

# Introduction

## *Junípero Serra: New Contexts and Emerging Interpretations*

Steven W. Hackel

Few figures in California history have proven as polarizing as Junípero Serra, the Mallorcan Franciscan who initiated the chain of twenty-one missions that runs from San Diego to just north of San Francisco. Because of his importance to early California history, Serra has long been a staple of California's fourth-grade curriculum, and statues of Serra as well as Serra schools, roads, and buildings can be found across much of the state as well as in the nation's capital. But in the past few decades, especially after his beatification in 1987 and the publication of numerous books and articles describing the toll that missions exacted on California Indians, Serra's reputation as a benevolent and pioneering missionary and agent of Western civilization has come under reconsideration.<sup>1</sup> With a widely observed commemoration and an unanticipated papal pronouncement, this reconsideration accelerated. The year 2013 brought the three hundredth anniversary of Serra's birth, and in January 2015 Pope Francis stunned journalists and others when he said that "God willing," he would "canonize Junípero Serra." "He was the evangelizer of the West in the United States," the pope said of Serra as he jetted from Sri Lanka to the Philippines.<sup>2</sup> In declaring his intent to waive the customary requirement of two miracles for sainthood and canonize Serra, the pontiff, perhaps unwittingly, ushered in a nearly yearlong debate over Serra's life and legacy.

The run-up to Serra's canonization in Washington, D.C., on September 23, 2015, was characterized by scrutiny of his life, in particular his work in the missions of California. Every major news outlet—print, cable, and broadcast—in the United States, Mexico, and Spain discussed the virtues and flaws of Serra, the California missions, and, more generally, Spanish colonization of the Americas. In hindsight, however, it is clear that all of this media attention and the public adoration and

condemnation that it embodied and reinforced opened up no new inquiries into Serra's life and led to no new discoveries of his past. It did, however, give voice to a range of individuals whose passionate views about Serra might never have reached a wider audience. Furthermore, even though church spokesmen argued that Serra's defense of corporal punishment in the missions was emblematic of Serra's age, the pope, in something of a first, acknowledged that the church had committed "grave sins" and "crimes" against indigenous peoples during its zealous attempt to spread the gospel across the Americas.<sup>3</sup>

Regrettably, though, the surge of public commentary on Serra can be said to have narrowed if not diminished popular understandings of him. By canonization day as protesters and supporters gathered in Washington, D.C., to witness the papal mass and the canonization ceremony, Serra was either a saint in the making who brought civilization to California or a monstrous destroyer of Indian worlds akin to Hernán Cortés and other rapacious conquistadores. Scholars, activists, and leading church officials, who envisioned the canonization as a teachable moment about the complexity of Spanish colonization, called for a reconsideration of the place and importance of Spanish missionaries and settlers in the larger tapestry of European colonization of the Americas, imagined Serra's journey from Spain to Mexico to California as a counternarrative to the rising tide of xenophobic Trump Republicanism that gripped much of the nation in 2015, or observed that some Indians were Catholic and held complicated views about the missionary—all were marginalized by the media's need to simplify the news into tasty sound bites. Serra thus by the time he was officially recognized as a saint had been simplified into an evildoer or a righteous servant of God.<sup>4</sup> Today as Serra's canonization recedes more Americans are aware of him, yet their firm convictions about his life and legacies rest on an ever-simplified version of the man and the course of his life.

Fortunately, if the Serra year of 2015 can be said to have been all heat and no light in terms of deepening and expanding popular understandings of Serra, the same cannot be said of 2013, the tercentennial of Serra's birth. By contrast, 2013 witnessed the completion or publication of several new books on the life and times of Serra,<sup>5</sup> the opening of numerous exhibitions on Serra and his worlds,<sup>6</sup> and the unfolding of carefully planned academic gatherings dedicated to a reconsideration of Serra's life in Mallorca, Mexico, and California. This volume is the product of one of those extended intellectual forays, the academic conference "Junípero Serra: Context and Representation, 1713 to 2013," that occurred at the Henry E. Huntington Library some fifteen months before the pope's stunning midair announcement and almost exactly two years in advance of the canonization ceremony at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception at the Catholic University of America.

Unbeknownst to the presenters who gathered at the Huntington Library in September 2013, their ideas about Serra were shared and then turned into essays

during a period that now appears to have been a veritable calm before the storm. And so much the better, for the scholarly presentations that emerged over two remarkable days at the library offer profound insight not only into Serra himself but also into the various communities—intellectual, religious, regional, and artistic—of which he was a part and at times the driving force behind. The chapters that follow therefore provide essential context for a greater understanding of Saint Junípero Serra and his place in the related histories of the worlds he inhabited and shaped: Mallorca, Mexico, California, and, long after his death, the larger culture of the United States.

. . .

While Serra's legacy is contested, the basic facts and timeline of his life are widely known. Junípero Serra was born Miquel Joseph Serra on November 24, 1713, in the village of Petra on the island of Mallorca in the western Mediterranean. The son of a farmer, Serra spent his early childhood working the family's land and attending a Franciscan school situated just down the street from his home. Catholicism loomed large in both his home and in the greater community of Petra. At an early age Serra moved to Palma, Mallorca's main city, and began studying for the priesthood. When he joined the Franciscan order, he took the name Junípero in honor of one of the early followers of Saint Francis of Assisi. Serra rose quickly through the ranks of the Franciscan hierarchy in Mallorca and soon held an important position as a professor of theology at the Lullian University in the Mallorcan capital.

In 1749, Serra and several other Mallorcan Franciscans decided to answer what they believed was a divine call to go to Mexico as apostolic missionaries. After a harrowing journey across the Atlantic and a challenging trek from Veracruz, Serra arrived in Mexico City on January 1, 1750, and took up residence at the College of San Fernando. Soon thereafter he was assigned to the Sierra Gorda region of northern Mexico, where for eight years he oversaw five missions and supervised the construction of more permanent mission structures. As part of his work in the Sierra Gorda, Serra served as a *comisario* (field agent) for the Spanish Inquisition, investigating individuals accused of witchcraft and other spiritual offenses. He also traveled widely throughout the countryside as an itinerant minister, trying to instill greater religious fervor in Catholics. For this work he won wide accolades.

But Serra's intention to devote himself fully to the life of an apostolic missionary to Indians never faded. And by 1768 he was in Baja California, reorganizing missions in the wake of the expulsion of the Jesuits the previous year. High-ranking Spanish officials soon became worried that Russians or other Europeans might attempt to settle the coastal region north of Baja California and thereby threaten Spain's interests in northern Mexico. They were eager to lay full claim to the area that would become Alta California. The Crown therefore called on Serra to establish and oversee missions in San Diego, Monterey, and points in between. Serra, in

the company of other Franciscans and dozens of soldiers, worked his way north from Baja California and established Mission San Diego in the summer of 1769. The following year Serra established a mission in Monterey, and he and Gaspar de Portolá, the leader of the military in Baja California, took possession of Alta California for Spain.

Serra was as dedicated a missionary as he was a skilled administrator, and under his administration the Franciscans established nine missions in coastal California. Thousands of Indians accepted baptism and relocated to these missions. In keeping with Franciscan practice, Serra believed that Indians should accept Catholicism as the one true religion, adopt European agriculture to sustain themselves, and live their lives at the mission, “under the bell.” To this end, the Franciscans sometimes resorted to coercion to force Indians to follow Catholic precepts, remain in the missions, and provide the labor necessary to maintain them. While some Indians may have been taken by Serra’s vision, others resisted, sparking rebellions of varying intensity at all of the missions. At the same time, however, there was a blending of cultures in colonial California. For instance, Indians brought their own cultural traditions of music, art, and basketry to the missions, elements of which made their way into Catholic liturgical music, paintings, and decorative arts. But disease undermined much of what Serra hoped to accomplish and what Indians sought to gain from the missions.

By the time Serra died in Mission San Carlos (Carmel) in 1784, he had shepherded the building of nine California missions. Franciscans would initiate another twelve. While the padres could point to impressive numbers of Indians baptized and married in the missions, the death registers told another story. Frighteningly high mortality rates stalked the missions, claiming thousands and thousands of newborns and children and young adults. Further, the fertility of women plummeted. Missions became so unhealthy that the populations were rarely if ever self-sustaining, and it was only through the recruitment of Indians from greater distances that the missions’ populations grew. Once the supply of recruits dwindled, the population of individual missions plummeted as their graveyards swelled. Nevertheless, many Indians survived the missions.

In the 1830s during the Mexican period, the avarice of local settlers and a rising liberal ideology that saw missions as anachronisms led to the secularization of the missions. As the missions were being dismantled and the majority of their assets and property distributed to non-Indians and carved up into large ranchos, the survival of California Indians became increasingly imperiled. Then with the conclusion of the Mexican-American War in 1848, the advent of the California Gold Rush, the incorporation of California into the Union in 1850, and the exclusionary and racist attitudes of the great numbers of U.S. citizens who flooded into the region, California’s remaining Indian population was decimated and dispossessed, forced onto the most unproductive land and into an intensely exploitative wage

labor system. Indians were stripped of nearly all the rights they had retained under Spanish and then Mexican rule. In the gold mining regions, thousands were murdered in cold blood. Remarkably, Indians persisted throughout California. Their survival is a testament to human strength and courage and allows added insight into what the missions and their aftermath meant for Indians.

In the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth century through the efforts of local boosters and promoters, the decaying missions would become tourist attractions and a defining architectural motif for California, influencing the look of commercial, religious, and residential structures across California, the Southwest, and other parts of the nation. From red tile roofs to John Steven McGroarty's *The Mission Play* and the story of Ramona, missions took on a different and highly romanticized meaning—creating a Spanish fantasy past for the state and many of its inhabitants.

. . .

If more than a century of academic writing, the tercentenary observation, and the canonization year proved anything about the state of Serra studies, it is this: Serra's California years (1769–1784), and in particular his administration of the missions, have been examined in great depth, but most other aspects and periods of his life have received comparatively little scholarly attention. This volume by design therefore seeks to redress that imbalance by looking beyond Serra's California years. Its twelve chapters explore Serra's life in full and attempt to situate it within contexts well beyond the daily occurrences in and around the California missions. Divided into four parts, this collection explores Serra's life in Mallorca, his early years in Mexico and his approach to California Indians, the content and style of the liturgical art that he selected for the missions, and the ways in which Serra and the California missions have become a part of America's commemorative culture. As these chapters demonstrate, even though Serra's most enduring work will forever associate him with California, California's saint was shaped by events, ideas, and institutions from across New Spain and his native Mallorca, and his influence in turn reached regions well beyond where he oversaw missions and extended into centuries more recent than the one in which he lived.

Even though he lived much of his life elsewhere, Junípero Serra was first and foremost a Mallorcan. He was shaped in profound ways by the island's institutions, leaders, and history. As Josep Juan Vidal suggests in chapter 1, Serra's formative years were influenced by the imposition in Mallorca of the Castilian language and Bourbon institutions in the wake of Philip V's victory over the Hapsburgs in the Spanish War of Succession. The Mallorca of Serra's youth and early adulthood was one that experienced cultural change and grinding poverty in the wake of the collapse of Hapsburg rule. Nevertheless, communal life, as in Petra, and institutions, such as the Catholic Church, provided stability and structure. As Antoni Picazo

Muntaner shows in chapter 2, Serra's intense interest in a missionary life was deeply Mallorcan and can be traced to the career of another Mallorcan, Antoni Llinás, the Franciscan who founded a missionary college in Querétaro, Mexico, in the late seventeenth century. Perhaps more than Bourbon rule and the life of Llinás, it was the Mallorcan philosopher, missionary, and polymath Ramon Llull and the philosopher theologian Duns Scotus who most shaped the scholarly mind of Serra during his years as a student and professor. In chapter 3, John Dagenais explores the depth of Serra's intellectual indebtedness to Llull and Scotus through a remarkable analysis of class notes from Serra's years as both a student and a professor in Mallorca. Further, Dagenais's research shows how Serra's own devotion shifted from San Bernardino of Siena to Brother Juniper, the disciple of Saint Francis, and how Serra grew in confidence during his years of study and teaching, immersed as he was in the writings of Llull and Scotus.

The teachings and lives of Llull, Scotus, and Llinás were key ingredients of Serra's Mallorcan Catholicism, but it was Serra's devotion to a Spanish woman of the seventeenth century, Sor María de Jesús de Ágreda, that in part led him to leave Mallorca for the life of an apostolic missionary in Mexico. As Anna M. Nogar shows in chapter 4, "Junípero Serra's Mission Muse," Ágreda's influence on Serra was profound, and her writings and seemingly countless bilocations to New Spain, where she preached to Indians in their own language, were never far from the minds of Franciscan missionaries in New Spain. As Nogar argues, Serra and other missionaries carried copies of her writings to Alta California when they embarked on the colonization of the region and were spurred on by their deep faith in her revelations.

Ágreda traveled from her convent in Spain to New Spain, she wrote, on the wings of angels. California's future saint's journey to the New World was more prosaic. He was recruited by the College of San Fernando in Mexico City and crossed the Atlantic by ship. As David Rex Galindo shows in chapter 5, by 1750 the College of San Fernando was an institution with a rich institutional life and a large contingent of Spanish friars. Rex Galindo's careful study of the records of the college yields insight into Serra's place atop the college hierarchy and the ways in which a regimented daily schedule was intended to impart among missionaries the discipline they needed for life in the field.

It was the College of San Fernando that sent Serra to the Sierra Gorda, where he worked for most of the 1750s. As Karen Melvin shows in chapter 6, the Fernandino missionaries, as those from the college were known, wore at least two hats—they proselytized among Indians who had not yet heard the gospel and also preached among Catholics in an attempt to encourage them toward a more devoted religious practice. In her illuminating view of Serra's work carrying out "popular missions," Melvin captures the rhythm and goals of Serra's work in the small villages and isolated towns of New Spain. This was a Serra who was familiar to legions of

Catholics in his own day but one who is all but unknown today, as most people see him as exclusively a missionary to California Indians.

Serra, of course, did devote the final and most productive phase of his life to the evangelization of California Indians. As José Refugio de la Torre Curiel shows in chapter 7, by the time Serra established missions in Alta California, Franciscans had long experience with missions in the Mexican North, but they continued to wrestle with the gap between their utopian goals and what they could accomplish. And as Rose Marie Beebe and Robert M. Senkewicz reveal in chapter 8, Serra not only struggled with and against those around him but also battled with internal tensions and inconsistencies within his own policy prescriptions. Thus, Serra and his fellow missionaries were far more complicated figures than most scholars have acknowledged.

Spanish coercion and the snap of the lash—both supported by Serra—are among the most lamentable features of California mission life. But as art historians Clara Bargellini and Pamela Huckins show in chapter 9, the missions, at least in Serra's mind, were to be held together not just by violence but also by a common devotion to Catholicism that was reinforced by architecture and art. Bargellini and Huckins show that Serra had a clear sense of how he wanted to adorn the missions in the Sierra Gorda and those of Alta California, and he saw architecture and liturgical art as an important tool in the conversion of Indians. Images of the Virgin, Christ's Passion, and Franciscan saints all took center stage in the churches of the California missions, and Serra favored an older Baroque style over the emerging Neoclassicism. As Cynthia Neri Lewis argues in chapter 10, it was the Mexican artist José de Páez whom Serra leaned on most to fill his missions with beautiful and edifying paintings. Through the patronage of the College of San Fernando, Serra, and other California missionaries, Páez's works would eventually hang on the walls of many if not all of the early California missions.

Just as Serra's life and missionary career were the product of larger political, religious, and artistic influences across the Atlantic world, so too was his ensuing broad appeal in the United States part of a larger late nineteenth-century fascination in America with all things Spanish. As Richard L. Kagan shows in chapter 11, in the latter decades of the nineteenth century a "Spanish Craze" captured the imagination of boosters and developers from California to Florida. This craze was manifested not only in an embrace of Spanish-like architecture but also in a growing sense that Spanish colonists and their descendants were somehow integral to the American experience. Serra himself was among the historical figures whose reputation most benefited from this period's reappraisal of Spaniards and the wane of the Black Legend, the belief that Spanish colonization was uniquely cruel and destructive.

Serra no doubt in part catapulted to fame as a result of this Spanish Craze, and as Michael K. Komanecky reveals in chapter 12, Serra's notoriety was embodied

and spread through a proliferation of largely laudatory images. Public representations of Serra and Spanish culture abounded after the late nineteenth century, with the most notable examples being Albert Bierstadt's monumental landscape of the Spanish landing in Monterey that now hangs in the grand stairwell of the East Front of the U.S. Capitol, McGroarty's *The Mission Play* that played before millions in San Gabriel, and the monumental statue of Serra placed in the National Statuary Hall in 1931.

Lest anyone conclude that these images of Spaniards and Serra have lost their power to inspire and provoke, it is worth noting that in 2013 *The Mission Play* was restaged with a much more ambiguous Serra at its center, and in the run-up to Serra's canonization in 2013 some California lawmakers—motivated by the belief that Serra had been cruel to Indians—attempted to remove his statue from the National Statuary Hall.<sup>7</sup> In the immediate wake of Serra's canonization, vandals attacked statues of him at Mission San Carlos and decapitated another that had been placed on the coast of Monterey by Jane Stanford in the 1890s.<sup>8</sup> The reconsideration of Serra's public visibility has shown little sign of abating and has accelerated as part of a larger national debate over the appropriateness of commemorative sculptures of controversial historical figures in public places. In 2017, vandals attacked Serra statues at Missions Santa Barbara, San Fernando, and San Gabriel. Only recently, Stanford University convened a faculty committee to consider whether Serra's name should be removed from campus buildings and streets.<sup>9</sup> But for every Serra building that might be renamed, another seems to emerge. In 2015 New York's Siena College acquired a brick building adjacent to the campus, and the English-style building is now known as Serra Manor. It seems highly unlikely that anytime soon Californians and others will stop debating Serra's legacies. It is the hope of the volume's authors and editor that the chapters contained herein help to inform and shape these conversations.

## NOTES

1. Steven W. Hackel, "Junípero Serra across the Generations," in *A Companion to California History*, ed. William Deverell and David Igler, 99–115 (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

2. Carol J. Williams, "Pope Francis Announces Plan to Canonize Junípero Serra," *Los Angeles Times*, January 15, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/world/mexico-americas/la-fg-vatican-junipero-serra-canonization-20150115-story.html>.

3. Jim Yardley and William Neuman, "In Bolivia, Pope Francis Apologizes for Church's 'Grave Sins,'" *New York Times*, July 9, 2015, [https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/10/world/americas/pope-francis-bolivia-catholic-church-apology.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/10/world/americas/pope-francis-bolivia-catholic-church-apology.html?_r=0).

4. For example, in the period before the canonization, the BBC, NBC News, *The Economist*, the Voice of America, National Public Radio, and Public Radio International all ran stories carrying some variant of the headline "Junípero Serra: Saint or Sinner?"

5. Steven W. Hackel, *Junípero Serra: California's Founding Father* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013); Gregory Orfalea, *Journey to the Sun: Junípero Serra's Dream and the Founding of*



*California* (New York: Scribner, 2014); Rose Marie Beebe and Robert M. Senkewicz, *Junípero Serra: California, Indians, and the Transformation of a Missionary* (Norman: University of Oklahoma: 2015).

6. “Junípero Serra and the Legacies of the California Missions,” Henry E. Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, Virginia Steele Scott Galleries, Erburu Wing, August 17, 2013–January 6, 2014.

7. Matt Fleming, “State Lawmaker Is on a Mission to Swap Out Statue of Father Serra,” *Orange County Register*, February 17, 2015, <http://www.ocregister.com/articles/statue-651497-serra-lara.html>. For the failure of this effort, see Michael Smolens, “Gov. Brown: Serra Statue Not Going Anywhere,” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, July 25, 2015, <http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/politics/sdut-gov-brown-serra-statue-not-going-anywhere-2015jul25-story.html>.

8. Kate Linthicum, “Shock after Junípera Serra Statue Vandalized Days after Sainthood Declared,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 28, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-junipero-serra-vandalized-20150927-story.html>; David Schmaltz, “Junípero Serra Statue at Presidio of Monterey Is Decapitated,” *Monterey County Weekly*, October 15, 2015, [http://www.montereycountyweekly.com/blogs/news\\_blog/junipero-serra-statue-at-presidio-of-monterey-is-decapitated/article\\_b3742f3a-7378-11e5-979a-3388cab6213.html](http://www.montereycountyweekly.com/blogs/news_blog/junipero-serra-statue-at-presidio-of-monterey-is-decapitated/article_b3742f3a-7378-11e5-979a-3388cab6213.html); “Decapitated Head of Serra Statue Found in Cove,” *Monterey Herald*, April 2, 2016, <http://www.montereyherald.com/article/NF/20160402/NEWS/160409934>.

9. Kathleen J. Sullivan, “Stanford to Establish Principles for Renaming Streets and Buildings,” *Stanford News Service*, March 4, 2016, <http://news.stanford.edu/2016/03/04/faculty-senate-meeting-030416/>.