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Two Years Before The Mast

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Richard Henry Dana



Synopsis

Two Years Before the Mast is a book by the American author Richard Henry Dana, Jr., written after a two-year sea voyage starting in 1834 and published in 1840. A film adaptation under the same name was released in 1946. While at Harvard College Dana had an attack of the measles which affected his sight. Thinking it might help his sight, Dana, rather than going on a Grand Tour as most of his classmates traditionally did (and unable to afford it anyway), and being something of a non-conformist, left Harvard to enlist as a common sailor on a voyage around Cape Horn, on the brig Pilgrim. He returned to Massachusetts two years later aboard the Alert (which left California sooner than the Pilgrim). He kept a diary throughout the voyage, and after returning he wrote a recognized American classic, *Two Years Before the Mast*, published in 1840, the same year of his admission to the bar. (Quote from wikipedia.org) About the Author Richard Henry Dana Jr. (August 1, 1815 - January 6, 1882) was an American lawyer and politician, and author of the book *Two Years Before the Mast*. Dana was born into one of the first families of Cambridge, Massachusetts, grandson of Francis Dana, and attended Harvard College. Having trouble with his vision after a bout of the measles, he thought a voyage might help his failing sight. Rather than going on a Grand Tour of Europe, in 1834 he left Harvard to enlist as a common sailor on a voyage around Cape Horn to the then-remote California, at that time still a part of Mexico. He set sail on the brig Pilgrim (180 tons, 86.5 feet long), visited a number of settlements in California (including Monterey, San Pedro, San Juan Capistrano, San Diego, Santa Barbara, and Santa Clara), and San Francisco. He returned to Massachusetts --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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Customer Reviews

Why should you read this book? Yes, it is a classic. Yes, it documents the wonderful, adventurous time of the clipper ship. But that's not why you should read it. Richard Henry Dana must have been a most extraordinary man. While attending Harvard as a young man, his eyesight became weak and his health declined. He decided that the austere prescription of salt air and plain hard work would be the cure. Not many would give up comfort and privilege, but for two years, Dana served as a common sailor, given no special treatment as the gentleman he was, and lived in the forecastle of the *Alert*, eating the mess of salt beef and common hardtack, risking his life and serving under a captain crueller than most. Dana was able to write in such a way as to re-create the life on board a sailing ship, down to the smallest details and that's what makes this book so real and touching. You can feel the cold of Tierra del Fuego, taste the salt beef, and feel the wind and damp. What's more amazing is that Dana's carefully-kept journal was lost along with his other mementos of his voyage when he landed back on shore in Boston, due to some tragic carelessness of someone he entrusted with his chest of belongings. Yet he was able to recreate his voyage in loving detail and in some very excellent writing. Dana's later life as a lawyer was far from happy, though he made some critical contributions to maritime law. He died a poor and disappointed man, but left us the richer with his book. I just re-read it again for the tenth time, and it is fresher than ever. Read it along side of *Moby Dick*. It's American literature and American history and culture at its very best.

I know many people cringe at the thought of reading a narrative that seems to greatly resemble *Moby Dick*, but I tell you this better than *Moby Dick* and easily makes it into my top ten books I have ever read! Occasionally the text bogs down in obscure sailing terms, but that is an exception and not a rule, otherwise, it is sheer poetry and lights the fire of wonder of exploration, and makes a sea voyage from almost 200 years ago spring to life. I give you my favorite short little passage, which explains it so much better. "So quiet too, was the sea, and so steady the breeze, that if the sails had been sculptured marble they could not have been more motionless. Not a ripple upon the surface of the canvas; not even a quivering of the extreme edges of the sail, so perfectly were they distended by the breeze. I was so lost in the sight that I forgot the presence of the man who came out with me, until he said, 'How quietly they do their work!'" Dana so perfectly described sea life you will be a part of the crew, you will feel his fear, his wonder, his joy and his awe. You will not regret reading this, philosophy disguised as a travelogue, a must-read!

This is a great story for nautical buffs, history buffs and adventure fans. This young man takes passage to sail around the horn to go to California in it's days of infancy as a traders destination. I found the personal stories , the information of the early days at the ports of call and the historical description to be exciting and deep in it's descriptive painting of a life long gone but important to the future of the state. I recommend this book.

This book is a great in many ways - as history, as narrative, as travelogue, as social documentary and as Adventure, but I feel that it's probably fair to caution the modern reader that it's written in a style that he or she may not be used to - not flowery, but not spare either. You do get the sense that you're not reading a modern work. Aside from its other merits, it's great background reading for fans of the Aubrey/Maturin series by Patrick O'Brian, even though it takes place about 20 years after their last published exploits. Faults? Well, for my taste, there was perhaps a little more sailor jargon than I could take in (the version of the book I read, not this edition, had no diagrams). When he was going into great detail on sails and ropes, I skimmed past some material, but not too much, and was able to pick up the sense of what he was writing about, without necessarily being able to determine the precise difference between two types of sails on the same mast (call me Maturin). Overall, you get the sense that he spent two years in almost unceasing toil, and that life as a sailor in those days was not one that anyone today would envy. Also, since this was a recount of an actual two year voyage, there was perhaps one or two too many recounts of cruises up and down the coast for those seeking "adventure" reading, but this is an actual historical account, and can't be faulted for some slow pacing - I have no doubt it WAS awfully tedious at times (which the book is not). However, it has SO many other merits that any patient reader will gain much from it, particularly an authentic, well documented perspective from another time. So, read the book, but don't think you'll knock it off in one night, or that it'll read like Tom Clancy, or even Mark Twain. Nevertheless, read it anyway, it's well worth it.

This is a great read. If you missed it in high school, as I did 55 years ago, it's never too late to catch up. This is the story of Richard Henry Dana Jr., a young Harvard student, who leaves school to go on a sea voyage to improve his health. He ships out of Boston on the brig Pilgrim bound for California to bring back cow hides, presumably for the leather industry around Boston. There are parts of the book that some will complain about. At times he seems to go on for page after page rattling off technical stuff about managing sails on a sailing ship, albeit under horrific conditions.

Give up early, he does not explain and you will not understand all this stuff about sails. But, he gives a graphic, sometimes chilling, picture of what life was like for seamen on a merchant ship in the 1800s. They were no better than slaves and life and death was subject to the whims of the captain. Their pay was small and sometimes they were forced to spend it in what amounted to a company store. It was possible to go on a two year voyage and wind up owing the shipping company money. Again, the conditons under which this labor was performed was sometimes beyond our imagination. Those of us who whine when the freeway slows down should try rounding Cape Horn in a sailing ship. Also, if you are interested in pre gold rush California history, this book gives a great view of Mexican Alta California, at least the history that happened close to the coast. Some of Dana's views will be seen as racist, and they are, but they seem to be a result of a judgment drawn from personal observations rather than a prejudice. He did have high regard for Sandwich Islanders (Hawaiians). All in all, an exciting adventure story and an insightful look into early 19th century merchant sailing. Highly recommended.

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