

\* \* \* \* \* **BOOK REVIEWS** \* \* \* \* \**The Great White Fleet*

James R. Reckner, *Teddy Roosevelt's Great White Fleet*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, Maryland, 1988; xii, 221 pp., bibliography, index; illustrated.

"The Great White Fleet," consisting of some sixteen battleships, six torpedo boats, four auxiliaries, and a converted yacht, departed from Hampton Roads, Virginia, on December 16, 1907, and returned, after circumnavigating the globe, to Hampton Roads on February 22, 1909. The voyage of the Great White Fleet was the longest such cruise ever accomplished to that time. The voyage confirmed the status of the United States as a first-class world power, and showed the results of the naval expansion during the administration of Theodore Roosevelt. Everywhere on the journey around the globe—in South America, Australia, Japan, Europe—the fleet was greeted with friendly enthusiasm. The voyage of the Great White Fleet is comparable in many ways to more recent voyages into outer space in terms of public interest, technological accomplishment, and widespread emotional involvement.

Theodore Roosevelt wrote in his *Autobiography* (1913): "In my own judgement the most important service that I rendered to peace was the voyage of the battle fleet round the world. I had become convinced that for many reasons it was essential that we should have it clearly understood . . . that the Pacific was as much our home waters as the Atlantic, and that our fleet could and would at will pass from one to the other of the two great oceans. It seemed to me evident that such a voyage would greatly benefit the navy itself; would arouse popular interest in and enthusiasm for the navy; and would make foreign nations accept as a matter of course that our fleet should from time to time be gathered in the Pacific,

just as from time to time it was gathered in the Atlantic, and that its presence in one ocean was no more to be accepted as a mark of hostility to any Asiatic power than its presence in the Atlantic was to be accepted as a mark of hostility to any European power. . . . At the time, as I happen to know, neither the English nor the German authorities believed it possible to take a fleet of great battleships round the world. They did not believe that their own fleets could perform the feat, and still less did they believe that the American fleet could. . . . My prime purpose was to impress the American people; and this purpose was fully achieved. The cruise did make a very deep impression abroad; boasting about what we have done does not impress foreign nations at all, except unfavorably, but positive achievement does; and the two American achievements that really impressed foreign peoples during the first dozen years of this century were the digging of the Panama Canal and the cruise of the battle fleet round the world."

The digging of the Panama Canal has been thoroughly chronicled in David McCullough's *The Path Between the Seas* (1977), and now that other impressive American achievement, the voyage of the Great White Fleet, has been given detailed attention by James R. Reckner in *Teddy Roosevelt's Great White Fleet* (1988), winner of the Theodore and Franklin D. Roosevelt Naval History Prize. Reckner's book is the most scholarly and substantive account to date of the voyage of the Great White Fleet. Reckner, who served twenty years in the U.S. Navy and now teaches at Texas Tech University,

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Prof. James R. Reckner, author of *Teddy Roosevelt's Great White Fleet*, speaking at the Fourth Annual Roosevelt Naval History Prize luncheon of the New York Council of the Navy League, Harvard Club, New York City, May 13, 1989. Prof. Reckner's book won the Roosevelt Naval History Prize for 1989. See article in "News and Notes."

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brings naval knowledge and scholarly analysis to the subject. Previous commentary on the voyage has focused on the diplomatic dimensions of the cruise, but Reckner, while by no means neglecting the diplomatic aspects of the story, gives an emphasis to the technological and military side of the Great White Fleet's global deployment. At the same time, he does not lose sight of the human elements or the dramatic and colorful in the saga of the Great White Fleet.

The voyage of the Great White Fleet is still remembered as a display of American naval power. What is forgotten in most textbooks is that the

voyage followed the failure of American efforts at the Second Hague Peace Conference of 1907 to limit the naval arms race. In short, "speak softly" had preceded the showing of the "big stick." Given a world in the grip of a naval arms race, the need to prepare for what might (and did) come in the next decades was crucial. Reckner writes: "The need to test the fleet was imperative. This was the all-important consideration behind the decision to conduct a cruise. . . ." TR had the potential threats of both Japanese and German naval power, and the real possibility of a two-ocean war, in mind when he decided to test the navy. The voyage was a gamble in several ways. The fleet might not make it. Foreign powers might not view the trip as a goodwill cruise. But all went well.

Reckner rightly refutes the charge that Rooseveltian militarism was behind the cruise, or that TR in some way was causing the naval arms race. ". . . The naval arms race of the first decade of the century grew not out of the cruise but out of rapid industrialization on the part of European continental powers, the appearance of the HMS *Dreadnought*, and the failure of the Second Hague Conference in 1907," says Reckner. "The battleship cruise was a manifestation, a result, of that arms race, not one of its major causes."

Reckner concludes: "The significance of the battleship cruise . . . must be understood in the context of the developing American navy. It was the first effective test of the New Navy's sea legs, of its ability to respond to defense requirements in the Pacific. And the experience it provided paved the way for a reappraisal of America's Pacific defense capabilities. Unprecedented publicity encouraged critical examination of battleship design and navy organization. Both were found wanting. That examination is an integral, often overlooked, part of the story of the fleet cruise, and perhaps equally important, it illuminates the story of the navy's often painful process of modernization. The fleet that returned from the world cruise was a fleet that through long and sustained practice had been welded into a single,

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The U.S.S. *Theodore Roosevelt* CVN-71 deployed in the Mediterranean, June 21, 1989. TR's modern Navy is still very much a factor in American defense policy, as it was in the days of the Great White Fleet.

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highly professional unit. The combined effect of cruise and debate was to set the American navy firmly on the road toward more rational, efficient, and professional development."

The long-term significance of the cruise can be illustrated by the fact that among the young men on the voyage were Ensign William Halsey and Midship-

man Raymond Spruance.

James R. Reckner's new book is a fine contribution to our understanding of American naval history in the twentieth century as well as a "good read" and "must" reading for all interested in Theodore Roosevelt's administration.

— John Allen Gable.



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*Louis Auchincloss Looks at the "American Renaissance"*

Louis Auchincloss, *The Vanderbilt Era: Profiles of a Gilded Age*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, New York, 1989; 214 pp., index, illustrated.

"Louis Auchincloss is one of the best American writers alive," says Susan Cheever. And so he is. Louis Auchincloss is the author of some thirty-two volumes of fiction—I have read twenty-two of them—and eleven volumes of nonfiction. In addition, he was for many years a practicing attorney in New York City, and he serves with distinction as President of the Museum of the City of New York. This year Auchincloss has published two books (he usually publishes a book a year), *Fellow Passengers: A Novel of Portraits*, which is vintage Auchincloss fiction, and *The Vanderbilt Era*. *The Vanderbilt Era* is a collection of profiles of the Vanderbilts, the high society they lived in, the artists and architects the Vanderbilts and other wealthy patrons employed, and other subjects related to the era that give birth to the term "conspicuous consumption." Auchincloss writes: "The era that I have chosen to so designate [as the Vanderbilt Era] is the period in American social history, centered to a large extent in the City of New York, that occupied the last two decades of the nineteenth and the first of the twentieth century. It is an era closely related, of course, to the Mauve Decade, the Edwardian Age, the *belle epoque*, terms which inevitably evoke elegant and extravagant ways of life. I do not suggest that members of the Vanderbilt family were responsible for the era. . . . I chose them because they were richer and more numerous than any of the other clans that dominated business in the decades that followed the Civil War, and because they made a greater splash with their money. It is my contention that it was that splash, combined with all the other splashes from the great new fortunes of the time, that gave its principal features to that age of gold and alloy, providing fuel for the engines that were to produce, amid a great deal of undoubted ugliness, the artistic productions of what has sometimes been called, for better or worse, the American Renaissance."

The comparison with the Italian Renaissance is obvious in the patronage of the rich for such artists and architects as Richard Morris Hunt, John Singer Sargent, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Louis C. Tiffany,

and Stanford White, all of whom are subjects of profiles in Auchincloss's new book. Indeed, Renaissance styles and forms were evident in much of their work, and Auchincloss calls Tiffany "an American Cellini." But while the new "Robber Barons" were Machiavellian, "a society was in the making where money and business would be the only acceptable interests for the conventionally successful male," as Auchincloss says. In other words, the "American Renaissance" did not live up to the original Italian ideal. Tom Wolfe's novel *Bonfire of Vanities*, with a title based in part on the work of the Renaissance reformer Savonarola, bears witness to the persistence of this late nineteenth century legacy of commercial domination, as do many of the novels of Louis Auchincloss. There were few Cellinis, few "Renaissance men," in this period of the "American Renaissance."

Theodore Roosevelt, however, has been called a "Renaissance man." He was painted by Sargent, and was a patron (as President, with coinage) of Saint-Gaudens. But he based much of his career on an opposition to the "Robber Barons" and the social climate they created. Theodore Roosevelt can only be fully understood in the context of the social world, "centered to a large extent in the City of New York," that Louis Auchincloss writes about in *The Vanderbilt Era* and in many of his novels.

Louis Auchincloss is a master of characterization and of American social history, and he writes with wit and clarity, qualities all evident in *The Vanderbilt Era*. The book perhaps lacks continuity at points, and the reader not familiar with the period may become lost among the large cast of characters and Vanderbilt cousins. But for those who know something of the era, rich rewards await. Auchincloss's opinions and judgements are informed, perceptive, balanced, and fair, and also "gentle," as in "gentleman," a word which will have meaning at least as long as Mr. Auchincloss is with us.

-J.A.G.