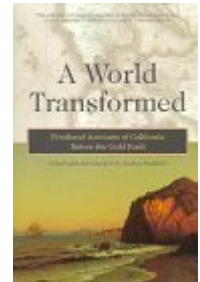


**Joshua Paddison.** *A World Transformed: Firsthand Accounts of California Before the Gold Rush.* Berkeley, Calif.: Heyday Books, 1999. xxiii + 344 pp. \$18.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-890771-13-3.



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>From the time of its founding at San Diego in 1769 until its takeover by the United States in 1847, Alta California received numerous visitors. Within less than a week after Gaspar de Portola and Junipero Serra left Mission San Fernando Velicata in Baja California for San Diego Bay, a joint Spanish/French scientific expedition arrived in Baja California to set up posts in San Jose del Cabo and Real de Santa Ana to observe the transit of Venus. This association of science and the Californias persisted. Over the ensuing years, the Comte de La Perouse, Alejandro Malaspina, Jose Longinos Martinez, and a number of others visited the coast of the newly founded Alta California. The scientists were joined by a host of others, as explorers, hunters, traders, trappers, and businessmen put in at one or other port of this most distant part of New Spain's and Mexico's northern frontier.

These travelers left behind a variety of records. The logs, diaries, journals, letters, sketches, and watercolors that they created did much to shape the perception of Alta California throughout Europe, the United States, and even in New Spain and Mexico itself. Much of this material was

published in the early nineteenth century, as exploration of the northern Pacific quickened, and commercial and territorial ambitions intensified long standing great power rivalries. Successive powers regarded Alta California as a potential bread basket for settlements in Alaska, or as a way to arrest the seemingly inexorable advance of the United States, or as a staging point for a commercial Pacific empire. In European and American capitals, accounts of travels to Alta California were widely read and discussed.

But much of this travel literature has long been relatively inaccessible to all but specialists, and that has been a shame. For the published works of these visitors, while they need to be used with critical caution, as all travelers' accounts do, provide, on the whole, a remarkable picture of many aspects of social, cultural, and religious life in Alta California. One of the great virtues of Joshua Paddison's collection *A World Transformed* is that it makes available once again a good sampling of these important writings. Selections from twelve authors are represented. Also, in addition to a fine series of illustrations throughout the text, the volume contains a section

of fourteen mostly contemporary maps and sketches of Alta California people, animals and places.

The work is divided into four large sections. The first, "Early Explorations," contains Fr. Juan Crespi's account of the expedition in which Sergeant Jose Francisco Ortega and his detachment became the first Spaniards to view San Francisco Bay in 1769; Fr. Vicente Santa Maria's account of the 1775 survey of the same bay by the vessel San Carlos; and Fr. Francisco Palou's account, in his life of Fr. Junipero Serra, of the founding of Mission Dolores.

The second section, "Life Under Spanish Control," contains accounts by Captain George Vancouver of his 1792 visit to San Francisco; narratives by Nikolai Petrovich Rezanov and Georg von Langsdorff of the 1806 Russian ship Juno to San Francisco; and selections from the diary of Adelbert von Chamisso, the natural on the Otto von Kotzebue's vessel the Rurik, which called at San Francisco in 1816.

The third section, "Picturing a World Transformed," consists of the maps and sketches. They include a 1625 map of California as an island by Henry Briggs; maps by Jose Canizares (1776) and Frederick William Beechey (1826); drawings by Louis Choris, Jean-Louis-Robert Prevost, Edward Belcher, August Duhaut-Cilly, John Sykes, and William Rich Hutton; a few drawings from the 1855 Annals of San Francisco, and a twentieth century rendition of Francis Drake's Golden Hind.

The final section, "Mexican Control, Yankee Infiltration and Conquest," contains Frederick William Beechey's account of his 1826 visit to San Francisco Bay; Richard Henry Dana, Jr.'s account, from *Two Years Before the Mast*, of his visit to San Francisco and of the 1836 Santa Barbara wedding of Anita de la Guerra and Alfred Robinson; Sir George Simpson's report of his 1841 visit to San Francisco and to Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo in Sonoma; Edwin Bryant's account, from *What I Saw in California*, of his 1846 trip from Sutter's

Fort in Sacramento to San Jose and on to San Francisco; and Edwin Kemble's 1873 reminiscences of life in San Francisco and Sutter's Fort immediately before the beginnings of the Gold Rush.

As the above summary indicates, this is a very rich collection. The choice of authors and the selection from these authors give the reader a good sense of life in the parts of Alta California which the visitors frequented. The passages are generally vivid and arresting. I was particularly taken by Crespi's description of the natural world which the Spanish were entering, Vancouver's description of life at Mission Santa Clara, Langsdorff's description of undertaking a water journey around the bay, von Chamisso's description of a bear and bull fight, Dana's befuddlement at trying to understand the games and amusements at the fiesta he attended, Simpson's arrogant dismissal of both indigenous and Mexican culture, and Kemble's ironic memory of his skepticism at the initial reports of gold. But each reader will doubtless have his or her favorites.

Paddison has chosen to organize the volume geographically, around the San Francisco Bay area, and this is both a strength and a weakness. On the plus side, this tight focus allows the reader to get a real feel for this area of Alta California and its dramatic transformations. Most areas of the bay are covered and a variety of experiences are presented. The accounts describe not only the harbor and the presidio, but also Missions San Jose and Santa Clara, where the number of Indians impressed the visitors, and Mission San Francisco, whose only impressive feature was the tragically high Indian death rate. The accounts also make it clear that the travelers relied on each others' accounts, and formed almost an international exploration community. Beechey was quite aware, for instance, of Vancouver's descriptions of Mission San Jose and of Langsdorff's assessment of the state of the Indians there.

Most of the foreign travelers found things about Alta California which they did not like. Many had a low opinion of the Native Californians. Vancouver wrote that "there is not an object to indicate the most remote connection with any European or other civilized nation" (76) and thought that the Indians boats were "without exception the most rude and sorry contrivances for embarkation that I ever beheld."(69) After seeing the Indians at Mission San Jose, Langsdorff wrote, "We all agreed that we had never before seen the human race on such a low level." (112). Even Beechey, who understood that the mission system defied easy generalization, stated that the indigenous peoples "lead a far better life in the missions than in the forests." (182) Paddison's selections help us realize again that the denigration of the Native Californians was not confined to citizens of the United States. Such opinions had a long international pedigree. One of the striking things about this collection is that we do not hear the words of the Indian peoples themselves. While this means that the volume offers a more truncated picture of Alta California than modern readers would like, it is also a very accurate reflection of the travelers' concerns.

Similarly, readers of this volume sadly realize that denigration of the Hispanic residents of Alta California was not limited to North Americans. Richard Henry Dana's well-known judgment ("In the hands of an enterprising people, what a country this might be!") is seen to be part of an international consensus. In fact, some of the most negative aspersions on the Mexican Californians come from Simpson in the 1840s. He spends a number of paragraphs in this volume wondering what has "conspired to render these dons so very peculiarly indolent." (232) Part of this was due, he thought, to the policy of settling Alta California with "superannuated troopers and retired office holders," Like many of the others represented in this volume, he professed to be amazed and appalled that the central government, either that of

Spain or Mexico, had done so little to develop the potential of Alta California.

There was a positive side as well, of course. Some of the travelers were taken with the hospitality of the missionaries and soldiers, and with the obvious sense of community and family which pervaded Hispanic Alta California. Vancouver struck up a friendship with Hermenegildo Sal, and even named a point near Santa Barbara after him. Langsdorff was warmly received at Mission San Jose by Fr. Pedro de la Cueva, with whom he got along very well during his visit. Perhaps the most significant tribute was from the hard-headed Beechey, in a passage unfortunately not included by Paddison. When one of his men died in an accident and was buried at San Francisco, he was impressed by the way in which the residents shared in his crew's grieving: "As the coffin was lowering into the ground, the good understanding that existed between the ship's company and the inhabitants was testified in the most gratifying manner, by the latter approaching and performing the last office for the deceased, by dropping the earth in upon his coffin. I cannot recollect ever having met with such conduct in any other foreign port, and the act, most certainly, did not lessen our regard for the inhabitants."

But focusing so tightly on San Francisco is also something of a weakness, for San Francisco was not all that important a place in Spanish or Mexican Alta California. Before Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo established himself at Sonoma in the 1830s, San Francisco was the northernmost extension of Spanish and Mexican presence. It was an outpost, and a small and isolated one at that. When Alexander Humboldt collected his data in the first decade of the nineteenth century, he noted that, of the five California presidios (San Diego, Santa Barbara, Monterey, and San Francisco in Alta California and Loreto in Baja California), San Francisco had the least number of soldiers stationed in it. The political center of Alta California remained Monterey for most of the pe-

riod, and the most prosperous missions and ranchos were located in the southern part of the province and territory. Dana, for instance, who was involved in the central economic activity of the land--the hide and tallow trade--spent only 23 days in San Francisco out of his sixteen months in California. This proportion is a pretty accurate indication of bay's marginality to the mainstream life of Spanish and Mexican Alta California. The settlement of Yerba Buena on the cove of the bay, with its large degree of foreign inhabitants, was always an atypical place. San Francisco did not become a major site until the gold rush.

Paddison is seemingly not always aware of this untypicality, and his otherwise excellent introductions to the volume and to the various readings tend to overplay the foreign role in the development of Spanish and Mexican Alta California. To generalize from San Francisco can easily lead one to do this, since it was on the very edge of the frontier, its Spanish and Mexican population was always less than that of the more developed south, and Hispanic institutions were less rooted there than elsewhere.

In this vein, Paddison writes of the "ongoing Americanization of California" in the 1840s (260), and, influenced by Edwin Bryant's statement that he heard more English than Spanish spoken in San Francisco in September 1846, he concludes by referring to "California on the eve of the gold rush--by now a thoroughly American land." (308) This may well have been true in the San Francisco area, but it was hardly the case in the rest Alta California. In the very same month that Bryant was in San Francisco, Mexicans in Los Angeles expelled their North American occupiers. A few years later, in the 1850s, Horace Bell said that that city still only "semi-gringo." The situation in Monterey, Santa Barbara, and San Diego was similar. Americanization over the entire new state in the 1850s and later was a complex process which involved questions of land, race, and power.

That caveat aside, this is a first rate book. It recovers an important part of pre-US California life in an informed and attractive fashion. It deserves a wide readership, for even the questions that it raises are deeply significant ones for California's future as well as its past.

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