

Newsday 11/3/96 Deconstructing William Hammer

DOSSIER: The Secret History of Armand Hammer by Edward Jay Epstein. Random House, 418 pp., \$30.

BY STEVE WEINBERG

ARMAND HAMMER died six years ago at age 92. Famous — some would say notorious — since his early 20s, he did everything possible to be remembered favorably after his death.

If this exposé by Edward Jay Epstein attracts attention, Hammer will have worked in vain to assure his good name. On almost every page Epstein demonstrates that Hammer built his reputation on a foundation of deception.

There is no doubt that Hammer accomplished a great deal in his life, in a staggering number of realms — business, most prominently at Occidental Petroleum Corp.; art collecting, including ownership of a New York City gallery and development of an eponymous museum; international diplomacy, especially with the Soviet Union during 70 years of hostile relations with the U.S. government; and philanthropy, with an emphasis on funding cancer research.

But Epstein suggests there was no humanitarianism underlying Hammer's accomplishments. Instead, everything Hammer did was motivated by greed and vanity.

Epstein's findings carry special interest for me. From 1983 to 1989, I researched and wrote the first unauthorized biography of Hammer. He vowed he would sue. He did, too, claiming I had libeled him in more than 100 passages. The lawsuit was about to go to trial when he died.

Ironically, my version of Hammer's life was more flattering than Epstein's, partly because the tycoon used his wealth and connections to close off negative information. Because Ham-

Steve Weinberg's most recent work is "The Reporter's Handbook," a guide to finding information.



Armand Hammer in the 1950s

mer was alive, important sources refused to talk to me. Many who did talk confined themselves to innocuous topics. Government agencies withheld thousands of documents on the grounds that Hammer's privacy would be invaded. The Soviet government and governments of other nations that did business with Hammer would give me little or nothing without the great man's permission.

With Hammer dead, Epstein faced fewer difficulties. He gained cooperation from Hammer's son and other disaffected family members, from Hammer's mistresses, archivists in the former Soviet Union, U.S. government agencies no longer hampered by considerations of privacy.

For me, Epstein's catalog of deception is endlessly interesting. For other readers, it might be numbing unless digested a chapter per day. Details, often technical, pile up. Hundreds of characters come and go, as in Russian

novels. Each character tries to use Hammer for nefarious reasons. Some succeed; more often, Hammer ends up using them.

For the beginning Hammerologist whose education is confined, so far, to this 800-word review, perhaps his duplicitousness is best captured by the Martha Wade Kaufman/Hilary Gibson saga. In 1974, Hammer, age 76, seduced Kaufman, a 32-year-old novice writer interviewing him for a magazine article about his art collection. Hammer, married for the third time, was blessed with a devoted wife whose own fortune had helped him enter the oil business. Kaufman was married, with two young children.

Hammer offered Kaufman lots of money to leave her husband and become his lover. She said yes. Hammer placed her on the Occidental payroll as an art consultant, although she knew little about art. He took her all over the world at corporate expense.

He insisted she submit to humiliating sexual demands.

When Hammer's wife, Frances, became suspicious, Hammer "devised an incredible deception," according to Epstein. "He had Kaufman legally change her name to Hilary Gibson, and he had her change her appearance and voice so that neither Frances nor, supposedly, her fellow workers would recognize her. He then told Frances that he had fired Martha Kaufman and appointed Hilary Gibson as the new . . . consultant."

It can be depressing for a biographer to spend years chronicling the life of a difficult personality. Fortunately for Epstein, he had previous experience researching difficult people, most notably Lee Harvey Oswald. Epstein had another advantage — he traveled with Hammer for a significant stretch during 1981, in preparation for a New York Times Magazine profile.

Epstein's initial contact with Hammer seems to have spawned a fascination driven by repulsion. This book is filled with Hammer's bile, and also with Epstein's bile. Hammer does not receive the benefit of the doubt. Over and over, Epstein advances the most negative possible interpretation for Hammer's actions.

Although an impressive researcher who has broken much new ground, Epstein sometimes overreaches, implying base motives to Hammer without qualification, motives that Epstein could not possibly know with such certainty.

Epstein also seems to credit sources whose stories should probably be handled with more skepticism. Those sources have scores to settle and quite likely understood that Epstein would be glad to serve as a vessel for posthumous revenge. Perhaps Epstein used only information he could verify independently of the informant, but the endnotes frequently fail to declare any independent verification.

That said, readers willing to correct for Epstein's overreaching will be treated to one man's recounting of a bizarrely fascinating life. □