

# They Battled for the Baltic

**The Sea and the Sword: The Baltic, 1630-1945**, by Oliver Warner (Morrow. 305 pp. \$6), concentrates on the monarchs and statesmen who for more than 300 years figured in the tumult arising over a strategic inland sea. A naval historian, C. Northcote Parkinson is the author of "The Evolution of Political Thought."

By C. NORTHCOTE PARKINSON

SINCE Oliver Warner's previous works have been mostly biographical, it need not surprise us that *The Sea and the Sword* should concentrate mainly on personalities. Beginning with 1630, the year that Gustavus Adolphus landed his troops at Rügen, the author tells us in rapid succession about Peter the Great, Charles XII, Paul I, and Admiral Lord de Saumarez. We reach the twentieth century on page 134. Thenceforward the story centers upon Carl Mannerheim, Pilsudski, Hitler, Roosevelt, and Stalin.

What connection is there between all the people Mr. Warner seeks so briefly to portray? What is there in common between Louis XIV, Gustavus IV, Nicholas II, and President Truman? They all, says Mr. Warner, had an interest in the Baltic. So, in varying degrees, they had; but the characters fail to sustain the plot. We are bound to ask what the book is about, and there is only one possible answer. It is about warfare in and near the Baltic from 1630 to 1945. The connecting theme is thus the Baltic itself—about which, however, we learn practically nothing.

Is it, to begin with, a sea? Hilare Belloc denied this, saying that it is better understood as an enlarged river or a fresh-water lake. True or false, this is a theory in which the author might at least have shown interest. But apart from that, in what way does the Baltic differ from the Mediterranean, and both from the Atlantic Ocean? What is the Baltic's average depth and tidal range? What is its wind system and average conditions of visibility? What navigational aids are essential there and to what extent are wooden ships vulnerable there to worm and marine growth? The trouble is not merely that the author does not know the answers. He has not even framed the right questions.

The effect would be less irritating if

there had never been a story to tell, but in point of fact there is. The story of the Baltic in modern times would be well worth studying. It would have to begin with the Hansa and the process by which the Baltic and North Sea came to be linked as they are. Then we should need an outline of the region's economic development, its internal trade, its importance to Europe, and its overland contact with Asia. How, for instance, could any competent person write a whole book about the Baltic without allocating a chapter to the Kiel Canal? The book that is wanted would survey the port facilities and give us an account of the early charts, made when and where, by whom and why. Against this essential background we could begin to see what centers of population have what specific interests, how the present national units have achieved their unity and purpose, and what their influence has been on the world at large.

There is a story to be told, but Oliver Warner, who can write very competently on a subject that defines itself—a single life or a single battle—does not tell it. What he has given us is Hamlet without the Prince. *The Sea and the Sword* is a very bad book indeed.

## At Virgil's Tomb

By Lucien Stryk

THE bus stops just outside the gate  
Where all day long  
The kids retrieve their soccer ball.

I watch and wait (in Ravenna  
Your Florentine  
Lay starred on every tourist's map,

And gendarmes' pikes, like gladioli,  
Blazed around him).  
Now as the tour-bus honks below

I imagine another Beatrice  
Entreating you,  
In glory's dream, to guide her lover

Through that flaming labyrinth.  
At last you speak:  
"Tell him to live remembering you,

Say that long ago man's boot ground  
through Inferno's crust,  
The world he made, and will not know."

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