

HUNTING THE WHALE

YANKEE WHALERS IN THE SOUTH SEAS, by A. B. C. Whipple; Victor Gollancz Ltd., English price 16/-.

(Reviewed by W. B. Stewart)

THIS is an interesting book, partly for what it says and partly for the way it says it. As to the first, the book is a collection of stories about whaling men, their ships and their quarry—the largest animal the world has ever seen. It has high adventure, pathos, horror; like the story of the whale-smashed Essex whose survivors sailed for three months and 4600 miles in an open boat, saving their lives by cannibalism.

The book is written in the slick American style—part was published in *Life*—and has the faults and merits of this type of journalism. It is extraordinarily vivid: "Like three elongated spiders the boats walked across the Pacific." But the effects are apt to be repeated; I can remember three spider-walking boats; and I found myself tiring of ships which don't so much sail as "splish," "plough" and "roll" their way along. No opportunity is lost to pile on the agony. Whether it be fear, pathos or horror, it is laid on

in good, thick slabs. The result is sometimes unfortunate. For instance, after describing a series of particularly revolting murders by a mad mutineer in minute detail—"the murmuring bubbles of air as Fisher panted through the blood in his mouth"—Mr. Whipple attempts another turn of the screw with, "Comstock (the mad mutineer) gave his command; the body was hoisted to the rail and dumped over the side—no brief, muttered words consigning the captain to the depths and to God." Maybe my moral sense is at fault, but it seemed to me that a consignment notice from Comstock would be appreciated by neither the consigned nor the consignee.

Mr. Whipple has done considerable research, with some attempt to give sources, but as he stresses himself, the book is not for scholars; too many gaps are filled in imaginatively, too much conversation and too many thoughts ascribed to historical characters of which Mr. Whipple could know nothing.

Further, there is a type of pulp writer who sets his adventure stories in exotic scenes, say Arabia, getting his local colour from *Teach Yourself Arabic* and a guide book. I suspect that slick writ-

ing like *Yankee Whalers* is sophisticated pulp: remarkably good journalism, exciting to read, at least in magazine-length articles, and even valuable. But whatever art might be, this isn't it. And if you think I'm taking too highbrow an attitude, read this book, then read (or re-read) Melville's *Moby Dick*. In the first, the interest wanes as the literary tricks become obvious, as the emotions become flaccid from the constant bombardment. In the second, considerable effort is needed to get over the initial heavy going, but then the rewards are rich. Maybe that childhood adage about the things you have to work for being the things worthwhile has got something. Maybe that's why, about half-way through, I began to get bored with *Yankee Whalers* which, like all its fellow books and articles, has as its watchword: Thou shalt not contain anything that even looks like a demand on thy reader.

PHOTOGENIC HIGH COUNTRY

THE MOUNTAINS OF NEW ZEALAND, by Rodney Hewitt and Mavis Davidson; A. H. and A. W. Reed, 18/6.

EUROPEAN and Himalayan ranges have been well treated with books illustrated with many photographs. There is need in New Zealand for more books on mountain scenery. While few of our alpine photographers can approach the skill of Andre Roch or Frank Smythe, a glance at contemporary mountain club

publications will show that our best men are good, among them the authors of this book.

The scope includes both islands, and the work of many photographers. All regions have been fairly treated, with the exception of Southern Westland. The most successful blocks are those that fill a single page. The standard of reproduction is high, and the use of art paper enables the text to link closely with the illustrations. The captions are clear and factual, but in many cases incomplete; a work that aims to give description and information could well identify the peaks shown in photographs. This has not always been done, and the reader has to be satisfied with generalities such as "Upper Tasman peaks from the Haast Ridge," instead of "The Minarets, Elie de Beaumont, Hochstetter Dome and Mount Darwin from the Haast Ridge."

The text is interesting and informative. Its impersonal tone makes one wish that the authors had allowed their more vigorous qualities to appear. Those familiar with the crisp wit of Mr. Hewitt and the generous exuberance of Mrs. Davidson will regret that these graces have been omitted. Nevertheless, readers of considerable mountain experience or none will be glad to have this book, whether for entertainment or reference. Both authors are widely travelled and skilful mountaineers, and their recent guidebook on the Central Southern Alps has been widely read and well received.



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