

Douglas Phillips-Birt, *The History of Yachting* (New York: Stein and Day, 1974). Illustrated. 288 pp.

The noun “blurb” is defined in this reviewer’s dictionary as [the]: “publisher’s laudatory description of a book frequently printed on the jacket or cover”; and nowadays blurbs-in-advance are common in the form of press releases prior to publication. Like the epitaphs upon tombstones, or Hollywood trailers for forthcoming films, both kinds of blurbs often seem too good to be true, and at times the great expectations of the reader are disappointed.

The advance publicity for *The History of Yachting* was no exception to the propensity for publishers everywhere to sell their products long . . . and hard, and loud. Among the claims that Stein and Day made for the book before it was distributed was that it would be “a treat for the sailing enthusiast and the art lover alike”, and that it “provides the definitive history of the sport from its earliest days . . .” Most historians have an ambition to produce a “definitive history” of some sort, just as they are sometimes indignant at the suggestion that somebody else might actually have accomplished it. Few adjectives are as provocative as the term “definitive”, and perhaps it is conferred to lightly and too frequently today and seldom deserved.

It must be admitted that such cynical and ungenerous thoughts were not absent from one’s mind when author Phillips-Birt’s work finally arrived, because of previous literary let-downs encountered in the line of review duty. In this case, however, the publishers were in fact far too modest. As well as art lovers and sailing enthusiasts, the book should also delight sports historians everywhere. It might well prove to be the

actual definitive work on the subject; certainly it is difficult to see how it could be surpassed at present.

The reader is first of all impressed by the elegant appearance of the book, a triumph of design and production which immediately arouses acquisitive instincts during the preliminary perusal and creates the desire for possession of such an object of beauty. Naturally the jacket is in gorgeous color depicting large yachts among white-crested waves, before a background of rugged mountainous landscape, and underneath a brooding, stormy sky (one can almost feel the wind!). The reader is further visually beguiled by no less than 32 full-color plates, and 135 black-and-white illustrations, between the well-bound covers. The author's claim that "The illustrations in this book are designed to amplify rather than decorate the text" is fully borne out when the narrative is read. Apart from acknowledged masterpieces by the Van de Veldes, Turner, Eakins, Dufy, and others, the illustrations are collected from a wide range of sources and include some hitherto unpublished rare ones. They are inserted at appropriate places and definitely enhance as well as amplify the text. Various famous Yacht Clubs gave their cooperation to this venture regarding the photographing of their models and/or pictures; and as an example of the prodigious care involved, the New York Yacht Club made special arrangements to have the immense glass hoisted free from around its large models, so that photographs could be taken of them in as pleasing a way as possible. Perhaps the art pertaining to the history of any sport has never been used in such an effective fashion before to complement a narrative. It is not surpassed in this respect even by Peter Heaton's *Yachting: A Pictorial History*—another authoritative and beautiful book—published in 1973 by The Viking Press. Indeed, anyone concerned with the history of this exotic sport need only refer to these two recent volumes to feel confident in her or his source material.

Douglas Phillips-Birt has already written more than twenty books on ship design, maritime history and yachting, edited *Yachting World Annual*, written the *Encyclopedia Britannica* entry on Yachting, and contributed a monthly causerie to *Yachting Monthly* for the past 22 years. He has been praised in a unique manner by Sir Francis Chichester as being perhaps the only man who understood in advance the difficulties of his "Gipsy Moth V" speed project. He has also served on numerous technical yacht committees with various clubs, and sailed in many ocean races including the Santander and the Fastnet. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that his writing should reflect authority, confidence and experience. However, the delightful bonus is that all this knowledge is presented in such exquisite, flowing prose. There is, to be sure, analysis and perception (particularly when technical details are significant), reference to wide-ranging primary and secondary source material of all kinds (including nautical poetry and fiction), and other identifiable hallmarks of the careful and conscientious historian. E.H. Carr once wrote that accuracy was not a virtue in an historian, but merely his duty. Phillips-Birt's history is certainly dutiful, but beyond that it is immensely readable as well, which many might still regard as a virtuous quality. Reading the narrative one is reminded in places of J. H. Plumb,

who has the similar ability to take a mass of rather complex, interdependent historical concepts, and in a few simple sentences, capture their essential meaning for posterity. It is tempting to take some examples from *The History of Yachting*-a sentence or two from here, a paragraph from there-to try and justify one's enthusiasm for this text. But the temptation must be resisted. Taken out of context they could not possibly do justice to the whole, and this is a book which should be savoured in its entirety.

In summary, then, it can only be said in somewhat uncritical and unoriginal fashion that this book is recommended without reservation. If ever a foreign challenger is actually successful in taking the *America's Cup* away from the United States, all the members of both the victorious and defeated crews should be presented with a complimentary copy. Having made history in their sport, they should feel a special affinity with the author, not to mention a debt of gratitude.

Gerald Redmond