Eighteenth–Nineteenth Centuries

Junípero Serra: California, Indians, and the Transformation of a Missionary. By ROSE MARIE BEEBE and ROBERT M. SENKEWICZ. Before Gold: California under Spain and Mexico. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015. Plates. Maps. Figures. Notes. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. 504 pp. Cloth, $39.95.

Rose Marie Beebe and Robert M. Senkewicz provide fresh translations and new insights into the recently canonized Junípero Serra. Those wanting to learn more about the life and ideas of Serra will find this book filled with important letters and correspondence, along with new interpretations of the historical events and experiences that shaped Serra's views on settlement, Native Americans, and the spiritual conquest of California. By providing plenty of newly translated documents, the authors carefully chronicle the way in which Serra's views were shaped by his formative years in Majorca, along with his time in the colonial outposts in the Sierra Gorda. It is in the latter that Serra came to view settlers as a hindrance to his mission to evangelize Indians, and it was through his experiences with the Inquisition that he saw the rejection of traditional ways as crucial to successful conversion of indigenous peoples, two central ideas that he brought with him to Alta California. The book is an important contribution to our understanding of the mind of Serra, his role in the development of Spanish colonial mission experiences, and his enthusiastic quest to leave his mark on the Spanish colonial landscape. The authors also offer insights into Serra's conflicts with Spanish authorities like Fernando de Rivera y Moncada and Pedro Fages.

Serra's recent canonization has been a controversial subject, in light of the devastating impact of his colonial project on the lives of indigenous Californians. For those looking to better understand the development of Serra's legacy, the authors offer important context, through tracing the heroification of Serra through the Spanish revival era of the 1920s (pp. 21–26). In contrast to the romanticized view of Serra, the authors here seek to humanize him, illuminating the ways that he failed to understand the indigenous people whom he sought to convert while tracing the formation of Serra's justifications of harsh corporal punishment, paternalism, and constricting oversight of native Californians.

For those interested in the title's implied inclusion of native Californians and looking for insight into indigenous Californian perspectives of these times, the book comes up short. The authors rely almost exclusively on Serra's perspective (or that of his correspondents) while making minimal use of sources like the baptismal records that could be used to illuminate indigenous perspectives.

There are a few moments when the authors call attention to the cultural gulf between Serra's views and those of indigenous Californians. For example, they examine the use of indigenous children as cultural intermediaries or ambassadors and point out Serra's own estrangement from his family to suggest how this might have made it tougher for him to recognize the importance of kinship ties within native Californian communities. More frequently, the book maintains focus on Serra's perspective.

But, to be fair, the authors make it clear that the book is less concerned with the indigenous perspective than with that of Serra's Spanish world, explaining that they found themselves "mediating between two cultures, our own and that of the eighteenth-century Spanish empire" (p. 37). In this, the book is quite successful and offers an important contribution to the study of the Spanish colonization of California.

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