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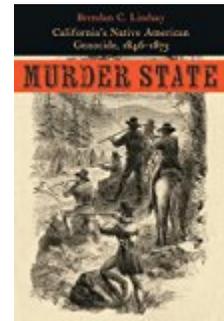
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Brendan C. Lindsay. *Murder State: California's Native American Genocide, 1846-1873*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012. xv + 436 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-2480-3; \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8032-6966-8.

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Democratic Genocide in Frontier California

In this ambitious and solid book, historian Brendan C. Lindsay makes two important claims about frontier California: first, that the violence perpetrated against Indians by Euro-American settlers constitutes a genocide; and second, that the genocidal impulse thrived in the popular democracy which characterized early settler society. Lindsay uses these two claims to weave together the argument of the book. He argues that Euro-American settlers and travelers to California brought with them a proprietary sense of popular democracy and deeply held prejudices about Indians, which, in combination with the dramatic push for Indian land and labor, laid the foundation for a popular, grassroots genocide, aided by the federal government's disavowal of its responsibilities, an energetic state government that crudely represented the interests of the white male settler population, and a popular press that reflected and inflamed the impulse.

By no means the first to argue that what happened to California Indians in the decade after the gold rush was a genocide, nor the first to use the definition from the 1948 United Nations Convention on Genocide to do so, *Murder State* is the most definitive statement yet in demonstrating the statewide scope of the violence. Lindsay builds on the work of other scholars, such as Boyd Cothran, Benjamin Madley, Michael Magliari, Stacey Smith, and Ashley Riley Sousa, who have carefully documented localized acts of genocide and isolated massacres across the state.[1] There can be no question that the violence against California Indians meets the United Nations' cri-

teria. Still, Lindsay is clearly aware of the persistent and occasionally inexplicable resistance such a claim will meet, and he makes a clear, strong case for the fact that, despite the absence of a centralized administrative directive, the violence nonetheless resonated deeply with the ideological disposition of the state government to exterminate the state's indigenous population.

Organized into three sections—"Imagining Genocide," "Perpetuating Genocide," and "Supporting Genocide"—the book moves between a comprehensive statewide narrative history and a theoretical analysis of the relationship between genocide, democracy, state formation, and violence. That is a difficult balance. Of the two, the former is Lindsay's strength. He is careful in his geographical distribution, judicious in his use of sources, broad in his reading, and strenuous in his synthesis.

Over the course of the three chapters in the first section, he unpacks the biases Euro-Americans brought with them to California through emigrant guides, travelers' memoirs, and government reports published and disseminated about California in the mid-nineteenth century. He argues that their biases were so powerful that, despite encountering indigenous cultures very different than their expectations, emigrants did not shed their prejudices in the face of contradictory evidence. Like the dog that barks at the mail carrier every day, believing that its barking is the single act that repels the mail carrier's attack, emigrants' prejudices were so deeply embedded,

they thrived in the presence of contradictory evidence.

The righteous, religious, and pragmatic ideals that undergird the pioneer mythology not only rendered Indians as a subhuman, dying race of “diggers” but also infused the political claims of the state’s settlers. They sought a government in California characterized by what Lansford Hastings, the author of a popular guide, described as “genuine republicanish, unsophisticated democracy” (p. 103). California’s boorish frontier democracy warped the law to protect the interest of white, male settlers. But Lindsay pushes further and argues that genocide was a vital element of the state’s political and economic development. As he phrases it, “rather than a government orchestrating a population to bring about the genocide of a group, [in California] the population orchestrated a government to destroy a group” (p. 22). The “Golden State” of popular imagination was, in reality, a “Murder State” (p. 123).

Lindsay plumbs well-known travel guides, such as those written by Richard Henry Dana, John Bidwell, John C. Fremont, and Lansford Hastings, for insights into attitudes toward democracy as well as prejudices against Indians. But one wishes for more detailed work into the structures of power and the particular ways that the biases and attitudes translated into juridical or political power. The violence against California Indians is fairly well-known, and the evidence overwhelms early California sources. But the claim that the state was called into existence in large part to exterminate Indians is bold. I had hoped that Lindsay could do for the phrase “murder state” what Ira Berlin has done for the term “slave society” (*Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* [1998])—that is, articulate a clear definition of what, exactly, a murder state is, other than a state in which murder occurred. That theoretical device could be very useful for scholars working in other areas of the United States and beyond.

In the second part of the book, Lindsay presents two chapters, one on the economics of genocide in Southern California, and another on the politics of “democratic death squads” (popularly organized bands of militia engaged in Indian hunting) in the northern part of the state. Southern and Northern California were (and are) different: ecologically and demographically. In his discussion of the South, Lindsay weaves together the stories of the Quechan ferry operation and the murder of John Ganton in 1850, the Garra Revolt in 1851, Paiute raids on the eastern Los Angeles basin, and the exploits of the Los Angeles Rangers loosely around the question of economics.

For the North, he explores the cycles of Indian starvation, livestock theft, and raids of retaliatory vengeance that settler society initiated. He focuses significantly on the Eden Valley, Round Valley, and the Eel River Rangers. But it is important to note, as Lindsay does, that economics and politics were inextricably linked in frontier California, and that regional diversity pulls against neat north/south divisions.

Part 3 returns to the question of the state. In three chapters, Lindsay explores the state government, particularly the infamous 1850 Act for the Protection and Government of the Indian, which prohibited vagrancy, codified an existing system of unfree Indian labor through indenture, led directly to kidnapping of Indian children, and enabled the agricultural viability of the state as the gold rush subsided. Alongside vigilance committees and volunteer companies engaged in hunting down Indians in the northern part of the state, the law enabled the government to function, as Lindsay describes it, more like a homeowners’ association than a representative democracy, protecting the interests of the white male property owners who dominated it. He also explores the near collapse of federal Indian policy at the state level, and the popular press which played to its audience with lurid accounts of Indian depredations and violence. A self-serving state government, an absence of federal government oversight, and an inflammatory news media contributed to the power that the people and popular will had on shaping Indian policy that supported genocide.

In the conclusion and epilogue, he argues that genocide continued after the surrender and execution of Kintipoo in 1873 and the end of the Modoc War, but in a more implicit fashion than before. To the rest of the United States, the Modoc War looked familiar, and it fit California history into national narratives, erasing the previous two decades of exceptional violence. The erasure was so complete that when Ishi wandered out of the foothills of Mount Lassen in 1911 and into the fascination of San Francisco celebrity (the subject of the epilogue) the cause of his condition had been largely forgotten by the descendants of its perpetrators.

Lindsay is a strong writer, best in the summative section introductions, where he pulls tedious and disparate evidence together into clear and tight prose. However, the book creaks under the weight of its evidence. There is such a rich and horrific primary source base to work from, and the heft is necessary to make the argument that the genocide was not a set of isolated events. But the banality of anecdote necessary to make one argument

crowds out the analysis needed for the other. In claiming that the “citizen settlers” who came to California were “one of the most murderous forces on Earth during the nineteenth century” (p. 123), Lindsay opens some important but unanswered questions: Was it a uniquely American phenomena? To what degree did various *different* Euro-Americans exhibit this predilection? In Lindsay’s hands, democracy represented the will of the majority, and “the Euro-American mind” in California was bent on the destruction of the Indians (p. 25). While true in the general sense, one hopes that future scholars will continue to provide detail onto the framework Lindsay sketched out.

Overall, this is a bold piece of work. It is solid in its synthesis of an array of scholarship, clear in its arguments, and much needed in situating California’s indigenous presence in the state’s history. The book will be of interest to scholars in California history, genocide studies, American Indian studies, and the history of the American West. While the book does not explicitly engage the theoretical questions of settler colonialism and indigenous sovereignty, California is a key site in those ongoing struggles, and the author’s willingness to engage the topic of genocide in that context potentially contributes to California Indian efforts to demand justice going forward.

Note

[1]. Boyd Cothran, *Remembering the Modoc War: Redemptive Violence and the Making of American Innocence* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Benjamin Madley, “California’s Yuki Indians: Defining Genocide in Native American History,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (2008): 303-332; Benjamin Madley, “Patterns of Frontier Genocide 1803-1910: The Aboriginal Tasmanians, the Yuki of California, and the Herero of Namibia,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 6, no. 2 (2004): 167-192; Michael Magliari, “Free State Slavery: Bound Indian Labor and Slave Trafficking in California’s Sacramento Valley, 1850-1864,” *Pacific Historical Review* 81, no. 2 (May 2012): 155-192; Michael Magliari, “Free Soil, Un-free Labor: Cave Johnson Courts and the Binding of Indian Workers in California, 1850-1867,” *Pacific Historical Review* 73, no. 3 (August 2004): 349-389; Stacey Smith, *Freedom’s Frontier: California and the Struggle over Un-free Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Stacey Smith, “Remaking Slavery in a Free State: Masters and Slaves in Gold Rush California,” *Pacific Historical Review* 80, no. 1 (February 2011): 28-63; and Ashley Riley Sousa, “‘They Will Be Hunted Down Like Wild Beasts and Destroyed!’: A Comparative Study of Genocide in California and Tasmania,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 6, no. 2 (2004): 193-209.

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