

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Kevin Starr, Richard J. Orsi, eds. *Rooted in Barbarous Soil: People, Culture, and Community in Gold Rush California.* Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2000. x + 364 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-22496-4.

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Published on H-California (March, 2001)

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Striking at the very heart of the California myth, *Rooted in Barbarous Soil: People, Culture and Community in Gold Rush California*, a collection of essays edited by Kevin Starr and Richard Orsi, seeks to offer a sweeping new picture of society and culture in Gold Rush era California. Published by the University of California Press in association with the California Historical Society, *Rooted in Barbarous Soil* is the third of four books in Richard Orsi’s California History Sesquicentennial Series; other collections in the series have examined California before the Gold Rush, mining and economic development in California, and politics and law in California. Like these other important collections, Starr’s and Orsi’s *Rooted in Barbarous Soil* brings the questions, problems, and methodologies of the New Western History to bear on what many think to be the decisive event in California history: the Gold Rush.

Unlike the other volumes in this series, which take on more narrowly defined topics, *Rooted in Barbarous Soil* attempts a particularly ambitious task. In covering both society and culture in Gold Rush California, the collection addresses a wide-range of topics including ethnicity, racism, migration, patterns of settlement, urbanism, women, gender, sexuality, art, literature, education, religion, and popular culture. In bringing these diverse and perhaps all-encompassing areas of concentration together, the editors at least implicitly attempt to create an overall synthesis of social and cultural historical methodologies and themes.

What binds these authors and their diverse essays together? Fortunately, the reader is treated to two useful attempts to address this question: first in

the brief preface, co-authored by Micheal Duty and Richard Orsi, and then in the introductory chapter, written by Kevin Starr. Duty and Orsi introduce the central problematic as a paradox. “Perhaps never in the time-honored American tradition of frontiering did ‘civilization’ appear to sink so low as in gold-rush California,” Duty and Orsi assert; but, they also add that during the same period, “social and cultural forms emerged, solidified, spread, and took hold” (vii). Is Gold Rush California best characterized as a period of social disorganization or social reorganization? Duty and Orsi—and several of the essayists that follow—make the paradoxical statement: “both.”

In his fine introductory essay, Kevin Starr elaborates on this theme and makes a significant contribution by considering its moral implications. Starr begins with the telling of a parable. The men of the Hartford Union Mining and Trading Company made their overseas voyage to California in 1849 to make a fortune in the gold fields. However, as Starr reveals, the well-organized company of 122 men quickly disbanded after arriving in California and within a year many were dead, many more had returned to the eastern seaboard, and still more had yet to find the gold they had come for. This story of social disorganization serves a parable for Gold Rush California overall. However, as Starr notes, not only did Americans suffer disarray while in California, but both longtime Mexican residents of California (the Californios) and immigrants from countries around the world became caught up in the prejudice and violence that chaos breeds.

It is this history of unequal relations, of racism, of the cultural conquest of California by the United States that has captured the attention of many schol-

ars now reexamining the Gold Rush and the history of the West overall. Starr writes that this new history, which appears prominently in this volume, “is not a pretty story; but it is a true story, and it must be faced” (6). Yet, rather than strike down the old narrative of the Gold Rush, of the glorious rise of American California, Starr requests that readers of the volume strive for a complex moral perspective which does not replace “good” simply with “bad.” He writes, “We can find no point outside of history to judge the frequently depressing behavior of the Forty-niners as far as racial and ethnic matters are concerned. Bearing witness through these essays to a terrible burden of past oppression, we cannot exempt ourselves from continuities and responsibilities of prejudice and racial animosities down to our own time” (7). Moreover, he adds, “Not until all racism and ethnic prejudice is purged from American society altogether should we feel morally superior to the California miners chronicled in this volume” (7). Thus, in challenging the moralizing perspective of several of the volume’s contributors, Starr sets the moral tone for the collection. He asks that readers hold the paradox of social chaos and order, of cultural conquest and commonwealth at the forefront of their thoughts when considering the issues raised and the new perspectives offered.

Following Starr’s introduction comes a series of essays that examine, with varying degrees of sophistication, the social and cultural change that came with the Gold Rush. Malcolm Rohrbough’s “No Boy’s Play: Migration and Settlement in Early Gold Rush California” repeats the well known story of how the discovery of gold came to be a reality on the eastern seaboard, how groups organized and made the journey to California, and how migrants attempted to maintain a degree of social organization in a chaotic world. The next essay, Sucheng Chan’s “A People of Exceptional Character: Ethnic Diversity, Nativism, and Racism in the California Gold Rush,” is a masterful synthesis of material about race and ethnic relations. Moreover, it provides a useful analytical structure that most studies of racism in California do not; in particular, Chan explains the transition from ethnic consciousness to nativism to racism by paying close attention to the geography, the order of arrival of migrants, the locational settlement patterns, and the differences among white ethnics as well as people of color.

James Sandos’s essay, “‘Because he is a liar and a thief’: Conquering the Residents of ‘Old’ California, 1850-1880,” builds on Chan’s article by providing

a more in-depth account of the treatment of native Californian Indians and of Californios by white migrants. This essay contributes to our base of knowledge through its many comparisons: between victimization and resistance, Indians and Californios, Indians in the east and in the west, and Indians in northern and southern California. Sandos ends his essay on an upbeat and perhaps too facile note by appreciating the good that casinos have brought to contemporary Indian reservations.

Robert Phelps’s “‘All hands have gone downtown’: Urban Places in Gold Rush California” marks a shift in perspective from the previous essays, which were concerned mostly with racism and its consequences. Inspired by works like Richard Wade’s *The Urban Frontier: The Rise of Western Cities, 1790-1830* (1959) and Lewis Mumford’s *The City in History* (1961), Phelps argues that cities in the California were of greater relative importance to their surrounding hinterlands than cities in the east. He proves his thesis by examining not only San Francisco, but also the key roles played by cities like Sacramento, Nevada City, and Marysville as they became regional social, cultural, and economic centers.

In “Weaving a Different World: Women and the California Gold Rush,” Nancy Taniguchi provides a synthesis of recent research in California women’s history and finds that “as California transformed, so did the lives of its women” (142). This episodic essay reveals these changes by discussing women in the mines, Chinese women, women and work, women and violence, female performers, and “respectable” women. Though Taniguchi claims that weaving women into California history changes our understanding of the latter, her evidence seems to support the opposite – that by examining women in the west, our notions of gender in history will be challenged.

Although the collection is not organized into sections – by my estimation, a mistake – the remaining six essays more closely adhere to various elements of cultural history. “‘As jolly as a clam at high water’: The Rise of Art in Gold Rush California,” by Anthony Kirk (who also served well as the volume’s illustrations editor), is a lively essay that celebrates the youthful adventurers who came to California and the equally adventurous artists who struggled to depict their historic wanderings. The contribution of Kirk’s essay lies in linking mining with art and hinting that in both endeavors luck more than talent seems to determine who succeeds. Michael Kowalewski’s essay,

“Romancing the Gold Rush: The Literature of the California Frontier,” attempts to explain how Gold Rush era writing, both fiction and nonfiction, was influenced by its unique historical context. While Kowalewski asserts that “The most engaging gold-rush writing allowed California’s new landscapes and the new behavior and idiomatic speech of its inhabitants to challenge the aesthetic and social criteria eastern readers might bring to a work” (209), he unfortunately offers little evidence to demonstrate how this might work.

The transmission of culture from one generation to the next is a theme considered in the following two essays, Irving Hendrick’s “From Indifference to Imperative Duty: Educating Children in Early California” and Steven Avella’s “Phelan’s Cemetary: Religion in the Urbanizing West, 1850-1869, in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Sacramento.” Hendrick provides a workmanlike history of education from the late 1840s through the 1860s. The most interesting element of the essay concerns the career of state superintendent of public education Andrew Moulder and how he introduced racial politics into the educational system. Avella’s essay uses the history of religion in California as window to peer onto the multicultural composition of the state’s cities; among the interesting points Avella makes is that “California’s dynamic diversity and distinctiveness . . . might very well stimulate a major reinterpretation of the controlling narratives of American religious history” (253).

In the book’s two final essays, Gary Kurutz’s “Popular Culture on the Golden Shore” and Susan Lee Johnson’s “‘My own private life’: Toward a History of Desire in Gold Rush California,” questions of culture and society intertwine and result in some of the volume’s most attention-grabbing essays. Kurutz’s essay is a survey of California’s colorful, Gold Rush era popular culture and amusements. While few new insights are offered (with the exception of his discussion of ethnicity and sports), the essay provides a good jumping-off point for scholars interested in researching the subject in the future.

The essay by Johnson is one of the volume’s most original and ambitious contributions. Johnson begins the project of remedying the woeful lack of attention given to sexuality in Gold Rush California by historians of the American West. Historians’ apparent blindness to this topic is particularly striking considering that at some places in some periods the gender ratio was as unbalanced as 97 percent men to three

percent women—a factor that would not only influence sexuality but social relations overall. Through innovative use of source material, Johnson introduces a series of themes related to race, class, age, and gender that provide the first step in the writing of the history of Gold Rush sexuality.

The contributions of this volume are many. However, perhaps the most interesting contribution – the beginning of a synthesis of social and cultural history – also hints at an unfulfilled promise of the volume. Succinctly, I think that this collection of vastly different essays does not add up to the sum of its parts. If there were more exchange among the essayists, if they were grappling with more of the same issues, sources, and methodologies, perhaps then the volume could be considered a unified whole. Then, readers would put down the volume with a solid impression of the current state of knowledge and thinking about society and culture in Gold Rush California. Although clearly not their charge, I think that collaborations between the authors might have been interesting.

For instance, I think that if Rohrbaugh and Kirk had combined their research, new and interesting insights about the consequential relationship between images of California and mass-distributed knowledge about California might have been made. Similarly, what if Chan and Kurutz had pooled their material? I suspect we would have been treated to a groundbreaking analysis of how popular culture helped reinforce or maybe even challenge the emerging social hierarchies in the state.

Some of the sheer diversity of the collection – both in regard to subject matter as well as effectiveness – is evident when considering the sources used. Many of the essays rely primarily on secondary studies to build synoptic accounts. However, some authors dig a little deeper and use their sources more wisely than others. For instance, Chan cites a wide-range of secondary material, including books and articles that date back to the early twentieth century; while she mines a great deal of information from these sources, she also uses them carefully, viewing them as primary as well as secondary documents. On the other hand, I found Taniguchi’s sources familiar and her reading of at least one book (Asbury’s *Barbary Coast*) not as sophisticated as it might have been.

Finally, I think that the need for a better synthesis of social and cultural history, of primary and secondary sources, rings true as well for the question of the volume’s moral perspective. Speaking about the

moral problem faced by American gold rush migrants—as well as current scholars of the era—Starr writes, “the Gold Rush posed an ecumenical challenge of unprecedented magnitude” (6). Were the contributors up to this challenge of accounting for the diversity of people found in California’s history and the moral paradoxes that come with it?

While reading *Rooted in Barbarous Soil*, particularly the excellent essays by Starr, Chan, Sandos, Avella, and Johnson, I was reminded time and again of Michael Rogin’s provocative 1985 essay, “Moby-Dick and the American 1848” in which he likens Ahab’s self-destructive pursuit of the white whale to the impending crisis of national unity following the Mexican-American War. At the heart of Rogin’s essay and several essays in the collection under con-

sideration here is a moral quandary. This quandary forces us, as historians, to consider the relative costs of what is lost and what is gained when one social order is replaced by another – especially when that transition is marked by violence, by megalomania, and by a disregard for the innocent and for history. These are big questions. And in making us again realize that these big questions are at the heart of the real story of the California Gold Rush, the editors of and contributors to *Rooted in Barbarous Soil* perform a great service. And they let historians and anyone interested in California history know that even after 150 years of being one of the most celebrated, criticized, and talked about events in American history, timeless questions about the Gold Rush will continue to influence our understanding of its implications and shape our moral judgments of its legacy.

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Citation: Martin D. Meeker. Review of Starr, Kevin; Orsi, Richard J., eds., *Rooted in Barbarous Soil: People, Culture, and Community in Gold Rush California*. H-California, H-Net Reviews. March, 2001.

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