
BACKGROUND BOOKS

CALIFORNIA

Even by American standards, California's recorded history is relatively brief. It was not until 1769 that the first Spanish mission in California was founded—150 years after the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, 250 years after Hernando Cortés invaded Mexico.

For a chronicle of California from the era of the Spanish friars and *soldados* to that of today's Governor Jerry Brown, there is Berkeley historian Walton Bean's reflective **California: An Interpretive History** (McGraw-Hill, 1968; 3rd ed., 1978). Bean measures California's "most controversial and persistent problems, such as racism, vigilantism, and the maltreatment of agricultural labor" against expansion, innovation, and economic growth under Spanish, Mexican, and U.S. control.

Entries range from abalone to Adolph Zukor (the Hungarian-born Hollywood film magnate) in James D. Hart's diverting guidebook, **A Companion to California** (Oxford, 1978). Hart's thumbnail sketches cover the state's agriculture, climate, geology, history, institutions, personalities, politics.

In 1510, Garci Rodríguez Ordóñez de Montalvo (about whom little else is known) wrote a melodramatic thriller—a Spanish best seller—that gave the future state its name. "Know ye that on the right hand of the Indies," he claimed, "there is an island called California, very near the Terrestrial Paradise."

Montalvo is one of 137 authors (including William Saroyan and Robinson Jeffers, as well as forgotten

miners and Indians) whose various diaries, verse, fiction, and critiques of California are excerpted in John and Laree Caughe's **California Heritage: An Anthology of History and Literature** (Ward Ritchie, 1962).

Montalvo's vision notwithstanding, the first Spaniards to set foot in "Terrestrial Paradise" found the land arid and mostly unfit for agriculture.

Led by Father Junípero Serra, a handful of Spanish missionaries and soldiers founded a Franciscan mission at San Diego in 1769—the first white settlement. Spreading the Christian faith among the Indians was only a peripheral concern to Spain, however.

Historian Charles Edward Chapman describes the Spanish move north into California from Mexico as the inevitable growth of an empire, in **The Founding of Spanish California: The Northwestward Expansion of New Spain, 1687–1783** (Macmillan, 1916; Octagon reprint, 1973). Spain feared—often on the basis of little or no real evidence—that Great Britain, France, or Russia might seize the region and threaten Spanish colonies to the South.

The result was an empire spread too thin. Franciscan friars taught the native Indians to farm and introduced irrigation methods that turned arid patches into oases. But the Spaniards and then the Mexicans—who took control from Spain in 1821—were mostly ranchers whose vast tracts were scattered along the coast and in the Central Valley.

In 1846, four years before California became the 31st state of the Union, its non-Indian population numbered fewer than 7,000—including some ambitious Americans.

Washington first attempted to gain control over California in 1829, when President Andrew Jackson sent an emissary to Mexico to negotiate the acquisition of what is now California, Texas, and New Mexico. According to historian Andrew F. Rolle, in **California: A History** (Crowell, 1963; AHM, 3rd. ed., 1978), U.S. offers of bribery offended Mexican officials, who refused to discuss the matter further.

The first wagon train of American pioneers bound for California set out from near Independence, Mo., in 1841. Five years later, as Zachary Taylor fought Santa Ana south of the border in the Mexican-American War, Kit Carson, John C. Frémont, and other Yankee immigrants successfully battled the Mexicans to gain California's freedom in the Bear Flag Revolt.

Dashing and opportunistic, Frémont later became one of California's first U.S. Senators (in 1850) and the state's first presidential candidate, running unsuccessfully on the Republican ticket in 1856. In **Frémont: Explorer for a Restless Nation** (Doubleday, 1977), author Ferol Egan observes that the intrepid Frémont came to symbolize for Easterners the larger-than-life Western hero. Frémont's impact on California's development was equally memorable. "From the ashes of his campfires have sprung cities," exclaimed his devoted wife, Jessie, daughter of Missouri's Senator Thomas Hart Benton.

In January 1848, James W. Marshall, a carpenter from New Jersey,

found gold nuggets in the American River at Sutter's Mill. The next year, 40,000 "Forty Niners" braved the five-month voyage around Cape Horn to San Francisco for a chance at a new start and instant wealth.

In **Americans and the California Dream, 1850-1915** (Oxford, 1973), historian Kevin Starr suggests that the Gold Rush irrevocably "linked California imaginatively with the most compelling of American myths, the pursuit of happiness." The discovery of gold put California up for grabs. During the ensuing 50 years, "a sudden and gorgeous drama," as Walt Whitman put it, was played out. This period of extraordinary expansion was marked by rampant speculation, the formation of powerful monopolies (especially in railroads), and cultivation of the land.

The Gold Rush hastened California's passage to statehood (1850), but Americans there remained isolated from the rest of the country—except for the Pony Express and, in 1861, the transcontinental telegraph. On an autumn evening in 1860, in a room above a Sacramento hardware store, merchants Collis P. Huntington, Leland Stanford, Mark Hopkins, and Charles Crocker—later to be called the "four associates"—met with construction engineer Theodore D. Judah. As Ward McAfee tells it in **California's Railroad Era, 1850-1911** (Golden West Books, 1973), the idea for the Central Pacific Railroad was born. The Central Pacific signed on as many as 10,000 Chinese coolies to build its railway, stretching from Sacramento to Promontory, Utah. Work was completed in 1869.

The four associates have been praised for their crucial role in California's economic growth and vilified for their ruthless business practices (for example, price fixing

CALIFORNIA IN LITERATURE

At the age of 19, Richard Henry Dana sailed from Massachusetts 'round the Horn to California as a common seaman in 1834. Four years later, he was among the first in a long line of "non-natives" to write about Californians and their environs. **Two Years Before the Mast** (1838) is his personal narrative of adventure along the California coast.

Bret Harte went west from Albany, N.Y., in 1854. His whimsical stories, among them "The Luck of Roaring Camp," romanticized the weathered miners, prostitutes, and gamblers of the rugged frontier.

A hard-boiled writing style marks the fiction of James M. Cain and Raymond Chandler. Cain's **The Postman Always Rings Twice** (1934) is a drifter's tale of adultery and murder, set along a rural highway in Southern California. Chandler's tough detective, Philip Marlowe, battled corrupt Los Angeles cops in such classics as **The Big Sleep** (1939).

Many established writers "hacked" for the movies. F. Scott Fitzgerald used his unhappy Hollywood experiences in his unfinished draft of **The Last Tycoon** (1941), as did Nathanael West in his eerie **The Day of the Locust** (1939).

Foreign authors who have penned their impressions of California include Britain's Aldous Huxley and Evelyn Waugh. Waugh's **The Loved One** (1948) gives a funny vision of love between two employees at Southern California's elaborate burial ground, Forest Lawn.

Nobel laureate John Steinbeck depicted the San Joaquin Valley in **The Grapes of Wrath** (1939) as a place of fruited abundance where, during the Depression, the children of migrant Okies starved. Fellow Californian Joan Didion writes essays (**The White Album**, 1979) and novels (**Play It As It Lays**, 1970) that probe the effects of celebrity, drugs, fads, and cars on Southern Californians—from bureaucrats to Black Panthers, to rock stars, to housewives.

In a lighter vein, novelist Cyra MacFadden's **The Serial: A Year in the Life of Marin County** (1977) satirizes the "mellow" lives of San Francisco's jogging, meditating, sexually self-conscious suburbanites. Her characters' chief worry, as one puts it, is "what it means to be *human*. You know—sex-role stereotyping, identity, meaningful human relationships. The whole gestalt."

and the control of docks to lessen competition). Notable among the biographies are David Lavender's **The Great Persuader** (Doubleday, 1970), a sympathetic portrait of Huntington (1821–1900), and Norman E. Tutorow's **Leland Stanford: Man of Many Careers** (Pacific Coast Publishers, 1971). Stanford (1824–93) founded the Republican Party in Cal-

ifornia, served as both governor and U.S. Senator, and financed and built the university named after his son. A melodramatic indictment of the Central Pacific—"that galloping monster, that terror of steel and steam"—is Frank Norris's muckraking novel, **The Octopus** (1901).

Today, agriculture is California's biggest business, with cash receipts

for 1979 totaling some \$11.8 billion. **Politics of Land** (Grossman, 1973, cloth; Penguin, 1973, paper), by Ralph Nader's Study Group on Land Use in California, focuses on how public and private land is allocated and used in the state. Competition for land is fierce. The authors note that the federal government has proprietary rights over 44 percent of California's 100 million acres; 25 corporate landowners hold more than 16 percent of the remaining privately owned land. Some 36 million acres, devoted to farming, produce 25 percent of the food (especially fruits and vegetables) that ends up on American dinner tables.

The precarious life of California's Hispanic migrant worker in the face of low wages and seasonal layoffs is described by novelist/naturalist Peter Matthiessen. His **Sal Si Puedes: Cesar Chavez and the New American Revolution** (Random, 1969, cloth; rev. ed., 1973; Dell, 1971, paper) paints a sympathetic portrait of the United Farm Workers' leader.

In 1887, Hollywood was a real estate development on the edge of Los Angeles. Movie-makers flocked there in the 1900s because of its sunny weather and its proximity to natural settings that could substitute for locales as different as the Sahara Desert and the French Riviera. British film historian Keven Brownlow has chronicled the history of California's early movie-making in several excellent books, among them **The War, The West, and the Wilderness** (Knopf, 1979).

Many of contemporary California's political debates have centered

around growth, land, and the environment. Because the Democrats and the G.O.P. are weak, local groups have arisen to fight the political battles. In a broad survey of recent **Power and Politics in California** (Wiley, 1980, paper), Cal Tech political scientists John H. Culver and John C. Syer note that the state's strong interest groups do not just pressure public officials but help to elect them in the first place.

One current battle has seen developers squaring off against environmentalists. During the early 1970s, there were 235 professional lobbyists in Sacramento representing "landed interests" (corporations, utilities, etc.) as opposed to 3 representing conservation groups. Although still outnumbered, the environmentalists have had their successes, notably in curbing the commercial development of coastal areas and in requiring "environmental impact reports" for all major construction projects. California's Environmental Quality Act is the most stringent state law of its kind in the country.

Political journalist Gladwin Hill takes a bemused look in **Dancing Bear: An Inside Look at California Politics** (World, 1968). A Democratic electoral majority, growing since 1932, he notes, did not prevent four successive Republican gubernatorial victories, from 1942 to 1954. (Nor did it bar Ronald Reagan from victory in 1966 and 1970.) California politics, concludes Hill, is marked by flexibility and pragmatism—"the frontier urge for experimentation, on the one hand, and the innate desire for security on the other."

EDITOR'S NOTE: *James J. Rawls and Ted K. Bradshaw suggested some of the titles mentioned in this essay.*