



The Age of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the New American Dream

By *H.W. Brands*

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The California Gold Rush inspired a new American dream—the “dream of instant wealth, won by audacity and good luck.” The discovery of gold on the American River in 1848 triggered the most astonishing mass movement of peoples since the Crusades. It drew fortune-seekers from the ends of the earth, accelerated America’s imperial expansion, and exacerbated the tensions that exploded in the Civil War.

H.W. Brands tells his epic story from multiple perspectives: of adventurers John and Jessie Fremont, entrepreneur Leland Stanford, and the wry observer Samuel Clemens—side by side with prospectors, soldiers, and scoundrels. He imparts a visceral sense of the distances they traveled, the suffering they endured, and the fortunes they made and lost. Impressive in its scholarship and overflowing with life, **The Age of Gold** is history in the grand traditions of Stephen Ambrose and David McCullough.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Texas A&M University professor H.W. Brands enhances his reputation as one of America's great popular historians with *The Age of Gold*, which tells the story of the California gold rush through rollicking narrative and intelligent analysis. "James Marshall's discovery of gold at Coloma [in 1848] turned out to be a seminal event in history, one of those rare moments that divide human existence into before and after," he writes. It launched "the most astonishing mass movement of people since the Crusades" and "helped initiate the modern era of American economic development." Brands describes how thousands of people from all over the world hazarded the journey, faced the scientific challenge of extracting precious metal from the earth, and finally struggled "to sink roots" where so many came merely "to strip the land." This book is something of a departure for Brands, who most recently has written biographies of Benjamin Franklin and Theodore Roosevelt (both of them excellent). Yet he tackles this new topic with confidence, telling dozens of stories about John Fremont, Leland Stanford, and less famous forty-niners. He concludes by describing why these tales have a national and even global importance. *The Age of Gold* is magnificent in its sweep, and not to be missed by fans of American history. --*John Miller*

From Publishers Weekly

The gold rush of 1848, says Brands, was a watershed in American history, helping mold the country into its modern shape, transforming the wilderness and pushing the country into civil war. Noted biographer Brands (his life of Benjamin Franklin, *The First American*, was a Pulitzer finalist) makes good use of a sparkling cast of characters: George Hearst, Leland Stanford, Levi Strauss, even William "War Is Hell" Sherman, all raced to California to make their fortunes. For most of the hundreds of thousands who flocked to California, though, life in the mines of the Sierras was hard and rarely paid off. Yet the hopeful kept coming not only from the East but from around the world, with profound implications for California and the rest of the country. The question of statehood would California be a slave state or free? accelerated the onset of the Civil War, says Brands. He believes the gold rush changed the national psyche, pulling the country away from a Puritan ethic of "steadiness and frugality" and toward a new American dream of "instant wealth," the fruits of "boldness and luck." With solid research and a sprightly narrative, Brands's portrait of the gold rush is an enlightening analysis of a transformative period for California and America.

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From Library Journal

The California gold rush of 1849 revolutionized expectations. It gave material promise to the American Dream and made gold the lubricant of the world economy. Brands (history, Texas A&M), the author of acclaimed works like his life of Benjamin Franklin, *The First American*, here fashions a smoothly flowing narrative from diaries, journals, letters, and other contemporary accounts. He recounts how the famous, like John Sutter, John Fr, mont, Leland Stanford, and the filibuster William Walker, and the not famous, like settler Sarah Royce, slave Archy Lee, Chinese immigrant Yee Ah Tye, and trader James Savage, changed their lives and shaped the history of California, the United States, and the world. These and the hundreds of thousands of other individuals who sparked the Age of Gold catapulted California into the center of a sectional and slavery controversies and of modern U.S. economic issues concerning gold vs. silver standards and debtors vs. creditors. Brands writes history as the art of storytelling that enthralls and informs the reader. Highly recommended, especially for public libraries.

Charles L. Lumpkins, Pennsylvania State Univ., State College

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