

uncertain developments underground.

Although placing Sharon in context is one of the book's goals, the author only hints at one obvious question: considering the impact of Social Darwinism on the business ethics of the Gilded Age, was Sharon's behavior an exception or the rule? With only a couple of paragraphs devoted to the larger perspective, readers are left to wonder how his career compares to those of more illustrious—and notorious—contemporaries.

From the evidence presented, the conclusion seems unequivocal that Sharon's greed was enormous and his ego unaffected by sympathy for the underdog. Even Jay Fisk gave generously to the poor, and Commodore Vanderbilt left sizeable charitable bequests. Sharon's will kept his wealth in the family. With newspapers, legal records and government documents the only primary sources available, perhaps the question remains unanswerable. After all, much of Sharon's reputation as an evil genius derives from journalistic hyperbole—as does the legacy of the Big Four and other celebrated “robber barons.” The author attempts to show that Sharon was not all bad, but without adequate raw material for a balanced historical assessment, his true character remains elusive.

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Albert L. Hurtado. *John Sutter: A Life on the North American Frontier*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006; 412 pp., 21 b&w ill., 3 maps, notes, bib., ind., cloth, \$34.95. ISBN: 080613772X

One name stands out in connection with the discovery of gold in a mill race on the south fork of the American River on 24 January 1848. That name is John Sutter. Forever after, Sutter's mill would become part of American folklore and history, as the greatest gold rush in American—and world—history overran northern California.

Albert Hurtado, Professor of Modern American History at the University of Oklahoma, has brought Sutter's entire career alive, not just that one defining moment. *John Sutter: A Life on the North American Frontier* reads like a Greek tragedy. Sutter never really benefitted from the discovery, nor from many of his other adventures following his arrival in California.

After leaving Switzerland and his family behind in 1934, Sutter eventually appeared in Mexican California in 1839. In due course, he built his fort where Sacramento sprawls now, and turned to developing an “empire” in the Sacramento Valley. He hoped to become a western entrepreneur, like many of his contemporaries, but that fateful January day changed his fortunes forever.

Sutter, as Hurtado's well-researched and comprehensive biography points out, was in many ways a con man. He lived, worked, and schemed with faith and a bit of his own funds, but he used many others' money. Nothing unusual about that in those years, he just became more famous. For all his efforts, it is debatable if he would ever have succeeded in building his empire, even if it had never been overrun by forty-niners.

The reader will probably end feeling sorry for Sutter, as his dreams fade, his downfall becomes obvious, and alcoholism takes over. As Hurtado wrote: “Drunk or sober, he was not up to the task. John Sutter, the lord of New Helvetia, would go wrong at nearly every turn (124).” Despite this, he apparently ended quite happily in his final years in Lititz, Pennsylvania.

This is a well-documented, researched, and admirably-written biography of a many-faceted man and his fascinating era. In this intriguing story, chapters six to eight are the key to the less-known earlier years and to the man himself, before fame interceded. But the classic story of his ruin comes in the later chapters. *John Sutter* is highly recommended.

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