Who Killed Jane Stanford?:
A Gilded Age Tale of Murder, Deceit, Spirits,
and the Birth of a University by Richard White.
Norton, 362 pp., $35.00; $19.95 (paper)

American Disruptor: The Scandalous Life of Leland Stanford
by Roland De Wolk.
University of California Press, 299 pp., $34.95; $26.95 (paper)

It’s not the crime; it’s the cover-up.
Someone murdered Jane Stanford, the cofounder of Stanford University, on
Tuesday, February 28, 1850, putting a precisely calibrated dose of pure
strychnine in her bicarbonate of soda. The murderer had made an earlier
attempt, introducing rat poison into Stanford’s nightstand bottle of Poland
Spring water. We can’t be sure who the murderer was, but in Who Killed Jane Stanford? the Stanford University historian
turned sleuth Richard White conducts a thorough investigation that includes showing who covered up the murder: David Starr Jordan, the founding
president of the university.
Jordan was at least an accessory after the fact. White reaches his own conclu-
sion about who dunnit, but the real interest of his book is his use of the crime and especially the cover-up to lay bare the
forces at work in the early days of Stanford. This institution (where I also
teach), with its intimate ties to Silicon Valley, its $36 billion endowment, and its outsized prestige—it generally ranks among the top three universities world-
wide—has a gothic heritage that might surprise you, as well as some skeletons in the closet that, alas, might not.

American Disruptor: The Scandalous Life of Leland Stanford, a recent book by the journalist Roland De Wolk, of-ers important background because, although the murder took place after the death of Leland Stanford, Jane’s husband and the other cofounder of the university, his life set the stage for her demise. Despite its glorifying title, American Disruptor penetrates the thicket of hagiography surrounding Leland Stanford, the son of a farmer and innkeeper near Albany, revealing him to be a typical American success story: he blundered and swindled his way to wealth, propelling himself up-
ward—has a gothic heritage that might surprise you, as well as some skeletons in the closet that, alas, might not.

The Gold Rush was on, and Leland’s four brothers were in Gold Country. The eldest had gone as a forty-niner, but now they were operating Stanford Brothers general store in Sac-
ramento, having discovered a mother lode in the miners themselves: as Mark Twain probably never said, don’t dig for gold; sell shovels. In the summer of 1852 Stanford’s father disposed of his
shiftless son by paying for his passage around Cape Horn to join his siblings. (Before the transcontinental railroad, the sea voyage was cheaper than the land route.) Upon arrival in Californ-
ia, Leland was sent by his brothers to represent their interests in remote mining outposts. In one, called Mich-
igan City, he bought a saloon with a gambling operation, began market-
ing whiskey, and got the local board of supervisors to appoint him justice of the peace. The dropout and failure, by the alchemy of the golden frontier, was now a businessman and politician.

Back in Sacramento in 1856, having fetched Jane from Albany, Leland
lucked out again: his brothers went on to other things and left him the store. Stanford Brothers was adjacent to the hardware store of Collis Potter Huntington and Mark Hopkins, while
nearby Charles Crocker was selling carpets, clothing, and shoes. These
men, too, had arrived from the East Coast with the Gold Rush and discov-
ered bilking miners to be a more com-
fortable method of gold digging. The four joined forces, with Stanford as their front man. Building a railroad became their bigger and better brand of bilking, and the nascent Republican Party their racket.
Calling themselves “the Associates” and known in the press as “the Big Four,” Crocker, Hopkins, Huntington, and Stanford formed the Central Pa-
cific Rail Road Company of California in 1861, with Stanford as its president. For several years they’d been trying to get him into a statewide office on the Republican ticket; now suc-
cceeded in getting him elected gover-
nor on Lincoln’s coattails. This victory helped position the Big Four to build the railroad and their fortune, which they did by misappropriating tax funds and land grants, bribing legislators, manipulating press coverage, estab-
lishing monopolistic control by co-
vertly acquiring the Southern Pacific Railroad Company, siphoning money into their own pockets, and hiding their profits from shareholders and creditors, notably the United States government. A quarter-century later, when the California Legislature ap-
pointed Stanford to the US Senate, his term was overshadowed by the congressional Pacific Railway Com-
mission’s investigation of the rail-
road companies’ books and accounts, or rather by its outraged attempt at an investigation, given the mysterious disappearance of all the documents, which turned out to have fueled a pre-
hearing bonfire.

Stanford’s railroad companies em-
ployed 10,000 to 12,000 Chinese labor-
ners, whom they exploited even more brutally than they did the smaller number of mostly Irish white immi-
grant workers. To lay the rails and build stations, they displaced Native Americans from their lands; the fed-
eral Pacific Railway Act of 1862 under-
took to “extinguish as rapidly as may be” the Indian titles to all lands falling under the operation of this act.” The journalist and writer James Michie called the Big Four the “rail-rogues” and referred to Leland Stanford as “Stealord Landlord.”
During his term as governor, as in his business ventures, Stanford pro-
moted white supremacy, partly by continuing a genocidal war against California’s native population. Even in his position to the extension of slavery, in keeping with the Republi-
can Party’s populist platform, Stan-
ford trumpeted “the cause of the white man.” He elaborated:

I am in favor of free white Amer-
can citizens. I prefer free white citizens to any other class or race. I prefer the white man to the negro as an inhabitant of our country. I believe its greatest good has been derived by having all of the country settled by free white men.

Regarding the influx of Chinese im-
migrants, White says, Stanford had it both ways: as a politician he called them “a degraded and distinct people” who would “exercise a deleterious in-
fluence upon the superior race” and favored checking their immigration; meanwhile, they built his fortune.

Leland Jr. was born in 1868, five years after David Starr’s demise, in his term as governor and one year before he drove in the “last spike” establish-
ing the first transcontinental railroad by joining the Central Pacific and Union Pacific rails. A late arrival—his mother was almost forty and his father forty-four—Leland Jr. was a coddled princeling. Accompanying his parents on European tours, he met the pope and the leading French painters and collected art and antiquities to found a museum in San Francisco. In 1884, at age fifteen, while travel-

ing in Florence, Italy, Leland Jr. died of typhoid fever. His parents’ anguish was limitless; the unappealing Stanfords are at their most sympathetic in their grief for their dead child. The night he died, his parents said, he appeared to his father in a dream, inspiring their resolve to build a university in his name: the choice would make the children of California their own. There’s no doubting the authen-
ticity of their emotion. There’s also no doubting that the university served the alchemical purpose of transforming
One of Leland Sr.’s brothers, Thomas Welton Stanford, had also become deeply involved in spiritualism, after his wife’s death. Jane visited T.W. Stanford in Australia, where he had emigrated and made a fortune selling Singer sewing machines. He arranged several occasions for his sister during her visit. The two agreed that occult sciences were essential to higher education, and he endowed a fellowship at Stanford University in psychic research. (I was disappointed to learn that T.W.’s endowment is now just part of the psychology department’s general funds, but the university still holds his collection of “spurts,” or objects delivered to him by spirits.) Jane also proposed to subordinate the academic departments to the church, for which she would hire a spiritualist minister.

These developments constituted an ever-worsening headache for Jordan, who was laboring to give the university a different profile. Jordan rejected spiritualism and considered mediums fraudulent. He began publishing articles in popular science magazines ridiculing the claims of spiritualists and psychics.

Jordan, like the Stephens, came from upstate New York; he was a member of Cornell’s third graduating class in 1872. He then joined the summer school for zoology teachers run by the Harvard creationist naturalist Louis Agassiz on Penikese Island in Buzzards Bay, Massachusetts, a few months before Agassiz’s fatal stroke. That summer was transformative for young Jordan, who idolized Agassiz and resolved to become an ichthyologist like him. Although Jordan ultimately became an evangelist of eugenics (with his own eugenic flavor), he never shed his devotion to the staunchly anti-Darwinian Agassiz, who Jordan said showed students “the necessity of young, healthy blood.” As the pathetic, backward river fishes and brilliantly successful tropical business-fishes demonstrated, Jordan explained in his lectures and writings on evolution, natural selection made progress possible but not inevitable. Competition, given the right selective pressures, would bring progress, but a lack of competition or the wrong selective pressures would bring regression and degeneracy.

Was it among Jordan’s leading examples of a situation that would lead to regression. He proposed pacifism during the period before World War I, arguing that war impedes progress by producing the survival of the unfit, since the strong young heroes die, leaving the weaklings to procreate. Jordan developed this argument in *The Blood of the Nation: A Study of the Decay of Races Through the Survival of the Unfit* (1907). The book went through many editions, including an expanded one under the even more sinister title *The Human Harvest*. Here Jordan lays out his two reciprocal guiding principles: “the blood of a nation determines its history” and “the history of a nation determines its blood.” Of course, he explains, “blood” is figurative, since heredity is carried not in the “perm-plasma” (then the current view). “Blood” simply means “race unity.” Jordan’s prose acquires a tightness as he offers examples: “A Jew is a Jew in all ages and climes…. A Greek is a Greek; a Chinaman remains a Chinaman.”

Jordan’s commitment to progress also informed his advocacy of eugenics, though you couldn’t really make a case for a feminist. A woman must be educated, he argued, in order to produce that pinnacle of social evolution, the perfect fits. His business model, Jordan’s science model was gilding over dirty tricks: a veneer of objectivity covered a sinister interior in which science not only reaffirmed all social prejudice but armed it with fearsome new powers. Progress was Jordan’s guiding theme, whether he was writing about fishes, higher education, moral cleanliness, or racial purity. Take fishes. In some conditions they would progress, but not in others, Jordan explained. Rivers, where fish lived in comparative isolation and had less competition, were “ages behind the seas, so far as progress is concerned.” The best conditions for piscine progress were to be found in the tropics, which served “to intensify fish life, to make it up to its highest effectiveness,” such that a tropical fish must rid itself “of every character or structure it cannot ‘use in its business.’” As the pathetic, backward river fishes and brilliantly successful tropical business-fishes demonstrated, Jordan explained in his lectures and writings on evolution, natural selection made progress possible but not inevitable. Competition, given the right selective pressures, would bring progress, but a lack of competition or the wrong selective pressures would bring regression and degeneracy.

Leland’s populist anti-intellectualism suited Jordan. He liked Leland’s notion that a university should train students “for usefulness in life” and his emphasis on science, placing the humanities in a subservient role, including them merely to show the university’s readiness to compete with the old schools on the East Coast. The Stanford University presidency was also attractive to Jordan because it promised an unusual degree of power: since it was a private institution, he wouldn’t have to worry about a state board of regents, and he wouldn’t even answer to the board of trustees, which was to be “without function during the lifetime of either founder.” He would also have the power to hire and fire faculty, picking up a kind of a medical degree at a short-lived school called Indiana Medical College. He then taught zoology at the University of Indiana, where he later served as president before Leland and Jane Stanford recruited him in 1891. While Leland personifies the American success story, Jordan typifies a certain heroic image of science that became powerful in tandem with that story. This new science defined itself by its separateness from all other modes of understanding—by its reductionism, instrumentalism, utilitarianism, and pragmatism. It had no time for Greek or Latin, literature or history, speculations or interpretations, or any idea without immediate industrial and economic application. It had little time for books: “Study nature not books” was one of Jordan’s mottos.

Toward the end of his term as Stanford’s president, Jordan had also become a vocal opponent of black and women’s rights. He favored an ocean of white Anglo-Saxons, “the higher man.” This was Leland’s notion, that a university should train students “for usefulness in life” and his emphasis on science, placing the humanities in a subservient role, including them merely to show the university’s readiness to compete with the old schools on the East Coast. The Stanford University presidency was also attractive to Jordan because it promised an unusual degree of power: since it was a private institution, he wouldn’t have to worry about a state board of regents, and he wouldn’t even answer to the board of trustees, which was to be “without function during the lifetime of either founder.” He would also have the power to hire and fire faculty, picking up a kind of a medical degree at a short-lived school called Indiana Medical College. He then taught zoology at the University of Indiana, where he later served as president before Leland and Jane Stanford recruited him in 1891. While Leland personifies the American success story, Jordan typifies a certain heroic image of science that became powerful in tandem with that story. This new science defined itself by its separateness from all other modes of understanding—by its reductionism, instrumentalism, utilitarianism, and pragmatism. It had no time for Greek or Latin, literature or history, speculations or interpretations, or any idea without immediate industrial and economic application. It had little time for books: “Study nature not books” was one of Jordan’s mottos.

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Henry Goebel, the head of the German departments, explained to her how much better things would be if the humanities, and the that ultimately as- sumed the duties of the university in the mode of Leland Stanford University, for instance, became the proud to find out White's conclusion, but as a transient in San Francisco's Ten- don't have the transcendent powers to their claim, things can't be done in unpre- dictable ways. Stanford University, for instance, became the leader in the mode of Leland Stanford and David Starr Jordan—when he ar- rived for his visit in January 1906 to lead a course in the history of philos- ophy. “If I only can get through these next 4 months and pocket the $5,000,” he wrote to a friend, “I shall be the happiest man alive.” He had 200 stu- dents and 150 guests, and in his own estimation he lectured excellently, but his efforts were wasted: his students didn’t understand basic concepts such as “hypothosis” or “analogy.” He could hardly “aim too low.” While he appreci- ated the California landscape, James warned that the university’s govern- ing powers had failed to make a suffi- cient priority of intellectual teaching and scholarship. It was a relief when, on April 18, the earthquake sent him packing. The next year James gave an address to the Association of American Alumni at Radcliffe about the social importance of a college education, arguing that the humanities, he observed, were nothing less than the “sifting of human creations” and should encompass all teaching on a university campus. He criticized the follows...