

S.E. Morison: History Was There

SAMUEL E. MORISON is both retired Professor of History at Harvard and a retired rear admiral. Although he has written much about the first founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, their problems of body and soul, he will likely be known to posterity as a writer of the sea. Two biographies, of Columbus and of John Paul Jones, have already won Pulitzer prizes. And he will certainly receive some kind of accolade for finishing the fourteen volumes in his *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*.

What distinguishes Morison from so many historians is that his has never been a sedentary life, and now in the mid-70's still is not. He has sailed Columbus' route to the new world and has been everywhere that Jones went, except Russia. When World War II broke out, he felt that necessity of a historian's being on the front to record data properly. As a hint he sent President Roosevelt a copy of his Columbus biography, in 1942; but FDR failed to take the hint. Luckily he was, at that time, part of a committee studying the Hyde Park library in FDR's home district. He attached a one-page outline of his naval plans to the report to make sure that the President would read it. He did; and Morison became an admiral. He was equally welcomed by Admiral King in the Pacific, who knew his work on Columbus.

As a result Morison sailed officially on 15 ships and won seven battle stars. One cruiser on which he served was hit by a torpedo, another by a kamikazi. Yet he kept taking notes, and the first volume of his series came out in 1947. Technically his is not the official naval history; but their own records could not be more precise, nor more interestingly

told. Over 220,000 copies of one volume or another have been sold, with 1958's *Leyte* in the lead.

HIS STYLE is unexpectedly relaxed, for a Boston Brahmin. Yet he himself belongs in history. His office, next to the stacks of American books in Harvard's Widener Library (second in size only to the Library of Congress) once belonged to Edward Channing, a long-line Bostonian chronicler. His home is the house in which he was born. It was built by his grandfather while Daniel Webster was tearing down his own house, so his grandfather walked over and took Daniel's living room mantelpiece from the scrap heap. The second floor which used to house servants now holds Morison's extra books. Sometimes the Morisons store the heavy furniture from several rooms in a moving van, call in an orchestra and have a party. Other times he keeps moving: from Harvard, to Washington, to Newport, Rhode Island (for naval archives), to his favorite hideaway, Mount Desert Island in northern Maine. While he was working on his fourteen naval volumes he found time to turn out eight others; and one is a slim 81 pages, called *The Story of Mount Desert Isle*. He himself declares that "it is not merely an island; it is a way of life to which one becomes addicted; and if we are permitted in the hereafter to enter that abode where the just are made perfect, let us hope that it may have some resemblance to Champlain's *Isle des Monts Deserts*."

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