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Book Review: The Complete Picture Guide to Newport, RI

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BOOK REVIEW
 THE COMPLETE PICTURE GUIDE
 TO NEWPORT, R.I.
 BY JOHN T. HOPF

What makes a first-class guidebook? Before considering that, let's agree that travel books and guidebooks have differing ends and techniques. A travel book, to be enjoyed by armchair travelers continents away from the country described, must evoke the spirit of place through photographs, through narrative, by anecdote, by conversation. A guidebook must aim at immediate identification for on-the-spot travelers, aided mostly by illustration and terse, captional fact.

John Hopf's fifth *The Complete Picture Guide to Newport, R.I.* (1986) has reached the bookstalls at the modest price of \$3.95. How does it measure up? Spinning rapidly through the one hundred, all-color photographs stirs up immediate interest. A careful perusal sustains that interest and adds admiration. Variety, not only of subject matter but of layout, avoids tedium. The photographs depict panoramas and closeups, scenes peopled and unpeopled, landscapes and seascapes, with a good sampling of aerial shots. If the majority of them display ideal, "postcard" summer weather, an occasional winter scene sets the picture straight. Plan and execution leave little room for complaint.

What about text? This reviewer found the captions crisp, accurate and mostly up-to-date, above all free of personal idiosyncrasy. He cringes, however, at calling the seventeenth-century Old Stone Mill a "mystery tower" to be compared with the antiquities of Mesa Verde and Pueblo Casa Grande. Modern research simply does not bear out this reasoning.

In the choice of the title, *The Complete Picture Guide . . .*, one is left wondering. Are there no possible other views of Newport? Does this book exhaust the possibilities? From Izaak Walton's time on we have had "complete" books, doubtful in every case. A less boastful title gives the reader the chance to build up his own estimate of the work, which in Hopf's case would easily soar. An assertive title leaves the reader no place to go but down.

As in most color reproduction, from "The National Geographic Magazine" on the blues are too blue. Hold a page up to the sky for comparison. Why must the azure sky look like cobalt sea?

The back cover of the *Guide* provides fourteen "Survival Tips for the Newport Visitor," and practical they are, warning of narrow streets, one-way streets and streets crawling with drivers just as bewildered as the next person.

Clearly, a Newporter put this work together, and it reflects well his knowledge and talents. It took more than a good camera, which recalls the anecdote of the stuffy journalist who faintly praised his photographer's latest pictures. He made the inevitable quip, "You must have a good camera." The photographer quickly responded in kind about the journalist's recent article, adding snidely, "You must have a good typewriter."

— RICHARD CHAMPLIN

With deep regret the Society notes the death of Joseph W. Blaine. For many years he had been a devoted friend and volunteer. His encyclopedic knowledge of Newport's history and urban growth stemmed from over twenty years of compiling and indexing journals, census records and city directories. Many patrons and visitors to the Society benefited from his research skills and willingness to offer assistance, finding quick answers to often difficult questions.