

Death of a Robber Baron

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H.W. BRANDS' *THE MURDER OF JIM FISK FOR THE LOVE OF JOSIE*

MANSFIELD is the first book in Anchor Books' American Portraits Series, which aims to provide "tightly written, vividly rendered accounts of lost or forgotten lives and crucial historical moments." Brands, a history professor at the University of Texas at Austin and a two-time Pulitzer Prize finalist, gives us that.

The Murder of Jim Fisk reads like a gripping crime novel. Brands also makes it work as a moral fable of the robber-baron period, delivering social and political commentary with a light touch. The first chapter describes a body being taken to a cemetery in Paris on a gray, autumn morning during the Great Depression. Who the attendees were remains a mystery. But they were the sole witnesses, besides the reporter who noted their attendance, to the lonesome burial of Josie Mansfield, the lover of gilded-age financier Jim Fisk, at ninety years of age.

In the second chapter, a grand funeral procession in New York brings out crowds larger than those that celebrated the Confederate surrender seven years earlier. An eyewitness reports, "And thus passed from sight the mortal remains of one who might have been a vast power for good, had he made more use of the glorious opportunities vouchsafed him. Doubtless he had noble qualities, but

they were hidden from the eyes of men, while his vices seemed to be on every man's lips." We later learn the remains were those of Jim Fisk.

Why all the attention? "Diamond" or "Big" Jim Fisk was a corporate executive who used stock market manipulation, bribery of legislators and judges, high-stakes political maneuvering, ruthless business dealings and large-scale public bloodshed to consolidate his wealth and power. Then he was shot dead by his lover's lover.

Brands relies on newspaper coverage and "legal depositions, trial transcripts, and summaries of court proceedings published in various editions at the time and later." The trials of Fisk's accused murderer and a libel suit against Fisk by his alienated mistress, Josie Mansfield, attracted the same saturation coverage as the O.J. Simpson trial.

The media also covered the Orange Day Riot in July 1871. In this clash between Roman Catholic and Protestant Irishmen during a parade in Manhattan, 60 civilians and two members of the National Guard died, and more than a hundred were wounded. Fisk, as colonel of the 9th Regiment of the National Guard, led its members in escort of Protestant marchers. Fisk escapes by dodging down back alleys, running through houses and buildings, and jumping over a half dozen fences.

The Murder of Jim Fisk helps us see what made robber barons robber barons. We get fly-on-the wall perspectives on printing stock certificates and buying judges by Fisk and his associates Jay Gould and Dan Drew as they try to control the Erie

Railroad against a takeover by Cornelius Vanderbilt. Gould was so ruthlessly unscrupulous a financier that the *New York Herald* summed him up at his death as “one of the most sinister figures that ever flitted bat-like across the vision of the American people.” Drew, for a time, was their equal in manipulating stocks and ruining honest investors. Later, Brands takes us through Fisk’s and Gould’s plans to use connections with President Ulysses S. Grant to corner the gold market. Their scheme unraveled on Black Friday, Sept. 24, 1869.

The distinguishing characteristic of the robber barons, according to Brands’ story, is an ability to pursue wealth and power without moral or social scruples. The tragedy of his tale is that in most periods of American history, our social and government leaders have lacked the will or the means to stop them from doing so.

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