

II. FROM FOLLOWING IN PADRES' FOOTSTEPS TO CONFRONTING SUGAR CUBES:

Alta California Missions through
100 Volumes of the *Southern
California Quarterly*

By Mary Casey

ABSTRACT: Mary Casey's essay on mission history traces the tendency of early SCQ articles, in parallel with contemporaneous educational standards and cultural productions, to idealize the padres' work and romanticize the mission era, a trend that persisted into the late 1960s. It was only at that point that a more critical appraisal emerged. Critical analysis and new methodologies revealed the padres' ill treatment of Indigenous peoples, the mission system's role in imperial conquest, and the mission plants as instruments of control. The multiple perspectives and interactions of multiple groups of historical actors placed in the context of a wider borderlands in the recent articles in the *Southern California Quarterly* extend California history from a California-exceptionist mold into a richer understanding of continental history.

Keywords: Spanish fantasy; Borderlands history; Mission Play; critical mission history

In his inaugural address of 1884, the President of the Historical Society of Southern California, Col. J. J. Warner, exhorted Society members to undertake, among other endeavors, “a carefully prepared historic paper upon the rise and fall of the Catholic Missions in Alta California.”¹ Such a task was foundational to the newly-formed organization’s ambitious plans. Throughout the hundred volumes—and counting—of the journal we know as the *Southern California Quarterly*, historians have continued to find special significance in the establishment and operation of the mission system in Alta California—although the perception and meaning of the missions has changed quite a bit over the last 134 years.

To a writer in 1901, the missions meant that “the history of white men in California began” with “the last ripple of the wave of Spanish conquest.”² The mission buildings were “a mode of expression” (1907);³ equated with the state itself, they were, “above all Californian” (1914),⁴ and “the foundations of our own State history” (1924).⁵ In 1959, the missions still represented “the beauty and serenity of California’s past.”⁶ But by the late 1960s, histories of the missions became increasingly critical: the missionaries’ treatment of native people was perceived as “one of the blackest pages in California history;”⁷ the mission system had become “a political instrument of territorial conquest,”⁸ the mission buildings themselves reflections of control and imposed order. Padres aided and abetted the furtherance of empire; native people exercised agency, not victimhood. Even

-
1. J. J. Warner, “Inaugural Address of the President, Vol 1.1 Warner, delivered before the Society, Jan. 7, 1884,” *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California*, Los Angeles 1, No 1 (1884): 12–13.
 2. Walter R. Bacon “The Dilatory Settlement of California,” *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California and Pioneer Register*, Los Angeles 5, no. 2 (1901): 154.
 3. William L. Judson, “The Architecture of the Missions,” *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California* 7, no. 2–3 (1907–1908): 115.
 4. Rexford Newcomb, “Architecture of the California Missions,” *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California* 9, no. 3 (1914): 230.
 5. A. Harvey Collins, “California’s Yesterdays along El Camino Real,” *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California* 13, no. 1 (1924): 131.
 6. Frank A. Schilling and Gustav O. Arlt, “Mission Sketchbook,” *Historical Society of California Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (March 1959): 63.
 7. Ferdinand F. Fernandez, “Except a California Indian: A Study in Legal Discrimination,” *Southern California Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (June 1968): 161.
 8. Daniel Garr, “Planning, Politics and Plunder: The Missions and Indian Pueblos of Hispanic California,” *Southern California Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (Winter 1972): 292.

mission dioramas—the sacred cow of fourth-grade education in California—came under attack.

The 134 volumes of the SCQ provide a unique and important lens through which to view these changing perceptions of the California mission system. Clearly, that view is far from monolithic. By exploring three different approaches contributors have taken—following in the footsteps of the padres, celebrating the Spanish fantasy past, and utilizing evolving methodologies—we further our understanding not only of California’s past but, just as important, how that past has been perceived and constructed. Moreover, we come to understand how the history of California, long viewed as an exception to the origin story of the United States, may better be understood as an integral part of a national narrative that embraces a diversity of origins.

* * *

Over the years, a striking number of articles in the *Southern California Quarterly* have been written by scholars who were also Catholic priests. This should not come as a surprise. Their profession provided access to rich archival resources at Catholic institutions—resources not always available to the public—and, in addition to faith, they possessed the erudition and linguistic skills to translate and interpret what they found. Like Father Zephryn Engelhardt (1851–1934), a German-born Franciscan known for many decades as “The Dean of California Mission Historians,”⁹ many priest contributors to the *Southern California Quarterly* foregrounded the experience and outlook of mission padres. “Let us follow Father Palou step by step,” invited author J. Adam in an 1886 article, “and he will give us a fair idea of California a little more than a century ago.”¹⁰ As revealed in a later byline, “J. Adam” was better known as the “Very Reverend J. Adam, V.G.” And it’s no secret why a Spanish priest’s footsteps would feel so comfortable to the Vicar General: the “J” stood for José, and the Vicar General was a native of Barcelona.

Priest scholars continued to write the history of the missions throughout the twentieth century. Some of their richest contributions to the *Southern California Quarterly* focused on meticulous

9. Francis J. Weber, “Zephryn Engelhardt, O.F.M., Dean of California Mission Historians,” *Southern California Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (September 1965): 235–44.

10. J. Adam, “California in the Eighteenth Century,” *Historical Society of Southern California, Los Angeles* 1, no. 2 (January 1886): 14.

descriptions of mission architecture and the material culture inside, including “the rare old books in the bishop’s library.”¹¹ Spanish-speaking priests provided a significant amount of translations of original mission documents as well as of information from Spanish archives. Unlike many Protestants, they understood the Church. In his 1913 address, Rockwell D. Hunt encouraged their presence in the Historical Society of Southern California: “Special welcome should be extended to Catholic scholars, since the Catholic Church played so large a part in the early history of our commonwealth.”¹²

In the mid-1900s, with the publication of books by Sherburne F. Cook and Carey McWilliams, the pages of the *Southern California Quarterly* came to reflect both critique and defense of the mission system.¹³ In a 1965 reflection on the legacy of Father Engelhardt, Father Francis Weber admitted that Engelhardt “tended to spread his own religious ardor over the pages of his works.”¹⁴ Still, Weber believed, his facts were indisputable. Some Catholic scholars sought to lay the blame for mission excesses on lay officials. Regarding the 1824 Chumash revolt at the Santa Barbara mission, Father Maynard Geiger averred the revolt was not because of the mission system or missionaries; rather, the causes were to be found in the “military aspects of the mission system as well as economic factors related to the military.”¹⁵

By the end of the century, the presence of scholar-priests had diminished in the *Southern California Quarterly*. Most church archives had been opened to the public, allowing secular as well as religious scholars to peruse the vast documentary wealth that lay inside. Exciting developments in historical methodology and the demographics of the academy brought new scholars, new voices, and new perspectives into the field, and into the *Southern California Quarterly*. Yet, still, Father Palou’s footsteps lingered.

* * *

-
11. The Rev. J. Adam, V.G., “Rare Old Books in the Bishop’s Library,” *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California and Pioneer Register*, Los Angeles 4, no. 2 (1898): 154–56.
 12. Rockwell D. Hunt, “Historical Society’s Outlook,” *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California* 9, no. 1–2 (1912–1913): 16.
 13. For McWilliams’s views on the mission system, see Carey McWilliams, *Southern California: An Island on the Land*, (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1973), 21–48.
 14. Francis J. Weber, “Zephyr Engelhardt, O.F.M., Dean of California Mission Historians,” in *Southern California Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (September 1965): 241.
 15. Maynard Geiger, O.F.M., ed. and trans., “Fray Antonio Ripoll’s Description of the Chumash Revolt in Santa Barbara at 1824,” in *Southern California Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (December 1970): 345.

1884, we are discovering, was a very important year. In addition to the first issue of the journal that would become the *Southern California Quarterly*, the year brought another birth: the publication of Helen Hunt Jackson's novel *Ramona*. The book's arrival intensified what historians would call the Spanish Fantasy Past, the mythologizing of Alta California as pastoral and serene, its Mexican population "amiable and indolent."¹⁶ With the myth came a deep nostalgia for a past that never really existed—despite some historians' claims to the contrary: "One of the distinctive charms of the story of "Ramona," remarked retiring HSSC President H. D. Barrows in 1889, "is the picturing, so true to life, of a Spanish type of civilization that flourished right here in Southern California, where we Anglo-Americans are building our homes."¹⁷

Although Jackson sought to foreground injustices suffered by Native Americans in the period after the U.S. War with Mexico, her reading audience often focused more on her depiction of the dimming grandeur of *Californio* life and the fading beauty of the missions. Jackson's highly stylized prose, with its sweeping descriptions and emotive exclamations—"What gentle, suave, courteous tones!"¹⁸—tended to foreground romance over ethical instruction. The novel posits a world of "deep-seated attachment on the part of the Indians and the older Mexican families in the country to the Franciscan Order."¹⁹ The missions are steadily declining, "their vast properties melting away, like dew before the sun . . . Franciscan Fathers driven from the country or dying of starvation at their posts."²⁰

The influence of the mythic mission past on *Southern California Quarterly* contributors can be felt in a decidedly romantic 1908 description of the missions' decline: "the old Missions of California have moaned to the desert breezes the pathetic tale of defeat, disaster and of a noble purpose . . . through the incredible sacrifices of a half

16. Helen Hunt Jackson, *Ramona* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1884), 2. The phrase comes from Jackson's description of Señora Gonzaga Moreno: "She looked simply like a sad, spiritual-minded old lady, amiable and indolent, like her race, but sweeter and more thoughtful than their wont."

17. H. D. Barrows, "Retiring Address of ex-President H. D. Barrows, Delivered, January 14th, 1889," *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California* 1, no. 4 (1888–89): 9.

18. Jackson, *Ramona*, 3.

19. *Ibid.*, 21.

20. *Ibid.*, 25.

century of heroic struggle.”²¹ In a similarly romantic vein, the poem “Mission Echoes” appeared in 1922:

Sometimes when the moon swings low
And God seems breathing through the trees
We see the faithful padres go
‘Midst Mission ruins in the breeze.”²²

But *Ramona* was not an artistic anomaly in turn-of-the-century Southern California. John Steven McGroarty’s theatrical epic, *The Mission Play*, debuted in 1912 and, within a year, became a not-to-be-missed Southern California phenomenon.²³ Part homage to Junípero Serra and part requiem for the end of the mission system, *The Mission Play* was viewed as a history lesson by those, as William Deverell notes, willing “to suspend disbelief, to misremember everything about the dark ground of the region’s even recent past.”²⁴

Such valorization of priests and Catholic churches may seem odd in a predominantly Protestant nation, which has historically struggled with anti-Catholicism. Perhaps, with the United States victory over Spain in 1898, Spanish missions and missionaries could be safely venerated as non-threatening symbols of a conquered past.

Although the style of *Ramona* and *The Mission Play* were highly influential, not all contributors to the *Southern California Quarterly* succumbed to the conflation of history and myth. Some were at pains to separate the telling of tales from the writing of history. Witness Mrs. M. Burton Williamson’s parenthetical disclosure in her 1919 piece, “Glancing Backward”: “(As the title may indicate this paper is written in a reminiscent mood and makes no claim to be a formal document).”²⁵ Indeed, not all contributors welcomed the mythologizing of history. Looking into both the past and the future, J. M. Guinn

21. Judson, “The Architecture of the Missions,” 114.

22. Ida Eckert-Lawrence, “Mission Echoes,” in *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California* 12, no. 2 (1922): 68.

23. William Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of Its Mexican Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 204–49.

24. *Ibid.*, 217.

25. Mrs. M. Burton Williamson, “Glancing Backward,” *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California* 11, no. 2 (1919): 82.



Cast and playwright John Steven McGroarty (in center with upstretched arms) of *The Mission Play* in front of its annual venue, the Mission Playhouse in San Gabriel, California, 1930. *Pacific National Bank Collection, Los Angeles Public Library, 00023822.*

grumbled in 1894, “Much that has passed for authentic history has been found to be rubbish.”²⁶

* * *

The year 1884 brought into the world one more birth that would, at least indirectly, influence the writing of the history of Alta California in the pages of the *Southern California Quarterly*. The birth of an organization near and dear to many—the American Historical Association. Influenced by the German historical academy, the forty-one historians who gathered at Saratoga, New York, sought to make history an investigative process, one that emphasized the use and preservation of primary sources and rejected the myths and moral tales of the past. History in the United States was to become professionalized

26. J. M. Guinn, “Historical Debris, or the Mythical and the Fabulous in History,” *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California and Pioneer Register, Los Angeles* 3, no. 2 (1894): 67.

and the historian a professional—at precisely the same time the history of California would become, to many, myth.²⁷

Although focused on local rather than national history, the Historical Society of Southern California also sprang from the vision of a small group of scholars influenced by developments in the emerging field of history. As described by President Warner in his 1884 Inaugural Address, it originated when, “A few gentlemen, some of whom had been, and still are connected with scientific or historical studies . . . met in the Normal School building one evening in September last.”²⁸ Championing the scientific method for historical research, the group would, “by comparing statements and carefully weighing evidence, arrive in the neighborhood of truth,” ultimately vanquishing “that charlatan and quack who bask in the sunshine of simulated truth.”²⁹

From its inception the Historical Society of Southern Californians saw its object as “the collection and preservation of all material which can have any bearing upon the history of the Pacific Coast in general, and of Southern California in particular.”³⁰ This focus on local history mirrored a trend found nationwide in an era that historian Michael Kammen describes as “a fertile time for the production of local history.”³¹ In the western United States this trend had been slow to form, in part because of the very newness of non-native settlement: eager for “progress,” many towns in the West viewed glances backward as antithetical to movement forward.³² Yet as the nineteenth century neared its close, the detritus of the once-vaunted progress ultimately created—even in Angelenos—flashes of longing for a less frenetic time. “In this new, busy, bustling town of ours,” noted President Warner in 1884, “new enterprises are started, older enterprises are abandoned . . . all so rapidly that within a short time it will be difficult to trace their beginnings.”³³ Historian David M. Wrobel succinctly

27. For a thorough analysis of the origins and growth of the historical profession in the United States, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

28. Warner, “Inaugural Address,” 7.

29. Mansfield, “Remarks of President Mansfield,” *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California*, Los Angeles 1, no. 2 (January 1886): 8.

30. Warner, “Inaugural Address,” 7.

31. Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 272.

32. *Ibid.*

33. Warner, “Inaugural Address,” 9

describes the duality of this historical moment as “the hope for a post-frontier future . . . followed later by a longing for the frontier past.”³⁴

Deeply embedded anxieties were also at work in the preservation of Southern California’s history. “In the midst of the intruding flood of immigrants,” Col. Warner fretted, “old land marks are rapidly disappearing . . . and after a few years more, they will cease to be.”³⁵ Immigrants threatened a society many Euro-Americans perceived as homogeneous. “The blending of races here is a theme of great significance,” noted E. W. Jones in his President’s Address of 1888. “It seems at first sight as if the pioneer race, who brought the arts of civilization to these shores, is being extinguished by the flood of immigration which has prevailed for the last few years.”³⁶ Historians of Southern California at the turn into the twentieth century thus sought to preserve—in collections, writings, and oral histories—a past familiar to them as a hedge against an increasingly complicated future.

The initial champion of the compilation of the “history of the race” was Hubert Howe Bancroft. More bookseller than professional historian, Bancroft’s shadow loomed over the early writings in the *Southern California Quarterly*. “This modern Israelite,” as one appreciator dubbed him, oversaw the creation of volumes that were “immense storehouses of facts, not always well digested nor happily presented, but full and complete.”³⁷ Several early members of the Society were paid writers for the multi-volume work for which Bancroft is famous.³⁸ In addition, Bancroft’s vast works and, later, his eponymous library provided an enormous resource for early SCQ historians.

But the single most influential historian in the telling of the story of Alta California was Herbert Eugene Bolton, for decades Chair of the History Department at U.C. Berkeley—and a professional historian. Bolton’s development of the field of Spanish borderlands

34. David M. Wrobel, *Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West*, (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002), 1.

35. *Ibid.*, 7.

36. E. W. Jones, “Inaugural Address of E. W. Jones, delivered February 4, 1889,” *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California*, Los Angeles 1, no. 4 (1888): 13.

37. Ira More, “President More’s Address,” *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California*, Los Angeles 1, no. 3 (1887): 11.

38. According to Mrs. M. Burton Williamson, former HSSC President George Butler Griffin and Secretary B.A. Stephens had both been employed as part of Bancroft’s “corps of writers.” Mrs. M. Burton Williamson, “Glancing Backward,” *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California* 11, no. 2 (1919): 83.

history brought to the fore the long-neglected history of the Spanish presence in what is now California, the American Southwest, and much of the Southeast. By broadening the area under historical observation, his work also broadened the demographics. Bolton was not without problems as a historian, and many later scholars would see him as an apologist for Spanish imperialism. But the expanded field of Borderlands history would, by the early twenty-first century, provide important methodological resources for scholars of Alta California, and for readers of the *Southern California Quarterly*. For, from a Borderlands perspective, California was no longer an outlier in the national origin story of New England pilgrims and revolutionaries; borderlands history was at the very center of American history.

Over the course of the first half of the twentieth century the increased professionalism in the field of history gradually became apparent in the pages of the *Southern California Quarterly*—which, in fact, became a quarterly, instead of an annual publication, in 1934. Footnotes became standard practice in 1935. Book reviews became a regular feature in 1938. Scholars worked hard to provide quantitative analyses, especially regarding the deep decline in California's native population. Criticism of the mission system increased—and with it defense by Catholic scholars. Father Francis Guest sought to contextualize eighteenth-century mission friars as men of their day—a day in which corporal punishment and bodily penance played a notable role. Still, vestiges of the Spanish fantasy past remained, as seen in a 1959 article about the missions, these “shrines of our California past.”³⁹

By the late 1960s, however, defense of the mission system was diminishing, concomitant with the rise of the fields of Native American history and Chicano Studies, among a number of other fields that foregrounded historically silenced voices. “Except A California Indian: A Story of Legal Discrimination,” (1968) by Ferdinand Fernandez, began with a quote from George Orwell's *Animal Farm*: “All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others.”⁴⁰ The title of Daniel Gar's 1972 article, “Planning, Politics, and

39. Schilling and Arlt, “Mission Sketchbook,” 62.

40. Ferdinand F. Fernandez, “Except a California Indian: A Study in Legal Discrimination,” *Southern California Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (June 1968): 161–75.

Plunder: The Missions and Pueblos of Hispanic California,”⁴¹ summed up perfectly an increasingly accepted analysis.

At the turn of the millennium exciting developments in new fields of study found their way into the SCQ. Thomas G. Andrews brought the methodology of environmental history into his 2011 study of Bancroft’s multi-volume history.⁴² Steve Aron used Lewis & Clark, Sacagawea, and York to look at frontier race relations.⁴³ Elliott West urged the readership to “keep our ears historically cocked,” better to hear “the historically silent.”⁴⁴ Similarly, Chelsea Vaughn explored, “The Forgotten Presence of *Monjeríos* in Alta California.”⁴⁵ Gloria Ricci Lothrop broke new ground in her study of women and property rights in Spanish California.⁴⁶ Iris Engstrand looked at the region’s early modern legal heritage.⁴⁷ David Iglar explored captive-taking and conventions of encounter in the Pacific Northwest.⁴⁸ Stephen Hackel “dug up” the history of the Los Angeles Plaza cemetery and continued his extensive work on native depopulation.⁴⁹ To name only a few important contributions.

The influence of contemporary methodological approaches on the historiography of the mission system is perhaps best epitomized in Zevi Gutfreund’s 2010 article, “Standing Up to Sugar Cubes: The Contest over Ethnic Identity in California’s Fourth-Grade Mission Curriculum.”⁵⁰ The author traces the effect of Native American and

41. Garr, “Planning, Politics and Plunder.

42. Thomas G. Andrews, “Toward an Environmental History of the Book: The Nature of Hubert Howe Bancroft’s Work,” *Southern California Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 33–68.

43. Stephen Aron, “The Afterlives of Lewis and Clark,” *Southern California Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 27–46.

44. Elliott West, “Listen Up: Hearing the Unheard in Western History,” *Southern California Quarterly* 85, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 21–22.

45. Chelsea K. Vaughn, “Locating Absence: The Forgotten Presence of *Monjeríos* in Alta California Missions,” *Southern California Quarterly* 93, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 141–74. *Monjeríos* were the quarters where unmarried female Indians were sequestered in the missions under chaperonage.

46. Gloria Ricci Lothrop, “Rancheras and the Land: Women and Property Rights in Hispanic California,” *Southern California Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 59–84.

47. Iris H. W. Engstrand, “The Legal Heritage of Spanish California,” *Southern California Quarterly* 75, no. 3–4 (Fall/Winter 1993): 205–36.

48. David Iglar, “Captive-Taking and Conventions of Encounters on the Northwest Coast, 1789–1810,” *Southern California Quarterly* 91, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 3–25.

49. Stephen Hackel, “Digging Up the Remains of Early Los Angeles: The Plaza Church Cemetery,” *Southern California Quarterly* 94, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 1–24.

50. Zevi Gutfreund, “Standing Up to Sugar Cubes: The Contest over Ethnic Identity in California’s Fourth-Grade Mission Curriculum,” *Southern California Quarterly* 92, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 161–97.

Chicano activists' attacks on the romanticized depiction of the missions in fourth-grade textbooks, while also looking at the complex internal struggles over ethnic identity and political power. The author posits the resolution as "a spectrum of California history books that give children multiple perspectives about the mission period."

Ultimately, it is that multiplicity of perspective about the mission period that has marked the *Southern California Quarterly's* one hundred plus volumes. Influenced from its inception in part by Catholic scholars and the Spanish fantasy past, the journal at the turn of the twenty-first century is home to a range of methodological approaches that look at the history of Alta California in fresh new ways. Such scholarship points us toward a national narrative inclusive of a wide range of voices and perspectives. By incorporating the Spanish borderlands into the American origin story, scholars have posited California as integral to a United States of America centered not on borders or boundaries but on a range of peoples, experiences, and histories.