

# Obituaries

BRUCE CATTON

In a delightful memoir of his boyhood in Michigan, our distinguished fellow member Bruce Catton wrote a good deal about trains. He preferred them to every other form of transportation, and as the honorary degrees poured in—nearly thirty, I believe; he was too modest to say and a total had to be wormed out of his secretary—he would only go if the bestowing institution was reachable by rail. It may be apocryphal, but he is said to have remarked that the honorary degree was not worth submitting to the third degree, which is to say an airplane or a long ride by automobile. The memoir itself was called *Waiting for the Morning Train*, with the train a powerful metaphor:

Sooner or later [he wrote] you must move down an unknown road that leads beyond the range of the imagination, and the only certainty is that the trip has to be made. In this respect early youth is exactly like old age; it is a time of waiting for a big trip to an unknown destination. The chief difference is that youth waits for the morning limited and age waits for the night train.

On August 28, 1978, the night train stopped unexpectedly at his home in Frankfort, Michigan, picked up Bruce Catton, and whistled off to the big junction where—one profoundly hopes—the great historians and their subjects gather, the disputes are settled, and all the mysteries are made manifest. He was seventy-eight, born in the very last months of the century that laid strong hold on his talents, imagination, and affection. For all that he was a modern man, with wide-ranging modern interests, his courtly, agreeable, yet reserved manners belonged to a century ago. His friends at *American Heritage* (who had tried him often enough in identifying Brady's photographic

subjects) are convinced that he would have known most of the eminent men he might have met in the mid-nineteenth century on the streets of Washington, New York, and Charleston. One fluttery young thing, recently and perhaps mistakenly hired for the *Heritage* staff, is supposed to have asked him which army he had been in: the Union or the Confederate? It may not have been such a silly question, however, for E. B. Long, Catton's researcher and friend, once pressed him as to why he understood so much about the people and the ideas of the Civil War, and got this ruminative answer: 'I don't know. Maybe I was there.'

The fascination with that tragic conflict began to cast its spell on its future chronicler as a boy in the little town of Benzonia, Michigan, in the person of the old veterans of the Grand Army of the Republic, who told him their tales of camp and battle. His father was a minister who ran a struggling local academy; the atmosphere was pious but happy. Nearly all his brothers and sisters became ministers, too, but young Bruce, who had briefly considered a career as a locomotive engineer, and then as a concert violinist, eventually went off to Oberlin, that strangely productive seat of learning. The First World War, and a short hitch in the navy, interrupted Catton's college career (he never stayed for a B.A.), and he became a newspaperman, in Cleveland, Boston, and Washington. During the Second World War he was a speechwriter and an information official in the War Production Board and the Department of Commerce, experiences out of which he drew his first book, an account of floundering officialdom called *The Warlords of Washington*. It is a good book, but the war was over and it made no ripples at all; the time to write about wars is during them, or long afterward. Catton was forty-eight, and his first success was yet to come. He tried to write a novel based on the Civil War, pondered, and tore it up. He would tell the real story, and he began his first, famous trilogy on the Army of the Potomac. The books were, in order, *Mr. Lincoln's*

*Army, Glory Road*, and, then, the one that brought the fame and the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, *A Stillness at Appomattox*. Here is something—a new career at fifty—to cheer on other, late-starting authors still pecking away on card tables in the spare room.

About this time, in 1954, Catton joined our little group engaged in launching *American Heritage* as a hard-cover magazine of history. The whole idea was to treat history as literature, not dry-as-dust, and for this, of course, he was eminently suited. Not only did he 'live' his subject, but he combined painstaking scholarship with story-telling mastery, and the rest of the secret was hard work. By the time the other editors, as is the wont of the profession, had drifted into the office about half past nine, hung up coats, fetched coffee, and glanced at the mail, Catton's typewriter had been working steadily for two or three hours, and he would emerge smiling to take up the problems of the magazine. He contributed heavily to that as well, as an editor and planner, as an expert in other fields besides the Civil War (he was fascinated by Mayan writings, full of enough Michigan lore to write a book about it, and an encyclopedia on the subject of baseball). There are few issues of the magazine between 1954 and 1978 without one and often two Catton by-lines, and he wrote nearly all the book reviews. And he contributed to other magazines as well.

The astonishing thing is that at the same time he was writing more superb books: *This Hallowed Ground*, a one-volume history of the war, which is my own favorite; then the three-volume *Centennial History of the Civil War*; then a one-volume essay on General Grant, the man he most admired, with all his imperfections, perhaps because of them. This he followed by completing a three-volume series on Grant's life that had been started by the late Lloyd Lewis. That was two more big books: *Grant Moves South* and *Grant Takes Command*. While the major facts naturally do not change, this whole body of work has the singular quality that it never repeats, and is full of fresh

incident and insight in each book. That he could do it all and still find time for leisurely lunches at such favorite haunts as the Algonquin Hotel and the Plaza's Oak Room, and to make speeches and conduct a course at Wesleyan University utterly confounded us.

Many notable authors and scholars helped *American Heritage* over the last quarter century. It owes a tremendous debt to the late Allan Nevins, who advised us well, egged us on, and sent many writers to us. And Bruce Catton, by his contributions, his presence, and his example, made us famous in the world of history. Yet he was unassuming, unbothered by interruptions, gentle to writers, quite willing to be disagreed with. Surrounded by regimental histories of the war, and a thousand other references, he would type away on an old-fashioned machine, using piles of yellow foolscap. If he made a mistake, he would yank out the page and type it over, neatly and precisely. As his editor at Doubleday, Samuel S. Vaughan, once wrote: 'Many popular or distinguished writers receive (in the Post Office phrase) special handling; but Mr. Catton, who is both distinguished and popular, earns much special handling and never demands any.'

When Catton was asked by us to write the narrative text for our own *American Heritage Pictorial History of the Civil War*, he picked up a new supply of foolscap without a murmur and, to our delight, won us a special Pulitzer citation. He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and given a Medal of Freedom by President Ford. He was elected to the American Antiquarian Society in October 1969, contributed to the development campaign, but attended no meetings. The Society, I recall, was one of the pleasures that he said he would like to take part in when—as never happened—all the due manuscripts were written and there was time to travel. Perhaps, if the train service to Worcester were what it used to be, one might have seen more of him.

Bruce Catton leaves a brother, a sister, and a son, William

B. Catton, a professor of history at Middlebury College, with whom he had jointly written two additional books. The latest of these, published in late 1978, just after Bruce Catton's death, is *The Bold and Magnificent Dream: America's Founding Years, 1492-1815*. Father and son wrote different chapters, and it would have pleased the father that such a Catton student as the undersigned tried to identify five of Bruce's passages and came up with only two right—batting, as he would have said, only .400.

We have had on the Society's roster a man of enormous character and brilliance. He said once, back in 1956 at the Loomis School in Connecticut (he was typically giving a graduating address as a favor to a friend): 'It is the noble dreams of men which live the longest. . . . Shakespeare was a cynic when he remarked that the evil men do lives after them. The evil is of short life. It is the good that survives. It survives in brick and stone, in human institutions that go on working long after the men who founded them have been gathered to their fathers. It survives in the hearts of men who . . . re-examine their debt to the past.'

That is the business of the American Antiquarian Society as it was of our late good friend, Bruce Catton.

Oliver Jensen

#### SINCLAIR HAMILTON

Sinclair Hamilton, lawyer, book collector, and preeminent authority in the field of early American book illustration, died in his house in Edgartown, Martha's Vineyard, on August 28, 1978. He was ninety-three.

A lifelong New Yorker, except for some of the years of his growing up, he was born in Manhattan on October 17, 1884. His father, Samuel Hamilton, had come from Belfast in 1873 to accept the pastorate of the Second Scotch Presbyterian

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