

## A Colossal Life

Review By Joanne Pilgrim

(08/08/2007) “Uncharted Course: The Voyage of My Life,” by Anthony Drexel Duke with a co-author, Richard Firstman, leaves a reader deeply affected, not only by the compassion and accomplishments of Mr. Duke, a descendant of three aristocratic families who made creating opportunities for disadvantaged city youth his life’s work, but by his Zelig-like appearance with people and at times and places that have shaped 20th-century history.

There is no doubt that Mr. Duke, who is 89 years old, has had a remarkable life. In his autobiography, the founder of the Boys Harbor camp (now called Boys and Girls Harbor), which is tucked into the East Hampton woods on Three Mile Harbor, tells his stories in great detail, with an emotional immediacy unfaded by time.

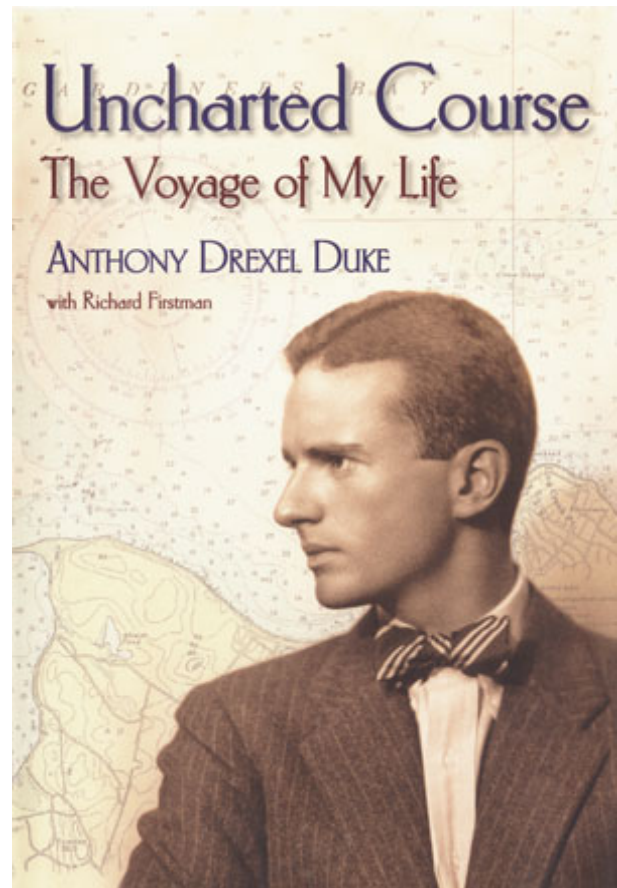
He grew up in Old Westbury, New York City, and Southampton, where, in the summer of 1937, after volunteering at a camp for disadvantaged city kids run by St. Paul’s, his New England preparatory school, he arrived with a group of his campers in tow, determined to extend their experience. They set up camp, with his mother’s blessing, in the pool house of the family’s Southampton estate.

By the next summer, the 18-year-old had arranged to use land on Jessup’s Neck for his own camp, called Duck Island. “The seeds of my life’s work were sown at St. Paul’s camp,” writes Mr. Duke.

“There were boys who had reputations for being trouble, and some certainly lived up to their billing. In some of those cases, all it took was a little care and attention to change a kid’s direction,” he says.

He employed the same “theory of leadership” both at camp and, later, as a commanding officer in the Navy: an environment of “openness, cheer, and real affection,” tempered with structure and authority.

Camp emphasized education, and Mr. Duke mobilized his friends to tutor attendees in academic subjects and public speaking.



During the year, he invited campers to his house in Locust Valley on weekends, and, in East Hampton, if a camper was in residence on his or her birthday, they were invited, with a handful of friends, to the Duke house, next door, for dinner and a party.

By the end of one of the camp's initial summers, Mr. Duke was engaged to the first female camp counselor, who became the first of his four wives.

During college at Princeton, Mr. Duke writes, he began to develop an awareness of "race and class, wealth and poverty, and to wonder how such extreme disparities could exist in a true democracy."

In reading the book, its subject comes across as intelligent, urbane, respectful, and compassionate — exactly how those acquainted with Mr. Duke today are likely to describe him.

And, typically, and truthfully, Mr. Duke credits many others who have helped along the way. He describes Paul Moore, a classmate of means who became a counselor at the camp, as "a man of extraordinary wisdom and decency," an apt description, again, perhaps for Mr. Duke himself.

Mr. Moore, he writes, was not one of those "people born into great privilege [who] never venture beyond that cocoon of wealth, stature, and cradle-to-grave comfort — not to mention an unearned sense of superiority." Well, neither was Mr. Duke himself.

The philosophies of Mr. Moore, who became a priest — (Mr. Duke says that he thought of seminary school, too, "but ultimately I decided I was too fond of having a good time,") — influenced Mr. Duke's life "profoundly," the author writes.

The privileged, Mr. Moore wrote in his own autobiography, "prefer charitable giving to social action to empower the poor because charity makes the giver feel good and the receiver feel humbled; empowerment gives the poor a sense of dignity but threatens the advantages of the rich."

Early on, Mr. Duke recounts, both he and Mr. Moore had "similar reactions to the urban sons of struggling immigrants. We found them tough, sometimes nasty, but also funny, loveable, and full of potential."

"If someone asked me what my major concern is for our nation, the answer would be the same whether it is 1946 or 1975 or 2006. I would say that for our democracy to survive, its youth at all economic and social levels must be educated," Mr. Duke sums up toward the close of the book.

He left Princeton to join the Navy at the advent of World War II and, in 1941, was a naval intelligence officer in Argentina. Commander of a tank landing ship, and later in charge of a fleet of a dozen ships at the tender age of 26, he landed at Normandy and Okinawa, and lost not one man under his command in more than two years, earning a Bronze Star for his service.

Upon his return from the war, he invited urban kids to a camp at his own Weston, Conn., property, and, later, by flying over the Northeast metropolitan area, discovered the East Hampton property for a more permanent site.

At camp, Mr. Duke led calisthenics and took the boys aboard his boat, the Rum Runner, out into Gardiner's Bay. He shook each boy's hand every morning, and said good night to each at night. He even enlisted the help of his own children to work at the camp.

Over the years, the work at Boys Harbor has gathered an illustrious array of supporters, including Jackie Robinson, who invited campers to his Dodger games, Gary Cooper, the actor, whom Mr. Duke met at a golf club in Southampton, and who came to Boys Harbor in East Hampton to play ball, and the novelist John Hersey, who defended the early camp against prejudiced Connecticut neighbors.

In East Hampton, initially, there were some questions, too, about the gathering of city kids out in the woods. After visits to the camp by some local doubters “we were embraced,” he writes. Among those doubters were members of an East Hampton Episcopal church that Mr. Duke and the boys attended, who were coerced to go and see the camp by a visiting bishop. Mr. Duke has an interesting family pedigree. The Biddles of Philadelphia were Quakers who took a stand against slavery in 1688, one of the first stirrings of the abolitionist movement. His great-great-grandfather Anthony J. Drexel, a financier who partnered with J.P. Morgan, has been called “the man who made Wall Street.” Another Drexel became a philanthropist and a nun, who was canonized by Pope John II in 2000. Tony Duke was in attendance.



Anthony Drexel Duke

On the Duke side are the founders of American Tobacco, and James Buchanan Duke, whose support of North Carolina’s Trinity College resulted in its being renamed Duke University.

He reveals that after his father drowned on a sailing trip across Long Island Sound when his sons were young, his branch of the family was left in more constrained financial straits than other relatives (such as his cousin, Doris Duke, who inherited \$80 million at age 13.) He acknowledges that his experiences are unavoidably colored by the privileges of his family’s wealth, influence, connections, and social strata, as well as its eccentricities.

His grandfather, Anthony Joseph Drexel Biddle, was a journalist and an amateur boxer who taught boxing at Bible classes, kept alligators, and, in

retirement, trained Marine recruits in the martial arts.

Mr. Duke’s father’s sister married his mother’s brother in 1915, creating a tangled web of relations in the Biddle and Duke families. (Mr. Duke created a large extended family himself, with four marriages and “seven sons and four daughters born over the course of 37 years.”)

His mother, Cordelia Biddle Robertson, was a scion of Southampton and New York society and the family’s colorful matriarch. Her stories about her father became the book “My Philadelphia Father,” and later adapted into the Broadway play and Disney movie, “The Happiest Millionaire Alive,” starring, respectively, Walter Pidgeon and Fred MacMurray.

Extraordinary. You can’t make this stuff up. And there’s more:

On a trip to Cuba in 1958, he and his teenaged son Tony Jr. were at the bar at the Hotel Nacional in Havana and witnessed one of Castro’s military officers pull out a gun and shoot another man, a colonel in Fulgencia Batista’s army, in the head.

Later in 1980, Mr. Duke and his son John, both married at that time to sisters born in Cuba, returned to the island by boat during the Mariel boatlift, and ferried 35 Cuban refugees to the United States.

He sat behind Hitler in the Munich opera house during a performance of Wagner in 1932. (Many times later, he wrote, he would play out a “fantastic scenario” in his mind: “What if I had reached out and used my lessons from Granddaddy Biddle to kill Hitler with my bare hands?”)

Two years later, at age 16, on a hunting trip in the Austrian Alps he was taken captive by a group of young Austrian Nazis and wound up in the midst of a firefight. That experience, he wrote, “ignited my interest in world affairs.”

World affairs were indeed somewhat a family business. Mr. Duke describes how after drinking martinis in London before the invasion of Normandy with his uncle, Tony Biddle, who was an ambassador in Europe and then an aide to General Dwight D. Eisenhower, they went to meet the boss. “Captain Duke - you’ve arrived,” Ike said. “We can now proceed with the invasion plans.”

In the last chapter of the book, called “All My Children,” Mr. Duke details the qualities and accomplishments of each of his 11 children, his sons and daughters-in-law, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, calling each one “the best.” Many of their accomplishments sound just as remarkable as the family patriarch’s.

Hundreds of alumni of the camp, which now has year-round New York City programs, including a charter school and performing arts conservatory, have made Mr. Duke “especially proud,” he says in the book. One is Eduardo Padro, who was a camper, and then a counselor, earned a scholarship to Yale, and later became a New York State Supreme Court Justice.

One of first girls to attend the camp, when programs were extended to them in 1972, went on to become a lawyer and president of the Harbor Alumni Association. And quite a few Harbor camp alumni became teachers when the organization began offering enrichment classes in Harlem, or took other roles in the organization.

Mr. Duke offers his prayer and belief that “we will continue to find ways to help the disenfranchised find their rightful place at the table.” He notes that the latest tally of young people that the Harbor has “helped empower” is “upwards of 45,000.” That is an awfully impressive circle of influence for one teenaged boy to have begun.

“Uncharted Course:  
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Richard Firstman is a former staff writer and editor at Newsday.