***Two Years Before The Mast***

Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* is a travelogue of his time as a crewman on the brigs *Pilgrim* and *Alert* in a two year journey from Boston to the "wilderness" of California. On this journey, Dana and his shipmates twice "double" the Cape, 4 times crossed the equator, and spent many months "droghing hides" on the little known coastline. Dana's description of the "Californios" and the tiny settlements of San Diego, San Francisco, and others is a treasure, if for no other reason it provides such a vivid record of a California now many decades lost to the American memory. It is a description of a lonely and impoverished place before the gold rush, in which the Church has lost its influence, and the people are a sparse mix of poor Mexicans, Indians and old guard Spanish aristocrats. The only visitors to this remote place come to practice a meager and back-breaking commerce collecting and curing cow hides for transport back to the New England. We can count on one hand the number of merchant ships working the coastline with the *Pilgrim* in 1835-36.

We are introduced to many of the men with whom he shared the journey. Men like Bill Jackson and Tom Harris - both perfect sailors-, the draconian Captain T---- who flogged a crewman mercilessly for speaking out of turn and because he "liked to do it", Mr. Mannini and the other Kanakas at the Oven on the beach in San Diego, and George Marsh, tattooed from his time in captivity among the natives of the Pelew Islands. More interesting are the strict and ceaseless daily activity on the ship, from the regimented schedule of watches, to scrubbing the decks, spinning yarn, and mending clothes. Dana fully embraces the jargon of his trade, and this undoubtedly turns away the casual reader, for we must let go our desire to fully grasp the technical meaning of such things as fore royal, squared yards, bunt gasket, cat-block, lee scuppers, studding-sails, etc, and instead let the anatomy of the ship flow from the page and through our minds in much the same way the Pilgrim cuts loose from its anchor to ride the south-eastern to whatever destination the wind chooses, and in so doing our land-locked imaginations transcend the shackles of terra firma to join Dana among the ranks of maritime men in the time of sail. The richness of his language lends vitality and authenticity to the narrative.

Dana claims to take this voyage to treat an eye malady, but I doubt his sincerity. Surely the rigor of 2 years at sea was not the only treatment available to a Harvard man in the prime of his life. Perhaps instead his heart yearned for the adventure of the sea, and personal trial of the ordeal. There is an inherent modesty in the account, as Dana speaks very little of his personal danger. Rarely does he complain about his circumstances, even when working with frozen hands "90-100 feet above the deck", or enduring the never ending call to duty during a raging gale under a clear sky. What courage it must take to scrambled into the rigging in high seas, when the ship is pitching "to 45d"! But Dana doesn't draw attention to himself. Instead he writes on behalf of the common sailor, bringing to light the circumstances in which they must labor. He breaks from this "every-man" perspective on occasion to impart fragments of "earthy" wisdom on such topics as death at sea, the necessity of unquestioned command and order, the lightness of singing or the psychology of coming home.

We find ourselves immersed in his experience, longing to say we too had been there not only to experience the "romantic qualities" of the sea, but so that we might say we too shared in his hardships, wrestled with the separation of all that we know, and were forever changed for the better. Dana's story is an invaluable recollection of pre-American California, and his account of life at sea is surpassed by precious few. He takes his place with Conrad, Melville and Cooper among the great maritime writers of the American Cannon.