Riches For All: The California Gold Rush and the World (review)

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Riches For All: The California Gold Rush and the World. Edited by Kenneth N. Owens. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002. Pp. xii, 367. Maps. Notes. Index. $27.95 paper.

The official California Gold-Rush-to-Statehood Sesquicentennial Commission was authorized by the state of California to raise millions of dollars from the private sector to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the events that propelled California to a miraculously swift admission as the thirty-first state. As retired history professor Kenneth N. Owens of California State University Sacramento points out in his Preface, the Commission failed in its fundraising goals. Yet all was not lost; for before, during, and after the two-year observance there occurred a number of challenging reassessments of the Gold Rush by historians, and these re-evaluations succeeded in laying down a challenging and nuanced interpretation of the Gold Rush that, in effect, demanded that Californians, indeed, all Americans, abandon stereotypes in favor of a sense of history enlivened by nearly four decades of revisionist inquiry.

In 1949, Californians celebrating the Centennial of the Gold Rush had at their disposal a story, a parable, fashioned largely from a Victorian-era myth of progress, cross-referenced by Bret Harte and Gaby Hayes. The Gold Rush, so this interpretation went, represented a triumph of American resourcefulness and ingenuity. It was a colorful pageant and a triumph, in its rush to statehood, of Anglo-Saxon political astuteness and common sense. Already, however, dissident voices had been heard—most notably, the California-born Harvard professor of philosophy Josiah Royce, writing in the mid-1880s—but the Centennial largely ignored any dissenting interpretations. Since that time, both California and the historiography of California have changed dramatically. A state of nearly ten million in 1949 has more than tripled its population. A state dominated by Anglo-Americans has become an epicenter of multi-ethnicities and multiculturalism. A profession, history, dominated by middle-aged white men has become as diverse as the state itself. Topics that were once ignored—the decimation of the Native American population by the Forty Niners, the destruction of the environment through hydraulic mining, the xenophobic violence in the mines, the role of women, sexuality (including homosexuality), the Gold Rush in terms of race, class, religion, and gender—are now front and center in the minds of a younger generation of historians.

Riches for All constitutes a convincing anthology of this new sensibility. In his learned Introduction, Owens outlines how a more complete understanding of the Gold Rush struggled to be born across the decades. The essays manage at once to keep the Gold Rush in mind as a comprehensive event while attacking it from various angles, like miners hoping to intercept a vein of gold in the Mother Lode. Owens himself underscores the importance of Mormons to California in this period, a topic that has long needed amplification. Malcolm Rohrbough envisions the Gold Rush as international event, a topic also addressed by Jeremy Mouat in his essay on the other gold rushes in the Asia Pacific Basin. Brian Roberts sees it as the first major case study in Anglo-Hispanic relations. Albert Hurtado deals with the horrible decimation

of Native Americans (the term genocide can fairly be used) from a consideration of both personal misbehavior and failed public policy. The impact of the Gold Rush on Mexicans, Chinese, and African Americans is set forth by Michael Gonzalez, Sylvia Sun Minnick, and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore in a way that is fair-minded and non-polemical. The late Martin Ridge weighed in with one of the best brief essays yet to be written on the whole question of violence in the mines. Elizabeth Jameson and Susan Johnson assert the centrality, not the marginality, of women in Gold Rush California, despite their lack of numbers. Clark Spence follows in the footsteps of Charles Shinn and Rodman Paul in providing new interpretations for the role of technology in the gold fields; and Charlene Porsild, in her essay on the Klondike, shows how the California Gold Rush created a social genre that could be exported. In his third elegant essay, Owens returns to show how the Gold Rush—as fact and fairy tale, as myth and archeology—represents a recoverable past that is still shaping Sacramento, mother city of the Mother Lode, and its hinterlands.

No mere catalog of these essays, however, can suggest their richness and nuance. Whatever else the Sesquicentennial did or did not accomplish, the interpretations put forth some 150 years after James Marshall's discovery now anchor California's sense of itself in tragedy and loss as well as accomplishment, proper behavior and misbehavior, the good, the bad, the ugly.

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Borderman: Memoirs of Federico José María Ronstadt. By Edward F. Ronstadt. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003. Pp. xxxi, 154. Illustrations. Map. Notes. Bibliography. Index. $16.95 Paper.

In one of two Forwards to Federico Ronstadt's edited memoir, Ernesto Portillo explains, "The Arizona-Sonora border region has long been a contiguous slice of the Americas. . . . Long before [NAFTA] opened the border region for easier trade of goods, Sonora and Southern Arizona were exchanging people and products across the artificially drawn line in the desert" (p. xiv). Ronstadt's memoirs, edited by his son, Edward, provide a fascinating first-hand account of such exchanges, revealing how one family adapted to rapidly evolving conditions through cultural, financial, and kinship ties that transcended the U.S.-Mexican border.

Ronstadt was born in 1868 to a German immigrant father and a Mexican mother from a well-established, landholding Sonoran family. As a child, Federico traveled with his mother, his siblings, and his father—a mining engineer and occasional government official—throughout Sonora and Baja California. Due to his parents' high social status, he became acquainted with some of Sonora's most important political and economic elites and received a formal education in mostly private schools. He learned to speak English and read music, while informally he learned skills in mining and agriculture. In 1882, Ronstadt's parents sent him across the border to