Influence of All: California and the Nineteenth-Century World

Though the title might imply an undue optimism regarding the brief egalitarian opportunity in gold rush California, this collection of essays is not solely concerned with California, nor does it suppose the enrichment of all comers. Rather, Riches for All is a gathering of thoughtful pieces on the phenomenon of the California gold rush and its effects upon people and place. Rooted in lectures given during the sesquicentennial celebration of the 1848 gold strike at Sutter’s Mill, Riches for All should stand alongside the California Historical Society’s recently published California History Sesquicentennial Series on the bookshelf of anyone interested in the state-of-the-art of California history. The essays generally retain the conversational tone appropriate to the public talks while casting a wide net and presenting much worth considering.

Editor Kenneth Owens contributes an introduction, an essay on the role of Mormons in the initial stages of the California gold rush, and a concluding essay on the unique history of the city of Sacramento. Owens’s introduction offers a brief but thorough historiography of gold rush history. The other twelve authors present a wide-ranging assemblage, concentrating on topics ranging from gold field technology to the experience of particular ethnic groups to the many legacies of mid-nineteenth-century California. While several authors take a comparative approach, Malcolm Rohrbough’s contribution, “We Will Make Our Fortunes—No Doubt of It”: The Worldwide Rush to California, perhaps most exemplifies the spirit of the book’s title, delivering a veritable roll call of nations as word of the gold rush attracted men and goods from increasingly far-flung locales. As a fine introduction to the multinational character of the early gold rush, Rohrbough tempers the notion of easy riches for all in noting the effects of Foreign Miners Taxes levied against non-Americans. Indeed, by the early 1850s, many foreign miners had returned home in the face of increasingly discriminatory measures.

The experience of various ethnic groups is central to several essays. Sylvia Sun Minnick offers a concise primer on the Chinese experience. She suggests that Chinese immigrants entered California with “far greater advantages than most” (p. 142). The maintenance of family honor and the organization of the Chinese community in America lent structure that most immigrant groups lacked. The establishment of huigans (too often conflated with their corrupt counterpart, the tongs) as a uniquely effective mutual aid society enabled early and continued Chinese success in the gold country as well as contributing to American suspicion. Shirley Ann Wilson Moore examines the various situations of African Americans from both free and slave states upon their arrival in California. Demonstrating anything but a uniform experience, Moore presents cases ranging from kidnapping for Latin American slave markets to being freed by force to accounts of free blacks returning east with their fortunes.
The racial restrictions inflicted against Chinese and blacks extended to other groups as well. Michael J. González asserts that rather than differences, it was the similarities of Mexicans and Americans that created animosity in gold rush California. The egalitarian nature of the gold fields (at least potentially) rewarded labor equally. The free labor ideology and herrenvolk democracy of antebellum America thus persisted in a particularly Californian manner. On a related theme, Albert Hurtado’s essay on California Indians considers the story of dispossession increasingly familiar to students of California history. Hurtado’s framework of multiple political, demographic, economic, environmental, and cultural revolutions striking California almost simultaneously is a useful one to help explain how Native Americans moved from their brief period of Mexican citizenship to the isolation and exclusion of late-nineteenth-century California.

Brian Robert’s essay on forty-niners’ experiences in Latin America is among the most intriguing pieces offered. The contrast of the spirit of the second Great Awakening and the lack of restrictions placed upon young men en route to the gold fields have made for many interesting tales and historical studies. However, Americans’ take on Latin America and the Caribbean simultaneously situated these foreign lands as both an edenic paradise and a threat to Victorian values. The experience of the thousands of Americans and Europeans moving through and among the peoples of Panama, Brazil, Mexico, and Chile is an overlooked topic.

Continuing in a common theme of California’s rapid change from the initial gold strike through the rush and into statehood, Martin Ridge asserts that the gold rush was much more lawful than has been portrayed in popular accounts. Despite issues of racism and interethnic violence, Ridge explains, property rights were respected in gold rush California. In an interesting conclusion, Ridge argues that lynching and claim jumping increased only after the initial opportunities of the gold fields had been depleted.

Elizabeth Jameson and Susan L. Johnson consider gender in their respective essays. Jameson compares the Cornish, Chinese, and American male immigrants to examine the establishment of a middle-class ethos among all three groups. Johnson also considers middle-class values, but concludes that the arrival of American women resulted in attempts to duplicate Victorian America. Earlier arrivals who had found success in the male-dominated world of the gold rush found themselves under attack, but Johnson asserts that these efforts to impose ideals of American womanhood were, at best, partial.

Jeremy Mouat and Charlene Porsild examine subsequent rushes in Australia, New Zealand, British Columbia, and the Yukon. Mouat considers gold rushes as a world-wide phenomenon spurred by improvements in transportation. The presence of placer gold and its rapid depletion sparked a nearly continuous flow of people around the Pacific Rim. Porsild rounds out Mouat’s argument with a look at the Klondike gold rush. As the last of the large-scale gold rushes, the Klondike reflected many of the patterns of the California gold rush fifty years earlier. Twentieth-century gold strikes were less cosmopolitan and egalitarian, requiring mines rather than pans. Clark C. Spence accordingly concentrates on the transition from hand to hydraulic mining in the Pacific Rim gold rushes. Dredges and other less successful schemes continue to extract gold from California streams to this day.

Like a good collection of short stories, the essays here vary in depth of analysis and revelatory power. Almost all of the essays touch upon multiple peoples and their interactions and it is in dealing with this diversity of experience that this collection is most useful. One relationship referred to in several essays here, but which remains unsatisfactorily explained, is why, of the many immigrant groups, the French were apparently singled out for such animosity by other miners. Though current authors seem conscious of the racial prejudices of previous historians, the anti-French accounts of the nineteenth century remain less questioned. Were French Argonauts truly so different from other non-English speaking European immigrants?

Taken as a whole, this collection retains a stronger cohesive thread than many in its genre. Attention to the rapidly changing circumstances of the gold rush is a strength displayed by several essays. The gold rush world of 1848 was demonstrably and distinctly different than that following the arrival of the ’49ers. These worlds changed again with transitions in mining techniques, the influx of a new group, the extension of formal governmental structures, or new discoveries. In turn, the lessons and experience of California changed the character of subsequent gold rushes even as each retained its own unique conditions. Treating the multiple nineteenth-century gold rushes as a single phenomenon creates both pitfalls and opportunities which these historians navigate well.

Though the essays are highly readable, the addition
of at least one more map would be helpful for readers not familiar with the plethora of mining towns and camp names past and present. Hurtado alone makes extensive use of maps, and few accompany the remaining essays. This, however, is a minor flaw. Each author has managed either to present new ideas or to polish off historical nuggets for new inspection. Dedicated to the late Rodman Paul, *Riches for All* contains several condensations of recent or forthcoming work and will surely pique the interest of readers to pursue their individual favorites. Paul would be pleased with these new explorations. In short, this is an excellent overview and will serve courses in California History or as a starting point for anyone curious about the gold rush and its effects.

Note

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