

# An Artist's Angle of Vision

**John Sloan's *New York Scene*, edited by Bruce St. John (Harper & Row. 658 pp. \$12.50), the artist's diary from 1906 to 1913, comprises both a personal record and a social history. Bartlett H. Hayes, Jr., is director of the Addison Gallery of American Art at Phillips Academy.**

By BARTLETT H. HAYES, JR.

**"LOOK** around you and tell me how many right angles you see in this room," I once heard John Sloan say to some seventy-five students seated on the floor about him. Promptly their heads began to twist like a covey of wide-eyed owls. Hands were soon raised as each challenged youth sought to give the answer he had found in the architectural moldings, the corners of the furniture, and the paintings and frames that adorned the surrounding walls. Sloan allowed the game to continue for a minute or so, then firmly called it to a halt. "I believe," he said, "that none of you is in a position to see one right angle and certainly not more than one, because you must be directly perpendicular to one in order to see it that way. What most of you actually see is an obtuse, or

an acute, angle, depending on where you are. Move a few feet and the angle will change from your particular point of view." This is a vivid example of Sloan's personality as it came through to others, and as it does not come through in this diary, written before he had ever sold a painting.

Trained as a newspaper illustrator, he earned a marginal living by his wit and observation. Entry after entry includes such comments as, "Sent off a puzzle to the *Press* (Philadelphia). Manuscript from *Appleton's Magazine* arrived." This brief notation was the entire entry for July 3, 1906, and many others in this daily record of seven and a half years are scarcely longer or more stimulating.

On the other hand, even if there is repetition in the prosaic record of who called, who was entertained and where, or what work was in progress, there are moments when the reader comes on reminders of how significantly the New York scene has changed in little more than half a century. For instance, on July 22, 1908: "Dolly [his wife] and I went to a new place, Sutor's, on Seventh Avenue. The cooking is done by the proprietor and his wife, a little French woman, waits on the table. It is a fairly good dinner for the price, thirty cents with wine!" However, the following

night, "... Dinner at home, which after all is much the best. . . ."

Comments such as the latter were not so innocent as one might suppose. The diary was begun at the recommendation of Dolly's doctor as a "safety valve" for Sloan's melancholy, and also to please Dolly herself and give her confidence in her battle with neurosis and alcohol. Sloan said, "I tried very hard to write things that would make her happy," and he often expresses his need of her: "As I expect Dolly to come home to her very lonely me tomorrow, I spent several hours today trying to make the studio and the front room look a bit cleaner. I swept and dusted and had the satisfaction of getting a good heap of dust which is always pleasing; to sweep a house and not get a good lot in the dustpan is a disappointment. . . ." (August 23, 1908.)

In contrast to the earlier years, the diary for 1911 and 1912 almost achieves a narrative quality. Not only is it a very human document; it is also a source of social study, for Sloan was much concerned with the problems of the day and was active in the affairs of the Socialist Party (from which he resigned in 1914), as well as with publications such as the *Call*, *Coming Nation*, and *New Masses*. Dolly shared his interest, going from one Socialist Party street meeting to another, and serving on the committee that helped the Lawrence, Massachusetts, textile workers' strike.

But essentially this is the diary of an observant artist. Painters, writers, and editors move in and out of the picture as they battle for freedom of ideas and seek esthetic justice. The famous exhibition of the "Eight" in 1908 and the Independent Artists Exhibitions begun in 1910 could have been held from no other motives, and Sloan recounts his own vital role with both humility and conviction.

An introduction by Sloan's second wife, Helen Farr Sloan (Dolly died in 1943), and a foreword by Bruce St. John, director of the Delaware Art Center, where the Sloan papers have been deposited, give the general background of the diary and of its artistic environment, which is useful for the reader who may know little of this aspect of the social history of the early twentieth century in America. The diary, however, speaks for itself, for Sloan was both a conscious observer of the passing scene and a humanist who protested the injustices he saw in it, although he kept the two quite distinct. He describes it best himself, the day before his fortieth birthday: "Wrote to Abe Simons of the *Coming Nation*



# The Bygones in Boston

***The Gentle Americans: Biography of a Breed***, by Helen Howe (Harper & Row, 435 pp. \$6.95), focuses on the Victorian Boston of Mark Anthony DeWolfe Howe. Iola Haverstick is a free-lance critic who specializes in the nineteenth century.

By IOLA HAVERSTICK

AT A monthly meeting some years ago of Boston's intellectually elite Saturday Club the late mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead was quoted as saying: "If I were asked to choose a representative of homo sapiens to send to Mars, I believe I should choose Mark Howe." He was referring, of course, to Mark Anthony DeWolfe Howe, the biographer, historian, editor, and poet who, from the turn of the century until his death at the age of ninety-six in December 1960, was not only prominent in the world of letters, but highly respected by those who knew him as an exceptionally warm-hearted and well-balanced human being. Accordingly, it is not surprising to find philosopher Whitehead's would-be Martian ambassador the focal point of *The Gentle Americans*, an exceptionally warm-hearted and well-balanced re-creation of a recent and radically different past—the Boston of

yesterday—by the would-be ambassador's daughter, monologist and novelist Helen Howe.

The seventeenth child of a family of eighteen (his father, a Protestant Episcopal clergyman who later became the first Bishop of Central Pennsylvania, had three wives), Mark Howe, who was born in Bristol, Rhode Island, in 1864, remembered seeing soldiers of the Northern Army of Occupation returning from the Civil War, and lived to see his son Quincy act as moderator of the last pre-election television debate between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. Although his arrival on the Boston scene in 1887 to attend Harvard, after having graduated from Lehigh, was greeted by the usual "chill" accorded most "outsiders," the convivial young Howe soon found himself (largely through his first editorial job on *Youth's Companion*) in the Charles Street salon of the local sibyl, Mrs. Annie Fields, widow of publisher James T. Fields and friend of such then-recently-defunct New England literary notables as Longfellow, Emerson, and Hawthorne.

It was at Mrs. Fields's that in 1905, as the escort of Julia Ward Howe, Mark Howe attended, along with Henry James, a dinner that the latter was to describe ten years later in the *Cornhill Magazine* as "a haunted little feast of ghosts if not of skeletons." Mark Howe's own memory of this event, as recorded by his daughter, confirms the Jamesian view. "I remember with a special enjoyment," he wrote, "the utterance of Mrs. Howe as she slumped into her seat for the homeward drive. Diminished as she was in stature by her nearly ninety years, she declared with an air of finality, 'Annie Fields has shrunk.'"

Though such links with the past were, inevitably, to shrink to a void, the living world of Boston was for Howe to widen, most notably, in an intimate sense, in the direction of Quincy, Massachusetts, where, abetted by Harvard Professor Charles Townsend Copeland, he finally, after a siege that lasted seven years, married Miss Fanny Quincy. Mother's "qualities," as Miss Howe describes them, were "original" and "in many ways the antithesis of Father's more obvious ones." Father, whose attributes were basically "faith, hope, and charity," "corresponded with any archetypical Father Image." Mother definitely did not, and Miss Howe explains why in a chapter of her book entitled "Mother—



—Samuel Chamberlain.

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