

**Nancy Rubin.** *American Empress: The Life and Times of Marjorie Merriweather Post.* New York: Villard Books, 1995. xvi + 445 pp. \$27.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-679-41347-9.



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Nancy Rubin has written a clear, intelligent and very thorough biography of one of America's most influential women. To an extraordinary degree, the book touches with equal skill on women's history, the history and development of philanthropy, social anthropology (especially of the Washington and European diplomatic communities; the New York and Palm Beach Society set, the fabled 400), architectural history (in one of the best discussions anywhere of Post's Palm Beach Estate *Mar-a-Lago*), business and economic history (especially the founding years of the Postum Company that later grew into the corporate behemoth General Foods) and even military and nautical history (relating the storied career of the yacht Hussar V, later renamed the Sea Cloud which Post bought with E.F. Hutton and which saw active service in the US Navy as a weather ship). The opportunity to plumb such variety is made possible by the first-rate research Rubin has assembled and the choice of a subject, Marjorie Merriweather Post, whose exceptional wealth and personality touched seemingly every corner of American life in the twentieth century.

Readers will learn that Marjorie maintained a conspicuously steady personality throughout the tumult of two World Wars, the Great Depression and the fickle political alliances in Washington in the 1950s. Far from becoming four separate persons in her marriages to--Ed Close, New York lawyer and socialite who attempted running the Postum Company for a time; E.F. Hutton, the legendary investment capitalist who managed the expansion of C.W. Post's original company into the General Foods conglomerate; Joseph Davies, America's second ambassador to the Soviet Union and (until the end of World War II) the most important figure in the FDR administration for Soviet affairs; and finally, a briefer marriage Pittsburgh businessman Herbert May, whose homosexuality caught Marjorie unprepared--Marjorie maintained true to her core midwestern values and Christian Scientist principles throughout her long life. A strong and appropriately assertive woman throughout, Rubin convincingly demonstrates Post's importance as the leader of a great many social causes and an accomplished busi-

nesswoman and diplomat without distorting her feminism.

Although Marjorie Post's relationships with rich and influential men would have been a tempting organizational principal for any biographer, Rubin correctly places her diversity of roles at the center of the book's structure. As Rubin says, "Though no feminist, Marjorie had evolved into an individual with a strong sense of her own identity and a history that would no longer be linked to the name of any man" (p. 319). The book is divided into eight sections of approximately 50-70 pages. The first, "A Midwestern Millionaire's Daughter", details the early years of the Postum Company and introduces Marjorie's compelling father, Charles William (C.W.) Post. Originally a rather wayward midwestern entrepreneur and salesman, C.W. Post made the journey to battle Creek Michigan to avail himself of Dr. John Harvey Kellogg's sanitarium for the cure of neurasthenia. It was there that C.W. Post experienced the profoundly unappetizing cereals and substitute coffee that some claim inspired him to seek out "a better coffee substitute" (Postum), invent boxed breakfast cereal (Post Toasties and GrapeNuts), and embrace Christian Science. In the somewhat hazy mytho-poetics of American capitalism, Kellogg and Post transformed over the course of three decades the tolerant enclave of Battle Creek Michigan into the Cereal Capital of America. The rest, as they say, is history, as the battle for America's breakfast tables revolutionized the status of the working housewife, gave rise to two Fortune 500 corporations and engendered two of America's most comprehensive and best-endowed philanthropic foundations. Marjorie's early childhood under such exciting and privileged circumstances was indeed quite special, but success could not ameliorate the essentially unhappy character of C.W. Post's marriage to his spouse Ella. The breakup of that marriage (and C.W.'s subsequent remarriage to his personal secretary) served as the template for many of Marjorie's own expecta-

tions of both men and marriage throughout her life.

"The Matron" explores Marjorie's young adulthood and her first marriage to Edward Bennett Close. Her marriage to Close was typified by the Greenwich Connecticut-Manhattan axis and was a proving ground for her budding skills as a socialite. Initially snubbed by the old guard represented by Edward Close's family (the Four Hundred listed in the social register), Marjorie made it one of her life's ambitions to prove her lineage, a feat she felt she had attained some 60 years later in Hillwood, her Washington estate. One result of the marriage to Close was the acquisition of one of America's most lavish properties, seemingly parallel to her relationships to wealthy men was the establishment of some of the grandest homes to grace American shores. Her establishment of *Mar-a-Lago* detailed in section three, "Palm Beach Days and Nights") gave rise not only to a distinctive and lavish American estate but to an entire community, Palm Beach, many of whose institutions and traditions circled in orbit around Marjorie Hutton and her wife E.F. and Florenz Ziegfeld. Perhaps more so than her wealth, these properties established Marjorie as a member of the reflected aristocracy of Europe. Rubin offers fascinating accounts of the construction and reception of many of these properties, including: The Boulders (Greenwich, CT), Hillwood (Long Island and Washington DC, now the site of a museum displaying Marjorie's Russian art collection), 2 East Ninety-second Street (Manhattan), Camp Hutridge/Topridge (The Adirondacks), Hogarcito (Palm Beach), Mar-a-Lago (Palm Beach), Tregaron (Washington, D.C.). Reflecting her father's civic virtues, these properties seemed to typify simultaneously Marjorie's personality, the zeitgeist of the times and, most curiously, the expectations and unspoken aspirations of the surrounding communities. Interestingly, when Marjorie attempted to sell her Long Island estate Hillwood to found the C.W. Post campus of Long Island University to accommodate the expansion of higher education for

returning G.I.'s, she earned the ire of her fellow neighbors because she transgressed the very values of the community (seclusion, exclusion and income-based barriers to emigration) that were enshrined in Hillwood itself.

At times, the middle sections, "Palm Beach Days-and Nights", "Depressions", "Ambassadress to the Soviet Union", and "Capital Hostess" make the eye blur with its layered reference to the rich and famous. This is no fault of Rubin's but rather the teasing out of social and political networks that are most serpentine. It is sufficient to say that throughout these chapters, Marjorie Post had a privileged vantage point on many of the more significant events in these decades. Rubin paints a very flattering portrait of her subject, seeing in her a completed cycle and a very human drama played out on a scale that seems almost impossible today. The closest parallel we might have to a Marjorie Post in our own times might be the recently deceased Ambassadress to France, Pamela Harriman. Rubin claims with ample evidence that Post's greatest legacy was her philanthropy and she convincingly demonstrates that from her youngest days--in the donation of Number 8 Base hospital in France during World War I (for which she was elected to the French Legion of Honor) her establishment of soup kitchens in Manhattan to benefit women and children to her elder years--dedication to the causes of youth (the sponsorship of free National Symphony Orchestra concerts, establishment of Boy Scout camps, the construction of college buildings at Mount Vernon Seminary and C.W. Post), art and even the propagation of canned food, liberating housewives from domestic drudgery--Marjorie Post represented an enlightened capitalist with a very human heart.

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