

TABOR BOOKS GLUT MARKET

A review of *The Legend of Baby Doe* by
John Burke. Putnam's \$7.95

By Caroline Bancroft

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Of Tabor books, there is no end. This is unfortunate for two reasons. Colorado has dozens of colorful characters whose stories cry out to be told and, secondly, most of the Tabor books merely repeat in slightly different language what a series of authors has been saying for 40 years.

There are scores of such examples from this latest production that might be cited. But the following passages will do as an example. They are taken from page 84 of this newest "Legend of Baby Doe" at the point right after William H. Bush has introduced Tabor to Baby Doe in the Saddle Rock Café in Leadville and has gone back to the Tabor Opera House leaving the couple alone:

"She spilled her brief biography, her respectable upbringing, her unhappy marriage, the death of her baby, her relationship with Jake Sands. She indicated that she was eager to break off her association with Jake but that she owed him money which he had advanced from time to time when Harvey was proving himself a poor provider.

"But you don't want to marry this fellow Sants?' Tabor asked her.

"She shook her head. 'Tell you what,' Tabor said, 'I've got more money than I know what to do with. Let me pay him what you owe him.'

"I couldn't do that,' Baby replied.

"Look on it as a grubstake. I've backed more men than I can remember. Hundreds of them. I wouldn't be sitting here in the Saddle Rock tonight if I hadn't taken a chance on a couple of fellows named Hook and Rische."

Now let the reader turn to page 39 of “Silver Queen” and the same scene invented by this reviewer 37 years ago, but written from Baby Doe's viewpoint:

“I told him, rather tearfully, about Harvey and Jake, and why I was in Leadville.

“So you don't want to marry Jake Sands—but you think you ought because of the money he's spent helping you out?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I tell you I've got plenty of money, more'n I know what to do with. Let me give you enough to pay this fellow back and carry you along for awhile. Something's bound to turn up.”

“This dazzling offer resounded in my ears like the explosion of dynamite.

“Why Governor Tabor, I couldn't let you do that!”

“Why not? Look on it as a grubstake. I've grubstaked hundreds of people in my day—I never saw Hook or Rische before they walked into the old Tabor store and asked me for a grubstake and then they found the Little Pittsburgh. Meant millions for me.”

No doubt the reader will find very little difference in these tellings, but there is one major difference. The new book pretends to be solid history and cites many sources (most of them questionable).

“Silver Queen” never pretended to be anything but a fictionalized story. It was based on as many interviews and as much history as was available during the years 1935 to 1952 when the late Edgar C. McMechen had squirreled away all the scrapbooks, letters and primary Tabor source material belonging in the State Historical Society and secreted the material in his basement.

After his death when the material became available in 1952, Eva Hodges of The Denver Post wrote an excellent Tabor series for the paper, and Forbes Parkhill, formerly of The Denver Post and later Western fiction writer and historian, contributed some articles to Empire Magazine. More and more facts began to emerge, and former statements were now checkable. This reviewer also contributed some further solid research to the new trend, including revising “Silver Queen.”

Gross errors had appeared in “Where They Dug The Gold” by George F. Willison (1931), “Silver Dollar” by David Karsner (1932), “The Tabors” by Lewis Gandy (1934) and in lectures of those days by Edgar C. McMechen. Sadly, every single one of these errors now reappears as fact, with a few flights of fancy added. Even such mundane errors as the name of the artist of the prophetic curtain in the Tabor Grand Opera House are repeated. Burke gives the artist as Edward Daingerfield (wrong in Gandy). It was actually Robert Hopkin of Detroit .

Burke's principal source, frequently cited, is Sue Bonnie, a prostitute in Leadville who had a third-grade education and had drifted into town with a truck driver from New Haven , Conn. During the last three years of Baby Doe's life they became good friends. Sue Bonnie's real name was Naomi Portiers, and she was almost illiterate. Her personal notes to this reviewer were touchingly pathetic before she came to a sordid sad end.

In 1937, True Story a very successful confession magazine, gave this reviewer a “ghost” commission for a five-part serial about Baby Doe. One of the editorial requirements was that it had to be signed by someone to whom the subject could have told her life story in the first person. Baby Doe had talked quite a lot to Sue Bonnie and so this reviewer bought the use of the younger woman's name, little guessing what unending repercussions would follow. Now an uneducated prostitute who could not write a complete sentence is an historical authority!

On the credit side of the ledger, Burke, a former newspaper man, is an accomplished writer with a pictorial pungent style and a caustic wit. He is very much at home in the culture of the 19 th century American scene (although not in Colorado where he scrambles geography and dates). He shows contempt and deals harshly with the robber barons, Tabor most of all, who emerges as an unattractive, consummate boor.

Burke also has no hesitation in making everything more sensational than it was. Irving Stone, also unreliable, said in “Men to Match My Mountains” that the Tabors had 100 peacocks on their lawn. Nonsense! They had one pair. But Burke following Stone makes a to-do about the 100 peacocks and on his own ups the Tabor's one coachman to two coachmen and two footmen along with many other exaggerations and folklore tales repeated as fact.

The whole production is very sad. Colorado deserves something new and something much, much better.