



2-2014

Book Review: John Sutter: A Life on the North American Frontier

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Recommended Citation

Rothera, Evan C. (2014) "Book Review: John Sutter: A Life on the North American Frontier," *Swiss American Historical Society Review*. Vol. 50 : No. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sahs_review/vol50/iss1/8

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Albert L. Hurtado. *John Sutter: A Life on the North American Frontier* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), xviii, 412pp. Hardback, \$34.95.

Most people know simply that John Sutter owned the sawmill where gold was discovered in California in January, 1848, and little more. Albert L. Hurtado's well-documented treatment of Sutter is, therefore, quite welcome. Sutter, Hurtado contends, embodied early California, so incomplete understanding of Sutter means that full comprehension of the history of California, the gold rush, and America is impossible. Hurtado's analysis of Sutter is carefully balanced, capably assesses Sutter's strengths and weaknesses, and probes Sutter's importance to modern America. Are Sutter's ways and means accepted and admired? Of course not, Hurtado assures, but Sutter and California are nevertheless "prime examples of the troubling and ambiguous history of western North America" (page 346). And thus Hurtado presents the dark heart of Sutter's legacy. "Most Americans enjoy the benefits brought by frontier conquests even as they condemn them. This is not Sutter's contradiction but our own. Until it is resolved, we will live uneasily with the past and with the memory of John A. Sutter" (page 346). Like Banquo's ghost, apparently, Sutter will not down.

Throughout the monograph, Hurtado blends analysis of Sutter's character flaws with the history of North America. Sutter, Hurtado explains, had constant problems with money and did not have a head for business. This had potentially important ramifications for Mexican California. When Sutter acquired Fort Ross from the Russians, he incurred tremendous debt and the Mexican government became concerned that the Russians would seize Sutter's fort and land grant, New Helvetia, thus winning a stronghold in Northern California, and by so doing threaten Mexico. Fears of a Russian outpost in California never came to pass, but the episode indicates that Sutter was a major player in Mexican California. Beyond incurring massive debt, Sutter built a private army, interfered in Mexican political disputes, and attempted to carve himself an empire where he could rule with absolute authority, as the master of his domain. In keeping with this wish, Sutter extended his influence over the Indians, alternatively using force and diplomacy and relied heavily on enslaved Indian labor. Hurtado also contends that Sutter's fondness of the bottle is a part of his character historians can-

Published by BYU ScholarsArchive, 2014

not neglect. Drink clouded Sutter's mind and judgment and made him easy prey for con men and scam artists. Sutter's overindulgence meant that he made poor business decisions, squandered a fortune, signed over many of his lots in the new town of Sacramento to venal speculators and, in the process, helped shape post-independence California.

Hurtado, however, is concerned not only with the besotted and brutal side of Sutter, but also Sutter's gentler side. By most accounts, Sutter had a deep and genuine concern for the immigrants who came to California. It was said that no man or woman who arrived in need at Sutter's fort was turned away. Perhaps this was simply good business, but Hurtado informs readers that Sutter often sent supplies to stranded immigrants (most famously the Donner party). Hurtado's book is important precisely because of the encompassing scope. Hurtado analyzes not only the immigrant who invented himself as a visionary frontier entrepreneur and the trader who did not have a head for business, but the gregarious charmer, the seeker of glory, and, in his elder years, the myth maker, who, in conversations with Hubert Howe Bancroft, refashioned the conquest of California in ways favorable to himself.

In such an excellent book, it is difficult to find problems, but one issue suggests itself. In the introduction, Hurtado comments that "I have looked for the roots of Sutter's insecurity and tentatively locate it in his identity as an outsider . . . Sutter was never at home" (page xiv). This seems a bit problematic. If anything, Sutter seemed to make himself at home wherever he landed, whether in the United States or Mexico. Sutter fashioned himself as the consummate insider who worked with the Mexican government to secure a land grant, protected immigrants, and, in 1849, helped shape California's constitution as a delegate to the constitutional convention. Might a better way to view Sutter be through the prism of cosmopolitanism? Sutter seems more the cosmopolitan, traveling from Switzerland to the United States to Hawaii, to Mexican California, and back to the United States, fully engaged with an international world, than an outsider. Quibble aside, Hurtado's impressive scope, readable prose, and careful research merit wide circulation and will appeal to both a lay and scholarly audience.

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