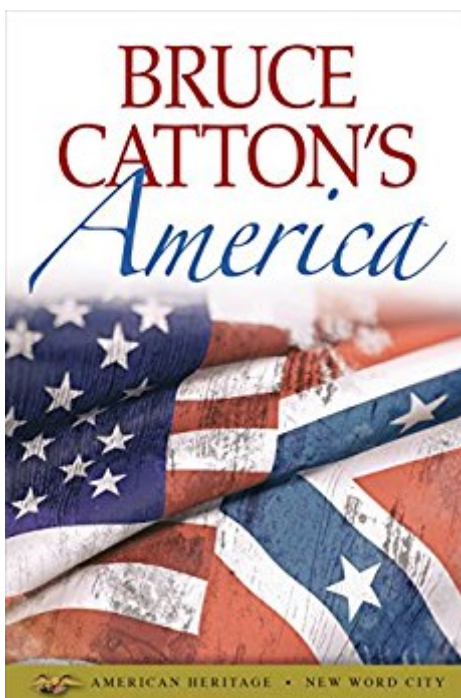


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Bruce Catton's America



Synopsis

No one has ever told America's story with more grace, clarity, and emotional power than Pulitzer Prize winner Bruce Catton. In his books, ranging from the celebrated Civil War trilogies to the account of his boyhood in back-country Michigan, Catton brought the people of the past to such vivid life that he became the nation's best-loved and most widely read historian. Bruce Catton's friend and associate for many years, Oliver Jensen, has assembled this volume of selections of Catton's works - as a memorial to the man and a tribute to the historian. The excerpts chosen for Bruce Catton's America include portions of A Stillness at Appomattox, which won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award; The American Heritage History of the Civil War, awarded a special Pulitzer Prize Citation; and representative selections from many other books and articles. The book also includes several previously unpublished pieces. Bruce Catton helped to create American Heritage magazine in 1954 and continued to influence it for the next twenty-four years - first as editor, then as senior editor and a frequent contributor. He spent much of his adult life as a newspaperman in the Midwest and Washington, D.C., and became a historian "by logical extension." Although best known as the greatest writer on the Civil War, he had wide-ranging interests. To those who are familiar with Bruce Catton's work, these selections will appear as old friends whose company never fails to provide enjoyment, stimulation, and a deep sense of worth. For those who have not yet read him, Bruce Catton's America will be an introduction to historical writing at its best.

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Customer Reviews

Bruce Catton is a premier historian of the 20th century and if you haven't yet read the works of this Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award-winning author, then start with this one and get ready for a treat. Many scholars and writers agree that Catton was the foremost authority on the American Civil War, in part because his stories read like he was there. The only son in his family who didn't become a minister, Catton grew up in Michigan at a time when Civil War veterans were still around. As a kid, he heard their many stories until he said it felt the war had taken place just a few years earlier in the next county. He soaked up their words and immersed himself in books and studied old Civil War photos until he admitted that could probably "recognize people on the streets of Washington in 1860 better than 1960." Fortunately for readers of great literature, Catton was much more than simply a brilliant Civil War historian. This compilation attests to that. For me, a child of television, the beauty of his words reminds me of those great CBS programs about life in America hosted by Charles Kuralt or narration at the end of "The Waltons" by Earl Hamner. This is rich, enjoyable reading by a national treasure and recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom. It's the kind of book that takes one away from their daily grind and transports them to the times and places of Catton's subjects. It truly a pleasure to read.

"No one ever wrote American history with more easy grace, beauty, and emotional power or greater understanding of its meaning than Bruce Catton," writes Oliver Jensen, the former editor of American Heritage, in his introduction. Proving that statement, this book is a collection of excerpts from Catton's various writings, mostly about the Civil War but also some poignant recollections of his boyhood in Michigan. There is a magical power of imagination in Catton's work. More than any other historian, he was able to create cinematic scenes that make you feel that you are by the campfire, in the forest, or on the dusty, smoke-filled field of battle. If you want to learn to write great history, starting by retyping passages

from his books. For example, here was what Grant's soldiers saw just before the Wilderness slaughter: "It was the fourth of May, and beyond the dark river there was a forest with the shadow of death under its low branches, and the dogwood blossoms were floating in the air like lost flecks of sunlight, as if life was as important as death. Or the moonlit scene when Confederates wait in trenches on Missionary Ridge near Chattanooga, with the Union Army in the valley below getting ready to attack, and the moon goes dark with an eclipse. "There had been a great silver light over mountain and plain and rival battle lines, and it died and gave way to a creepy rising shadow as the moon was blotted out, so that the armored ridge was a silent, campfire-spangled mass outlined against a pale sky, with darkness coming up out of the hollows. Both armies looked on in awed silence, and the sight seems to have been taken as an incomprehensible omen of ill fortune. Early in the book there is an amazing chapter on the pivotal week in May 1856 that set the nation on the path to war. First, Sen. Charles Sumner inspired the North and outraged the South with his impassioned speech against the evils of slavery. Then pro-Southern "Border Ruffians" burned and looted Lawrence, Kansas; Sumner was caned almost to death in the Senate for insulting the South; and John Brown's gang murdered five people in Pottawatomie in retaliation for the Lawrence atrocities. All in one week. You can feel the country spilling out of control. Perhaps the most moving passage, about the death of Catton's father, came at the end, as a night train stops in the station to pick him up. You have to read it.

If you've never read anything written by Bruce Catton, you couldn't do better than beginning with this book. Mr. Catton doesn't simply rehash history, he brings it to life in a way that makes you feel like you are there, deftly inserted into the action. This book is a collection of items previously authored by Mr. Catton. Editor Oliver Jensen explains in the Introduction that he wanted to present examples of Bruce Catton's best work without feeling that he had to include any of the chapters, articles, or speeches in their entirety. Much of the book covers the Civil War (Catton's expertise), but one would be remiss to skip Chapter 1 "Morning Train," which is a brief history of Mr. Catton's early life, and written by the author. It is a wonderful remembrance of his youth, ending with an appropriate section concerning the Civil War veterans he had known in his home town. You will be rewarded with portents of his writing style, such as this entry describing America moving into the 20th century: "On the eve of this terrible century of mass

slaughter and wholesale collapse, of concentration camps and bombing raids, of cities gone to ruin and race relations grown desperate and poisonous, of the general collapse of all accepted values and the unendurable tension of the age of nuclear fission. On the eve of all of this, it was possible, even inevitable, for many people to be optimistic. The world was about to take off its mask, and our worst nightmares did not warn us what we were going to see. It is this same skilled description that escorts us through the Civil War, where we meet heroes and villains, generals and politicians. Mr. Jensen briefly introduces each chapter before allowing the author to introduce us to the many different (and interesting) stories of this war between the states. It would be impossible for any reader not to gain a deeper insight into the reasons for this war, as well as learn more about the personalities of the leading as well as the bit players. There are countless anecdotes relating incidents about household names (Grant, Lincoln, etc.) as well as nameless men who, for different reasons, grabbed their guns and marched off to fight. At times the book reads like an exciting novel, and it almost feels disappointing when a chapter comes to an end. The book concludes with an excerpt from Mr. Catton's book, "Waiting for the Night Train," which focuses on his memories of his father's last few years. It provides a fitting ending to a memorable book. Five stars.

Like everything I've read by Bruce Catton. It wasn't what I expected. It's a book of shorts and excerpts from other books. I enjoyed it very much,

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