

UC Merced

Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology

Title

Gutierrez and Orsi, eds.: *Contested Eden: California Before the Gold Rush*

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7cb5v80s>

Journal

Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology, 21(2)

ISSN

0191-3557

Author

Farris, Glenn J.

Publication Date

1999-07-01

Peer reviewed

REVIEWS

Contested Eden: California Before the Gold Rush. Ramón A. Gutiérrez and Richard J. Orsi, eds. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, xi + 395 pp., 13 color photographs, 76 black and white photographs, 5 maps, \$60.00 (hard cover), \$27.50 (paper).

Reviewed by:

GLENN J. FARRIS

California Department of Parks and Recreation, 2505 Port Street, West Sacramento, CA 95691.

This is the first in a series of four books to be issued by the California Historical Society as part of the Sesquicentennial of the Gold Rush. As such, it is of particular importance to those interested in the history of the Native Americans and the California population in the time before “the world rushed in” (to quote Holliday [1981]). It is composed of 12 chapters, each written by a specialist in the particular field under discussion. In some ways, this book has the character of an annotated bibliography, listing a number of the sources and studies pertinent to each aspect of California before the Gold Rush.

Chapter 1 is an introduction by Ramón Gutiérrez. In it, he lays out the temporal and social scenes in broad brush that are filled in by the succeeding authors. He notes in a characteristic purple prose that “Spanish-speaking settlers arrived febrile with dreams of gold,” dreams that they did not realize in California, so they focused on exploiting the land and its inhabitants. In characterizing past approaches to history in California, Gutiérrez sets up a series of rhetorical questions to frame the view of the postmodernist historians who reject the notion of any historian writing purely objective history (p. 4). Shortly afterward, when he says that “. . . Anglo-Americans conquered California at the end of the U.S.-Mexico War in 1848” (p. 5), it appears that he sets the date about a year after the fact. Since California was clearly under

U.S. control by early 1847, one is left to wonder about the accuracy of his command of California history. Gutiérrez then sets about introducing the succeeding chapters.

Chapter 2, *A World of Balance and Plenty*, is a joint effort by Kat Anderson, Michael Barbour, and Valerie Whitworth that speaks eloquently of the connection of the California Indians to their natural environment. They argue that human land management, mostly through the judicious use of fire, was important to the development of the park-like landscape frequently remarked upon by early visitors. They portray Native Americans as far more than hunter-gatherers, indeed as ecologists at one with nature.

William Simmons provides an extensive overview of California Indians in Chapter 3, *Indian Peoples of California*. He offers a nice accounting of the very large number of different tribes in California, mainly citing secondary sources. In one instance, he refers to Indian myths (p. 68), but fails to mention the historical nature of Indian accounts (cf. Farris 1989). In another example (p. 62), he suggests that a drawing of a scene inside an Indian dwelling by the Russian artist, Tikhanov, portrays a Pomo shaman involved in a curing ceremony, whereas it is more likely a scene of the transfer of power from a dying Coast Miwok chief to his successor (cf. Farris 1998).

In Chapter 4, *Seekers of the Northern Mystery*, Iris Engstrand provides a good overview of the historiography of early explorers to California (p. 78). However, it seems to me that she overlooked Michael Mathes’ book on the Vizcaino voyages (Mathes 1968), which also has an interesting discussion of the landing of de Unamuno in 1584, suggesting that he may have been in the Monterey Bay area rather than the more accepted Morro Bay location. Her discussion of Francis Drake (pp. 87-88) might have mentioned an intriguing, recent book by Brian Kelleher (1997), who argued for a landing at Bo-

ga Bay, although she had undoubtedly turned in her manuscript before it appeared.

Steven Hackel of Oregon State University wrote Chapter 5, *Land, Labor and Production*. This is an excellent account of the interacting features of the uses of land and Indian labor in pre-Gold Rush California. He relies extensively on primary sources in his study to reveal a coherent story of the development of California, especially following the transfer of California from Spanish to Mexican sovereignty in 1821. In addition to discussing the missions and presidios, he also deals with the pueblos as bases of Mexican civilian populations. He comments on the dearth of information on the Villa de Branciforte. Perhaps a recent issue of the Santa Cruz County History Journal (1997) might have been of help.

Chapter 6, *The Child of the Wilderness Weeps for the Father of Our Country*, by Michael J. Gonzalez, starts out looking like a discussant's review of a conference session. His theorizing on what inspired the Franciscans (i.e., Erasmus) seems highly hypothetical and does not take in the influence of John Duns Scotus. There is a new character introduced to California history on page 163, Governor Pedro de Solá in 1821. We are also told that a vara is "slightly more than a yard," a surprise to those of us who have used 33 inches as our calculation for all these years. In his discussion of the relations between rancheros and Indians, he paints a uniformly gloomy picture and fails to see the numerous instances of mutual appreciation (e.g., Capitan José Panto and the neighbors of San Pascual [Farris 1994] and comments by Mauricio Gonzalez [1877:27-28] regarding the cleverness of an Indian outsmarting John Fremont on his march south). In fact, he paints the Indians as mere pawns and victims in games played by the various conquerors of California.

Douglas Monroy gives a notably excellent account of the development of the Californios in Chapter 7, *The Creation and Recreation of California Society*. Although he apparently missed Vallejo's (1994) claim that originally it was the

American hide and tallow traders whose desire for tallow brought down on them the disdainful epithet "mantequeros" (loosely, "greasers") by the Californios, he provides a good overall view of the California society and its imperatives.

Chapter 8, *Between Crucifix and Lance: Indian-White Relations in California, 1769-1848*, by James A. Sandos, which is the story of the missions from an Indian perspective, is a contribution in the style of Sherburne Cook and so to be applauded. I was concerned over some seeming extrapolations, such as the account of the Indian women being publicly shamed for not having borne children (p. 201), which seems mainly to come from two sources: the Lorenzo Assisara account of life at Mission Santa Cruz (Amador 1877) and the recollections of Hugo Reid in the vicinity of Mission San Gabriel (Dakin 1939). Sandos' assertion that Indian boundaries were marked by "rivers and creek drainages" (p. 202) flies in the face of California ethnography that generally demonstrates that watercourses were virtually never used as boundaries by Indians (Heizer and Elsasser 1980). This was a Euroamerican conceit. When he speaks of large numbers of Indians entering Chumash missions in early days (p. 209), he seems not to understand clearly the reasons (cf. Larson et al. 1994; also see Farris 1999). When Sandos moves up into the San Francisco Bay area and the Russian settlement of Fort Ross, he is clearly dealing with dated references. On page 213, he states that Mission San Rafael was founded in 1819 (it was actually founded in 1817). He cites descriptions of Fort Ross provided by Captain von Kotzebue, who did not personally visit Fort Ross and was at considerable odds with the commandant there, Ivan Kuskov.

Engendering the History of Alta California, 1769-1848: Gender, Sexuality and the Family, by Antonia I. Castañeda (Chapter 9), is an excellent and thought-provoking approach to the situation and role of women in the history of California. An example that caught my eye appears on page 237: "If colonizing males thought of Indian women's

bodies, both symbolically and materially, as a means to territorial and political conquest, women constructed and used their bodies, both symbolically and materially, as instruments of resistance and subversion of colonial domination." I thought it odd that she did not address the power of women in California based on their remarkable fecundity. Having all those doting sons certainly provided some clout. Her discussions of witchcraft among the Indians seems to miss the notable European tradition of witches. I was a bit puzzled by her reference to both women and men on the frontier "attaining adulthood at a chronically tender age" (p. 244). Perhaps she meant chronologically.

In Chapter 10, *Serpent in the Garden: Environmental Change in Colonial California*, William Preston posits a large population destruction in California prior to 1769 due to diseases advancing into the area ahead of the settlers, much as he had done in a similarly named earlier article (cf. Preston 1996). In this case, he suggests that the decline of the Indian population led to a notable increase of the wild animal population in California. However, if this were the case, it seems odd that the Indians of the Central Valley went to such effort and personal danger to raid the coastal missions for animals in the 1820s to 1840s. Ultimately, there seems to be no solid archaeological support for his thesis that there were major population reductions in California immediately before the arrival of the Europeans. What was more likely happening was that the severe droughts starting around A.D. 1300 had abated and that many people were moving into areas that had been abandoned during the earlier harsh climatic periods.

In Chapter 11, Doyce Nunis, Jr., regales us with *Alta California's Trojan Horse*. In this chapter, he discusses the first waves of foreigners who peacefully entered Californio society, usually marrying an *hija del pais*. For the most part, this is a very well-researched story. However, Nunis falters when it comes to discussions of the Russian presence. For instance, he trots out the old shibboleth that the actual name for Fort Ross was "Rus."

However, this is not at all borne out in the Russian spelling of the name as found in numerous Russian American Company documents where it is spelled "Ross" or *Россъ* in Cyrillic. On page 304, he speaks of the ship *Ilem*, which was actually called the *Il'men*. He also quotes the exciting, but thoroughly discredited, account of Vasili Tarakanov (cf. Owens 1990:137).

The final chapter, *War in California: 1846-48*, by Lisbeth Haas, brings us up to the sea change that occurred to the inhabitants of California, presaging the total upheaval of the Gold Rush. It is notable that the number of historical accounts of California increase exponentially about this time, which influences the historical memory of California. Haas details these crucial years that punctuated the shift from Spanish/Mexican California to the American period of the Golden State.

Though not characterized as a formal chapter, there is one more part to the book that could well make it worthwhile buying all by itself. Titled *Picturing California*, it is an introduction by Anthony Kirk to a marvelous set of 14 classic images—all but one in color—of various aspects of California before the Gold Rush.

Overall, despite my nitpicking, I think this a book well worth having available. I am sure it will be frequently quoted in the future. It is unfortunate that the editors chose to treat the Russian presence and considerable interaction with Spanish and Mexican California from 1803 to 1842 as largely a minor series of asides and occasional footnotes. But apart from that, I think it is a very useful contribution.

REFERENCES

- Amador, Jose Maria
1877 *Memorias sobre la Historia de California*, dictated to Thomas Savage, Whiskey Hill, 1877. On file at the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
- Dakin, Susanna Bryant
1939 *A Scotch Paisano in Old Los Angeles: Hugo Reid's Life in California, 1832-1852*, derived from his correspondence. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Farris, Glenn J.
 1989 Recognizing Indian Folk History as Real History: A Fort Ross Example. *American Indian Quarterly* 13(4):471-480.
 1994 José Panto, *Capitan* of the Indian Pueblo of San Pascual, San Diego County. *Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology* 16(2):149-161.
 1998 The Bodega Miwok as Seen by Mikhail Tikhonovich Tikhonov in 1818. *Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology* 20(1):2-12.
 1999 The Reyes Rancho in Santa Barbara County, 1802-1808. *Southern California Quarterly* (in press).
- Gonzalez, Mauricio
 1877 *Memorias dadas por Mauricio Gonzalez en Monterey, año de 1877 á Thomas Savage para la Bancroft Library*, dictated to Thomas Savage, 1877, Monterey. On file at the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
- Heizer, Robert F., and Albert B. Elsasser
 1980 *The Natural World of the California Indians*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Holliday, J. S.
 1981 *The World Rushed In: The California Gold Rush Experience, An Eyewitness Account of a Nation Heading West*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Kelleher, Brian T.
 1997 *Drake's Bay: Unraveling California's Great Maritime Mystery*. Cupertino: Kelleher and Associates.
- Larson, Daniel O., John R. Johnson, and Joel C. Michelson
 1994 Missionization Among the Coastal Chumash of Central California: A Study of Risk Minimization Strategies. *American Anthropologist* 96(2):263-299.
- Mathes, W. Michael
 1968 *Vizcaíno and Spanish Expansion in the Pacific, 1580-1630*. San Francisco: California Historical Society.
- Owens, Kenneth N.
 1990 Timofei Tarakanov: Frontiersman for the Tsar. In: *Russia in North America: Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Russian America, Sitka, Alaska, August 19-22, 1987*, Richard A. Pierce, ed., pp. 136-143. Kingston, Ontario: The Limestone Press.
- Preston, William
 1996 *Serpent in Eden: Dispersal of Foreign Diseases Into Pre-Mission California*. *Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology* 18(1):2-37.
- Santa Cruz County History Journal
 1997 Special Branciforte Bicentennial Edition. *Santa Cruz County History Journal*, Issue No. 3. Santa Cruz: Art and History Museum of Santa Cruz County.
- Vallejo, Platon Mariano Guadalupe
 1994 *Memoirs of the Vallejos, New Light on the History, Before and After The "Gringos" Came, Based on Original Documents and Recollections of Dr. Platon M.G. Vallejo*. Fairfield, CA: James D. Stevenson, Publisher.



The Ute Indians of Colorado in the Twentieth Century. Richard K. Young. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997, xiii + 290 pp., maps, photographs, index, bibliography, \$29.95.

Reviewed by:

MARTHA C. KNACK

Dept. of Anthropology and Ethnic Studies, Univ. of Nevada, Las Vegas, NV 89154-5003.

The purpose of this volume is to "trace the divergent paths followed by the Southern Utes and the Ute Mountain Utes during the twentieth century, with particular emphasis placed on the experiences of the two tribes since the early 1930s" (p. 9). The organization is chronological until the 1960s, and then breaks into separate topical treatments of economy, politics, and society and cul-