



Commodore: The Life of Cornelius Vanderbilt

Edward J. Renehan Jr.

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Using previously unreleased archives, Edward J. Renehan Jr. narrates the compelling life of Cornelius Vanderbilt: willful progenitor of modern American business. Vanderbilt made his initial fortune building ferry and cargo routes for sailing vessels. Then he moved into steamboats and railroads. With the New York Central, Vanderbilt established the nation's first major integrated rail system, linking New York with Boston, Montreal, Chicago, and St. Louis. At the same time, he played a key role in establishing New York as the financial center of the United States. When he died in 1877, Vanderbilt left a fortune that, in today's dollars, would dwarf that of even Bill Gates. Off Wall Street, Vanderbilt was a hard-drinking egotist and whoremonger devoid of manners or charity. He disinherited most of his numerous children and received an editorial rebuke from Mark Twain for his lack of public giving. *Commodore* sheds startling new light on many aspects of Vanderbilt's business and private life including, most notably, the revelation that advanced stage syphilis marred his last years. This is the definitive biography of a man whose influence on American life and commerce towers over all who followed him.

Commodore: The Life of Cornelius Vanderbilt Details

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Johns says

A ruthless competitor with a disgusting personal life style but he accurately can be described as NOT being slow to seize the opportunity when he started the first commercial ferry service for New York city. As usual, the fortune ol' Cornelius built was systematically wasted by his offspring. Trivia: the Vanderbilt family mausoleum on Staten Island, NY is the largest private structure of its kind in the USA. An interesting biography.

Robert says

History, finance, transportation, and more history.

I really enjoyed this book. I've heard about Cornelius Vanderbilt for years, in connection with Grand Central Station, trains, Vanderbilt University, and some vaguely phrased legend about his starting out rowing people from Staten Island to Manhattan or something like that.

The details are more complex, and a lot more fun.

First of all, I'd always associated Vanderbilt with trains. It turns out that most of his career (and fortune) was in shipping. The fun part was watching the technology change (steam ships!) and the United States change with the advent of the Erie Canal, the California Gold Rush, and other major events. I feel like this book knit together a lot of history for me.

And the book doesn't avoid any of his blemishes. His passion for dockyard whores is discussed as plainly as his passion for racing horses. His poor treatment of his first and second wife and his alienating manner with his children are front-and-center.

Interestingly, I feel that the author neither demonizes nor adulates Vanderbilt. The good points and bad points are both laid out with humor and more than one wink-and-nudge. What emerges is a well-rounded portrait of a man who loved to make money, loved to be in control, and loved to do exactly what he felt like doing.

Amber says

This book started out well. It was so interesting to learn about the man who founded the Vanderbilt dynasty. However, as the book progressed it got pretty tiresome in the descriptions of his day to day business transactions. I also found I did not like Mr. Vanderbilt at all. he was a brutalizing, womanizing, arrogant person, with almost no redeeming personal attributes.

Mike says

I usually enjoy these kinds of books for the wish-fulfillment aspect - watching a guy go from poverty to king-of-the-world wealth. And this one started off interestingly - you learn that "the Commodore" was a tough, scrappy Staten Island boy and that he grew up to be a heartless bastard who abused and disinherited nearly everyone in his family. So far so good. But when the book started to get bogged down in the minutiae of his early business ventures (e.g., long passages about shipping routes and schedules), I had to give up.

Steve Schinke says

Interesting read. I had almost no knowledge of Vanderbilt prior to this book. It seems to be an objective account of how an illiterate jerk became one of the richest men in the world through hard work and total disregard of morality and ethics.

Jacque says

Currently reading.

It seems to be a good read with a glass of wine after a hard day when you don't want to think too hard On page 44: Boy, it's been a lot of ship info. Doesn't explain what the difference a schooner and sloop is, so a lot of the ship detail seems superfluous at this point. Earlier there was lots of family detail that could have been condensed - no way to remember all the minute details anyway. My 10th grade daughter remembered who the Commodore was from her history class, but I knew nothing about him other than that the Vanderbilt name represented New York wealth.

If I was only reading the book for information, I would go to Wikipedia instead. However, I do need something a bit tedious to wind down at night, so this definitely serves that purpose.

p 46 End of the chapter -- fun passage: Very interesting tidbit about the attitude of the sailors of the traditional ships (and the Commodore) towards the new fledgling passenger-carrying steamships.

p 47. Did you know that in 1815 the New York Humane Society existed not to serve the needs of stray cats and dogs but to humans?

I had arrived at page 170, which is about half-way through, a while back and have NO incentive to continue . . . just too tedious. (Even for getting to sleep purposes.) There is so much I skipped over where the author started getting hung up on minute details such as reciting ad nauseum loads of details from public records on peripheral people. Ugh. I am trying another bio of C. Vanderbilt.

Lauretta says

This book seriously needs a map as the author discusses in detail the water and rail routes commanded by Vanderbilt. Initially, after reading the book, I was surprised by the lack of detail concerning Vanderbilt's family affairs, and thought perhaps that goes toward the fact he was not involved with his family. Since having finished the book, however, I've looked at other biographies and have found them to have maps and

family stories. Consequently, I'm disappointed I put the time into this book when there appear to be better ones out there on the topic.

Update: I just finished Fortune's Children by Arthur T. Vanderbilt II, and found it so much more enjoyable. Having had the prior background for the Commodore helped, painful as it was.

Cathy says

Mr. Renehan obviously has a personal bias against Vanderbilt in this book. He refers to amny instances when the Commodore was promiscuous or sneaky as a man and as a businessman with no proof to back it up. I knew nothing of the Vanderbilt clan when I began and not much more afterwards. I am now reading Stiles autobiography to see if I can get a more balanced view. A little too Ida Tarbell for me

Johnsergeant says

Narrated By: John McDonough
Published By: Recorded Books, LLC

Acclaimed historian Edward J. Renehan, Jr.—author of Dark Genius of Wall Street —draws upon previously unreleased documents to deliver the definitive biography of Cornelius Vanderbilt, the 19th-century transportation tycoon who accumulated the largest private fortune in U.S. history.

I listened to this book after visiting the Biltmore Estate in Asheville, NC which triggered my interest in finding out more about the Vanderbilts.

Mark Myers says

Went through a phase where I read everything I could on 19th century businessmen that fit the category of monopolist with a bent for success at all costs. This book gives you an excellent understanding of the man and his decisions. His amoral worldview pokes through the covers. The consequences of his decisions are spelled out in detail.

Mark M

David says

A very interesting and a well done researched book. I found the book very enjoyable and quiet easy to read. The details of the Commodore's life are very fascinating especially growing up on Staten Island and how he develops his shipping business. We can use his tenacious ability as well as his cunning business antics right about now. Well done!!!

Kenneth says

Using previously unreleased archives, Edward J. Renehan Jr. tells the compelling life of Cornelius Vanderbilt -the patriarch of the family. This man had very few redeeming qualities. Of all of the biographies that I have read, and there have been quite a few, this man easily comes out on top as the worst person. I give the author credit though for his research. Renehan evidently only includes what can be verified through documentation on Vanderbilt, and leaves out some of those fanciful "word of mouth" accounts of the man. The book is filled with details of schedules, rates, and routes of the scion's ships and trains. I feel the author did a reliable job in telling the man's history, but to be quite honest, you may wish to pick another biography of a better person that you have been waiting to read about.

At his death, Cornelius Vanderbilt was worth(adjusted for inflation), more than three times what Bill Gates was worth back in 2006.

Jonathan Freed says

Wow.

After a tour of the Biltmore Estate last Christmas, I was inspired to read (later to write) and to learn more about the dynasty behind the fantastic American castle in my home state of North Carolina. It turns out to be less a dynasty as the juggernaut drive of one man, Cornelius Vanderbilt.

Historical and biographical works are not my normal fare (at all). This one was gripping. Though there were some slow spots, as I would expect from either history or bio genres, the pace more than kept my attention. The things Vanderbilt accomplished, built, and his "man behind the curtain" on absolutely HUGE events in American history: free trade & state-to-state commerce, shipping & trans-Atlantic travel, steamship engineering & construction, railroads, government, Wall Street, Grand Central Station, the Civil War, the California Gold Rush) was a real eye-opener.

I left the tour of the Biltmore inspired to accomplish greater things professionally; already taking steps to do so. I closed the final pages of this book inspired to open my horizons to more biographical & historical works.

Fantastic man written about by an author well suited to bring his legend to life. The period photos, drawings, and images were a great addition too. I highly recommend this book.

Jason Koivu says

What a complete and utter bastard!

If Edward J. Renehan Jr.'s *Commodore: The Life of Cornelius Vanderbilt* is anything to go by, shipping and railroad tycoon Cornelius Vanderbilt was the definition of scrooge. He amassed more wealth in his lifetime than Bill Gates, almost never gave to charitable causes, eschewed his wife and relations, and had the personality of someone who might as well have saved their breath and had "Go Fuck Yourself!" tattooed to his forehead.

Vanderbilt took ambition and success at all costs as the measure of a man's quality. Nothing else seemed to matter. I found him so despicable I wasn't sure I could rise above my loathing for the man in order to give Renehan's book a fair review, but the 4 star rating would seem to indicate so. Renehan, while lacking an epic Homeric eloquence, proved to be a utilitarian wordsmith. With a subject as formidable as the historical specter that is Vanderbilt, you can't hope to capture him, you can only hope to contain him.

Reading Renehan's entombing of Vanderbilt within *Commodore...* is well worth your time, provided you're willing spend a few hours on the life of a repellent dick.

Chris Bauer says

A succinct biography of C. Vanderbilt. Very typical biography which details the life of one of America's first super wealthy individuals. The author has done a significant amount of research in creating this book. I was surprised how sedate it was, overall. Apparently Vanderbilt was an tyrannical, egotistical, uncouth rogue with hundreds of millions of US dollars at his disposal - this in the days when \$30,000 could get you a mansion along the Hudson River. Interesting to read about his hard scrabble-life, incredible willpower and utter disregard for anything aside his personal bottom-line profits. My only negative comment is that, at times, I felt like I was reading an accounting ledger rather than a biography.
