View of Manhattan by Robert Havell, c. 1839.

The New York That Was

THE ICONOGRAPHY OF MANHATTAN ISLAND. By I. N. Phelps Stokes. Illustrated. 6 vols. About 4,500 pp. New York: Arno Press. $795.

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

SOME books become legends in their own time. "The Iconography of Manhattan Island, 1498-1909," by I. N. Phelps Stokes, has a triple mystique: scholarship, scarcity and sumptuousness. It is the definitive history of New York, "literally colossal and indispensable," a chronological, literary and artistic *assemblage* of international sources and documents that stands as the primary, authoritative reference work and research achievement on the development of Manhattan and New York City.

Issued volume by volume from 1915 to 1928, there are now 420 of the original sets of six, weighty, vellum and cloth-bound books, printed on hand-laid English paper or Japanese vellum. They are lavishly illustrated with color, black and white and fold-out reproductions of rare and elegant maps, prints and drawings. With the work unavailable and in demand since the day of publication, possession has added one more element to the mystique: status.

Now anyone—or at least the first 500 anyones—with $795 can have it. The "Iconography" has been reissued by Arno Press as one more example of a burgeoning trend in publishing—the facsimile edition of esoteric and often expensive and extensive out-of-print works of prime value to libraries, educational and research institutions. According to the definition of the trade, a facsimile edition is a replica of the original, containing all of the original material. It is made possible by the increasing technical excellence of the photographic copying and printing processes; in this, and many cases, the offset process.

The selection of these specialized works for reproduction is a long gamble for the publisher, with the possibility of a disastrous wrong guess, or, if he hits it right, of lucrative institutional sales. He must undertake complicated and elaborate reproduction (such as is involved in the "Iconography") against the formidable economic odds of the publishing business, where the cost of excellence is increasingly prohibitive.

By these terms this reissued "Iconography" may represent the maximum achievement possible. Certainly it represents an enormous and valuable service to scholarship, making unobtainable material available, and for this purpose alone it is completely adequate. But the purchaser with $795 in his hot little hand must be forewarned; it has the content but not the quality of the original. For institutions, it will be a remarkable research tool.

Collectors, however, might wait. There are those to whom the painstaking reproduction of the beauties of the visual material in the original volumes counts beyond the reprinting of the work's factual chronologies. Collectors are concerned, quite properly, with the accuracy of the plates and their closeness both to the original edition and to the superb maps, charts and works of art from which they were copied. Indeed, even with immense care, results in the original were not without variation.

Now the present edition is twice removed from its splendid graphic sources, and the second removal is frequently damaging. An iconography, after all, is a "record or representation by means of pictures or images." To I. N. Phelps Stokes, who devoted 20 years not only to obtaining the material but also to assuring the best reproduction possible, often in Europe, and at the expense of a personal fortune, the reissue would have seemed a mixed blessing.

"Iconography" buffs might reserve that $795 for the rare occasion when an original set comes on the market. It might happen more frequently, now that a facsimile edition is available to satisfy researchers' needs; and that amount of money has always been ample to purchase an original. (The Museum of the City of New York owns six, a fact that has driven scholars and dealers to the genteel edge of insanity.)

What the purchaser of the new edition will get is a very competent commercial copy. He will have a standard book-club kind of gray and maroon binding instead of vellum-trimmed cloth. A good quality, matte-finished, cream-color offset stock replaces the rough, hand-laid English paper. The brilliance of line and tone in the early plates is softened and blurred by rephotography and screen printing. This was inevitable, unless the publisher went to more expensive processes. The black-and-white reproductions have the characteristic loss in light and dark areas that can only be lessened by the most expensive fine-screen printing. The color is frequently off. The plates have a consistent "offset grayness." This is an adequately reproduced reference work, but it is no longer a work of art.

In any version, however, the "Iconography" is a curious and wonderful thing. Stokes was not only a socialite-scholar of independent means, but also a practicing architect, and his preoccupation with the physical development of a city that has surpassed any other in the magnitude of its structural drama is an understandable and valuable bias. This, then, is primarily *(Continued on Page 40)*

MRS. HUXTABLE is architecture critic of The Times and the author of "Classic New York: Georgian Gentility to Greek Elegance."

View of Manhattan and the Hudson River during Hudson-Fulton Celebration Parade, by Richard Rummel, 1909.

Illustrations from "The Iconography of Manhattan Island. 1498-1909."

The New York That Was

(Continued from Page 7)

a physical history. Undertaken seriously during the author's convalescence from typhoid fever in 1909, it led from the pursuit of prints in back rooms in Brooklyn to international reference archives. The remarkable collection that resulted is now owned by the New York Public Library.

Not the least of the "Iconography's" fascinations are the peculiarities of its organization. Almost every volume has addenda; material that came to hand too late for chronological inclusion. Using the index has become a famous exercise in pure frustration. Tracking down any subject in its entirety is an acrobatic exertion in which the intricate process offers as much ultimate satisfaction as the information obtained.

For the record, Volumes I and III are history. The story is told from the earliest harbor explorations through the turn of the 20th century. Each section, Dutch, English, Revolutionary, etc., has its treasury of plates, followed by separate sections of subdivided descriptions. Volume II is cartography, illustrated with a virtually complete compilation of pertinent maps, many unearthed in Europe specifically for this purpose. Examples are classic: the 1660 Castello plan of New Amsterdam, the Minuit and the Manattus maps, a litany of magic names and evocative geography. A list of early New York newspapers is also included here, because, as Stokes explained, there happened to be room for it. Volumes IV and V are the fine print chronology from original records. Volume VI has land grants and the baffling index.

Surprisingly, the history itself is immensely readable. One could do worse than curl up with Volumes I and III. Stokes wrote that rare thing, a simple declarative, unobtrusive prose; the wealth of primary sources and hard facts that he wove together with intellectual restraint but infectious enthusiasm make the story enthralling.

ONE hates to give away the plot, but the course of New York history is clear from the Commissioners' plan of 1811, when every inch of rustic Manhattan land was squared off into a regular grid of uniform, salable lots. The Commissioners defended the lack of provision for open space and the leveling of natural features on the basis of the high price of Manhattan real estate and the closeness of the surrounding rivers, which would ensure pure air.

"These are men," the plan's opponents observed, "who would have cut down the seven hills of Rome." It is a species of New Yorker that has survived.

In the reading, there is a notable sense of *déjà vu*. Water shortages? In the 1880's the system had become so inadequate that water would no longer rise above ground floors. Riots? Flour, draft and election, to name a few. Racial tension? It was the native-born versus the immigrant population a century ago. Nineteenth-century New York had cholera and crime and the dirtiest streets in the world. It was proud, defensive, corrupt and incorrigible. Lethargy, inertia, cynicism and political gamesmanship at City Hall are a 150-year-old heritage; everything happening today has happened before.

What has occurred only briefly, or rarely, is an increase (like the present one) of New Yorkers' concern for their tarnished, shabby city. To those curious about the past, we recommend the "Iconography." To the publisher, or some public-spirited foundation, we recommend the enormous task of bringing the volumes up to date, and if possible, re-indexing them. Or perhaps a system of prizes could be established for information successfully retrieved.

For the future, there is the example of Isaac Newton Phelps Stokes, gentleman historian and distinguished public servant, who worked for both the Fine Arts Commission and tenement-house reform, while he created a literary colossus. He was hopelessly addicted to the illusionistic glamour of the most exciting city in the world; he knew its beauty and its squalor. A modest man, he printed only 44 copies of his autobiography, in which he chronicled the life of a happy New Yorker. The "Iconography" was a tribute to the city he loved, meant to offer "hope and belief, strength and inspiration, to succeeding generations of sojourners on Manhattan Island."