

Floating Guesthouse

Away From It All, by Sloan Wilson (Putnam. 333 pp. \$6.95), reveals what happens when a Manhattanite sheds his gray flannel suit, buys Guy Lombardo's yacht, and leaves smog more or less permanently behind. James Kelly himself abandoned Madison Avenue for Mexican *mañanas* in Ajijic.

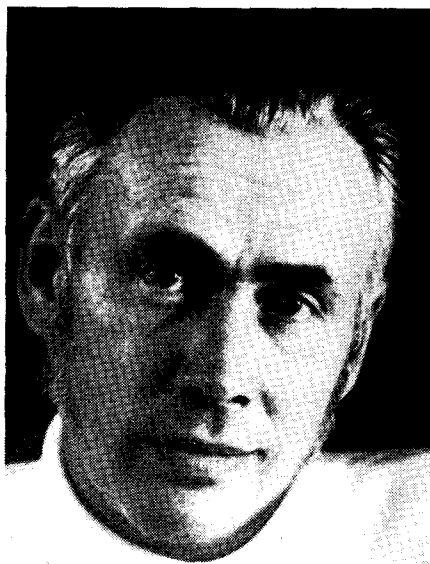
By JAMES KELLY

WHAT HAPPENS when a disgruntled, middle-aged family man turns his back on urban existence, puts on a pair of sneakers, buys a boat, and heads for the horizon? Sloan Wilson tells what in *Away From It All*, his first nonfiction book.

A solvent but tax-tangled forty-six-year-old novelist, Mr. Wilson, after taking personal inventory, concluded that he had become an unjolly fat man with a drinking problem, that his friends were "faded, frenetic, semi-alcoholic, gossipy . . . at best worthy of compassion, at worst deserving contempt." He was surfeited to the eyes by city life and martini lunches at the Harvard Club, and the rigmarole of inhabiting an apartment overlooking Central Park for which the lease was running out. On the brighter side, he was happily married to a beautiful young wife who urged him to follow his inclinations, on good terms with his two-year-old daughter and three college-age progeny by a previous marriage, and still young and free enough to activate his lifelong dream of running away to sea. Experienced in small craft as a boy, in command of Coast Guard vessels during World War II, he suddenly knew that it was now or never on the boat idea—and what happened afterward provides for the book at hand.

The first step was to shuck the trappings of materialism: clothes, furniture, accumulated possessions—with friends and the Salvation Army the richer for it. The next step was to find a boat costing less than \$25,000 to serve as home and transportation for Skipper Sloan, Mate Betty, and young Jessie. After abortive encounters with several eager dealers, a smart broker led them to Maryland's Eastern Shore, where they bought for \$18,000 a venerable fifty-four-foot motor yacht formerly owned by Guy Lombardo. After spending another \$12,000 or so to put her into shape, the Wilsons conned triumphantly across the Chesapeake and headed south via the Inland Waterway.

From this point on, the *Pretty Betty* log mostly chronicles misadventures. The twin diesels operate suspensefully or not at all; young Jessie falls into cooking fat; the cat goes over the side; Mate Betty, not a seagoing lady by experience or preference, finds quarters rather cramped; Skipper Sloan, plagued by a mysteri-



—Peter Strick.

Sloan Wilson — "long New York-type thoughts."

ous fungus infection where he sits, is pleased with his awakened skills as a boat handler spends morose hours at the helm thinking long, long New York-type thoughts. Most soul-disturbing of all are the visitors who come aboard for extended stays: Mate Betty's elbow-bending, colleen-chasing father from Ireland, who proudly lives up to advance billing as "a Brendan Behan who doesn't write"; Skipper Sloan's lovable but talkative mother; his seventeen-year-old son, who elects to return to the States-side company of his young lady and take his chances on Vietnam; daughters, business associates, random hitchhikers—at one time a passenger list of thirteen people booked aboard the floating guesthouse.

The *Pretty Betty* did make a nervous crossing of the Gulf Stream to rendezvous with shrimp fishermen of the Grand Bahama, after island stops along the meandering course. But there was an almost audible sigh of relief from the ship's company when bow-lines went out at the Coconut Grove marina near Miami. Skipper Sloan, feeling purged and happy, faced a few writing assignments including this book. Mate Betty, considerably more amphibious than at the beginning, looked forward to land-based social activities and enrolling an older Jessie in a nursery school. *Away From It All* ends with a cliff-hanging avowal that the Wilsons will soon purchase a boat large enough to sail the Atlantic and visit Jessie's roistering ancestor on his home grounds.

And here we take our leave, anticipating in due time the next installment of this candid, amusing hegira.



Age of the Ego

Princes of the Renaissance, by Orville Prescott (Random House. 397 pp. \$8.95), is, in its author's words, "a popular narrative about the lives, personalities, and politics of extraordinary people." Walter Guzzardi, Jr., a former resident of Rome, is a longtime student of Italian history.

By WALTER GUZZARDI

ORVILLE PRESCOTT, for twenty-five years the leading book reviewer of *The New York Times*, is, quite obviously, a widely-read man. Although he has written an autobiography, edited anthologies, and published collections of his criticism, *Princes of the Renaissance* is, as far as I know, his initial venture into historical writing.

It is harder to imagine a richer subject for a first effort, or one more difficult to manage. Prescott has chosen twenty of the major figures who participated in and helped to create one of the most passionate and explosive eras in all history. These are the princes—figuratively, to be sure, since some were dukes, some duchesses, some popes, and some poets—whose brilliance, cruelty, selfishness, largess, and bursting energies made the Italian Renaissance. Under their patronage Leonardo flourished; under their strong hands the state became a work of art. It was, in short, a marvelous age and, almost since it ended, men—from Symonds and Burckhardt to, most recently, Harris Harbison of Princeton—have been studying it and writing about it with a perception almost as marvelous. Harbison began teaching his course on the Renaissance and the Reformation at just about the time Orville Prescott started reviewing for the *Times*. Harbison's lectures were a work of art, too, and it seems a shame that Prescott could not have been there to listen.

To this splendid literary outpouring Prescott has now added his contribution. It is not, I am sorry to say, a very significant one. First, he underestimates his readers. "This book," he remarks in his introduction, "is a popular narrative about the lives, personalities and politics of extraordinary people. Most of them are unknown except to students of the Renaissance." Charles VIII of France, the Sforzas, Pope Julius II, Baldassare Castiglione—these are not people known only to scholars. Second, he underestimates his subject. He does not suggest the complexity of either the period or the people about whom he writes. Again in his preface Prescott makes the flat statement that he is "ignoring the currently fashionable question of just when was the Renaissance," although it is a ques-

(Continued on page 56)



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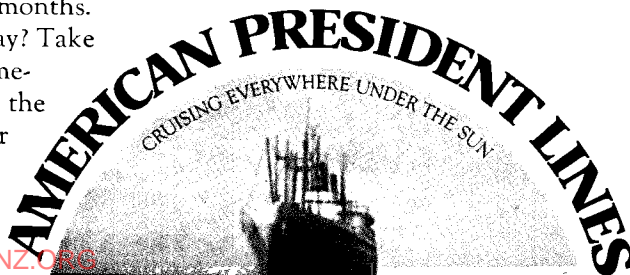
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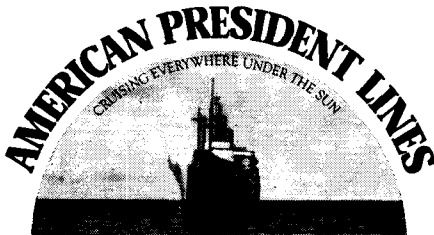
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Edited by David Butwin

Young and in Amsterdam

ONE OF THE quickest ways to get in Dutch with a Dutchman is to mention those two intrepid folk heroes, Hans Brinker and the boy who saved Holland from watery ruin by poking his finger in the dike. I tried it on a Dutch steward a few weeks ago just to break the ennui of a seven-hour flight to Amsterdam. For a moment, I think, he considered pulling the exit hatch beside us and either coaxing me into a free fall or making like a Flying Dutchman himself.

Rapidly I confessed that on two earlier visits to Holland I was left with the impression that Hans Brinker and the dike-stopper have cut larger figures in American folkways than in Dutch. That seemed to win his confidence. "I tell you," he said, "I grew up in Amsterdam and I didn't hear those stories until I started meeting Americans. I have told my children the same stories, so they will know what to expect." He recalled experiencing some anxious moments one Sunday afternoon when, on a country outing with his family, he came upon a statue of the dike-plugger. He explained it away, he told me, as the work of an American sculptor.

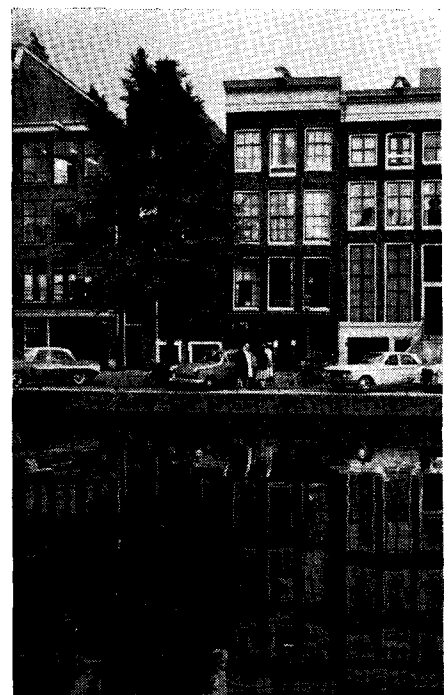
I am not convinced that the two tales are entirely the products of American educational propaganda. On my next visit to Holland, I intend to commandeer a set of Dutch primers, for I have a suspicion that both lads occupy more than a footnote to national lore. If they do, however, I can see why the Dutch deny it. Doubtless they have grown weary of disclaiming the widely circulated fiction that their lives are devoted to such puerile acts as clomping around in wooden shoes, watering tulip beds, and spinning windmills. I cannot help but regard The Netherlands as something of a storybook land, and I can think of no other country in the world, including Heidi's Switzerland, where children enjoy greater favor. This the Dutch might admit privately, for while they shrink from promoting Holland to outsiders as a merry-go-round for children, they continue the tradition of celebrating, quietly and domestically, the glories of youth.

One encounters this tradition the moment one boards a KLM plane, which could if necessary be converted into a flying nursery school. The steward showed me several drawers in the galley crammed with playthings to occupy young travelers—puzzles, coloring books, Dutch flags to fly on their bicycles back home—

and as I fell into some remarkably well-preserved patterns of juvenility, he held off a coquettish Egyptian tot who seemed intent on securing, as a souvenir of her travels, a Dutchman's nose.

Amsterdam abounds with monuments to youth. In the Spui Square stands a statue of Het Amsterdamse Lieverdje, or the Amsterdam Lovable, a young boy in knee pants smiling in the slightly daft manner of Alfred E. Neuman, *Mad Magazine's* what-me-worry kid. The Dutch know the Lieverdje as a peculiar homebred style of pre-teen-ager, who delights in pulling such harmless, though maddening, pranks as letting the air out of Amsterdamers' bicycle tires.

Every so often a holiday from school is declared so that children can prance around the Stock Exchange and drum up as much racket as they can create, all in honor of a seventeenth-century Amsterdam orphan. In 1622, so the story goes, a Spanish general undertook a plot to burn Amsterdam to the ground. One day the orphan and his friends were playing about the Exchange, which was built out over the water, when their ball skipped into the canal and disappeared beneath the building. The boy plunged in after the ball, and although history



—Fritz Henle (Hans Meyer).

Anne Frank House (center)
—no greater monument to
the aspirations of youth.