California:

THE GREAT EXCEPTION

[1]

ON UNDERSTANDING CALIFORNIA

I MET *a Californian who would*
Talk California—a state so blessed,
He said, in climate none had ever died there
A natural death.

—ROBERT FROST

WITH CALIFORNIA noisily celebrating three centennials—the discovery of gold (1848); the adoption of the first state constitution (1849); and admission to the Union (1850)—a question first raised a hundred years ago and never really answered has acquired a new urgency: Is there really a state called California or is all this boastful talk?—Is this centennial only ballyhoo,—a hoax, a fraud, a preposterous imposition? The question has bobbed up again because people have always been dubious about a state whose name is something of a hoax. No one knows, of course, the origin of the word "California" or whence it came or what it means. It first appears as "Califerne" in the *Song of Roland* and was probably borrowed from the Persian, *Kari-i-farn*, "the mountain of paradise." Deeply encrusted with myth and legend, the name is historically associated with a hoax, Marco Polo's mention of a fabulous isle "near the coast of Asia" which apparently no one ever saw or mapped or set foot upon. Although its derivation is unknown, California has a meaning which is as clear today as when the word stood for a place not yet discovered. It is the symbol of the mountain of paradise; the fabulous isle; the dream garden of beautiful black Amazons off the Asia coast; "the good country"—the Zion—of which man has ever dreamed. Naturally, people have always been wary of this great golden dream, this highly improbable state; this symbol of a cruel illusion.

CALIFORNIA: *The Great Exception*

Like all exceptional realities, the image of California has been distorted in the mirror of the commonplace. It is hard to believe in this fair young land, whose knees the wild oats wrap in gold, whose tawny hills bleed their purple wine—because there has always been something about it that has incited hyperbole, that has made for exaggeration. The stories that have come out of California in the last hundred years are almost as improbable and preposterous as the tale from which the state gets its name. Although the exceptional always incites disbelief, it comes to be accepted as perfectly normal by the initiated; and thus a problem in communication arises as different standards of credence emerge. Like Alice to whom so many out-of-the-way things had happened that she had begun to think that very few things indeed were impossible, the Californians have acquired a manner of speaking that arouses ridicule. The failure of understanding that has resulted is based on the difficulty of avoiding the hyperbolic in describing a reality that at first seems weirdly out of scale, off balance, and full of fanciful distortion. For there is a golden haze over the land—the dust of gold is in the air—and the atmosphere is magical and mirrors many tricks, deceptions, and wondrous visions.

Not recognizing this danger, those who have written about California fall into two general categories: the skeptics who, in retrospect, have been made to look ludicrously gullible; and the liars and boasters who have been confounded by the fulfillment of their dizziest predictions. Hinton Helper, one of the first of the skeptics, bitterly denounced the California of the gold rush as "an ugly cheat," vastly overrated and greatly overdone; a state where "nothing is as it should be" and every event seems "as momentous and unaccountable as the wonderful exploits of Aladdin's genii." The fact that it didn't rain between April and November struck Helper as being symbolic of the deceitfulness and perversity of a state whose every outward form was somehow a snare and delusion. But, amusingly enough, this "ugly cheat," this most improbable state, has always made the skeptics look silly and, as a symbol, has lost none of its potency. That 3,000,000 people have trooped into California in the last eight years shows, in the most alarming

manner, that the golden legends still flourish. But, since nothing is yet quite what it should be in California, a section of American opinion still refuses to take seriously a land which seems to distort fact but in which the real distortion is in nature. The implacable Helper complained that California was "already a pandemonium" in 1848 and pandemonium it remains. Any doubts on this score were removed by the amusing antics that took place when, in an effort to ape a solemnity they did not feel, the citizens of California undertook the first ceremonial observances of the state's triple centennial.

On the morning of January 24, 1948, thousands of automobiles began to converge on the sleepy little town of Coloma (population, 300), on the south fork of the American River, to celebrate the centennial of James Marshall's discovery of gold in California. Two narrow, winding foothill roads are the only means of reaching Coloma. The sun was hardly up before both roads were jam-packed with cars, bumper-to-bumper, with traffic paralyzed for fifteen miles. As the cars inched their way toward Coloma, the people laughed and shouted, and ran up and down the line of march exchanging drinks and greetings. By noon 75,000 people were surging through the streets of tiny Coloma. Long before noon, however, the improvised booths were emptied of souvenirs, the food supply was exhausted, and the hotel was a shambles. With no place to stay overnight, visitors began to push their way out of town toward nightfall, although many, in despair of the traffic, curled up in their cars and went to sleep.

While the celebration lasted, Coloma was in the grip of a second gold rush which brought ten times the number of people who had assembled there, a hundred years ago, when the place was a gold camp of 10,000 population. For two days, Coloma was again a fabulous boom town: prices zoomed; stores and shops were stripped of merchandise; and the competition for parking and standing room was phenomenal. By the morning of January 26th, the crowds disappeared as suddenly as they had arrived, and the dazed residents of Coloma, still groggy, began to sweep up the littered streets and remove the tattered bunting from the store-fronts. Coloma's second gold rush had come and gone and now

Coloma, and California, had crossed the threshold into the second century of the state's meteoric rise to fame and power.

The confusion, incongruity, and disorder of the Coloma celebration, inaugurating the centennial of the discovery of gold, are symbolic of the still on-rushing, swiftly-paced tempo of events in California. At the famous Philadelphia centennial of 1876, the visitors could at least pause and reflect upon the course of events and the significance of the occasion. The crowds were large but they moved slowly, swinging canes and parasols, taking their time, enjoying a new sense of maturity. But the crowds that descended on Coloma were in a hurry, pushing their way into Coloma from Red Dog and Gouge Eye, from Hangtown and Lotus, Slug Gulch and Poker Flat, and speeding back along the winding roads once the celebration was over. They had not come to pause and reflect but to have a drink and be on their way. There was no pause in California's observance of its centennial, for, if anything, the tempo of events had been stepped-up with the passage of time. This was not just a centennial, but a lark, an outing, a split second's interruption in the busy, heedless lives of the Californians.

In fact it was quite apparent in Coloma, on January 24th, that California was not prepared to celebrate its centennial. A hundred years had passed, to be sure, but the Californians had to work awfully hard to bring off the illusion of lapsed time. The local male residents of Coloma donned flannel shirts and sported whiskers, and the ladies of the Mother Lode appeared in the bonnets and calico gowns of yesteryear. But no one was fooled by this innocent deception; everyone knew that the celebration was a hoax. Although California has more than its share of poets, no one was asked to write a Centennial Ode, for how could any poet invest this jamboree, this awkward traffic snarl, this rip-roaring clambake, with overtones of solemnity and high purpose? The calendars said that a hundred years had passed but, in terms of symbolic truth, the celebration was premature.

Just as California cannot properly celebrate its centennial, so the time has not yet arrived for a real summing-up; one cannot, as yet, properly place California in the American scheme of things. The gold rush is still on, and everything remains topsy-turvy. The

analyst of California is like a navigator who is trying to chart a course in a storm: the instruments will not work; the landmarks are lost; and the maps make little sense. The last eight years have been, in fact, the most dynamic years in the history of this most dynamic state. No, the time has not come to strike a balance for the California enterprise. There is still too much commotion—too much noise and movement and turmoil.

What I have attempted, therefore, is in the nature of an essay in understanding—a guide to an understanding of California. The following chapters might be described as the notes, the working papers, of a California journalist; the summation, not of California, but of my effort to understand California. There is, however, a theme which runs through the following pages—that California is "the great exception" among the American states. There is also a purpose, namely, to isolate the peculiar dynamics underlying California's remarkable expansion.