The Real Joaquin Murieta: Robin Hood Hero or Gold Rush Gangster? by Remi Nadeau
Review by: Leonard Pitt
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Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*. I would agree that Atherton was “the most read woman writer of her times,” although I’m not sure how to prove it, and certainly she has not received the credit deserved for originating the biographical novel.

Richey’s journalistic style, although popular these days, is unfortunate in tone. In addition to suggesting historic interpretation without presenting facts, she makes a practice of first-naming women without extending the familiarity to men. I could read “Julia” (for Morgan) if the author would also write “Bernard” (for Maybeck).

Dorothy Gray’s book on western women is far more solid although subject to criticism. Her brief biographies of about twenty women (which do not overlap with Richey’s selection) include Willa Cather, Sacajawea, Dame Shirley, and Narcissa Whitman. Gray’s stated purpose is to describe the “strange,” meaning “unique,” experience offered in the West for women. Although I would agree that the western woman’s experience differed from that of her sisters in the East, I think it was not so different from her eastern grandmother’s pioneering existence. In any case, Gray makes an attempt to describe the western experience by including women who made the long overland journey from the East, women who lived in mining communities and on farms and cattle ranches, and even women who were members of minorities. Most of her essays are based on wide primary research, and exciting reading is made from the stories of Juliet Brier’s 1849 crossing of the Mojave Desert and Biddy Mason’s fight in the California courts for freedom from slavery. (One source overlooked on Mason was Sue Bailey Thurman’s *Pioneers of Negro Origin in California* [Acme, 1952].) Incidentally, Gray’s book points out one of the main difficulties in the “heroine” approach to women’s history, *i.e.*, to convince readers of the importance of a particular woman, her role may be falsely enlarged, as in Gray’s essay on Sacajawea of the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

Gray’s book has been published by Les Femmes, an imprint specializing in general interest books by, for, and about women. Anyone interested in women’s history should be alert to their fine publications; some are guides for women actively changing their roles, and some are of historical importance—my favorite being Judith Colucci Brcault’s *The World of Emily Howland: Odyssey of a Humanitarian*.


As a final note I applaud Richey and Gray for titling their books with dignity. At last we have buried the cranks, the charmers, the gentle tamers, the shady ladies, and the wily women of the West.

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The Real Joaquin Murieta: Robin Hood Hero or Gold Rush Gangster?


Wise readers often balk at books that claim to deal with the “real” anything, including the “real Joaquin Murieta.” Still, this is a serious work by a recognized writer (author of *Los Angeles, From Mission to Modern City, and The Water Seekers*) and one that merits careful reading.

The main point of the book is that while Joaquin Murieta is, indeed, a literary myth, the creator of the myth, John Rollin Ridge (Yellow Bird), did not weave him out of whole cloth. Rather, he founded his fanciful tale on a genuine, though elusive and poorly defined, badman. Those who have concentrated on debunking Ridge—especially Joseph Henry Jackson in *Bad Company* and Franklin Walker in *San Francisco’s Literary Frontier*—have thrown the baby out with the water. Nadeau cites newspapers and other primary sources dating from the 1850’s which, he says, were overlooked by “all” previous writers, including Jackson and Walker.

Nadeau’s central argument in favor of a “real” Joaquin is sound enough. In the course of establishing it he re-examines the origins of the literary myth, the alleged exploits of Joaquin in Los Angeles and Calaveras, the skullduggery of the rangers who went to kill him, the confusion over the identity of Joaquin’s sidekick, Three-Fingered Jack, and the latter-day writings of “myth-killers” Jackson and Walker.
Yet the book invites criticism. The author’s claim to originality is exaggerated. Though his facts are more numerous, his basic assumptions and conclusions closely resemble those of Walker and Jackson. The latter, citing the *Alta California* of 1853, refers to “a marauding cattle-thief who did exist—Joaquin Murieta” (Bad Company, p. 4). I said almost the same in *Decline of the Californios*. The truth is that even Nadeau’s strenuous efforts have turned up no dramatically new hard proof about his man—no baptismal or marriage record, no gallows confession or corroborated eyewitness account to give him flesh and blood and character.

Another point: in a work where evidentiary matters are of prime importance and where all evidence is circumstantial and inconclusive, precise citations are absolutely essential. The editorial decision to omit footnotes was unwise. We are left wondering exactly who gave the testimony about Joaquin in the Los Angeles murder trial, who said what about him on the night of November 7, 1852, and who established the “public record” on him. Are the data from credible or corroborated witnesses? We deserve to know, yet the bibliography alone won’t help on this score.

But the writing is lively and lucid, the coverage is broad and balanced, and, despite its defects, the book is a welcome addition to the literature of Crime and Punishment in Gold Rush California.

Some *California Catholic Reminiscences for the United States Bicentennial.*

Edited by Msgr. Francis J. Weber. (Los Angeles: California Catholic Conference, 1976. ix, 166 pp. $5.00.)

*Reviewed by Gary F. Kurutz, CHS Library Director.*

“The present volume,” according to editor Msgr. Francis J. Weber, “is issued by the California Catholic Conference, in the name of the Golden State’s People of God, as a prayerful tribute to the American nation in the 200 years of its independence.” This slender volume consists of a collection of papers presented at three California Catholic universities by a group of distinguished historians and prelates that “touch upon a number of vital historical factors identified with the Catholic presence along the Pacific Coast.” While the book, as one would suspect, focuses on the religious, it also provides significant data on things secular.

Although much of the material included has previously been published or made available elsewhere, Editor Weber fashioned together in one volume a capsulization of the best research currently underway dealing with California’s Hispanic past. Weaving together the art of biography and historical interpretation with the science of archaeology, eleven essays cover a number of topics ranging from early Jesuit exploration of Baja California to the activities of modern graduate students digging up the past at Mission San Diego. A major portion of these reminiscences, of course, are devoted to the missions and their relationship with the secular world of viceroys, soldiers, and American smugglers. Only two of the contributions touch on the post-Hispanic era.

After the introductory material, *Some California Catholic Reminiscences* begins with W. Michael Mathes’ superbly written “Cornerstone of Catholicism in the Californias,” which summarizes Jesuit activities in exploring Baja California and founding fifteen missions. Fr. Francis Guest, an expert on Spanish colonial institutions, provided an analysis of the famed Leather Jacket Soldiers derived from his findings in the Archivo General de La Nación in Mexico City. James R. Moriarty, an archaeologist-historian from San Diego, contributed a compelling narrative on his efforts to locate at Mission San Diego the remains of California’s first martyr, Fr. Luis Jayme. A comparison of events in California and in the thirteen colonies was eloquently stated by Doyle B. Nunn in “California Within the Context of the American Revolution.” Fr. John B. McGloin, the doyen of San Francisco’s Catholic heritage, narrated the story of his city’s first churches and their pastors. Sister Magdalene Coughlin, an authority on California’s early coastal trade, contributed a revealing article on the practical economics of sustaining a mission system in “Missionary and Smuggler: Agents of Disobedience or Civilization?” Art historian Therese Whitcomb reviewed the architectural impact of Catholicism’s most visible reminder, the mission. Fr. Maynard Geiger, the distinguished biographer of Fray Junípero Serra, delivered a fascinating account of the mechanics involved in achieving the mission’s beautification. Ray Brandes, an accomplished archaeologist and historian, illustrated the significance of Mission San Diego based on his years of excavations at the site. Iris Engstrand completed this historical anthology by summarizing her extensive research into the cryptic file of José de Gálvez, the powerful *visitador general* who made possible the colonization of Alta California.