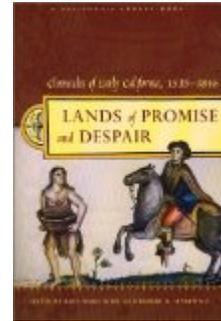


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Rose Marie Beebe, Robert M. Senkewicz, eds. *Lands of Promise and Despair: Chronicles of Early California, 1535-1846*. Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2001. xxi + 506 pp. \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-890771-48-5.

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Exploring Hispanic California from the Inside

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Rose Marie Beebe and Robert M. Senkewicz's *Lands of Promise and Despair* is a fascinating collection of primary sources that reveal the texture of daily life in Hispanic California. These sources run the gamut from documents describing the initial contact between Europeans and indigenous peoples to illustrations of native animals by explorers to recollections of life in Californio society. Despite the wide range of source material, the collection is remarkably focused and informative. I recommend it to both scholars of early California and interested members of the general public.

Lands of Promise and Despair is organized into four sections focusing on critical periods in Alta California's history: "Exploration," "Colonization," "Settlements," and "Mexican California." Each section offers a brief overview of the period's context and noteworthy features. In "Exploration," we learn how California fit into Spanish expansion in the New World, and its precedents in the Reconquista. Colonization introduces the three key institutions of Spanish colonial life: the town, the presidio and the mission. A brief description of their California variants is preceded by a short history placing them in the context of adapting Old World patterns to the New World. Two themes are explored in "Settlements": Indian efforts to retain their autonomy within and outside the mission system, and the "toxic" struggle between the military and missionaries in Alta California. The collection concludes with Mexican California, which

considers the origins of Mexican independence and its effects on California. Secularization of the missions, the opening of California to foreign trade and the concentration of former mission lands in the hands of the Californios are the focus here.

Beebe and Senkewicz's desire to provide "a genuine experience of Spanish and Mexican California from the inside" (p. xx) means that Indian-centered documents complement the Hispanic. Firsthand accounts of tribal culture, descriptions of herbal medicines, transcripts of judicial proceedings against Indian defendants, reminiscences by former Mission Indians and illustrations of native practices, dress and habitations provide a rich view of Indian life in Alta California. Throughout the editors demonstrate an even-handed approach to source selection and explanation. They do not shy away from pointing out the negative aspects of Spanish-Indian interactions while acknowledging that life in Alta California could have its charming moments (as revealed by missionary Miguel del Barco's descriptions of indigenous fauna or governor Juan Bautista Alvarado's recollection of hunting bear as a boy).

Within the sections, each document is preceded by a brief description of its context and significance. Beebe and Senkewicz use these descriptions to deepen our understanding of the patterns sketched in the introductions and to add new information. In "Exploration," for example, they use a collection of maps of California to explore the slow realization of Europeans that Alta Cali-

ifornia was not an island detached from the mainland. A whimsical excerpt from Garci Rodriguez de Montalvo's 1510 account of the Amazonian society purported to live on the island of California is juxtaposed with part of the *Requerimento* that Spanish conquistadors were required to read to indigenous people before conquering them. The combination of these and other documents and commentary makes clear the complexity of Spanish efforts to comprehend and manage this new land and its peoples. Similar linkages emerge in all four sections.

I have only two complaints about this otherwise excellent collection. A minor one is the poor construction of the paperback version; pages began breaking away after only one perusal, a drawback in a book that demands multiple readings. A somewhat larger complaint, though

still minor, is that there is no table of illustrations; this is unfortunate, given the visual richness of the collection. The smaller black-and-white images accompanying the majority of textual sources are not listed separately nor do they appear in the table of contents. More egregiously, the reader only learns of Fr. Ignacio Tirsch's wonderful watercolor drawings of indigenous flora and fauna by stumbling onto them; likewise, the delicate and whimsical representations of animals encountered during a scientific expedition in 1791 are not in the table of contents.

These are minor quibbles about an otherwise excellent book. I recommend it wholeheartedly to both scholars of Alta California and those wishing to sample the flavor of life in early California.

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