



The Rush: America's Fevered Quest for Fortune, 1848-1853

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A riveting portrait of the Gold Rush, by the award-winning author of Down the Great Unknown and The Forger's Spell.

In the spring of 1848, rumors began to spread that gold had been discovered in a remote spot in the Sacramento Valley. A year later, newspaper headlines declared "Gold Fever!" as hundreds of thousands of men and women borrowed money, quit their jobs, and allowed themselves- for the first time ever-to imagine a future of ease and splendor. In THE RUSH, Edward Dolnick brilliantly recounts their treacherous westward journeys by wagon and on foot, and takes us to the frenzied gold fields and the rowdy cities that sprang from nothing to jam-packed chaos. With an enthralling cast of characters and scenes of unimaginable wealth and desperate ruin, THE RUSH is a fascinating-and rollicking-account of the greatest treasure hunt the world has ever seen.

The Rush: America's Fevered Quest for Fortune, 1848-1853 Details

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Eric Ruark says

This was one of those books that was a real pleasure to read perhaps for more personal reasons than literary one. As a young man, back in the 1970s I struck out for San Francisco to recreate myself as many of the people in Mr. Dolnick's book did. Granted, my flight/drive hardly compared to the struggle the wagons had as they followed the Platte River. However, I followed that same route, up the Platte (now a US interstate) and crossed the Rockies and Sierra Nevada and finally made it to the Golden Gate. Like many of the 49ers, life didn't turn out as I had planned, but that's OK.

History and adventure buffs will get a kick out of following the men and women who's diaries, Mr. Dolnick mined on their hazardous and harrowing travels across the country, around the Horn and across Panama to the California gold fields. It was great reading from the first page to the last.

Kiwi Begs2Differ ✎ says

Insightful, engaging and well written with plenty of first-hand accounts (including news reports, journals and letters which I loved). The book clearly explains the reasons for the rush, it describes the nightmares of the journey, the dismal situation at the diggings and in the cities like San Francisco and Sacramento.

The reader will meet a myriad of colourful characters: con artists, entrepreneurs, adventurers, very few women and, of course, the throng of miners (including foreigners) all brought together by the same dream: Gold!

The newspaper cartoons, ads for ship passages, original drawings, illustrations and old pictures with corresponding captions included in the book were very interesting too.

Fav. Quotes:

The to-go-or-not-to-go conflict pitted not only wary fathers against eager sons but two deeply held beliefs against each other. One was the age-old fear that the world punishes its dreamers, the other the new American gospel that people shaped their own destiny.

Often men turned down jobs with a guaranteed wage double what they were likely to earn in the mines. What was the choice, really? The moment a man took a job with a salary, no matter how high, the possibility of an unbounded future vanished and an impenetrable ceiling crashed into place. Security was not the stuff of dreams; opulence and independence were. Treasure, not wages!

This two-edged freedom—the freedom to be left alone (to do as you pleased) and to be left on your own (regardless of need)—marked California from the outset. Here was a society that was cosmopolitan, rowdy, violent, brand-new, thrilled with itself when it was not horrified, exploding in size, knee-deep in wealth, with no entrenched leadership class but instead a churning, changing hierarchy based on fortunes newly made and newly lost.

Money Above All remained the credo of the age. Surprisingly, this grab-it-now doctrine bound men together more than it drew them apart. Everyone sought the same prize—gold—with the same tools—muscles,

diligence, luck. While they dug endless day after endless day, they all baked under the same sun and shivered in the same streams. That experience of shared hope and shared misery seemed to unite men separated by deep gulfs of language and culture, in one of the most multinational societies the world had ever seen.

In California failure was an option; sometimes it seemed almost a requirement. Nearly all of California's rich men had risen and fallen again and again, the trajectory of their careers almost always a jagged peak-and-valley sawtooth rather than a smooth incline.

This, too, set California apart. The notion in the East had always been that to fail in business was to suffer a humiliation that could last a lifetime. People stared and whispered at their fallen neighbors with an almost lascivious malice. A man's reputation as fiscally sound, nineteenth-century moralists delighted in pointing out, was akin to "a woman's chastity, which a breath of dishonor may smirch and sully forever."

But Californians seemed almost to take pride in their falls. "In any little random gathering of a dozen men in San Francisco, you will probably find some among them who have been wealthy on three or four occasions and then poor again," wrote one miner-turned-journalist. "When men fail they do not despair... they hope to be rich again."

Emily says

Downloaded the audiobook from the library and I am so glad I did because the reader does a grizzled prospector voice sometimes and it adds even more to this fascinating but concise history of the California Gold Rush. Dolnick talks of "gold fever" like a real illness or an addiction, as the prospectors did returning home in penniless in desperate health, and he puts it into context. America was simpler, more naive in '49, and nothing like this had ever happened before to dampen enthusiasm or make people question tales of thousands of dollars gold lying on the ground.

Three percent of America left for California. I'm always surprised how accurate Oregon Trail, the computer game from the '80s, is. Thousands of people left Missouri, saw Chimney Rock, and died of dysentery. Getting to California takes most of the book, and many lives. Dolnick follows a few of the best letter-writers and diarists but his mountain of research turns up plenty of less literary souls whose few words add color to the arduous journey. By the time the '49ers turn up in California in droves, the easy diggings, the places where you could walk around stuffing gold nuggets into your pockets, were gone, and the work was arduous, especially when you were weak from the trail and falling to scurvy. Dolnick does a good job with Indian genocide, and the xenophobia and lynchings that befell Black, Mexican, and foreign miners (even the French), as a proportion of the total space, although one should do further reading for a true scope of the horror. Same with the environmental damage. Even the slow, agonizing deaths of formerly optimistic white Protestants off to make their fortunes can't get full treatment in a slim volume, but this is the perfect overview for those curious about the Gold Rush.

James (JD) Dittes says

Edward Dolnick knows how to weave threads of experience into first-class, historical tapestries. This account of the 1849 California Gold Rush is a fascinating read.

Dolnick follows four Americans infected with "gold fever" as they make their way to California. One woman travels via Panama while the others travel overland, coping with cholera, stumbling across savage wastes, and making their way through the towering Sierra Nevada mountains.

Throughout Dolnick weaves in histories, verifying and expanding on the experiences at the heart of his narrative.

I read this in advance of a trip to California, and I'm really glad I did.

Jennifer says

From a scholarly perspective, this book had some shortcomings (in other words, I wouldn't make it my first and last book on the subject). That being said, as a fiction writer I loved how it focused a few of the Gold Rush participants who kept substantial journals, so that the reader can see the journey through their eyes. There are moments that surprise and shock, as well as heartwarming bits. I wished it had spent more time in the gold fields rather than on the journey, but clearly the diarists were too busy digging and running businesses to write.

Myra says

Although I don't generally like history, anything even remotely related to historical exploration I enjoy. Such was the case with this book. The Rush tells the story of the California gold rush through the eyes of several individuals and families who went. Dolnick draws from personal journeys to tell of the struggles and (occasional) successes of this time period. This is the kind of book that, had it been around when I was in school, might have made me enjoy my history classes. It brought together a lot of the background history that was going on during this notable event and actually helped me see this country in a bigger picture. Great book! (I will admit that there were still some sections that were a bit of a snooze-fest for me, but very few of them.)

Jeff says

Gripping and thoroughly well researched utilizing lots of firsthand sources to paint a vivid picture of life on the overland and overseas routes. Evokes the period with an air of historical accuracy, instead of utilizing manufactured drama. Very entertaining and lots of material in a thick bibliography to provide further reading.

Pam says

By using first hand accounts, Edward Dolnick has created a fast moving, easily read account of California's Gold Rush from 1848 to 1853. Dolnick kept my interest right up to the end balancing information and drama. I did catch some unfortunate inaccuracies and exaggerations which Dolnick used to elevate the importance of this event in American history. For me that was very annoying as I kept wondering what

inaccuracies I was missing as I went along. But for sheer readability, this book is an excellent one.

David says

A wonderful book about the California Gold Rush and the impact it had on forty niners and the entire nation. We learn about the discovery of gold, the trip to California - by stage, by boat, by boat and trek across Panama, the digging for gold and the gains and losses of everyone involved. Great use of journals and letters to give a real feel for what the experience was like. Most people who got rich served the miners. Everyone reveled in the freedom from a East Coast norms the gold digging provided. Today's California, as strange as it may be, is a direct descendent of this era, which is very much a good thing.

Don Best says

A friend recommended I read this. He knows of my interest in Western history. I'm glad he did. Not the first migration of Europeans to head for California, the Spanish beat the Americans by over 200 years, Dolnick tells a well documented history of the first mass migration of Americans to not just seek land of their own....but instant wealth. A way to escape from a predetermined life of hard labor and possibly leapfrog into the 1% as we call the super wealthy today. Short of that, at least get enough gold to come back home to the east and live a better life with more opportunities. The author outlines why the California gold rush was a world and nation changing event which I found interesting. Like so many things, there are lot of intertwining events before, during and after the rush of 1848 that are covered in the book. The fact that gold was "free for the taking" is a point made that when you think about it, no wonder there was a mad rush to be first. The book uses extensive excerpts from journals written by the gold seekers traveling overland across the continent, partially by ship to a land crossing of Panama and back to ship and finally entirely by ship from the east coast or Gulf ports around South America to California. All of them had their risks, hardships and death. And that was just to get to California. The book is not just about the journey to California, but perhaps just as important in the gold rush story, the lives of the people that survived the journey, became successful (not the same as being rich) or hated it (on moral grounds or just plan hard work that mining became for those that arrived later). The author's epilogue does a nice job of summing up what he was trying to convey in writing the book about that period in this nation's history.

Gary says

A well-told presentation of the California Gold Rush, with the emphasis upon what the experience was like. Focusing largely on the journals of several participants, men and women, who provided particularly detailed accounts, we get portrayals of the what the overland journey was like versus the journey by sea (note: they were both pretty torturous), and what the "49-ers" met when they reached their destination (typically hard work leading to disappointment). We get such details as what they ate and how they sheltered; we learn what the experience was like for women, foreigners (with special emphasis on the Chinese), minorities and Native Americans.

The "gold fever" that infected so many people in 1ht 19th century was a kind of madness. Why would someone leave their secure life of job, home, and even family to subject themselves to the hardships of a cross-continent journey to follow the wild-eyed dream of becoming unimaginably rich? Though it still seems

like madness to me, the author does a good job explaining in the beginning the particular socioeconomic realities of the time that could make one vulnerable to infection. While I was engaged by the book throughout, that insight alone made me appreciate the book for its contribution to my understanding.

Chrissie says

What drew me to this book was a funny quote of Warren Buffet. It is found in this book: "(Gold) gets dug out of the ground in Africa or someplace. Then we melt it down, dig another hole, bury it again and pay people to stand around guarding it. It has no utility. Anyone watching from Mars would be scratching their head."

That made me laugh. I didn't laugh that much more.

I am glad I read the book. It draws a clear picture of what it really meant to take part in the Gold Rush. Who were these people? The poor, the wealthy or the middle class? Why did they go, and what was the state of the world that shoved them in this direction? All of this is clearly described. There were several ways of getting to California, all of them arduous. We follow several different people and how each of them got there. Some men and two women. LOTS of other people are quoted too. Earlier books documenting the Gold Rush in addition to diaries and letters are what form the basis for the story.

I had trouble with the way the book hopped around; you never fastened on any one person. Some of the people crossing the continent were going to California NOT for the gold, but rather to colonize California! Others traveled via Panama or Mexico, others around Cape Horn. Skipping around from individual to individual you don't really get close to any one person, and that is what I always look for in a book. The author did what he could though by adding an epilogue which explained what happened to five of the central characters AFTER the Gold Rush.

Once there in California, the book discusses how the gold was mined and how the mining changed with time - from single individuals to men working in teams with hydraulic hoses. There is little about how the gold was cashed in. Was it bought up at a government agency? What is discussed is how the miners spent it - gambling and boozing and the inflation of costs. And racism that revealed itself here too.

One thing bothered me from start to finish. What makes history are crises and calamities. At least to some extent there has to be an overload on the negatives. It was good that one of the women characters the book follows never regretted her choice. She left her children and traveled westward with her husband. Women were a scarce commodity in the West. She adored the dazzle of California, the independence it afforded and the wonderful possibility of making something out of nothing. Quick wealth was tantalizing, but never easy, as all soon found out. All sought success, monetary success. This woman finally returned to Maine since her daughter would not move.

Finally the author draws these early Californians and shows how they have shaped the character, the spirit of present day California. Maybe that is so. I don't know. Are they more entrepreneurial, rowdier and more cosmopolitan than other Americans? Are they more willing to take risks? I think ALL Americans are entrepreneurial, lovers of independence and equality, competitive and value financial success. Steve Jobs states one has to be willing to fight so hard, put yourself so far out on a limb that you may even fall off. To really succeed you have to be willing to even accept failure. A roller coaster career is the only real way to success. Anyhow, this discussion was interesting.

Parts were repetitive. I understood how dangerous it was - the many illnesses, the deluges and the deserts, the working conditions, the lack of food, the violence, the degree to which gold or no gold was pure luck. That is a huge psychological burden. It is just that the book returned to the same points over and over again, and I began wondering if a more positive view would have been given had the author chosen other letters to quote. But they are not so exciting, are they? No seriously, I would rather read about these people than search for gold myself!

I didn't like the narrator's (Bernard Setaro Clark's) exaggerated gruffness used for some of the men, particularly Israel Lord. Neither the author nor the narrator knew how he sounded, so please, let me imagine that. Other than the quotes, the narration was fine and it had a good speed.

Caroline says

My one criticism of this book is that it isn't long enough - and if that is the only negative I can think of, you can be sure I thoroughly enjoyed this book. Dolnick has a very lively style of writing, engaging and informative, with a humorous whimsy that adds to the experience without overwhelming the narrative. I generally don't like any kind of humour or whimsy when reading history, but when relating the story of the California Gold Rush it somehow seems appropriate.

Dolnick covers the origins of the Gold Rush and the experience of the '49ers in reaching the gold fields in admirable detail, focusing especially on a handful of individuals, several couples and the rest single men. And again, this is where my criticism arises - over half the book is passed before any of these individuals have even reached California. It's all thoroughly interesting, true, but I felt that another hundred or so pages on the experiences actually in California could have been better served. A bare few chapters on the mining, the life in the shanty towns, the letters sent back home, and all the book is over. There was almost no discussion of the experience of foreigners in the field, who made up well over one third of the '49ers; very little about the tentative steps in establishing order, policing, city governance; almost nothing about how the rest of the States viewed California; almost nothing about the experience of those already in California.

So whilst I say I only have one criticism, it's a big one. This book really cannot be considered a proper overview or history of the Gold Rush with such a narrow and limited scope. I cannot believe the author couldn't find any more to say, and I'd be surprised if the limited size and coverage was due to editorial or publisher pressure. It's a mystery to me, and it really let me down as a reader. A book that I could have given five stars to if it had been twice as long only really merits an average grade in the end.

Coral says

"I wish I had all hell boiled down to a pint just to pour down your throat."

What set this book apart, for me, from all of the others that cover the Gold Rush is its mining of the journals and diaries of those who had caught the fever and made the grueling trek from East Coast to West Coast. It also has a fairly extensive bibliography section, split into first-person accounts and histories, that I'll be digging through in the future.

Grumpus says

Marshmallows! You're all marshmallows. I'm a marshmallow too. We're all so soft these days. None of us could have survived the journey that these hardy pioneers undertook. I'm not talking about the greed of gold but rather the determination of these folks to essentially walk across the country. First, with too many supplies and stuff (e.g. furniture), then having reality set in and the need to abandon much of it, only to then realize they don't have enough. Illness, hunger, thirst, and perilous travel followed them every day (for those crossing the country). So much death and yet they marched on to fulfill their dreams of a better life that only a small percentage will realize.

The journey for those coming from the east coast by ship having to endure the long trek around the southern tip of South America or crossing through Central America was not much better.

All of this was wonderfully documented through the journals of these people. The epilogue wrapped it all up nicely letting me know what became of these people after reaching California. I love history that is told in their own words through quotations. The author uses them in a manner that really makes it all come alive and keeps me thinking about it even when I'm not reading it. That, as I've stated before is what constitutes a 5-star book in my mind—one that can comfortably be enjoyed in your favorite chair with a nice cup of hot chocolate with (you guessed it), marshmallows.
