

justification of, as Ridge writes in the novel, "discretionary power, so necessary to be used in perilous times when the slow forms of law . . . are altogether useless and inefficient."

Packed with melodrama, bravado, daring escapes, and graphic violence, Ridge's short novel (the first edition, published by San Francisco's W. B. Cooke, was just ninety pages) traces Murieta's transformation from a young Mexican immigrant into a legendary bandit and insurrectionary. Murieta starts off as an "exceedingly handsome and attractive" young man who arrives in California "fired with enthusiastic admiration of the American character." Like the young Ridge, he is displaced, assaulted, and forced to witness assaults on his family when white men jump his claim, rape his wife, take his farm, murder his half-brother, and publicly whip him. After numerous attempts to live an honest life in the face of racial violence, Murieta turns outlaw, kills all the men in the mob that assaulted him, and organizes a statewide network of bandits secretly aided by Mexican civilians. A master of disguise, a brilliant tactician, and an eloquent speaker, he unfolds a plan to raise and supply a band of "fifteen hundred or two thousand men" for a mass raid of southern California: "to kill the Americans by 'wholesale,' burn their ranchos, and run off their property at one single swoop so rapidly that they will not have time to collect an opposing force before I will have finished the work and found safety in the mountains of Sonora." His own suffering at the hands of white attackers represents the plight of all Mexicans whose rights went unprotected following the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo: "My brothers, we will then be revenged for our wrongs, and some little, too, for the wrongs of our poor, bleeding country." After narrating a series of adventures, run-ins with the military, near misses, massacres of "Chinamen," and

incidents illustrating Murieta's noble character, Ridge shifts to an account of numerous efforts to hunt down the bandits. The outcome of Harry Love's campaign, in which Murieta's head and Three-Fingered Jack's hand are preserved and exhibited around the state, would not have been news to many of the novel's nineteenth-century readers. What would have come as more of a surprise is Ridge's interpretation of the story: "there is nothing so dangerous in its consequences as *injustice to individuals*—whether it arise from prejudice of color or from any other source . . . a wrong done to one man is a wrong to society and to the world."

Like the Westerns and vigilante narratives it influenced, *Joaquín Murieta* presents a conflicted drama about the legitimacy of violence in a time and place where the rule of law was not firmly established. In the novel, conflicts are settled by mob rule, extrajudicial "trains," inequitable laws, vigilante policing, and summary lynchings rather than by the courts. Under such chaotic conditions, justice depends on the discretion of righteous individuals. For example, Murieta takes justice into his own hands when he kills the men who flogged him, when he plots revenge for the wrongs committed against all Mexicans, when he decides not to steal from a poor ferryman, when a well-spoken youth persuades him to spare a group of hunters, and when he returns a kidnapped woman to her mother and fiancé. At times, Ridge presents his hero's ethical deliberations, retributive killings, forcible collection of "tributes" from white and Chinese miners, and cautious governance of his outlaw followers as a kind of shadow government that enacts Murieta's vision of justice in the absence of just laws. Murieta's virtue, however, has clear limits. This is most evident when he allows Three-Fingered Jack to torture and kill Chinese