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## *Contested Eden*

### *An Introduction*

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History, as the study of change over time, always requires that we stop periodically to take stock. Whether we measure by years, decades, or centuries, by regions, cohorts, or generations, the goal is identical: to assess what has transpired and what still remains to be done. California became part of the United States of America a century and a half ago. On the event of the state's sesquicentennial we commemorate our genealogies and complex pasts, acknowledging the debts of knowledge and interpretation we owe to previous generations, fashioning our present with distinct questions and concerns, charting a course toward a richer, more complex understanding of the past.

In the years since 1850, when statehood was won, California has gone from a space sparsely populated to the most populous place in the Union. Once a largely isolated backwater where Native Americans subsisted on hunt products, on plantings, and what could be gathered, California has been continuously and radically transformed, and periodically renewed. Spanish-speaking settlers arrived febrile with dreams of gold. But on finding none, they settled for lordship over the land and over its native labor. Gold was eventually discovered by Anglo-Americans in 1848. Gold fever truly gripped the national imagination then, and in California that fever has never completely cooled.

In the Golden State, one generation after another has found a tangible place on which to project its myths and fantasies of utopic possibility. Eden, Arcadia, lands flowing with milk and honey, gardens grander than Nebuchadnezzar's—in California such dreams have taken form. Parched deserts have been turned into verdant fields of plenty. The sea constantly yields its bounty. The aerospace industry has given us mastery over our universe. And our edifices scrape the sky and color the horizons.



California's is today the sixth largest economy in the world because of its incredible human and natural resources. Since the earliest days of human occupation, California has been home to numerous linguistic, ethnic, racial, and national groups. If in ancient times the first natives of this land were Asians from Siberia, Asian presence today is much more diverse and of even grander import. If from central Mexico came the Spanish impetus for settling California, over the centuries Mexican presence has only grown. The Anglo-Americans who first visited California under Mexican rule were a diverse lot. The boom towns they and the forty-niners fueled were often cosmopolitan sites for feasting and hosting diplomats and plenipotentiaries, raiders and traders, and just plain folk. California, a state blessed by numerous microclimates, has also been cursed by virulent climates of hate, genocide, and intolerance for differences born of blood, faith, and race.

California is today the product of these multiple and diverse pasts. Still vibrant and alive today are many human memories of feast and famine, joy and pain, centrality and marginality, power and powerlessness. These memories are the potent stuff of history, for they fuel conflicting narratives of how it was in the "olden days." Call them golden days of yore or hurtful times that remain tender and sore, they are, nevertheless, wellsprings of historical imagination and the breeding ground of historians. Communities of memory and interest in the present cannot advance a trajectory toward the future without a commonly accepted origin and useable past. This is even more the case today, as California's population is renewed by immigrants from every corner of the globe.

Historians and the histories they write have always been the imaginative products of the period in which they were produced. Each generation turns to the past with different questions, with new concerns, with different hopes and anxieties. Since the 1960s there has been a revolution in historical writing about the United States, and about California's past more specifically. The exact causal lineages for this profound transformation are complicated and remain open to debate. Obviously, such change was born of generational tensions, fueled by the war in Vietnam, and intensified in the late 1950s and early 1960s by the massive social movements for civil rights, women's equality, lesbian and gay freedom, and the full extension of personhood to the very young, the very old, the disabled, and the transgendered. Eventually the force of state was given to the reaffirmation of our egalitarian constitutional principles, and as this occurred, educational institutions were desegregated and the American mind was opened to different ways of thinking and to perspectives on the past that were situated in relationship to power.

The impact of these changes on contemporary historical writing has been a heightened body ethic. Greater attention and importance is given to the human body, particularly to those physical aspects by which the status inequalities of gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity are read. Now, for history-as-written to be deemed

a good depiction of history-as-lived, it must acknowledge that it is but a very small slice or limited perspective on a whole as viewed from a specific locale, rather than a transcendent total perspective. For a social whole to be represented, a matrix of society's status groups must be systematically addressed. No longer is it considered adequate to write the history of men without acknowledging the presence of women, and vice versa. Power and its relational dyads—conqueror and conquered, master and slave, white and Indian, male and female, rich and poor, old and young—are similarly the focus of new and sustained attention.

Much of what is considered new in historical writing stems from profound epistemological shifts, most notably an attack on positivism and empiricism as truths, and the feminist critique of modernism's transcendent, universal "Man." Modernity was that extraordinary intellectual effort on the part of Enlightenment thinkers to develop objective science and a universal morality and law. The idea was to use the accumulation of knowledge, generated by many individuals working freely and creatively, for the pursuit of human emancipation and the enrichment of daily life. The scientific domination of nature promised freedom from scarcity, want, and the arbitrariness of natural calamities. Rational forms of social organization and thought would liberate humanity from irrationality, myth, religion, and superstition.

History as a university discipline and profession was born out of this modernist impulse.<sup>1</sup> Historians sought objective, universal truth, laws of human progress, and ways to liberate citizens and subjects. In the late nineteenth century, objectivity and the quest for truth became the collective myths of the historical profession. By reading sources in a detached and dispassionate manner, historians of that era assumed, one could reveal and discover the truth of the past. That knowledge, gained in an "objective" manner, enhanced its scientific value. If scientific rules were imposed on documentary bodies of evidence, the past would be reflected in written history.

Postmodern critics have retorted that consciousness has always been, and always will be, embodied. Can historians detach themselves from their bodies and their social participation in class-, gender-, and race-inflected ways? No. Are archives neutral and systematic collections of documents that record everyone's past? No. Can history-as-written exactly represent history-as-lived? No. The selection process, the mental filters and prisms through which events, people, and theories are refracted to create historical narratives, are always supremely subjective acts rooted in bodily experiences. Bodies are alive at particular times, in specific contexts, and in unique warps of power. In the writing of history, such realities cannot be ignored.

The implications of these epistemological and interpretive shifts for writing about early California's history heighten our awareness of how each generation has interpreted its past differently. Those pasts have always been partial views, rendered from highly partisan economic and political sites. When the Spanish arrived in California and pronounced that Native Americans were savages, ensnared by Satan and re-



In 1806 the German-born physician and naturalist Georg Heinrich von Langsdorff portrayed a ceremonial dance of mission Indians that he observed near the shores of San Francisco Bay. Decorating their bodies with red clay, chalk, and charcoal, the natives moved to the accompaniment of singing and the clapping of sticks, attempting, thought Langsdorff “to represent battles, or scenes of domestic life.” *Courtesy Bancroft Library.*

quiring instruction in civilization, they concluded that these people had a history, but one that had to be obliterated. By calling them “Indians,” the incredible complexity and diversity of native peoples and cultures in California was erased; henceforth Native Americans would share a subjective legal identity as “Indians.” When Anglo-Americans conquered California at the end of the U.S.-Mexico War in 1848, they too rewrote history to fit the designs of conquerors. From the perspective of the new lords of California, the land was vacant, the Indians a meaningless race that would soon disappear, the Mexicans an inferior, indolent breed in whose command California had wasted.

The essays collected in this volume significantly revise the history of California from prehistoric times to 1848. The historians, scientists, anthropologists, and social ecologists chosen to write for this volume represent the best of interdisciplinary

work in their scholarship. Readers familiar with California's traditional history writing will note that the missions, as the main institutions of mythology, fantasy, and romance, have receded into the background, and are analyzed here instead as institutions not only with religious, but with economic, social, and political functions. Where generals, friars, soldiers, adventurers, and merchants as individual actors used to dominate the narrative of Spanish and Mexican California's history, here the essays focus less on persons and personalities and more on the complex social networks of society. And while some familiar and well-known terrain is addressed—European exploration, the U.S.-Mexican War—these essays assess what has been learned over the last thirty years about these topics and what still remains to be investigated. Long ignored, California's indigenous peoples here take center stage. Rarely mentioned until recently, California's ecology and changing natural environment here gain sustained attention. Women, the family, the nature of Californio society, these are all themes of the vibrant scholarship over the last thirty years that is represented here.

One of the most troublesome aspects of histories of California written between the 1880s and 1960s is that they largely ignored the Indians. When Indians were mentioned, they were, more often than not, set in an endless stream of blood—nameless, and usually faceless, victims of atrocities. Indian prehistory was found mainly in archaeology and anthropology books, but rarely in history books. If and when Indian history gained attention, it was only as a prelude to the larger narrative of American triumphalism. Indian voices were rarely heard, and the categories of thought and action they were given to respond to their own conquest and colonization were those of ventriloquists. Bit players in morality plays about assimilation, noble savages who had disappeared—this is how Native Americans were primarily represented in early writing on California history.

The essays collected here not only offer a very different starting point for Native American history, but also give agency to California's Indians. This is not the history of white expansion and Indian responses to it; it begins with the complex dimensions of indigenous prehistory. Beginning Indian history before contact allows us to understand how leaders and followers responded to invasion and the changing circumstances of various tribes over time.

M. Kat Anderson, Michael Barbour, and Valerie Whitworth's rich essay on the natural environment surveys the state's great climatic, geological, floral, and faunal arrays, the complicated natural history of its vegetation, and the abundant, creative new scholarship about it. This information forms the foundation for a brilliant discussion of the intimate relationship Indians had with the natural world, structured around complex methods of plant conservation and use. Anderson, Barbour, and Whitworth urge us to view Indians as active agents in the use and modification of their environments and to abandon long-held stereotypes about a sharp divide between Indians who practiced agriculture and those who subsisted on hunting and gathering.

William Simmons's essay, "Indian Peoples of California," provides a succinct discussion of indigenous linguistic diversity. California was and remains geographically diverse. California Indian communities reflected that diversity in the resource base on which their economies and cultures were structured. Drawing on native categories and indigenous memories, Simmons brings attention to the centrality of human-animal relations and by so doing allows us to understand better why Indians thought that the first Europeans they encountered were beings from the spirit world.

Indian agency and the logic of native cultural categories forms the substance of Antonia Castañeda's essay, "Engendering the History of Alta California, 1769–1848: Gender, Sexuality, and the Family." Here readers will learn how California's Indians organized their gender and sexual systems, and particularly how those systems were assaulted, resisted, and transformed. Attention is given to the resistance strategies Indian women crafted to protect their status in native society and to assure that their cultures endured despite Spanish assaults. Castañeda also asks us to reassess the nature and extent of biological mixing that occurred when Spanish men raped Indian women, thus creating the beginnings of mestizo California.

Indigenous resistance strategies are also at the core of James Sandos's essay, "Between Crucifix and Lance: Indian-White Relations in California, 1769–1848." Seeking to understand how California's Indians resisted and often subverted their own domination, Sandos explores the "hidden transcripts" of Indian life, those often overt and covert folktales, graffiti, rumors, and actions that reveal native agency in the darkest moments of colonial domination. As readers will note from this and other essays, California's Indians both before and after conquest were not passive, silent observers of their own conquest and subordination. In the history presented here, they are historical actors; the complexity of their cultures before and under colonial rule is explained; and their long-silent voices are heard with particular clarity.

A second set of essays addresses the complex motivations that led to the conquest and colonization of California, the structure of the colonial economy, church-state conflicts over the place of the Indians in that scheme, and the tenor of daily life in Spanish and Mexican California. American exceptionalism often colored previous interpretations of the Spanish/Mexican past. Here, California is examined as one of many colonial outposts of imperial Spain, and thus a part of a much larger whole, encompassing both Europe and the Western Hemisphere, with all that entailed with respect to church-state relations, government, fiscal reform, and the institutions of daily life. For much too long, historians have wrongly assumed that the Enlightenment and the Bourbon Reforms had no impact on Spanish California. These essays profoundly revise that mistaken impression.

Iris Engstrand's essay, "Seekers of the 'Northern Mystery': European Exploration of California and the Pacific," begins the section of this volume that addresses the



Vaqueros at Mission San José lasso cattle with their *reatas* in an engraving based on a watercolor made in the 1820s by William Smyth, an admiralty mate who visited California with a British exploring expedition. Expert horsemen, legendary for their skill in working cattle, the California vaqueros captured the imagination of travelers and became a symbol of provincial Hispanic life on a distant Pacific shore. From Frederick W. Beechey, *Narrative of a Voyage to the Pacific and Beering's Strait* (London, 1831). *Courtesy California State Library.*

European arrival and its impact on California as a land and on its native inhabitants. Engstrand explains the complicated motivations that brought Europeans to California. First were the dreams of wealth and discovery, then came population movements motivated by defensive concerns, reconnaissance, and scientific discovery. Extensive attention is given to the scientific journeys, which originate in Enlightenment curiosities and Bourbon economic imperatives. Each of these types of exploration devoted attention to geographic features, fauna and flora, native languages and cultures, and natural products that eventually became coveted trade items.

William Preston's essay, "Serpent in the Garden: Environmental Change in Colonial California," studies the devastating impact of European diseases on Native Californians through human and nonhuman vectors, such as lice, mosquitoes, and fleas. Preston also documents the spread of foreign seeds and weeds and the impact of European livestock on indigenous flora and fauna, which together worked a literal revolution in California's life forms. Since Californians, both native and European,

depended on the natural environment for their existence, Preston's account of the intended and unintended consequences of biological exchanges is a particularly important one.

Bourbon defensive policy in New Spain, most notably the protection of northern Mexico's silver mines from possible British and Russian encroachment, was the motive for colonizing Alta California, according to Steven Hackel in his essay, "Land, Labor, and Production: The Colonial Economy of Spanish and Mexican California." Since this was Spain's primary interest in California, Spanish desire to invest in the area was marginal, never amounting to more than meager military salaries and church subventions. California's colonial economy thus developed a self-sufficiency through agricultural and livestock production and ancillary products, some of which found their way to markets in central Mexico. Production depended on Indian labor, and on this topic Hackel brings our attention to several forms that are rarely mentioned: the compensated use of non-mission Indians for prearranged tasks and the periodic contracting of mission Indians. After 1821, the Californios believed that Mexican independence would bring greater governmental attention to their province, but it did not. Under Mexican rule, California prospered somewhat, nonetheless, primarily because the lifting of trade restrictions quickened mercantile activities in local products, especially cattle hides.

Douglas Monroy's essay, "The Creation and Re-creation of Californio Society," begins with an insightful analysis of the politics of previous interpretations of the Californio past, colored as they were by the preoccupations of each age. Whereas early romanticizers characterized the Californios as Spanish Europeans, Monroy's own interpretation highlights the fundamentally hybrid, or mestizo, nature of the society created when Indians and Spanish colonists came together in California. Particularly important is Monroy's analysis of the caricatures of Indians the colonists crafted, which bore little relationship to the complex spiritual and productive lifeways Native Americans created even under the harshest conditions on the missions and on their ancestral lands. Unlike the Indians, who imagined a relationship of reciprocity between themselves and the natural environment, the Spanish attitude toward land was one of ownership and command. Monroy describes the culture and customs that such attitudes encouraged, including how life was produced and reproduced.

Church-state conflict over Indian labor forms the core of Michael González's essay, "The Child of the Wilderness Weeps for the Father of Our Country." This is an intellectual and political history of imperial Spanish debates about the place of the Indian in the Americas, and more specifically, how those contests were played out on the bodies of Indians for whom California's friars and soldiers competed. Like Steven Hackel, whose essay ends with the secularization of the missions under Mexican rule in the 1830s, González addresses secularization in the context of central Mexican intellectual currents.

The final two chapters of this volume chronicle the changes that transpired under Spanish and Mexican rule because of growing foreign influences. The essays address how foreigners entered California in larger numbers after 1821, how some of them intermarried with the Californios, how their economic activities profoundly shifted the direction and geography of trade, and finally, how the U.S.-Mexico War was fought and lost.

Doyce B. Nunis, Jr., in his essay, "Alta California's Trojan Horse: Foreign Immigration," displaces standard interpretations about the role of Manifest Destiny in bringing California into the American republic. Nunis describes the nature and motivations behind the initial visits to Spanish California by French, Russian, and British travelers. With Mexican independence after 1821, the pace of visitation quickened, led increasingly by Anglo-American traders who married Californio women to gain access to large amounts of land and business opportunity. Indeed, the presence of many citizens of Britain and the United States in an enclave distant from Mexican military control created the conditions for secessionist movements that culminated in the U.S.-Mexico War from 1846 to 1848.

The acquisition of California from Mexico was one of the largest spoils of that war. Lisbeth Haas's essay, "War in California, 1846-1848," provides a sweeping overview of the personages, motives, and war campaigns in California. What is particularly noteworthy in her essay is the discussion of Californio responses to their displacement by Anglo-Americans both before and after 1848. What is still sorely needed to reach a fuller understanding of the war and its impact is more study of how the Indians allied themselves, and what thoughts and actions may have shaped the reactions of ordinary Californios. We know the details of the war and its aftermath primarily from the perspective of the victors. The voices of the vanquished have still not been heard in their polyphonic complexity. This is one of the challenges Haas offers us in her essay.

In addition to the innovative historical research gathered in these pages, this volume is also extensively illustrated with some of the earliest and rarest images of California. Anthony Kirk gathered the illustrations for this volume, and in his essay, "Picturing California," he draws our attention to California's iconographic history before 1848. Beginning with Native American pictographs, Kirk shows just how important the natural environment has been in shaping human perceptions of California. From the early Spanish maps to drawings of the area's flora and fauna by French explorers, from Russian watercolors of Fort Ross to the American drawings of the Klamath River, the objective has been the same: to depict California as a land of abundant wealth and natural variety awaiting human exploitation.

The thirteen essays collected in this volume represent a full range of interpretations about California's past from prehistoric times to 1848. Natural and human ecology are given equal weight. California's long historiographic traditions and its

uncharted terrains are all laid bare. Our hope is that by examining what is new in California history and what still remains to be studied and written, this volume will be generative, giving readers the leading questions and historiographic resources necessary to pursue these topics further on their own.

## NOTES

1. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).