
Gregory Crouch. *The Bonanza King: John Mackay and the Battle over the Greatest Riches in the American West*. New York: Scribner, 2018. 466 pp. \$30.00.

John Mackay may be the least-well-known mining tycoon in the history of the American West. In *The Bonanza King*, Gregory Crouch resurrects Mackay, who was reportedly one of the richest men in America when he died in 1902. An Irish immigrant who, along with hundreds of thousands of other hopeful prospectors, journeyed to California gold country in 1851, Mackay found his success not in the streams and rivers of Northern California, but rather in the silver mines of Nevada, in what became known as the Comstock Lode. After struggling for nearly a decade in California, Mackay—through skill, hard work, and some luck—found success in the mountains of western Nevada. After striking one of the greatest bonanzas in the 1870s, Mackay and his partners became some of the first “Bonanza Kings” or “Silver Kings” of the Comstock. Over the next few years the enterprising Mackay would found a bank, form a telegraph cable company to compete with Jay Gould’s Western Union, and live like royalty in France.

In somewhat thick detail, Crouch examines Mackay’s life and his significant role in the Comstock. In doing so, he reminds us of the powerful influence of California in shaping the Far West. Not only did the gold rush spark the search for minerals on the Pacific Slope, but the Golden State provided mining labor, critically needed capital, and the transportation necessary to make the Comstock success possible. For example, early on, Mackay and others relied on California investors and the Bank of California to help underwrite the cost of extracting the ore from deep in the earth, and on San Francisco shipping to transport the silver to eastern buyers.

The Bonanza King offers the reader a colorful tour of the Comstock’s history, including detailed descriptions of mining processes, sordid scandals, and unsavory business practices. However, largely due to the biographical approach, this study lacks a clear purpose or thesis. Readers may wonder how this story compares to other mineral strikes or how this episode fits into the history of the American West. Moreover, while Mackay is the central focus of the book, at times he disappears from the narrative. In several chapters, Mackay’s name appears only a handful of times as the author focuses on mining operations or the exploits of other interesting figures. The apparent lack of Mackay’s personal papers or writings may explain his absence.

Crouch’s knowledge and insight into the complex world of mining in the nineteenth-century American West are quite commendable. Many readers will marvel at how Mackay and others overcame physical, technical, and financial obstacles in their quest to extract the minerals and find riches. However, scholars will be troubled by the book’s lack of footnotes or references (perhaps due to the publisher’s requirements). The author explains that references are available on his website, but going back and forth between the two was rather cumbersome. Nevertheless, for those interested in the rough-and-tumble world of silver mining, *The Bonanza King* will both entertain and inform.

John Putman
San Diego State University