

*The Elusive Eden:
A New History of California.*

By Richard B. Rice, William A. Bullough, and Richard J. Orsi. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988, xix, 620 pp., \$28.00 hardbound.)

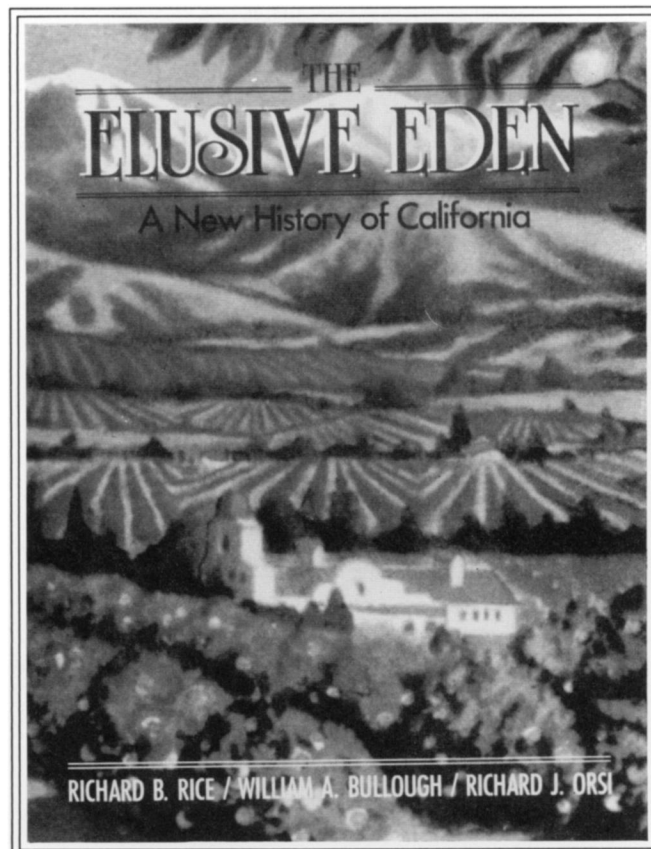
Reviewed by Donald H. Pflueger, Professor Emeritus, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona.

A triumvirate of California State University, Hayward, history professors has just authored a new general history of the state that will be equally at home on the coffee table, in the library, or at the desk of a college student. New overall state histories come along so infrequently that they deserve more attention than they usually get; a more common phenomenon is an updating of an earlier work. Californians are indeed fortunate to have so many fine single-volume histories; this new effort is a welcome addition.

First off, *Elusive Eden* is a physically attractive book. The authors have done a splendid job of organizing their material into nine eras, which become Parts, each of which has a good list of items for further reading. Each Part has as its initial chapter an in-depth look at a particular problem, event, or personality, while subsequent chapters carry on with the chronological narrative. On top of these there are thirty short thought-provoking essays interspersed throughout the volume that range from Father Serra to Ansel Adams and from Spanish-Mexican culture to contemporary cultural maturity and diversity. The 185 photographs are outstanding, while the 20 maps are very helpful. If the authors even looked at earlier texts, it does not show. Their teamwork was remarkable; the overall unity and lucid style of writing would make it appear to be the work of a single author.

Without seeming so, the volume is encyclopedic, missing very little despite the fact that in their Preface the authors apologize for cutting "favorite stories." Cesar Chavez gets about equal treatment with Father Serra. Pensioner George McLain made it; pensioner Myrtle Williams did not. Smallpox made it; AIDS did not. Swindler C. C. Julian made it; swindler J. David did not. Jane Fonda made it, but Thomas Starr King, whose statue stands in the nation's capitol as one of two outstanding Californians, did not, and for good reason. This game could go on, and prove little.

We are still in an era of rebellion against an Edenized California, created not only by such nineteenth-century writers as Nordhoff, Truman, and McGroarty, but also by more recent



The cover of *The Elusive Eden* depicts a red-tile-roofed farmhouse amidst orange groves, backed by snow-capped mountains—an idyllic scene of rural California in the early 20th century, taken from the packing label of Redlands Foothill Groves, Redlands, California. *Photographic reproduction courtesy of University Relations Office, CSU Hayward*

“professional historians [who] bear part of the blame for the state’s skewed history.” The authors claim that “ideas about race, ethnicity, sex roles, and other questions have also changed dramatically since the 1950s, requiring a reevaluation. . . . Instead of celebrating the achievements of frontier rugged individualism, this volume will emphasize the important role of human interaction and organization.” The authors deliver on their promise of a reconsideration, but their history is not the radical departure that they want to make it seem. Recently updated versions of the works of Rolle, Bean and Rawls, Caughey and Hundley, among others, certainly display a new sensitivity to ethnic minorities, the role of women, the various environmental themes, social movements, group interaction, and other previously ignored threads in the California historical fabric. What the authors have done, it would seem, is to push a bit harder in these directions.

Have they, and others, gone too far in these directions is the philosophical question. This reviewer is unsure. It is easy to dwell upon California's record of exploitation, ranging from the rape of the environment to the mistreatment of everyone from the Indians to grape pickers. Greed, corruption, and dishonesty abound, but Californians have also exhibited great humanity, achieved enormous projects for the common good, and made honest efforts to right the wrongs of the past. More needs to be said about these things.

No matter how hard they try, historians seem unable to overcome either their attachments to place or political philosophy. As for place, look at the treatment given to the Gold Rush *vis a vis* the Boom of the Eighties. In *Elusive Eden* the Gold Rush received two whole chapters as well as a prologue to Part IV; the Boom of the Eighties is dispensed with in five paragraphs. Dianne Feinstein rated a portrait; San Diego, now the second largest city, apparently has had no mayor since Pete Wilson and he was mentioned only in context of his favoring slow-growth measures. San Francisco gets its Opera House, but the gays are largely closeted; Los Angeles gets a whole chapter on Aimee Semple McPherson, whose antics testify to "cultural vacuity."

As for political philosophy, it is somewhat revealing that Chief Justice Rose Bird's removal by the citizenry had "heavy sexist overtones" while nothing was said about her stand on the death penalty. Jerry Brown seems not to have been troubled by the medfly, and somehow his budget cutting was humanitarian, while Ronald Reagan's was not. These are isolated and overdrawn examples; overall the history is fair-minded.

If the Frontispiece and endsheets are dreamy, even Edenesque, then the cover and dust jacket are even more so. Both are replicas of an orange box label depicting a red-tile-roofed home set amid a sea of orange trees with snow-capped mountains in the distance, a scene identical to this reviewer's birthplace and childhood home, since enveloped—and devastated—by greater Los Angeles. Hoping for a nostalgia trip, this reviewer was profoundly surprised to find that the citrus industry was passed off in a single paragraph of six sentences, none of which treat of the Eden aspects of citrus civilization or take into account that citrus was the single largest economic factor in the state for a period of half a century.

The authors are to be congratulated on producing a splendid and fresh new history, brilliantly organized, provocative in content, well written, carefully edited, mature and sobering, beautifully illustrated, and certain to be widely read by countless students and concerned Californians. CHS

Mexico Through Russian Eyes, 1806-1840.

By William Harrison Richardson. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988, 287 pp., \$29.95 cloth.)

Reviewed by Sasha Schmidt Honig, *Professor of History at Bakersfield College.*

A familiar figure in California history is Nikolai Rezanov, sailing to California to find help for Sitka's suffering colonists. California *pozole* must have looked like ambrosia to him compared to the dried fish and fir cone beer on which his compatriots were barely surviving. In the first chapter of *Mexico Through Russian Eyes, 1806-1840*, William H. Richardson gives us a glimpse of how Russian visitors from that time to the 1830s viewed Alta California as a "fine and fruitful country," a paradise, abundant in the necessities of life, a land of wheat and meat, milk and honey, a land they would have liked to see in Russian hands rather than Spanish or Mexican. Richardson summarizes the writings of Rezanov, Langsdorff, Tarakanov, Khvostov, Kotzebue, Golovnin, Zavalishin, Khlebnikov, and, finally, Wrangell and gives a good idea of what these men thought of California, its resources, its institutions, and its people.

Although the author hypothesizes in his introduction that Russians differed from the majority of European and American visitors to Mexico in feeling less superior, less alienated, and more at home with the Mexican people and culture, this idea does not apply well to the early period. Instead, Rezanov and the others seem to have reacted to Alta California in much the same way as other foreign visitors. Dana's comment "In the hands of an enterprising people, what a country this might be! . . ." could have been said by any of the Russians included by Richardson. In that era of expansionism, national pride caused Americans and Russians alike to feel superior toward *californios* and their government. Hence, Russians, too, wrote of the inefficiency of the government, the exploitation of the neophytes, the laziness of the people, and the mismanagement of resources. However, the Russian reaction has a special edge to it when we consider the contrast between the starkness of life in Sitka and the relative ease of life in California. As Richardson points out, what seemed to Spain or Mexico as an uncomfortable frontier was a potential Garden of Eden to Russians. No doubt, anyone who experienced the numbing cold of a Sitka winter would regard as heavenly even the densest of California fogs. Golovnin expressed this thought when he referred to California as "a blessed region."