scale to a length of ten inches without distortion. Large paintings, and especially those whose unity depends upon a subtle and pervasive color-orchestration, come off badly, and reveal most clearly the limitations and imperfections of color photography and color printing: Renoir's "Luncheon of the Boating Party," Seurat's "Grande Jatte," and such Venetian works as Titian's "Bacchus and Ariadne." There are plates in this volume in which a false color passage destroys the plastic coherence of the



Memling's Madonna and Child

work,—a flag in Delacroix's "Liberty Guiding the People," a tablecloth in Rembrandt's "Syndics," the foreground tones in the Daumier "Washerwoman." Inaccurate registering has given fuzzy contours to Duccio's "The Three Marys;" and Tintoretto's "Miracle of Saint Mark" looks, in the copy examined by this reviewer, as though it had been photographed through a glass of lemonade.

All such reservations aside, one estimates the accomplishment in relation to the magnitude of the venture and the technical problems it faced; and one concludes that even imperfect color reproductions are in important respects more valuable to the layman and to the teacher than those lifeless effigies one sees on the screens of class-rooms. A substantial number of plates in this volume were made

from originals with homogeneous or flat color areas, with relatively simple space-design, with underlying formal statements which the artist emphasized as primary to the color-distinctions. These plates,—among them Giovanni Bellini, Eakins, Vermeer, Van Gogh, Guardi, Blake, the "Adam and Eve" of Masaccio, the "Battle of Constantine" by Piero della Francesca,—will add a new dimension to study and enjoyment of the artists, and more than justify the welcome which one hopes this "Treasury" will receive.

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"Cape Stiff"

CAPE HORN. By Felix Riesenbergh. New York: Dodd Mead & Co. 1939. 452 pp., with index. \$5.

Reviewed by
ALEXANDER CROSBY BROWN

THERE is cause for wonder why up until this time there has never been a book on Cape Horn. This lack has now been filled with consummate skill by Captain Riesenbergh's scholarly book, which could not fail to thrill even the most timorous landlubber.

The epic story of "Cape Stiff" could never have been adequately told by an ordinary historian, no matter how well qualified. More than a mere recital of historic events is called for and a true appreciation of these tempestuous regions is found only in those whose blood is thoroughly saturated with salt. Captain Riesenbergh has "rounded the Horn" more than once and knows whereof he writes. The result is a lusty book rating Force 12 on the Beaufort Scale.

A century elapsed between the epoch-making circumnavigation of Magellan and the actual discovery of the Cape and the open seas to the southward by the intrepid Hollander, Schouten. It will be remembered that Papal bulls were neatly partitioning the world between Spain and Portugal. England's famous sea-dogs, Drake, Cavendish, Davis, and the rest were ranging over the globe defying these unsubstantiated claims. Holland had formed its powerful East India Company, whose monopoly strangled individual enterprise and closed Magellan Straits and the Cape of Good Hope route to others than its own fleet. The open water below the tip of South America's Tierra del Fuego was as yet unknown. Denied the only established routes to the East, Schouten decided to find another way. Sailing right on past the entrance to Magellan Straits, he soon discovered the Cape, which he named for his home town back in Hol-

land. On his return, however, he was thrown in jail and some time was to elapse before his important findings were proved and accepted.

Captain Riesenbergr traces these early voyages of discovery and exploration with masterly skill, and performs a real service in properly comparing and evaluating them for the first time. We follow the story of the Cape Horn regions down through the dark chapter of native exploitation and extinction of the tribes brought on (as was invariably so) by firearms, whiskey, and disease, coupled with the attentions of the fatuously misguided missionaries.

Final chapters cover the golden age of sail when lofty California clippers were racing round the Horn for gold; the decline of the great sailing craft immortalized by Villiers; and the establishment of steamship service through the Straits, to be in turn diverted by the Panama Canal. A final chapter covers the battle of the Falklands between British and German warships in the late war, and adds a note on the neglected importance of the Cape Horn regions in future wars.

The book contains splendid charts prepared by William Briesemeister, a frontispiece painting by Gordon Grant, and several excellent photographs. The latter should have been expanded to take in more of famous Cape Horn ships. Likewise the author dwells at too great length on the comparatively inconsequential story of the natives Capt. Fitzhugh brought back to England, space which might have been better devoted to, for example, a résumé of the tempestuous open boat voyage of the *Wager's* men, a fact barely noted. I feel too that a lively chapter could have been drawn around the more famous freak craft, Long Island Sound steamboats, etc., which made the trip to Cape Horn waters.

These are small points, however, and "Cape Horn" is not only a stirring book, but a noteworthy contribution to letters.

"Ship of Democracy"

THE HERITAGE OF AMERICA. Edited by Henry Steele Commager and Allan Nevins. Boston: Little Brown & Co. 1939. 1152 pp., with index. \$4.

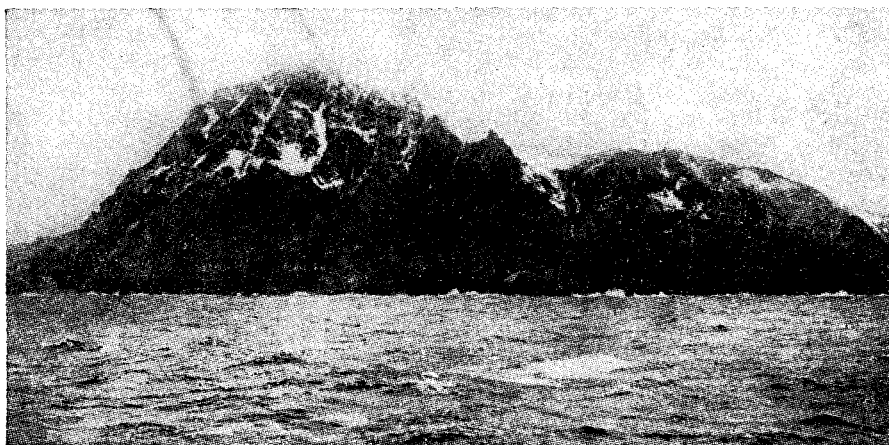
Reviewed by STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

WE are getting more and better source-books on American history all the time, and we are lucky to have them. The diarists, letter-writers, travelers, contemporary commentators—the people who saw the thing happen when it happened—are at last getting their place in the sun, and we should all be grateful. When I was a boy, I can only remember one series that specialized in the first-hand account, and that was supposed to be for "advanced" students. Now, from Mark Van Doren's "Autobiography of America" to Henry Boston's "American Memory," from Foerster's admirably edited "American Poetry and Prose" on the literary side to the present compilation on the historical one—there are at least a dozen one-volume editions where the average reader, leafing through, can get at least a reasonable notion of some of the forces, events, and ideas that went to make this republic, seen as people saw them when they were new. Not all these books, of course, serve quite the same purpose or cover quite the same ground. But they help explain us to ourselves, if we are capable of receiving the explanation.

"The Heritage of America" begins with Leif Ericson's voyage to Vineland. It ends with an extract from that fine book, "We, Too, Are the People"—an extract dealing with the problem of relief—set in vivid juxtaposition with Whitman's "Sail, Sail Thy Best, Ship of Democracy." In between, there is a God's plenty of rich and vivid material, and the names of the editors alone should be sufficient warrant for careful and judicious selection, skillful edit-

ing, and sound historical knowledge. They have not been afraid to quote from the well-known—to quote Crevecoeur's "What Is an American," and Franklin's account of his famous first arrival in Philadelphia. They have not been afraid to include the Declaration, the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln's letter to Mrs. Bixby, and a section of Franklin D. Roosevelt's First Inaugural. They have also not been afraid to include such things as a first-hand account of the great horse-race between Eclipse and Sir Henry; Martin Chuzzlewit's fling at land-speculation in Eden; Mark Twain's poker-faced recital of his first lessons as a steamboat-pilot; and Ike Hoover's dumfounded reminiscences of just what happened to the White House when Theodore Roosevelt and his family moved in. The two hundred and fifty-two selections that compose the book offer rich and varied fare. Almost everybody will find something new here, almost everybody will find something he had always meant to look up, if he hadn't been too lazy to go to the library. As the authors cautiously state, "No collection of personal narratives, no matter how extensive, can ever form a really connected history of America." That is true. But what such a collection can do, when it is as good as this one, is, in the first place, to make formal history come alive to most of us, and, in the second, to pique our imaginations and curiosities so that we wish to know more about those living people of the past.

Naturally, one always has one's own predilections and prejudices. I am delighted to meet again Sarah Knight, the Rebel War Clerk and the Georgia Girl, and to make such new friends as Sarah Royce and Thomas Dabney. I'm particularly glad to see two extracts from Herndon on the character of Lincoln. I miss Young Ward's Diary and Kane's account of deserted Nauvee. I miss an extract from "Forty Years a Gambler on the Mississippi" as I miss one from that extraordinary account of railroad life, "Railroadman" by Chauncey Del French. But with any compilation, as with any anthology, it is infinitely easier to point out the occasional omission of favorite selections than to do the job oneself. And, where the job is concerned, Messrs. Commager and Nevins have done a fine one. Here is the stream, with its eddies and its turbulence, with queer straws floating in it and a few lasting landmarks—the stream of American history from the days of Leif to today. If you want to know something about it, this must be one of your books.



Cape Horn