

# Ex Libris

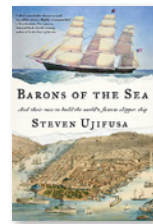
## Reviews of a sprightly seafaring saga from the 19th century and a tech biography that offers little insight

by Christopher Silvester and Rasika Sittamparam

### Barons of the Sea

And Their Race to Build the World's Fastest Clipper Ship

STEVEN UJIFUSA



**THE CHINA** trade in tea from Canton to New York not only gave rise to several great New York fortunes in the 19th century, but also produced those most romantic of sailing vessels known as clippers.

The young American men who sailed these ships to and from China, or toiled in the mercantile counting houses of Canton (known as ‘factories’, after the practice of factoring, or selling on bills of sale) were dubbed Canton bachelors. Men like Warren Delano II and Robert Forbes forged a valuable relationship with formidable Chinese opium merchant Houqua. They were also backed by promissory notes issued by the British bank of Baring Brothers & Co. Alongside British merchants such as William Jardine, they built seed fortunes from shipping opium from Singapore to Canton in clipper schooners, and then shipping green tea back home.

Forbidden to fraternise with the local Chinese population, their ethos of working long hours and partying hard was similar to that of a Wall Street trading floor of the 1980s. Thrown together in this way, the

Americans and their former colonial masters forged a powerful bond of common interests and sentiments.

Once they had returned to the New York of the 1840s, the men from Yankee New England families took their place as aspiring merchants. As Steven Ujifusa writes: ‘In an era before international investment banks and multibillion-dollar venture capital funds, no New Yorker was socially loftier than a wealthy merchant. He not only sold goods from abroad and owned fleets of ships but also served as a source of capital, funding all sorts of new enterprises.’ The Canton bachelors joined the Union Club, modelled on the gentlemen’s clubs of London, and sought appropriate matches, such as that between Warren Delano and Catherine Lyman, a cousin of the Forbes clan.

In the competition for the China trade, speed of delivery to market was of the essence. The first of the clippers, named *Houqua* after the Chinese merchant, was commanded by Captain Nat Palmer, built in New York, and launched in July 1844. Her return voyage from Canton to New York took only 90 days. The merchant William Henry Aspinwall commissioned an experimental design from John Willis Griffith for his *Sea Witch* and hired Captain Robert Waterman as consultant and commander, who came up with a huge sail plan of five tiers of sails on three masts. ‘The daring sail plan, coupled with Griffiths’ lithe, V-bottom hull, created a ship as skittish as a thoroughbred

racehorse,’ writes Ujifusa.

The race to build faster ships sped up with the 1849 California gold rush. Suddenly, ‘East coast merchants could sell manufactured goods to western gold diggers for hard currency rather than dubious paper notes.’ Shipments of gold bars and coins back east rose from \$4.9 million in 1849 to \$42.6 million in 1851. In 1849, a passage from New York to California via Cape Horn might take 180 days; by 1851 the standard for a fast run on the same route was 100 days.

The clipper business continued to grow, despite competition from steam (which had conquered transatlantic trade). Lessons learned from the China clippers led to the construction of California clippers. ‘Bigger, faster, and stronger than their predecessors, they could circumnavigate the world in record time, able to earn more than \$100,000 in a single successful voyage,’ says Ujifusa. ‘For a brief period, the California clipper would be the envy of the seagoing world.’

Vigorous competition came from Boston shipyard owner Donald McKay, an experienced builder of transatlantic packets, who ‘ushered in the era of the so-called extreme clippers, enormous vessels with sharp lines and massive spreads of canvas’. The speed of these Leviathans, wrote one San Francisco journalist, is ‘so great, that could power enough be brought to bear on the hull of an old-fashioned ship, as to force her through the water at the same rate, it would crush her to pieces.’

Sometimes these great ships could not take the strain, and their upper masts would come crashing down. Sailors aboard storm-tossed clippers might fall from the rigging into the raging sea or smash on to the deck below. Eventually, the extreme clippers, which required crews of up to 60 men, became uneconomic, while Captain Nat Palmer’s China clippers found the right balance between size of cargo and speed.

The apogee of extreme clipper design and an example of hubris was Donald McKay’s *Great Republic*. With a hull measuring 335 feet (‘longer than a modern football field’), she had four masts instead of the usual three,

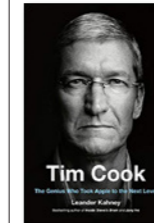
four complete decks, and ‘the graceful lines of a racing yacht’. She cost \$300,000 to build. Towed to New York after her launch and fitting out, she took on cargo and was scheduled to sail for Liverpool in late December 1853, when a fire in downtown Manhattan spread to the East river as the water froze in leather fire hoses. The masts and rigging of the mammoth clipper were consumed and it was scuttled, though the hull was later resurrected by Captain Nat Palmer, who produced ‘a leaner, less heavily sparred ship that was much more economical to operate’, needing a crew of only 50, not the original 100. *Great Republic* ‘never got the chance to surge along under full sail – most likely smashing every record on the books’. A record time of 89 days and eight hours for the New York to San Francisco sea passage under sail was actually set by merchant Moses Grinnell’s *Flying Cloud* in 1854 – and stood until 1989.

Several merchants used their earnings to build stately homes or diversify into new enterprises, such as railroads and transatlantic telegraph cables. Warren Delano lost his fortune in other pursuits, then acquired another from importing opium to America for pharmaceutical purposes – it was used to treat shattered casualties of the Civil War. In this sprightly seafaring saga, Ujifusa, who knows his keelson from his arched forefoot, intersperses descriptions of changes in ship design with oceanbound exploits, tales of commercial rivalry, and fluctuating family fortunes. **CS**

### Tim Cook

The Genius Who Took Apple to the Next Level

LEANDER KAHNEY



**TECHNOPHOBES** and non-Mac users should be aware that the only biography available of Tim Cook, Apple’s CEO, is told through the lens of an Apple-watcher

familiar with the company’s myriad products, updates and bug fixes. Author Leander Kahney runs the Cult of Mac, a website that acts as a newswire on all things Apple.

With two decades’ worth of insight, authority and access to many current and former employees at Apple, Kahney has unusually omitted interviews with Cook himself. Perhaps there has been extensive quality control to protect Apple’s trillion-dollar valuation. The author describes Cook as a solo character who grazes on energy bars and replies to emails at 3-4am, usually before or after a workout.

Apple still helped Kahney gather enough material to sing Cook’s praises. The author, almost dutifully, extols his precision of mind and the soft touch approach he exercised – a complete contrast to the late Steve Jobs. From the start, there are juxtapositions of the belligerent genius of Jobs against the calm competence of Cook. The book starts

with Jobs choosing Cook as CEO over the more interesting Jon Iver while nearing death. You are compelled to read further to find out why.

Chapter two recognises the Cook as the ‘hometown hero’ of Robertsedale, the small town in Alabama he grew up in. But not many see the globalised CEO as such. Kahney discovers locals’ criticism of Apple’s lack of presence in the town. This, we know, is personal: the openly gay Cook is still troubled by the racism of his neighbourhood, having witnessed a KKK member cross-burning in front of a black family’s house – an account many residents still dispute.

We then start to learn about Cook’s uncanny ability to transform Apple’s operations. There are rare revelations of kinks in its process and the wastage Jobs accrued due to the rise of PC.

The highlight of the book is the account of Cook’s fearlessness against the FBI, as told by Bruce Sewell, who was Apple’s general counsel at the time. He reveals that there had been government interest in ‘getting access to phones on a mass basis’, even before the San Bernardino shooting which triggered the crackdown on the iOS’s security features.

While the book tries make Cook appealing despite his lacklustre public persona, instead it tails off into PR-like prose. You learn everything of the CEO’s operational success, but you end up knowing very little about what makes him tick. That, unfortunately for Kahney, reinforces the very boring-but-good image he tries to protect his subject from.

## THREE TO READ



### POLITICS

Siege: Trump Under Fire  
Michael Wolff

In a sequel to his scintillating 2018 bestseller *Fire and Fury*, Wolff evaluates the forces arrayed against the POTUS.



### ECONOMICS

People’s Republic of Walmart  
Leigh Phillips and Michael Rozworski

Arguing the case for Walmart as a model for a new form of democratic socialism.



### ENVIRONMENT

Green and Prosperous Land  
Dieter Helm

Can we be prosperous and green at the same time? Helm makes the economic argument for conservation.