

The Reverent Historian

Vistas of History, by Samuel Eliot Morison. *New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964.*
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AT A TIME when historical writing is "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought," when historical literature all too clearly indicates a "shift from an ethic of 'action' to one of 'behavior'" as Page Smith recently remarked, it is refreshing and heartening to read a historical narrative in which men are men, and women are glad of it, and God's in His heaven, however perverse the world of man may show itself to be. It is in depiction of the virile world of "action" rather than "behavior," of heroism rather than hysteria, of dignified belief rather than a dithering indifference that Samuel Eliot Morison has made himself the most widely read of contemporary American historians. His history belongs to the school of Herodotus rather than to the school of Hamlet. It unfolds great deeds and it reverences a mystery that always remains in history after the imperfect explanations have been made and the confusions have been cleared away.

It is an elegant and aristocratic history where choices are made in terms of values and where the principle of parsimony always seeks the clearest, the most direct, and the most evident explanation. It is serene and cheerful. It is above argument and its demonstrations are so deft that their great learning seems an easy burden. His style is at once polished and restrained. It is direct and reflective by turns and possesses an easy forward motion which carries the reader through its broad perspectives and its complicated actions.

Even so, Morison is not a great historian, a fact which he cheerfully admits. "Let me say here that, in spite of having received the Balzan award, I do not rate myself in a class with those great historians of the past whom I have mentioned. But I do claim to be a good historical workman; talented if you like, but no genius." If this statement does not convince, let the doubter read, in contrast to Morison's lecture on receiving the Balzan prize "The Experiences and Principles of an Historian," Lord Acton's Inaugural Lecture as Regius Professor of History at Cambridge. The gulf that separates talent from genius is immediately apparent. But to judge Morison in this way is to employ the wrong standard. We don't judge Grandma Moses by the standards set by Rembrandt. His greatness is that of a

good historical workman, a greatness like that of those Yankee builders who turned carpentry into architecture in so many New England villages and cities. It is a greatness achieved mostly by good taste and "a painstaking cultivation of moderate abilities."

And so it turns out that "The Experiences and Principles of an Historian" has little to say about the nature of history and a good deal of very wise advice on the subject of how it is written. The advice is practical and direct and extends from tips on note-taking to the injunctions to be a Christian and to always take the summer vacation rather than do research or teach in summer school.

The test of the pudding is in the eating and the remainder of this slim volume is a collection of samples, representative rather than outstanding, of what a good historian can achieve by imagination, industry and good workmanship.

No one of these essays better indicates the values which underlie Morison's historical writing than the essay, "The Wisdom of Benjamin Franklin," which first appeared, significantly, I think, in the *Saturday Evening Post*. Common sense, a dedication to humane values, a rational religion as deep as it is broad and tolerant, simplicity and utility, an indefatigable curiosity, a commitment to peace, compromise, and expedience which, however, were never purchased at the expense of basic principle, a humanity tinctured by self-indulgence and a patriotism tempered by cosmopolitanism are values which both Franklin and his historian share.

Chapter VI, "The Battle off Samar, October 25, 1944," is an apposite and extremely interesting selection for several reasons. Here Morison demonstrates his great skill in managing a large canvas filled with exact and complex detail while at the same time maintaining a human focus which permits us to see into the heroism and composure of individual men facing the near certainty of death. Beyond this we are permitted to experience vicariously the dedication, "the defiant humor and indomitable courage of blue-jackets caught in the 'ultimate of desperate circumstances' [which] will make the fight of the 'Taffys' with Kurita's Center Force forever memorable, forever glorious."

In this same selection Morison writes "And, also at 0706, compassionate Providence sent a rain squall, under which the carriers, in conjunction with the smoke that they and the escorts were making were protected for about fifteen minutes." Herodotus would not have stated it otherwise. Yet much as we admire the balance Morison maintains between the action of Providence and the force of freely acting men, we cannot help but feel that

here as in Morison's history as a whole there is a depth and unexplored dimension which he wisely did not attempt to explore. His resources are unequal to the task.

Finally, the book is marked by a petty and loquacious vanity expressed with disarming candor in Chapter I, "Receiving the Balzan Award." Written in the vein of "Boston Boy Makes Good and Sees the Pope; Wife Dressed for Occasion in Bergdorf Gown," it lends the distinction of humanity to an uncontested eminence.

Reviewed by STEPHEN J. TONSOR