INTRODUCTION

California is a land of contrasts. Both the highest and lowest elevations of the lower forty-eight states are in California—and then only eighty miles apart. The hottest temperatures in the United States are found there. It has some of the world's greatest wonders, and has had some of its worst natural disasters. Naturally, this landscape has inspired prose that, like the land itself, is diverse and full of contrasts. This book aims to corral the best of it.

The special quality of California's landscape has affected all sorts of writers, not all of whom fall into the category of "nature writer" or "naturalist." Gretel Ehrlich, Barry Lopez, and David Rains Wallace, for example, have certainly made nature their special province, but they also write fiction. Then there are writers known primarily for their fiction—Henry Miller, Wallace Stegner, and Robert Louis Stevenson, to name but three—who turned to nonfiction to express their feelings about California's wild places. Also present are authors who work principally in nonfiction, such as M. F. K. Fisher, John McPhee, and John Muir. Others yet seem equally at home in both fiction and nonfiction; these include Edward Abbey, Joan Didion, and Mark Twain. Finally, there are poets, such as John Daniel, Joaquin Miller, and Gary Snyder, who have also worked in prose. Not all the pieces rounded up here are

nonfiction, however. Included are selections from works of fiction by Jack Kerouac, Jack London, John Steinbeck, and others. What all the pieces by these authors have in common is good writing, which is what makes this anthology "literary," rather than a historical survey of nature writing in the state.

The constraints of space have regrettably forced the omission of much worthwhile writing. Some of the early European explorers, pioneers, and settlers left wonderfully descriptive journals about a wilder California. Writers as varied as Clarence King, Stewart Edward White, George Wharton James, Page Stegner, Judy Van Der Veer, Galen Rowell, David Wicinas, and Paul McHugh have all written memorably about the outdoors, while others, such as Jaime de Angulo, Gerald Haslam, Maxine Hong Kingston, Roy Parvin, William Saroyan, and Gary Soto, have given life and voice to the people of California, on the land and in their diverse communities. Many other important contributions could be mentioned. In order to strike a balance between classic writers and newer voices, and to provide a consistent focus on the state's natural treasures, hard choices had to be made.

The incredible biodiversity of California has not been mirrored to date by a like diversity in the cultural backgrounds of those who write about nature. Not surprisingly, most such essayists, poets, and fiction writers have been European-Americans, for they had the education and leisure required to trek through the wilderness and record their impressions. Although today some of the best writers in California are of Mexican, African, and Asian descent, these authors have usually chosen to write about their immigrant and urban experiences rather than rhapsodize about the mountains, deserts, and forests. The same is true of Native Californian writers, most of whom write about their people on the land, rather than the land itself. This situation is changing, however, and soon, no doubt, a body of "nature writing" will emerge that better reflects the cultural diversity of California's population.

Women are perhaps more adequately represented in contemporary writings about nature. Although historically they lacked not only rooms

of their own, but tents as well, that has changed in the past several decades, and today women are among the best in the field.

Some years ago the Central Valley writer Gerald Haslam claimed that California has four "geo-literary" regions: the greater San Francisco Bay Area, the Heartland, the Southland, and Wilderness California. Most of the places covered in this collection are in the last region—if, that is, "wilderness" can be stretched to embrace the merely rustic and pastoral as well as the truly untamed. It does not mean places where men and women do not dwell. Simply, when we speak of wilderness, our attention is focused not on people, but on the place itself.

The book is organized around the basic landforms: mountains, hills and valleys, deserts, and coast. As a prelude, there are two California Indian myths about how the land was created. The first is an old Cahto narrative, and the second is an A-juma-wi story filtered through the modern sensibility of Darryl Babe Wilson.

Of all California's many mountain ranges, the most imposing is the Sierra Nevada. This four-hundred-mile-long wall of jagged, glacier-sculpted mountains has probably inspired more writers than any other topographical feature in the state. At the top of the list of Sierran natural wonders is surely Yosemite, represented here by Joseph LeConte experiencing its wonders for the first time, Jack Kerouac and a couple of his dharma-bum companions scaling Matterhorn Peak, Daniel Duane climbing Half Dome, and Ann Zwinger delighting in the high country's "trumpets of light." Elsewhere in the Sierra, John Muir relishes a wind storm, and Mark Twain camps out at Lake Tahoe.

Extending north and south between the Central Valley and the Pacific are the Coast Ranges. The Santa Lucia Range, for example, which is visited in a short piece by John Steinbeck, rises abruptly from the ocean to heights of almost 6,000 feet.

Other mountains, too, have heartened writers. Bordering Oregon, the Klamath Mountains (visited here by Joaquin Miller and David Rains Wallace), the Cascade Range, and the Modoc Plateau terminate

the Central Valley at its north end. In the south, the valley is closed by the Transverse Ranges—so called because of their east-west lineation, which runs at an oblique angle to the northwest-southwest-trending Sierra Nevada and Coast Ranges. The Transverse Ranges comprise such mountain chains as the San Bernardinos, Santa Monicas, and Santa Ynez, as well as their interior valleys, including San Fernando, San Gabriel, and Ojai. South of the Transverse are the Peninsular Ranges—so called because most of them are in the Baja Peninsula—which include the Santa Ana and San Jacinto ranges. Isolated mountains have captured writers' hearts as well. Mount Tamalpais, for example, whose skyline and trails delight San Francisco Bay Area residents, is described here in closely observed detail by Harold Gilliam.

Wherever there are mountains, there are hills at their feet and valleys in between. Separating the Coast Ranges from the Sierra Nevada is the Great Central Valley, almost five hundred miles in length. The northern portion is known as the Sacramento Valley, and the southern the San Joaquin Valley, after the two rivers that drain them. David Mas Masumoto writes eloquently of the land that he farms near Del Rey, in the San Joaquin. Another prominent valley lies between the Transverse and Peninsular ranges: the populated Los Angeles Basin. Less great, but nonetheless dear to those who live or hike there, are the hundreds of smaller valleys and foothills throughout California. In this collection you will read about Napa Valley (Robert Louis Stevenson), Sonoma Valley (Jack London), Salinas Valley (William H. Brewer), the Altadena foothills (Hildegarde Flanner), Hemet Valley (M. F. K. Fisher), the Santa Barbara foothills (Margaret Millar), the San Rafael Wilderness (David Darlington), the Klamath Basin (Barry Lopez), and the Los Altos hills (Wallace Stegner).

California has three major deserts—the Mojave, the Colorado (or Sonoran), and the Great Basin. Each is unique and thus presents a special challenge to writers who wish to "explain" the desert. Here, the extremes of Death Valley are detailed by Edward Abbey; John Daniel and Sue Zwinger recollect memorable desert treks; Gary Paul Nabhan

visits some oases in the Colorado Desert; and Mary Austin writes of the high desert of the Owens Valley.

California is delimited on the west by eight hundred miles of Pacific coastline, with its rocky headlands, bays, beaches, and offshore islands. This collection highlights various faces of this diverse margin. In the northern and central reaches we encounter the "lost coast" as it is walked by John McKinney; Russell Chatham narrates a fishing excursion on Bodega Bay; and Henry Miller describes his beloved Big Sur. Farther south, around Santa Barbara, J. Smeaton Chase and Jane Hollister Wheelwright travel on horseback on the beach, while Kem Nunn surfs the waves and Gretel Ehrlich hikes one of the Channel Islands. In the southland, T. H. Watkins and Lawrence Clark Powell reminisce about Dana Point and Malibu, respectively.

The elements—earthquakes, storms, fire—play a significant role in California. In the last section, the infamous San Andreas Fault is observed by James D. Houston and John McPhee. John Muir and Joan Didion write about the wind—a storm in the Sierra as experienced from the top of a tall tree, and a Santa Ana in Los Angeles—while Mary Austin and Jane Hollister Wheelwright describe the rain as it pours down on the Owens Valley and a Pacific beach. The aftermath of a forest fire is taken up by Margaret Millar.

Finally, in an afterword, Gary Snyder takes a broad look at California's environment and suggests ways in which it can be preserved.

I hope that this book will be kept on a nearby shelf by armchair naturalists and virtual wanderers, and in the backpacks of hikers and trekkers—to refresh and inspire them, like a dip in a cool mountain lake, and as a reminder of the "natural state" of California.