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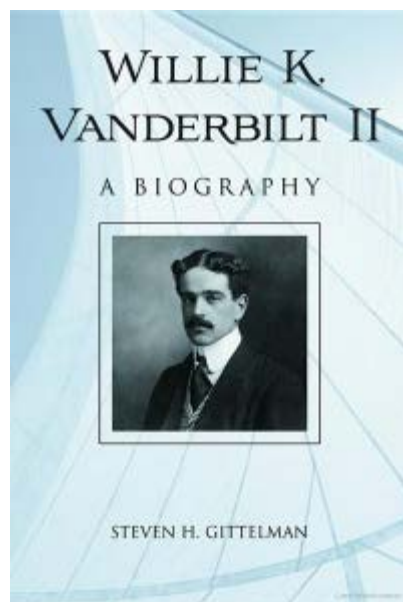
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Steven H. Gittelman. *Willie K. Vanderbilt II: A Biography*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2010. Pp. 264. Photos, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN: 9780786447770. \$38.00.



As Steven Gittelman, a board member of the Suffolk County Vanderbilt Museum admits in his acknowledgement and preface, *Willie K. Vanderbilt II: A Biography* represents a parallel journey. On the one hand, it's a study of William K. Vanderbilt II and his attempts to live up to his family legacy, make his own unique contribution to that legacy, and reconcile those two goals with his own desire for personal adventure (via car racing, taking world cruises, and other kinds of sport). On the other hand, the research for the book was a way for Gittelman, who earned a doctorate in ecology but eventually dedicated much of his time to the museum field (becoming first a trustee and later the President of the Suffolk County Vanderbilt Museum) to find a way to give his own life direction, hoping to find clues in Vanderbilt's similar struggles. In many ways, this biography is a sensitive tribute to Vanderbilt, warts and all, a work that empathizes with Willie's conflicting impulses without ignoring his often selfish squandering of his time and money. Gittelman relates to the question Vanderbilt asked after he had completed his first voyage

around the world: “What’s next?” With a sympathetic understanding of his subject, Gittelman confesses: “this book is about two men and their search for fulfillment: one a Vanderbilt and the other his biographer” (Preface, page 3). In itself, this is a fine reason to research and write a biography of “Willie K,” and one can applaud what such an exercise can do for the author. The question lies in whether or not those benefits can be extended to the book’s audience. The book’s charms are to be found more in the journey (once the reader is able to identify with Willie) than with the destination, because by the end of the book the reader finds that Vanderbilt never really found a life purpose.

Vanderbilt did of course leave a legacy. The Suffolk County Vanderbilt Museum grew out of “Eagle’s Nest,” the retreat that Willie built for himself following the failure of his first marriage. Vanderbilt expanded this estate in subsequent years, adding to it a vast museum of the various animals he caught and killed on his voyages. Yet, even this museum, which Suffolk County obtained after Willie’s death, did not represent life fulfillment for the restless Vanderbilt heir. What the book tries to assemble (and its inability to do so may have more to do with its subject than with anything else) is a narrative trajectory for a man who came into his fortune by accident (due to the passing over of the rightful heir), who never had a passion except for sailing and for reckless automobile driving, whose attempt to establish himself as the head of his family railroad was thwarted by wartime government regulations, and whose museum legacy was an outgrowth of his bored wanderlust and his taking up of the hobby of amateur naturalist.

For someone with such a prominent name in American economic history, living at such a pivotal era in that history, Willie seemed to be oddly on the margins of his own life story. He lived on the edges of the events going on around him. At the turn of the twentieth century, American popular sentiment was souring on the ostentatiousness of the very rich, but that did not stop Willie from trying to purchase Lake Success and all its environs for his personal use, or from killing countless animals and injuring people with his dangerously fast automobile driving (that Willie started carrying compensation cash with him on these excursions, rather than driving more carefully, makes his callousness more appalling). He did have a more industrious side, as evidenced by his rise to a seat on the Board of Directors, and ultimately the Presidency, of the New York Central Railroad, positions he achieved by working over a decade to prove that he had the business capabilities to run the enterprise, rather than claiming a right to those positions by family name alone. Yet, when President Wilson nationalized the railroads as part of America’s mobilization for World War I, the de facto control was taken away from Willie and even that hard-earned position became hollow for him. To the limited extent to which Willie saw the times changing, he realized that he could not be a Vanderbilt in the style his immediate forbearers had been. Yet, instead of adjusting to the times like his great ancestor the original Commodore (Cornelius, who had changed his great shipping enterprise to a great railroad enterprise in order to stay at the top of America’s transportation industry), Willie just withdrew into his private world of sea voyages and hunting. As the founder of the Vanderbilt Cup event, Willie certainly saw the advantages of the automobile, and he set up the Long Island Motor Parkway as a place where car racers could drive without the legal and physical obstacles that other public roads had. Yet he lacked either the will, the drive, or both, to emulate the original Commodore and take the

Vanderbilt family business into this new frontier in American transportation. As Gittelman observes, Willie had a number of visionary ideas, but he was unable to translate those ideas into business success.

Gittelman started this biography as a pamphlet companion to the Suffolk County Vanderbilt Museum, and if the reader is looking for something to show for the life of Willie K., then the museum is it. Gittelman's narrative might have been tightened if somehow he could have made the book more about the development of the museum than about the unanswered life questions of the man who built it. It is well that Willie K. catalogued his naturalist discoveries so extensively and extended his mansion to accommodate them; in the absence of so much more he could have done, the museum he made of his estate remains one of his few positive legacies.

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