



LITERARY LANDSCAPES OF HISPANIC CALIFORNIA

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Teaching the history or historical geography of California is a task beset with the problem of what material to present and emphasize. All too often, classroom attention is focused upon the spectacular phenomena of the Gold Rush and subsequent events, tending to ignore the eighty years of hispanic occupancy prior to 1849. The hispanic people, however, had an impact on the California landscape and their presence, when the Americans arrived, contributed to the uniqueness of the California frontier. What seems to be lacking, however, in our awareness of the past is that hispanic people did alter the landscape and because their imprint was not totally obliterated by the twin impacts of Americanization and the Gold Rush, an understanding of the hispanic culture will put into perspective some of the patterns which persisted after 1849.

Many of the landscape patterns created under Spanish and Mexican rule remain and can be recognized today in boundary lines, street patterns, architectural styles, city locations, and by the various

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relict buildings preserved by historical societies.¹ Even more evident, however, is the intangible heritage: place names, food habits, and especially the fiesta days and mission plays held by many communities. Unfortunately, these things present only a partial and often distorted view of hispanic culture in California.

A common method in acquiring knowledge of a culture and its impact upon a landscape is through documentary evidence. Some data are available for hispanic California but are too difficult to obtain or are too technical for classroom use. In lieu of documentary evidence, literature may be used not only to fill in gaps in certain areas, but to add another dimension to knowledge, one not covered by statistical data. Lines and numbers on a map, graph, or table. and mathematical models can impart a great deal of information about a place and its people but can not fully describe or impart its character and personality, particularly when used in classroom situation. The culture of a people is reflected by the character or personality of a place, making it unique in both time and space. This personality, this added dimension of a place can be acquired through literary images.

A travel narrative can impart more than just a description of a scene or landscape. The way in which a setting is portrayed, the words used, and its position within the context of the story all contribute to the feeling of place, giving us an awareness of what early California was really like. In this manner we begin to know and understand other cultures - including the hispanics who settled California before the Gold Rush. In an effort to show that

literary images can convey a certain type of information and be useful as a teaching aid, this paper presents literary passages which provide an additional dimension to hispanic California. These books represent a sample of the literature that can be used to depict early California landscapes. They were all written by foreigners and published before 1849.

"A beautiful valley,"² "a romantic spot,"³ "so fine a country, abounding in all that is essential to man"⁴ - phrases such as these refer not to one select area, but are frequently used to describe places encountered throughout the length and breadth of settled California. It seems that the writers could not include enough praise for the physical landscape and through their enthusiasm have left to us a detailed picture of the early California pastoral. Zenas Leonard, for example, a trapper encamped on a beautiful hill in the 1830's, wrote of "a handsome river gliding smoothly along immediately in front, [with] an extensive oat plain stretching out as far as the eye will reach. The banks of [the] river are most delightfully shaded with timber, principally oak and elm."⁵ Alfred Robinson visited Rancho Santa Anita which he thought was⁶

one of the fairy spots to be met with so often in California. On the declivity of a hill is erected a molino, or grist mill, surrounded with fruit trees and flowers. A beautiful lake lies calm and unruffled in front, and all around fresh streams are gushing from the earth, and scattering their waters in every direction. It would be a magnificent spot for a summer retreat....

The coast from San Francisco to Santa Cruz was described by the Frenchman, Duhaut-Cilly as⁷

very high in the interior, and everywhere covered with forests of fir trees; it then grows lower by a gentle slope toward the shore; but before reaching it, it rises again to form a long ride of hills, whence it descends finally to the sea, now bathing the foot of vertical rocky cliffs, now gliding in sheets of foam over sandy or pebbly beaches. Beautiful verdure clothed the plains and the hills.

More essential than beauty in the physical landscape, however, was a fertile soil and favorable climate necessary for agricultural production. The literature indicates that here too, California was not lacking. For example, the grass on the hills of California was "of a finer and better quality" than that of the midwest prairies.⁸ Oats and barley grew "spontaneously,"⁹ wild grapes grew in "great abundance,"¹⁰ and everywhere there was "remarkably fine pasturage."¹¹ Duhaut-Cilly also observed that in the mission gardens at Santa Barbara¹²

the paths...were shaded by fine olive trees, and...at the same time [grew] the fruits of temperate climates and of the torrid zone. Banana trees spread their broad leaves between apple and pear trees; and with the ruby of the cherries were mingled the golden apples of the orange trees.

An "abundance of fruits and vegetables"¹³ was surely the bounty of a fertile soil, aided by a beneficial climate. Shaler remarked in 1808 that¹⁴

the climate of California is generally dry and temperate and remarkably healthy; [that although] on the western coast the sky is generally obscured by fogs and haze...on the opposite side it is constantly clear; not a cloud is to be seen, night or day.

A gloriously beautiful landscape, a warm climate, and rich soil indicated the variety and magnitude of California's potential. That this potential was not being realized caused most visitors to be critical of the hispanic way of life and of their utilization of the environment. For

example, the homes and military establishments, which were among the first impressions of early visitors, were frequently derided for their dirt floors, humble style, and badly burnt adobe bricks.¹⁵ Frederick Beechey regarded them as "little better than a heap of rubbish."¹⁶ Farnham described the walls of the San Francisco fort as¹⁷

broken down...by the gentle pattering of the rains; the ruins covered with bones; not the bones of fearless men, who have fallen in...the face of a conquering foe; but the bones of beeves that have been gnawed by the garrison during years of valorous eating.

Land use was criticized to an even greater extent. The economy of hispanic California was oriented towards grazing - with enormous herds of half-wild cattle roaming at will over ranchos of thousands of acres in size. There was little cultivation outside of the missions; and the small gardens which did exist produced only for home consumption and as criticized by Camille de Roquefeuil in 1818 were often "badly enclosed and badly tended."¹⁸ The emptiness of the landscape is repeatedly emphasized: travelers tell of long journeys between settlements and of the lonely hills barren of any habitations. But it is in the words left unwritten that the reader gains even more information. Where are the waving fields of grain? The furrows turned by a plow? The straight and sturdy rows of orchard trees? All are conspicuously absent in the descriptions outside of the missions.

The literature tells us also about the people who inhabited this lonely land. They were recognized for their hospitality; Hastings, although usually an unreliable source, summarizes this quality of the hispanic people:¹⁹

all classes...are unusually kind and hospitable to foreigners, as far as it relates to their reception and treatment as guests. Whatever attention and kindness you may receive at their hands, while guests, and however long you may remain with them, they will receive no compensation, but to your proposition to remunerate them, they invariably reply, "God will pay."

The ladies were frequently praised; Robinson speaks of their "bright eyes, fine teeth, fair proportions,...beautiful complexions,...chastity, industrious habits, and correct deportment" which attracted many of the visitors.²⁰ The mission fathers received both praise and criticism, but it was the hispanic men who came under most frequent censure.

According to many authors, the men were not only indolent, but addicted to many vices such as gambling, "horse racing, card playing, and even stealing."²¹ Leonard concluded that "vice of every description [seemed] to be openly countenanced in some parts of the settlements."²² Thus, despite beautiful ladies and custom of generous hospitality, the consensus regarding the characteristics of the hispanic population was primarily quite negative.

It was, perhaps, the indolence of the Californios did "not work perhaps on an average one month in the year...the rest of the time is spend riding about."²³ Nor "will [he] do anything which he cannot do on horseback."²⁴ In spite of the derogatory opinions, some positive characteristics of the Californios were recognized. The men were described by Farnham as "excellent horsemen: the very best in North America; and...the best on the continent."²⁵ Robinson told of²⁶

children of not more than three or four years of age, two or three together on one horse, [who]...appeared as secure in their seats as the old men who had lived all their lives in the saddle [and]... when despatched by their parents on some errand, the two more expert riders seat the youngest between them, and go tearing across the

country without the least apprehension.

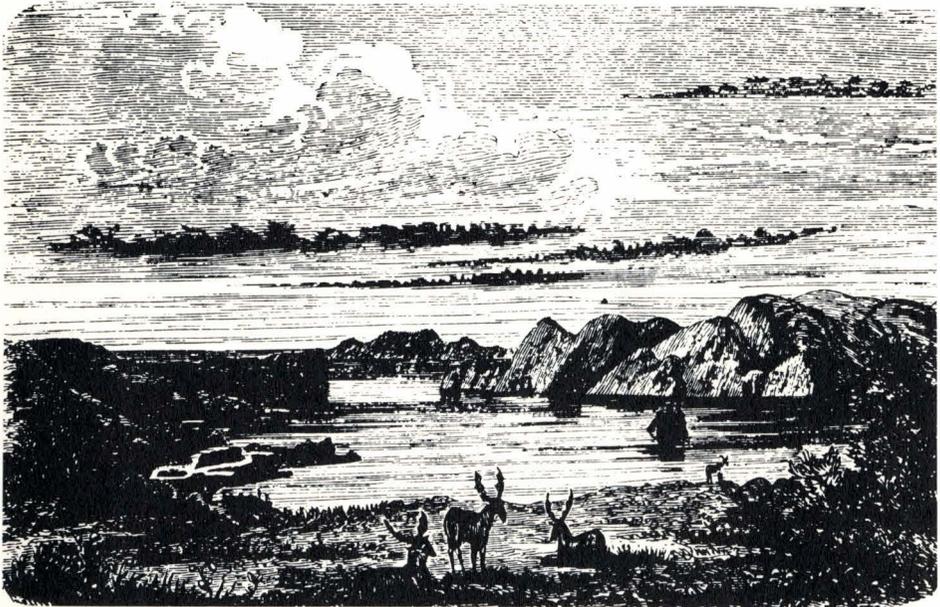
Life seems to have been quite carefree: a constant stream of guests, picnics, and week-long fandangos are mentioned by the early visitors. The perception of this casual social environment was entirely negative, for visitors felt that with their easy, work-free life, the Californios did not fully utilize the resources of the land. The cultural landscape reflected an extensive land use: on huge ranchos thousands of cattle grazed, homes were of simple adobe and scattered widely, the few small towns were far apart linked by primitive roads. There was some cultivation, but not as much as the foreigners were accustomed to. In effect, they felt that the hispanic people were wasting a beautiful, rich country and all that was needed for California to "rise rapidly to wealth and importance"²⁷ was an enterprising, hard-working population.²⁸

The passages presented here suggest that literary images convey a feeling for the people and places of hispanic California, and, more importantly, that they demonstrate the existence of a viable hispanic cultural landscape prior to anglo settlement. A continued lack of awareness of understanding, even to this day, of this important period of California's cultural growth might well stem from the negative perceptions and attitudes held and recorded by the foreigners who arrived in California in the early nineteenth century. Confronted with a dry, exotic climate, a unique social frontier, and a landscape already transformed by hispanic settlement, the visitors tended to scorn the unfamiliar.

The nature of these images reflects the negative bias of the authors in that they were unable to understand and appreciate the essence of

hispanic culture because it was quite dissimilar from their own. Thus, when we read and interpret, we must recognize the prejudice inherent in this literature. This should also be taken into consideration when choosing books or passages for classroom use. However, recognition of the cultural differences and biases inherent in opinions can in itself be a learning process in critical reading.

Knowledge of cultures which occupied our land in the past can increase our awareness of present patterns and characteristics and how they evolved. Literature is a medium through which we can acquire a feeling for people and places of the past and the changes wrought by an ever expanding society.



NOTES

¹A more detailed discussion is found in David Hornbeck, "California's Landscape Heritage," *Places*, Vol. 3 (1976), 26-29.

²William Shaler, *Journal of a Voyage Between China and the Northwest Coast of America, Made in 1804* (Philadelphia: C. & A. Conrad & Co., 1808). 63.

³Alfred Robinson, *Life in California* (1846; Reprint edition, Santa Barbara: Peregrine Smith, 1970), 132.

⁴Frederick W. Beechey, *Narrative of a Voyage to the Pacific and Beering's Strait*, 2 Vols. (London: Henry Coburn and Richard Bentley, 1831), 4.

⁵Zenas Leonard, *Leonard's Narrative: Adventures of Zenas Leonard, Fur Trader and Trapper, 1831-1836*, Edited by W. F. Wagner (Clearfield, PA.: D. W. Moore, 1939), 186.

⁶Robinson, *op. cit.*, 23.

⁷Edmund Le Netrel, *Voyage of the Heros Around the World with Duhaut-Cilly in the Years 1826, 1827, 1828 and 1829*, Translated by Blanche C. Wagner (Los Angeles: Glen Dawson, 1951), 149.

⁸John Bidwell, *A Journey to California* (1842; Reprint edition, Berkeley: Friends of the Bancroft Library, 1964), 41.

⁹Robinson, *op. cit.*, 153.

¹⁰Edward Belcher, *Narrative of a Voyage Round the World Performed in Her Majesty's Ship Sulphur, During the Years 1836-1842*, 2 Vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1843) 120.

¹¹Eugene Duflot de Mofras, *Travels on the Pacific Coast* Translated by Margurite E. Wilbur (1844; Reprint edition, Santa Ana, CA.: Fine Arts Press, 1937), 236.

¹²Le Netrel, *op. cit.*, 159.

¹³Robinson, *op. cit.*, 34.

¹⁴Shaler, *op. cit.*, 52.

¹⁵Beechey, *op. cit.*, 9.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷Thomas J. Farnham, *Travels in the Californias and Scenes in the Pacific Oceans* (New York: Saxon and Miles, 1844), 137.

¹⁸Camille de Roquefeuil, *Camille de Roquefeuil in San Francisco, 1817-1818*, (Los Angeles: Glen Dawson, 1954), 8.

¹⁹Lansford W. Hastings, *The Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California* (Cincinnati: G. Conclin, 1845), 45.

²⁰Robinson, *op. cit.*, 50-51.

²¹Leonard, *op. cit.*, 184.

²²*Ibid.*

²³Bidwell, *op. cit.*, 46.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵Farnham, *op. cit.*, 143.

²⁶Robinson, *op. cit.*, 66.

²⁷Shaler, *op. cit.*, 76.

²⁸Beechey, *op. cit.*, 66.

Illustration source: F. Soule, J. H. Gihon, and J. Nisbet, *The Annals of San Francisco* (New York: Appleton, 1854). "The Golden Gate" (at end of article) is from page 154.