

“Empire of the Beaver: Sir George Simpson and The Hudson’s Bay Company.” A merger of the North West Company and Hudson’s Bay Company in 1821 created the vehicle with which the Scottish Simpson competed (until his death in 1860) with American interests for the fur trade and sovereignty of a continent from Hudson Bay to the Pacific. Though its territory became part of the Dominion of Canada in 1870, its influence endured. The Company’s Fort Garry became Winnipeg, Manitoba, Fort Edmonton became Edmonton, Alberta, and Fort Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia. The Canadian-American border reflects the Hudson Bay Company’s shadow.

The final Merchant King is Cecil John Rhodes of the British South Africa Company. From his arrival in southern Africa in 1879, Rhodes consolidated diamond and gold mines, encouraged settlements and served as prime minister of Cape Province. His mineral enterprises fuel and racial policies plague a subcontinent to this day. His Rhodes Scholarships remain a prestigious award and supporter of academic excellence.

Bown’s text captures and holds the reader’s attention. Most chapters commence with a quote from their principal personalities. An index facilitates reference and the bibliography encourages further study. Pictures add faces and scenes to the text and the maps and “Timeline For The Age Of Heroic Commerce” are valuable supplements.

I find *Merchant Kings* to be a very interesting work. It teaches us that for three centuries, 1600-1900, policy and development was often led, not by politicians and generals, but by businessmen who assumed many of the powers normally associated with governments. The “Kings” featured were flawed men of accomplishment. Industries and nations are built on foundations they laid. Some of their means are no longer acceptable, but, as Bown posits, were even controversial in their own days and not necessarily inevitable. This is an excellent read for anyone interested in history of commercial and colonial development or pondering how so much of our world came to be.

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**Rinker Buck. *Life on the Mississippi. An Epic American Adventure.* New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, [www.simonandschuster.com](http://www.simonandschuster.com), 2022. 416 pp., illustrations, maps, index. US \$32.50, cloth; ISBN 978-1-50110-637-8. (E-book available.)**

If one wanted to invent a name for the author of a book about navigating a replica frontier flatboat down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, one could hardly do better than Rinker Buck. As it turns out, there is a real Rinker Buck,

who has written just such a book, as well as (pardon the pun) a raft of others. At 71 years of age, Buck owns just the kind of resumé one would imagine – pilot, logger, shoe-leather reporter, determined do-it-yourselfer, and history-minded adventurer – who recently retraced the 2000-mile Oregon Trail by covered wagon and wrote beautifully about it.

In *Life on the Mississippi*, Buck deftly braids the broad-shouldered story of the American flatboat with his own twenty-first-century river odyssey. Friends, family, and river dwellers predicted that he would die on his improbable voyage. The most lurid of their scenarios involved him being sucked into a whirlpool that would drag him along the silty bottom until his underwear was stripped away and his raw, broken body spit to the surface. During the course of the journey, Buck realized that the doomsayers were sharing imagined dangers rather than real knowledge. With every river mile that gurgled beneath his stern and every hair-raising episode met and mastered, his confidence grew, and he took justifiable pride in his hard-won river skills.

But his first challenge was to find someone who could help him build an authentic flatboat, or mostly authentic, since it needed a good engine and lots of gadgetry. This led him to John Cooper in Gallatin, Tenn., one of many quirky characters Buck encountered. Cooper, “folksy and hospitable” (42) but also contrary and prone to conservative political rants, managed to bang together a passable replica with Buck’s help, “a gorgeous code violation” (52) named *Patience*. The vessel was so heavy that trailering her north blew out a dozen tires. Eventually they launched the vessel into the Monongahela River, which meets the Allegheny River at Pittsburgh to form the Ohio. Sitting atop his contraption on water at last, Buck gloried in the river breezes, “a kind of visual and emotive bellows” (69), while he contemplated industrial vistas “so gritty they seem divine” (69).

Buck’s attempt to assemble a competent crew presented its own difficulties and entailed several bad choices. Not surprisingly, his plans attracted nineteenth-century re-enactors like flies to honey. These individuals adored foppish hats, trivial pontification, and parading river-town streets. One man insisted that everyone use period language on the boat and irritated passing commercial traffic with his superfluous radio chatter. Potentially more dangerous was his excitability. Eventually these types weeded themselves out, and Buck had a capable mix of men and women who knew how to work hard together.

*Patience* does not even enter the Mississippi River until page 263 of this book. Until then it threads the Ohio, a river defined by dams and slack pools where there is little current. It is, Buck laments, “a softened, predictable space” (104). The surrounding landscape alternates between rustbelt relics and scenic bluffs. A Cincinnati holiday weekend proved memorable thanks to drunken boaters clogging the river. Buck travelled the Ohio because it is actually

considered part of the Mississippi's main stem.

Running the Mississippi proper below Cairo, Ill. required constant vigilance reinforced by keen instincts and strong navigational skills. The Corps of Engineers, every river lover's favorite villain, has significantly altered the Father of Waters during the last century and a half. The river is now essentially a giant channelized ditch disciplined by towering levees, underwater riprap, and wing dams (large rock jetties that jut into the stream, funneling the current and reducing the need to dredge). There is heavy commercial traffic—giant towboats pushing long barge strings that carry the cargo equivalent of a thousand semi-trucks, scurrying switch-boats that ferry barges back and forth between strings, and ocean-going ships from Baton Rouge south. Buck understandably devotes considerable ink to his manoeuvres among these hazards, and the trip's tone becomes less riverine idyll than white-knuckled obstacle course. He quickly mastered riverboat radio lingo, kept out of the way, and gained the respect of the passing towboat captains, a no-nonsense bunch. Thankfully, *Patience's* light draft enabled her to hug the river margins when necessary. It only ran onto a sand bar once and was easily refloated. Furthermore, her bulk defeated the deadheads and snags that imperil light craft, not that there were many of the latter. In fact, Buck writes, "I passed a total of four pleasure boats on the river" (271).

Buck's forays into flatboat history are interesting, and his emphasis on the vessels' role in displacing indigenous peoples and spreading slavery will doubtless surprise general readers schooled on positive versions of Manifest Destiny. Of greater interest, to this reviewer at least, are his observations on modern America. He found river people to be unfailingly generous and curious, but like so many folks across the fruited plain, siloed into their respective communities. For example, he did not bring a gun, to the consternation of many of his interlocutors. The "tragicomedy of America" (356) manifested itself in the rednecks who told him that the Blacks in Baton Rouge and Vicksburg were going to rob the boat, and the Black kids who insisted the Louisiana Cajuns were going to "murda your ass" (356). Buck concludes, "The race-blind solution for all was the same: America get guns" (356).

*Life on the Mississippi* is a fun and informative read that definitely belongs on the shelf of anyone interested in the pageant of America's rivers. Buck has done a fine job of telling the flatboat's story and introducing readers to an America many of them may not even know exists.

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