

self-determination, Ridge believed that more “civilized” Native groups such as the Cherokee were worthy of the rights and privileges of US citizenship.* He also “shared with many Euro-Americans the racist assumption that intermarriage between whites and Natives was a necessary precondition for ‘civilizing’ indigenous peoples.”† This may explain why, by contrast with the Tejon Indians, the “half-breeds” at Cherokee Flat provide such effective support (in the form of torture and extrajudicial executions) to Captain Ellas in his search for Murieta’s men.

The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta is Ridge’s novelization of a series of sensational newspaper accounts of Mexican bandits robbing white and Asian miners and travelers between 1851 and 1853. The name “Joaquín Murieta”‡ refers to just one of many men accused of leading these bandit organizations. There were at least five Joaquíns who figured prominently in accounts of Mexican bandit raids. In 1853 the California legislature authorized Captain Harry Love to organize a group of twenty Rangers and lead them to capture “the party or gang of robbers commanded by the five Joaquins, whose names are Joaquin Muriati, Ocomorenia, Valenzuela, Botellier, and Carillo, and their band of associates.”§ When Love and his Rangers killed several Mexican horse thieves in a gunfight on July 25 of that year, they decapitated one of the corpses and preserved the head in alcohol along with a hand supposedly belonging to Three-Fingered Jack. The head was

* Whitley, “The First White Aboriginal,” p. 126.

† Whitley, p. 111.

‡ Also spelled “Murrieta.” This introduction will use “Murieta,” the spelling that Ridge used.

§ Hausman, “Becoming Joaquin Murrieta: John Rollin Ridge and the Making of an Icon,” p. 32.

displayed across the state as that of “Joaquin Murrieta.” While Love and his Rangers claimed \$6,000 in reward money for securing this trophy, some commentators questioned its authenticity. For example, a review of Ridge’s novel in San Francisco’s *Daily California Chronicle* suggested that “The book may serve as very amusing reading for Joaquín Murieta, should he get hold of it, for notwithstanding all which has been said and published to the contrary, we have little faith in his reported death at the hands of Love’s party.”* But for those who did believe Love’s claims, the preserved head retroactively singled out Murieta as the most notorious of the five Joaquíns and the most celebrated of California’s Mexican bandits.

For both aesthetic and political reasons, Ridge’s novel affirms that the preserved head was Murieta’s, and insists upon his hero’s individual responsibility for crimes that occurred throughout the state. Condensing the activities of scattered bandit groups into a single organization led by a man of extraordinary capacities, Ridge gave social disorder a perceptible shape and a storyline with a beginning and an end. Representing Murieta and Three-Fingered Jack as extraordinary, mythical figures, he fit them into familiar conventions such as the romantic youth, the chivalric adventurer, and the sadistic murderer. This double representation of Mexican bandits as a combination of noble hero (Murieta) and murderous monster (Three-Fingered Jack) elicits readers’ sympathy for Murieta while also suggesting the need for vigilante methods for suppressing the bandits. What begins as a story about a heroic insurrectionary against white supremacy becomes an ambivalent argument for the judicious deployment of extralegal violence—a

* Parins, p. 104. Ridge published a rebuttal in which he claimed the novel was based on newspaper files and conversations with witnesses throughout the state (Parins, p. 105).