

## BOOK REVIEW

Robert Senkewicz, Professor, Department of History, Santa Clara University

**Franciscan Frontiersmen: How Three Adventurers Charted the West. By Robert A. Kittle. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017. Notes and index. vii + 288 pp. \$29.95 cloth.**

The most important eighteenth-century Spanish expeditions into Alta California were those led by Gaspar Portolá in 1769 and Juan Bautista de Anza in 1774 and 1775. Also, the most significant Spanish military defeat in the region was the Quechán destruction of two missions and a settlement along the Colorado River in 1781. In this well constructed and nicely written volume, Robert A. Kittle, longtime editorial page editor of the San Diego Union-Tribune, brings these significant incidents to life in a fresh and invigorating fashion.

Much of what we know about early California comes through the writings of the Franciscan missionaries. Although this group was never the dominant force in the province and was always dramatically outnumbered by indigenous people and mestizo soldiers, it consistently included the most literate and well-educated men in California. In this book Kittle focuses on the writings of three missionaries. One was Juan Crespí, who accompanied Portolá. Another was Francisco Garcés, who participated in both Anza expeditions, explored – often with the Cochimí man known by his baptismal name of Sebastián Taraval – many regions of the Southwest, including the southern Central Valley of California, and was killed in the Colorado River attack. The third was Pedro Font, who accompanied the second Anza expedition. In vigorous and trenchant prose, Kittle engages the reader more fully than many previous writers with the lived experience of the Spanish exploration of Alta California.

The unique strength of this book is the engaging narrative Kittle constructs. Through the diaries and correspondence of Crespí, Garcés, and Font, readers feel deeply involved with the exploration parties. We share the travelers' excitement when the Portolá expedition realized that they had reached Monterey Bay in May 1770. We experience the expedition's relief when Kumeyaay guides led Anza's men to water in the midst of a desert in southeastern California in March 1774. And we wonder, as we read the respectful way in which Garcés interacted with the indigenous peoples with whom he came into contact on his wide-ranging treks, if the relationships between Spaniards and Alta California native peoples might have turned out very differently from the tragedies that too often ensued.

In addition to presenting the experiences of these three Franciscan explorers, Kittle offers excellent vignettes of important episodes that set much of the context for their writings and travels. The Kumeyaay revolt in San Diego in 1775 is fully described and the author makes every effort to present the indigenous perspective. Kittle uses the writings of the French explorer La Perouse to sketch, often in damning terms, the indigenous experience in the missions. And he employs the writings of a little-known missionary, Tomás Eixarch, to provide a concise picture of native life along the Colorado River. These vignettes serve to deepen the vivid narrative Kittle constructs.

The book would have benefited from a deeper discussion of eighteenth century Franciscan theology, especially the theology of conversion. And the epilogue, which correctly points out that the complicated truth of Spanish California is found neither in the mythology of heroic missionaries and contented neophytes nor in simplistic accusations of torture and genocide, would have benefited from a more explicit acknowledgment of the consequences, even if they were unintended, of the effects of large-scale Spanish incursion on indigenous lives and traditions.

The pens of Franciscan missionaries recorded and constructed a good part of early California history. In foregrounding these missionaries and in presenting their writings in such a colorful fashion, Kittle's book affords an excellent entry into our state's complicated and still crucially important past.