

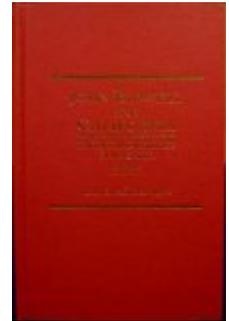
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Michael J. Gillis, Michael F. Magliari. *John Bidwell and California: The Life and Writings of a Pioneer, 1841-1900*. Spokane: Arthur H. Clark Company, 2003. 367 pp. \$39.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87062-316-5.

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## A Balanced View

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*John Bidwell and California: The Life and Writings of a Pioneer, 1841-1900* deserves a wider audience than the title alone is likely to attract. Part biography, part anthology of an early immigrant's extensive writings about California events and personages, this volume offers information useful to the studies of California agricultural history and Gilded Age race relations, in addition to its primary purpose: updating the biography of a man whom authors Michael J. Gillis and Michael F. Magliari consider "a major historical figure and ... a vital historical source" (p. 25).

In its anthological function, *John Bidwell and California* amply demonstrates that its subject deserves to be known as "a vital historical source." During his six decades in California, Bidwell left an extensive trail of commentary on his experiences in such events as the U.S.-Mexican War, the Gold Rush, the legal battle between hydraulic miners and farmers, and the emergence of specialty-crop agriculture. *John Bidwell and California* provides a variety of readable excerpts detailing Bidwell's observations about these and other events in his long public career. Sources range from Bidwell's extensive letters to his wife to his speeches before the California State Agricultural Society, and from pioneer narratives that Bidwell recorded late in his life to the archives of the California State Senate and the U.S. *Congressional Record*. Whatever subject one is researching in California history from 1841 to 1900, the prolific and well-connected

John Bidwell likely had something to say about it.

This book succeeds admirably in its effort to present Bidwell in a balanced light, neither as sinner and "slave owner" nor as "unselfish saint" (pp. 249-50). Rejecting the "celebratory school" of biography that shaped Bidwell studies in the first half of the twentieth century (p. 20), Gillis and Magliari are influenced by recent scholars who have investigated the limits of Bidwell's agricultural accomplishments, the resentment engendered by his philanthropy toward the town of Chico and local Mechoopda Indians, and other topics.[1] Both the biographical and anthological sections of this volume show Bidwell to be limited at times by the racist and classist thinking of his generation, and also limited in his ability to implement his better ideals; nonetheless, *John Bidwell and California* is a sympathetic study of a man more often found influencing events than being constrained by them.

The case for calling Bidwell a "major historical figure" unfolds slowly, with no very powerful claim during the years of his young adulthood. His experiences of overland travel in chapter 1 have interest because Bidwell helped organize the first overland party to emigrate to California, although at twenty-one he did not lead the group. His observations of Mexican rule and American conquest (chapter 2) and the Gold Rush (chapter 3) do not fundamentally change our understanding of these events. Rather, in the first chapters, Gillis and Magliari add fresh details to a familiar history. Indeed, they have a keen eye

for which details are worthy of reprinting. We learn, for example, from the anthological portions of these chapters that Bidwell believed himself to be “the first white man who ever saw the *Sequoia gigantea*” (p. 65), and that he suspected John Fremont of deliberately provoking a war with Mexico, although the allegedly symbolic act of raising the Bear Flag at Sonoma was, as he recalled, inconsequential to Californians in 1846 (pp. 99-101). Based on these and other details, the biographical portion of these early chapters establishes that Bidwell had the good fortune to be in the right place at the right time to make history.

It is in the next four chapters that Bidwell becomes more than an articulate observer. As the proprietor of Rancho Chico and a Congressman, he makes decisions in the fields of agriculture, politics, and race relations that have consequences for state and regional history. After purchasing a large claim on Chico Creek with his earnings from the Gold Rush, Bidwell established a “model farm” that helped to standardize specialty crops and other innovations in California agriculture (p. 129). An outspoken member of the California State Agricultural Society (CSAS), he testified against the hydraulic mining industry in the landmark case of *Woodruff v. North Bloomfield* and lobbied for state legislation to make ranchers, not farmers, responsible for fencing livestock. Both a rancher and a farmer himself, he believed “that California’s future lay with farming” (p. 133). In the chapter called “Rancho Chico and the Development of California Agriculture,” Gillis and Magliari provide details ranging from crop lists and yields to excerpts from Bidwell’s polemical speeches before the CSAS, all of which make this a data-rich resource for specialists in the history of California agriculture.

Two valuable chapters on Bidwell’s relations with Native and Chinese Californians demonstrate most clearly the biographers’ effort at a balanced portrait. One of the book’s more surprising sources, for example, is an unsuccessful “Indian Bill” that Bidwell sponsored in the California State Senate in 1850. The bill would have granted limited voting and judicial rights to Native Californians, as well as securing tribal use of hereditary lands (pp. 291-93). The evidence of this bill distances Bidwell from the far more racist act that *did* pass the California legislature, which provided for virtual enslavement of native people through a combination of child “apprenticeship,” anti-vagrancy, and labor lease provisions (p. 251). Yet even though we find Anglo Bidwell sympathizing with the native tribes that he found peaceable and agreeable, we also hear patrician and racially exclusive tones

when he writes privately to his wife of the Chinese employees on his farm who seek protection against resentful white laborers in Chico. Helpless to protect his Chinese employees, Bidwell retreats to racist platitudes when he advises them “to be good, industrious, quiet people, then they would have right on their side and gain, the good. Then also the law would have a better chance to protect them” (p. 333). To their credit, Gillis and Magliari show Bidwell in his helplessness against (and even participation in) class conflict and racism, as well as in his idealism.

In the spirit of David Vaught’s *Cultivating California: Growers, Specialty Crops, and Labor, 1875-1920*, which argues that labor practices in California varied by crop, region, and farm, three of the last four chapters of *John Bidwell and California* present a highly specific study of one particular ranch under just one proprietor.[2] Somewhat surprisingly, Gillis and Magliari do not take a position in Vaught’s quarrel with Carey McWilliams over the characterization of California agriculture as industrial and oppressive to workers or highly variable, with labor conditions negotiated between workers and employers.[3] A large landowner who successfully resists a strike by Chinese workers for higher wages and who has the political clout to host military forces on his land to prevent angry whites from fulfilling threats of violence (pp. 319, 273-74), Bidwell might to some degree fit the mold of McWilliams’s industrial landowners; however, Gillis and Magliari see their subject as a sincere philanthropist and pacifist (his call for the Army after all *averted* a likely slaughter of Indians) as well as a businessman.

That this volume makes no reference to Vaught’s debate with McWilliams is one indicator of its carefully maintained focus.[4] More descriptive than analytical in its presentation of material significant to California, the book turns analytical only in its role as biography. The overall sketch of Bidwell is favorable, but mixed, as in the last line of the chapter on “Bidwell and the California Chinese,” when the authors remark, “as he had done with the Mechoopda Indians, John Bidwell had successfully played the roles of both protector and exploiter of Chinese immigrant labor” (p. 332). This balanced portrait of Bidwell, not an analysis of larger historical problems, is the book’s central concern. Yet because of Bidwell’s wide-ranging interests and influence, *John Bidwell and California* contains primary sources of use to scholars working in multiple areas of California history, even though the authors do not themselves draw conclusions about how their subject’s career might illuminate debates such as Vaught’s with McWilliams.

*John Bidwell and California* is now the most up-to-date book-length study on its subject. Readable, well-documented, with a subject who had a hand in most significant issues and events of his day, it belongs in any library on California history.

#### Notes

[1]. Most of the new and critical essays on Bidwell that influence Gillis and Magliari appear in the essay collection, *Ripples along Chico Creek: Perspectives on People and Times* (Chico: Butte County Branch, National League

of American Pen Women, 1992).

[2]. David Vaught, *Cultivating California* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

[3]. Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1935).

[4]. In his acknowledgments, Vaught thanks Magliari for reading “the entire manuscript [of *Cultivating California*] with a keen editorial eye” (p. x), so we know that Gillis and Magliari were not unaware of the earlier book.

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