



NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS OF EARLY CALIFORNIA

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Since at least the time when Eric the Red visited a largely ice-covered land mass and misleadingly named it Greenland, it has been commonplace to describe areas of potential colonial settlement in roseate terms to encourage migration. California has shared abundantly in this tradition; no other area has received such a favorable press. Even from the beginning of outside contact, California was described in the most glowing terms as a land uniquely blessed in resources, climate, and beauty. There were, however, some dissenters who cautioned or discouraged intending settlers or otherwise expressed reservations about the region. This paper examines some of the early negative perceptions of California as related to geographical conditions and the bases on which they were made.

One of the major concerns of early visitors to California was the important matter of agricultural promise. In an age when most people were either involved in farming or only slightly removed from this occupation, early visitors generally showed both interest and expertise in the subject.¹ Although struck with the agriculturally undeveloped state of early California, most observers reported favorably on its prospects. Reservations were common, however, especially in

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regard to the need for irrigation. Some were less sanguine about the region's farming future and predicted that the California environment posed more or less insuperable problems of agricultural development.

Foremost among the problems was California's unique climate. Nowadays, the California climate is universally recognized as a major agricultural resource, providing a long growing season and permitting the production of a wide range of temperate and sub-tropical crops. But early American and northern European visitors were mostly unfamiliar with the regime of hot, dry summers and mild, rainy winters--conditions then often termed Italian. Early arrivals in California were generally habituated to constantly humid conditions, marked by more or less severe winters and relatively short growing seasons. Agricultural systems adapted to such Eastern or north European environments had only limited applicability to California. Furthermore, the aboriginal population practiced little agriculture and thus provided few examples to follow or store of knowledge to appropriate.

The development of agriculture in California was a matter of adjustment and investment. Crop selection and planting had to be fitted to the biannual cycle of drought and rains. Irrigation facilities had to be constructed, and in many areas wetland reclamation was a necessary precursor to irrigation development. Accordingly, to those lacking the foresight to anticipate the necessary steps, California looked unpromising.² William Kelly, who arrived in California in 1849, was typical of newcomers with his remark that "there are only three months to plough and harrow, sow and reap--a period infinitely too circumscribed for maturing any grain and most vegetables." Kelly excepted a few "highly-favoured localities" in various parts of the state from his stricture, but went on to assert that "California must ever be mainly dependent on the States Oregon, Chile, Australia,

and the Sandwich Islands, for its supply of breadstuffs, and the other great vegetable staples of existence."³

As might be expected, the distinctive California climate drew comments from the beginning and invited comparisons with homeland conditions. Many of the comments and comparisons were highly favorable, but the extended summer period of rainlessness was seen as posing problems. George Vancouver, the English navigator and explorer who visited the California coast in 1729-93, concluded that the land between latitudes 30° and 38°N was "subject to much drought."⁴ Another early Anglo visitor was John Work, who visited the interior of California in 1832. Work was also impressed by the intensity of the summer drought and the paucity of feed for horses in the Central Valley, and by the wetness and flooding of the Valley in winter. He complained of his horses bogging in the same ground that had failed to provide feed the previous summer.⁵

Newcomers to California, especially those accustomed to more equably humid climates, were apt to be profoundly impressed with the seasonal contrasts in the landscape's aspects. The extreme dessication and brownness of the summer landscape formed a striking contrast with the verdure following the winter rains. Accordingly, time of arrival in California was of prime importance in determining first impressions of the area's agricultural promise. A Forty-Niner named Enos Christman took note of these different reactions in an entry made in his journal in 1851:⁶

The agricultural resources of California have been rated too high by some and too low by others. One who has seen it in springtime only, represents the whole country as a luxuriant garden; another who has seen it only in the summer or just before the rain set in, represents it as a barren, desolate waste.

Most early overland visitors and migrants reached California in late summer when the area presented its most

parched and uninviting appearance, which accounted for a good deal of the negativism in the early literature. The first United States government exploring party to report to California, under the leadership of Lieutenant Charles Wilkes, investigated the Sacramento Valley in October 1841, at the end of the dry season. Like many of the migrants who came later, the Wilkes party reacted adversely to the late-summer dessication of the area and produced the pessimistic evaluation, "A large part of this is undoubtedly barren and unproductive, and must for ever remain so."⁷

Wilkes' negativism was echoed by another important early publicist of California, John C. Frémont. Frémont entered the Central Valley in spring (March 1846), when the area is at its greenest and most alluring. Although favorably impressed, and moved to comment on the abundance of wild flowers and animal life, even the optimistic Frémont had misgivings about the area's agricultural potential despite spring conditions because:⁸

The weather, which here, at this season, can easily be changed from the summer heat of the valley to the frosty mornings and bright days nearer the mountains, continued delightful for travellers, but unfavorable to the agriculturalists, whose crops of wheat began to bear a yellow tinge from want of rain.

Another United States government explorer of California was Lieutenant George H. Derby, who led two expeditions to the state. On his first visit, in 1849, Derby entered the Sacramento Valley at the end of the summer drought but, unlike his predecessor Lieutenant Wilkes, Derby reported favorably on the agricultural promise of the eastern side of the Valley. Derby dismissed the west side of the Sacramento Valley as "for the most part barren plain with little vegetation or water."⁹ On his second California trip, in the spring of 1850, Derby investigated the San Joaquin Valley. Despite springtime conditions he was unimpressed

with the area south of the Mariposa River, which was described as:

With the exception of a strip of fertile land upon the rivers emptying into the lakes from the east, it is little better than a desert. The soil is generally dry, decomposed and incapable of cultivation, and the vegetation consisting of artemisias and wild sage, is extremely sparse.

Derby was moved to derision in describing the area west of Tulare Lake, calling it a "miserable, barren sandy desert with no vegetation but a few straggling artemisias, and no inhabitants but attenuated rabbits and gophers."¹⁰

California appeared to be a garden in spring or a wasteland in summer, but the great Central Valley struck many early visitors as a dangerous morass in winter. In their pristine condition, because of their low gradients and occasional high volumes of runoff, both the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers were prone to almost annual overflowing of their banks. Since the floodplains of both rivers also had extremely low gradients, the overflow of the rivers caused extensive, if shallow, inundation of bottom lands. Patches of water would often linger through the summer, and vast tracts of aquatic vegetation grew on the Valley floor.¹¹

The British seaman, Captain Sir Edward Belcher, one of the first non-Spanish foreigners to journey up the Sacramento River (in 1837), was much impressed with the evidence of flooding in the region and noted that:¹²

During the rainy season ... the [Sacramento] river is said to overflow its banks, when its impetuosity is such that navigation (for the craft of this country I suppose) is then impossible. The annual rains do not, however, of necessity, inundate these low lands, but in severe seasons, after heavy falls of snow, they produce one immense sea, leaving only the few scattered eminences of which art or nature have produced, as so many islets or spots of refuge.

The winter flooding of the Central Valley and its conversion into a huge "inland sea," as it was often described, impressed early visitors and was the subject of frequent comment. Thus when Lieutenant Wilkes inspected the pristine Sacramento Valley, he examined the evidence of flooding and concluded that the "whole country was annually inundated." Particularly discouraging to would-be farmers was Wilkes' observation that the "part [of the Sacramento Valley] that is deemed good soil, is inundated annually, not for any great length of time, yet sufficiently long to make it unfit for advantageous settlement."¹³

Besides precluding agriculture, the seasonal flooding of the Central Valley greatly impeded travel and communications. Of course, only boats were usable in the flooded area, but wheeled vehicles and even horses could not pass through the heavy and tenacious clays of the Valley floor for long periods of winter and early spring. Riley Root, who came west in 1848, commented on the matter:¹⁴

The low country of the great valley of the St. Waukeen and Sacramento, is not infrequently inundated a month or two, during the latter part of the winter, which renders passages from one part of the valley to another by land, entirely impracticable....

While forming an impediment to travel (and a hiding place for that fearful predator, the now extinct California Grizzly bear), the swamplands of the Central Valley were nevertheless perceived by many as holding great agricultural potential which could be realized only after systems of drainage were instituted. Not all early observers were prescient in this matter. Kelly dismissed the San Joaquin Valley as "largely composed of *tule* marshes and low sedgy swamps, so subject to overflowing and lodgement that they cannot well be turned to profitable account."¹⁵ J. L. Tyson, writing at the same period, included the Sacramento Valley with that of the San Joaquin as a region with no agricultural

prospects. According to Tyson the "marshy districts of the valleys of the Sacramento and San Joaquin are valueless for agricultural purposes...."¹⁶

Early observers of California had little on which to base estimates of the agricultural promise. The soil quality was believed to be easier to assess than the unfamiliar and puzzling climate. However, the assessments were uneven and often highly negative. The extensive desert areas of the interior were scorned for their sandy wastes and saline tracts; indeed, much of California was seen as having sterile soils. A French visitor in 1849, Etienne Derbec, after exempting the "plain of Tulare" from his strictures, excoriated "the rest, which covers an immense area, is only a desert of sand and salt, without roads, without water, without plants, and which one dares not cross."¹⁷

Even the obviously more promising Central Valley was also scoffed at because of the apparent deficiencies of the soils. Most often criticized was the heaviness of the Valley soils which caused them to bake and crack in summer and become quagmires in winter. William Kelly, who had toured California in the late 1840's, granted that the Valley soils were inherently fertile but maintained that the climate and flooding regime rendered the area useless for crop raising:¹⁸

The soil, I admit, is of unsurpassed quality, made up of constituent qualities and ingredients capable of producing any crop were it not for the adverse operation of the seasons, which keeps it saturated, and in most places submerged in water, from November until April, rendering it physically impossible to prepare the land, much less to sow the seed, during that period. Then before July it is so baked and cracked under a hot and cloudless sun, that not only is all further vegetation arrested, but everything above ground is parched, and ready to fall into powder at the touch....

However, not all early observers of California saw the repeated cycle of flooding in the Central Valley as bad from an agricultural point of view. Dr. J. Praslow, a German

physician who visited California before the Gold Rush, not only gave generally favorable reports of California soils but singled out the Central Valley for especial praise because he believed that annual flooding maintained the fertility of the soil.¹⁹ Another Gold Rush period commentator on California, the Reverend Walter Colton, described the state as having many localities of great fertility, but:²⁰

... take California as a whole, she is not the country which agriculturalists would select. Her whole mining region is barren; nature rested there with what she put *beneath* the soil.... The productive forces of such a state as New York, Ohio, or Pennsylvania, sweep immeasurably beyond the utmost capabilities of California.

Soil fertility on the pioneer fringe of nineteenth century America was often appraised on the basis of natural vegetation. A prevalent view among farmers was that trees, especially deciduous trees, were indicators of the agricultural promise of soils. Thus, Franklin Tuthill could write of the state in 1866 that:²¹

When explorers come upon a new land, if they find it heavily timbered, or the intervals rank with wild grass, they know that cultivation will make it yield richly of grains and fruit; but if it bear not trees ... they condemn it as unfit for all farming purposes.

Accordingly, many early observers of California took the paucity of trees on most of lowland California as a poor augury for agriculture. John Bidwell, leader of the first overland immigration party to California in 1841, at first wrote off the treeless open sections of the Sacramento Valley as "prairie country" unsuited to cultivation.²² The prevalence of such views was later attested to by Charles Nordhoff in an 1873 book on the resources of California, where he noted that the almost treeless Central Valley was originally held to be a region of small agricultural promise because

"if not a tree will grow, of course, the soil must be barren."²³

Even more paradoxical, for a region so prone to drought, was the fact that even the especially arid sections beyond the Central Valley were also subject to a significant flood hazard. Some of this hazard has been eliminated as a result of modern flood control measures, but in earlier times flooding was a topic of frequent remark by visitors to California. Even the most arid regions, in the south and southeast, were subject to flash floods. These minor inundations often swept through the low country sought out by travelers and took a toll of the unwary, sweeping away livestock, possessions, and even the travelers themselves in what appeared to be an unlikely fate for an area so evidently deficient in water.

Some of the harshest criticisms of the pristine California environment concerned health conditions. This may be surprising to those who associate California with the projection of an image of extreme healthfulness, especially in the nineteenth century when numerous health migrants were drawn to the state. However, despite the impressive reputation for healthfulness that California developed, many early reports of the area were concerned with the perception of health problems.²⁴

First intimations that all California was not a pathogenic vacuum came from early and scanty reports that the Indian population of the Central Valley had been decimated by an epidemic (almost certainly malaria) in the period 1830-33. John Work, a fur trapper who passed through the Sacramento Valley in 1832, was one of several observers who were struck by the evidence of high rates of sickness and mortality. He noted that "there appear to be some sickness resembling an ague prevailing" among the Indians.²⁵

Most of the early negative comments on California health conditions referred to the Central Valley where the problem was malaria (and the diseases diagnostically confused with it). The problem was a real one. The then-marshy lowlands of the Central Valley were rightly seen as hotbeds of malaria. Even those given to boosting California often felt constrained to issue *caveats* regarding the unhealthfulness of the Central Valley and other lowland areas. For instance, Dr. Praslow, the German physician who visited California in the 1840's, cautioned that the Central Valley flooding produced "stagnant waters ... responsible for many miasmatic illnesses, and intermittent fevers, particularly malignant dysenteries, diarrheas, etc. endemic here."²⁶ Even Lansford Hastings, one of the earliest California boosters, felt obliged to caution that "bilious intermittent fevers, prevail to a very small extent, in some portions of the interior."²⁷ Many argued, however, that far from being minor, the intermittent fevers (malaria) of the California interior were virulent and widespread. A group of Oregonians, referring to the Sacramento Valley in 1846, announced that "The fever and ague is very prevalent during the summer and fall, scarcely any foreigner escaping, and the symptoms are usually severe."²⁸

Identification of a health hazard in the lowland sections of California evoked differing reactions. Tyson, a medical doctor, advised potential settlers in 1850 to "Above all, avoid the low, marshy, febrile districts on the shores of the Sacramento and the San Joaquin rivers."²⁹ Others were less categorical. Lieutenant Derby, noting both the lowlands agricultural promise and its unhealthy character, speculated that emigrants would be attracted by the fertile soil and "will brave its sickly climate."³⁰

Many did brave the "sickly climate." Leonard Kip, writing in the same year that Dr. Tyson inveighed against settlement in the Central Valley, noted that:³¹

In the lower country, also, troubles began to thicken. The Sacramento and San Joachin had risen many feet, until their banks would ultimately be submerged. Sickness and disease began to exhale from the wet soil, and, in California, sickness is to be dreaded beyond wild beasts or Indians.

While marshlands were supposedly the prime source of the "miasmata" that caused malaria, this same imaginary disease agent was believed to be released into the air when previously undisturbed soils were turned over. Accordingly, the extensive gold mining operations of California were seen as contributing to the malaria problem. Tuthill, in his pioneer history of California, wrote in 1866 that "in the parts where the miners constantly turn over new soil to the sun, miasmatic diseases prevail."³²

While California was correctly believed to present some serious physiological health hazards, it was also suspected that some feature of the environment caused mental health problems. This suspicion was based on the belief that California contained a disproportionate number of mentally sick persons. The "rapid increase of insanity in our midst," wrote a physician in 1872, "makes it one of the greatest and most interesting questions with which the [medical] profession has to deal..."³³ Some statistical support for this view was provided by the rate of admissions to the state insane asylum. It was claimed that "California furnished more cases of Insanity, in proportion to the population, than does any other State, while it is also asserted that the percentage of recoveries in her asylums is far beneath those of the others."³⁴

Various elements of the physical environment were thought to contribute to the supposedly high rate of insanity. The peculiar climate of the region was especially suspect. A San Francisco medical journal reported in 1868 that "some practitioners have imagined that the climate of the Pacific Coast wears on the nervous system with special severity."³⁵

Oxygen electricity, and winds were implicated as possible factors contributing to the prevalence of insanity.³⁶

Aided by hindsight and other evidence, a modern observer of California can readily affirm that this attractive region is indeed richly endowed by nature. Many early observers correctly anticipated the promise of California and praised the area in extravagant terms. Some seem to have expressed more or less negative geographical assessments of California for no other reason than lack of vision. Such views were essentially rational, although perhaps too hasty, and were based on apparent resource deficiencies, misgivings over land utilization in an untested and unfamiliar environment, or fears concerning health conditions.

Besides negative opinions based on the physical environment, there was a plethora of anti-California sentiment based on a distaste for some of the social and economic arrangements.³⁷ Unclear land titles, economic instability, inflation, water and land monopolies, racism, crime, social unrest, the sex ratio, moral and religious standards, and even disapproval of the important gold-mining industry, reinforced or offset geographically based judgements. Some observers even seem to have qualified their opinions because their judgement was clouded by a dislike of the exotic and remote.

Despite elements of clear prejudice in negative perceptions of early California, many of the adverse geographical judgements were made in good faith and formed part of what were believed to be balanced, and essentially favorable, positions. The negative perceptions were minority reports, and were almost lost in the superfluity of favorable comment.

NOTES

¹For further discussion of this topic as related to the Sacramento Valley, California, see K. Thompson, "The Perception of the Agricultural Environment," *Agricultural History*, Vol. XLIX, No. 1 (1975), pp. 230-237.

²Even observers with claims to agricultural expertise, like Robert Semple who contributed an appendix to L. W. Hastings' book about Oregon and California, dismissed 75 percent of California as unfit for agriculture because of its barrenness and summer drought. L. W. Hastings, *A New History of Oregon and California* (Cincinnati, Ohio: G. Conclin, 1847), p. 153.

³W. Kelly, *A Stroll through the Diggings of California*, original edition published in 1851 (Oakland, California: Biobooks, 1950), pp. 10-11.

⁴G. Vancouver, *A Voyage of Discovery to the North Pacific Ocean and Round the World, in Which the Coast of North America Has Been Carefully Examined and Accurately Surveyed*, Vol. 2 (London: G. S. & J. Robinson, 1787), pp. 489-492.

⁵J. Work, *Fur Brigade to the Bonaventura, John Work's California Expedition of 1832-33 for the Hudson's Bay Company*, edited by A. B. Maloney (San Francisco: California Historical Society, 1945).

⁶E. Christman, *One Man's Gold, the Letters and Journal of a Forty-Niner*, edited by F. M. Christman (New York: Whittlesey House, 1930), p. 201.

⁷Lieutenant C. Wilkes, U.S.N., *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition During the Years 1838, 1839, 1840, 1841, 1842*, Vol. V (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1845), p. 193.

⁸J. C. Frémont, *Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842, and to Oregon and North California in the Year 1843-44* (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1845), p. 248.

⁹F. P. Farquhar, ed., "The Topographical Reports of Lieutenant G. H. Derby," *California Historical Society Quarterly*, Vol. 11 (1932), p. 118.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 262.

¹¹K. Thompson, "Historical Flooding in the Sacramento Valley," *Pacific Historical Review* (1960), pp. 349-360.

¹²Captain Sir E. Belcher, R.N., *Narrative of a Voyage Round the World, Performed in Her Majesty's Ship Sulphur, During the Years 1836-1842*, Vol. 1 (London: Henry Colburn, 1843), p. 124.

¹³Wilkes, op. cit., footnote 7, p. 193.

¹⁴R. Root, *Journal of Travels from St. Josephs to Oregon*, original edition published in 1850 (Oakland, 1955), p. 119.

¹⁵Kelly, op. cit., footnote 2, p. 165.

¹⁶J. L. Tyson, *Diary of a Physician in California*, original edition published in 1850 (Oakland: Biobooks, 1955), p. 102.

¹⁷A. P. Nasatir, ed., *A French Journalist in the California Gold Rush, The Letters of Etienne Derbec* (Georgetown, California: The Talisman Press, 1965), p. 174.

¹⁸Kelly, op. cit., footnote 2, p. 10.

¹⁹J. Praslow, *The State of California: A Medico-Geographical Account*, original edition published in German (Gottingen, 1857), translated by F. C. Cordes (San Francisco: J. J. Newbegin, 1939), pp. 14-16.

²⁰W. Colton, *The Land of Gold; or, Three Years in California* (New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1860), p. 371.

²¹F. Tuthill, *The History of California* (San Francisco: H. H. Bancroft and Company, 1866), p. 88.

²²J. Bidwell, *A Journey to California, with Observations About the Country, Climate and the Route to this Country*, edited by H. Priestly (San Francisco: J. H. Mash, 1937), p. 31.

²³C. Nordhoff, *California for Health, Pleasure and Residence* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1873), p. 119.

²⁴For further discussion of this topic see K. Thompson, "Insalubrious California: Perception and Reality," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 59 (1969), pp. 50-64.

²⁵Work, op. cit., footnote 5, p. 19.

²⁶Praslow, op. cit., footnote 19, p. 15.

²⁷Hastings, op. cit., footnote 3, p. 85.

²⁸*Oregon Spectator*, Oregon City, Oregon, June 25, 1846.

²⁹Tyson, op. cit., footnote 16, p. 4.

³⁰Derby, op. cit., footnote 9, p. 120.

³¹L. Kip, *California Sketches with Recollections of the Gold Mines*, original edition published in 1850 (Los Angeles: N. A. Kovach), p. 56.

³²Tuthill, op. cit., footnote 21, p. 628.

³³E. T. Wilkins, M.D., "Insanity in California," *Transactions of the Medical Society of the State of California, during the years 1872-1873* (1873), p. 137.

³⁴J. Murphy, "Thesis on Insanity," *The San Francisco Medical Press*, Vol. III (1862), p. 129.

³⁵H. Gibbons, M.S., "On Some of the Causes of Insanity in California," *Pacific Medical and Surgical Journal*, Vol. XI (1868), p. 97.

³⁶For further discussion of this topic see K. Thompson, "Early California and the Causes of Insanity," *Southern California Quarterly*, Vol. LVIII (1976), pp. 45-62.

³⁷For an example of this genre of comment, see H. R. Helper, *The Land of Gold, Reality Versus Fiction* (Baltimore: H. Taylor, 1855), p. 71.

