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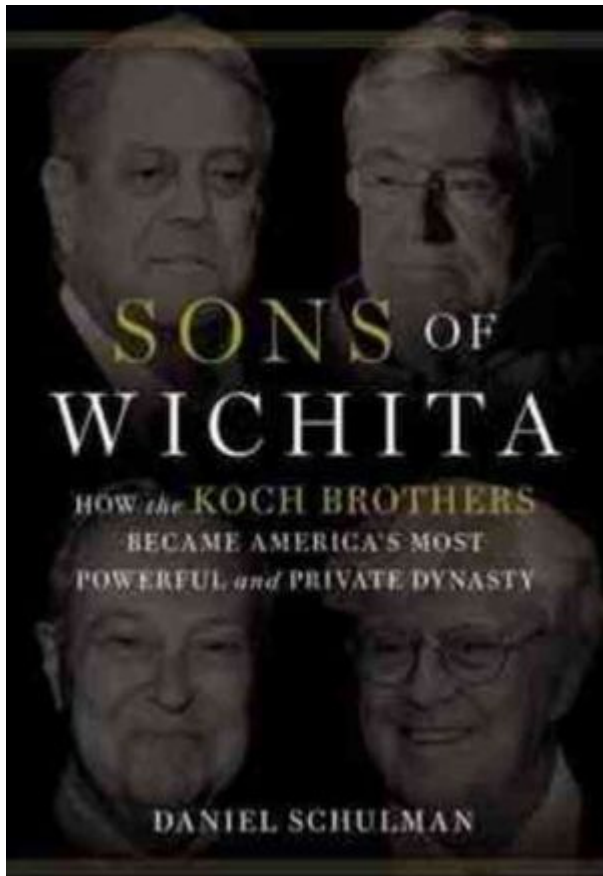
PARK CITY

DAILY NEWS

'Author leaves no stone unturned'

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"Sons of Wichita: How the Koch Brothers Became America's Most Powerful and Private Dynasty" by Daniel Schulman. New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing (Hachette Book Group), 2014, 424 pages, \$30.00.



"Schooled by his conservative father in the evils of government, Charles gravitated to libertarianism, a philosophy that advocates the maximum of personal and corporate freedom and the most minimal government," Daniel Schulman explains near the beginning of *"Sons of Wichita: How the Koch Brothers Became America's Most Powerful and Private Dynasty,"* his exhaustive and unflinching look at the rise of one of America's most influential families. "He grew to believe zealously in the power of markets to guide human behavior, and to loathe the government regulations and subsidies that distorted markets – and behavior itself – by trying to impose false order."

Like many readers, I have been vaguely familiar with the Koch brothers through their highly publicized involvement with conservative politics over the past few years. They have been portrayed as both patriots as well as villains, depending on the political leanings of those doing the characterization. Until I ran across this book at my local Barnes and Noble booksellers, however, I did not know much about their personal lives or how

they came to occupy such a prominent place in the political spectrum. After reading Schulman's exquisite account of the lives of these four brothers, I now feel I have a fairly accurate and comprehensive understanding of who they are, what they believe, and how they operate. As is usually the case, the real story is much more complicated and nuanced than the caricature typically put on display by the media, regardless of whether we are referring to the conservative or the liberal variety.

"Sons of Wichita" is based on interviews with hundreds of relatives, friends, business associates and others who have interacted with the Koch brothers over the years. Schulman's research for this volume was extensive, with no less than thirty-one pages of source notes at the conclusion of the fifteen chapters that make up the main text.

Fred Koch, the patriarch of the family, was born in 1900 (the same year as my maternal grandfather). He had four sons: Frederick, Charles, David and Bill; the latter two being fraternal

twins. At the time of his death in 1967, his financial empire was worth \$50 million. He made his fortune in the petroleum industry, primarily by developing a new method for turning crude oil into gasoline – a process he had to defend vigorously in the courts after being sued by the larger oil companies. After successfully navigating his way through years of litigation, he cofounded the Wood River Oil and Refining Company in 1940, which eventually became Koch Industries. The genesis of his political views, which lean heavily to the right, can be traced to a visit he made to the Soviet Union in 1928 in search of new business opportunities. He became very passionate about the threat he felt communism posed to America, a perspective that led to his being a founding member of the John Birch Society. Perhaps his greatest accomplishment was instilling an intense and enthusiastic belief in capitalism and free markets in his four sons.

Although I found the business and political aspects of the book enlightening, it was the personal drama surrounding the four brothers after their father passed away that most intrigued and fascinated me. Fred Koch was a man with staunch allegiance to a set of clearly defined principles, as noted in this passage from “Successor,” the fifth chapter:

“According to Charles, on the first occasion Fred caught his son stealing, he forgave Frederick. Indeed, Fred included Frederick in a previous version of his will, drafted in June 1966. But later that year, after Fred had created trusts for each of his sons, the industrialist discovered that Frederick had again stolen from him. Frederick learned of his disinheritance when he returned home for Fred’s funeral. His grief-stricken mother – unaware of Frederick’s removal until she read her husband’s will – broke the news to him in the library of the family’s home.”

Fred Koch clearly valued success, but it had to be achieved with integrity. I found this somewhat ironic given the events that have transpired after his death, as described in this excerpt from “The Art of War,” the tenth chapter:

“In 1985 Bill filed a lawsuit in federal district court in Wichita, alleging that Koch Industries had obscured assets during the settlement talks. Not long afterward, Bill and Frederick battled their brothers over control of their father’s foundation. In 1991, they contested their mother’s will, which included a clause cutting any of Mark Koch’s children out of her estate if they did not drop pending litigation against each other. In Bill’s ongoing psychodrama with Charles, nothing was off the table. If he had to drag the family name out of the shadows and through the mud to achieve closure, then so be it.”

Schulman is a founding member of the investigative journalism team at Mother Jones, where he also serves as senior editor of the Washington bureau. His articles have appeared in the Boston Globe Magazine, Columbia Journalism Review, Psychology Today, and the Village Voice. “Sons of Wichita” is his first book.

I recommend “Sons of Wichita” to anyone who wants to know the real story of the Koch brothers. The author leaves no stone unturned as he walks the reader through decades of personal and professional history. Sure, the detailed and realistic portrait Schulman paints of the development of a business empire that is almost unrivaled in its reach and influence is indeed mesmerizing. But it will be the human side of the equation that ultimately holds your attention.

— *Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*