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New Perspectives on California Indian Research

Introduction

IMRE SUTTON

Scientific inquiry predicates the need for periodic self-appraisal and reexamination. Perhaps it is axiomatic that the methods, research materials and findings of the collective scholarship on the American Indian, more than a century in process, would undergo regular reevaluation. It is healthy, of course, for scholars to challenge older theories and methods, to question earlier facts and findings as well as the very 'artifacts' of research upon which we hang our theories and conclusions. Sometimes newer methodology or a new perspective inspires innovative approaches to bridge disciplinary foci and thus bring fresh insights to a field of study. This is certainly true for the study of Native Americans. Recent decades, for example, have witnessed the maturation of ethnohistory, which has helped to synthesize the disparate approaches of anthropologists, geographers and historians—the three fields represented in this symposium.[1] Whatever newer perspectives are advanced in these three papers, they belong hopefully to the mainstream of concern for rigorous criticism not just of our findings but also of our source materials—those miscellaneous 'artifacts' that include herein mission registers or padrones, letters (those by John Sutter) and maps as they have recorded changing land tenure.

Imre Sutton is Professor of Geography, California State University, Fullerton, and editor of *Irredeemable America: The Indians' Estate and Land Claims* (University of New Mexico Press, 1986)

While we would collectively disclaim any idea of innovation in the choice of topics, some effort has been made to cut across ethnohistoric time. The registers date back to the early 1880s; John Sutter's letters belong to the early American period of the 1850s; and the selection of five maps span the period from 1857 to the recent. Others have, of course, explored these and other 'artifacts' of research and their contributions are duly noted in the papers and in the bibliography that accompanies this symposium. In a way the many efforts of Robert F. Heizer,[2] Lowell Bean and Sylvia Vane,[3] and others to pull together diverse older and often ephemeral materials inspired the need for this symposium. In addition, the California volume of the Smithsonian Handbook[4] series impressed upon this editor the enormous debt owed other researchers who have sought to update findings and reappraise research resources. Moreover, the literature of the Indian land claims cases—K-344 before the U.S. Court of Claims and Dockets 31-37, consolidated, before the Indian Claims Commission—suggests a rigorous interdisciplinary concern for exploring all avenues to sources, facts, and findings.[5] Cumulatively, we might assert that today there is a greater appreciation of newspapers, public and private papers, letters, maps as well as the contributions of earlier generations of scholars, Indian informants and non-academicians who reported, recalled, administered or just merely wrote about Indians.

As a geographer, I may be stretching a point to note that land and territoriality, not just a focus on research materials, unite these papers in purpose. In the Hispanic period, the practice of regrouping (reducción) Indians from various native locales led to their displacement, if not to their complete dispossession from traditional home areas as well as to their selective acculturation. Such contributed, for example, to the decline of native customs regarding birth, marriage and death and, no doubt, broke down traditional lineages. Johnson notes that the mission registers serve to "supplement and test statements about California Indian lifeways occurring in other historic documents. . . . " and that the ethnohistoric information in these registers "covers a sizeable sample . . . allowing analysis on a regional scale." His focus is the frequency of errors of omission, misunderstanding and clerical mistake as related to the Chumash.

Some of Johnson's discussion of marital information as reported in the registers suggests parallel problems in overcom-

ing contemporary distortions of indigenous customs. In a recent ethnographic study of Southern California,[6] based on thirty years of field work, Florence Shipek refers to the long-range implications of Hispanic and later American rules as imposed on native marriage of cross-cousins; Indians did not deem them to be relatives, but Europeans did. And since they were considered kin, cross-cousins, who all too commonly occupy the same reservations, could no longer marry. Policies of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) came to rule that "the formal basis for membership is the presence of an individual or an ancestor on a specified early list of residents of that reservation as compiled by the Bureau of Indian Affairs."[7] Because of a somewhat cavalier or indifferent attitude toward native culture and the method of reporting membership, today many bands face the need to change membership or marriage rules. Shipek insists that the mixture of rules carried all the way from Hispanic times makes it impossible for Indians to marry another member of the same reservation or even from another reservation in Southern California.

It may stretch credibility somewhat if we link her discussion to Johnson's appraisal of the padrones, yet the inference is that the archival record contains substantiation of a misconception of native culture that has resisted revision despite the efforts of scholars.

Albert Hurtado suggests that "the fullest record of Indian life during the gold rush era exists in the correspondence of the Office of Indian Affairs. . . . " He and other historians have found correspondence—private and public—valuable 'artifacts' that help to expand our understanding of given events. From letters we learn that John Sutter had a selfish motive in writing the superintendent of Indian affairs in order to get official approval to keep the Nisenan Indians of the American River Valley in their home territory (Fig. 2.1). It has helped to shed light on the fact that by permitting Sutter to do this, the superintendent retarded the integration of these Indians into the larger society and money economy that came to dominant California. The events surrounding Sutter and the Nisenan result, in part, from the denial of ratification by the U.S. Senate in 1851 of eighteen treaties (Fig. I.1) with the California Indians, leading to their loss of home territory as well as proposed reserves.[8] Alone, Sutter's letters do not adequately recount the events nor the implications of policy decisions in Indian affairs. Yet they prove indispensable in the

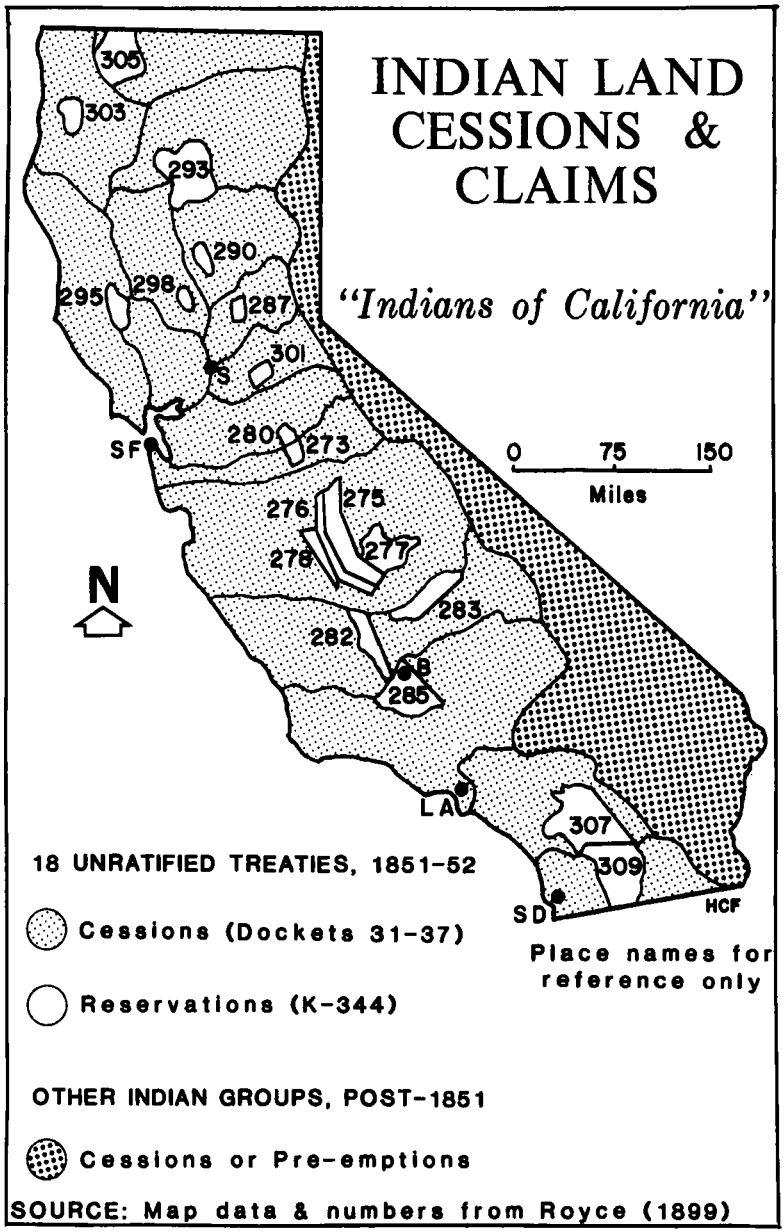

FIGURE I.1 Indian Land Cessions and Claims. The areas east of the Sierras, including much of the deserts, are normally not treated as part of native California. Compare Fig. 3.3 (Sutton). Map prepared by Harold C. Fox.

further reexamination of what happened to many Indian communities.

It is significant that of the three fields represented herein only history makes considerable use of letters, yet rarely do historians discuss the intrinsic value of letters to research. However, in California Indian research we do find countless reinforcement of their utility. John Caughey, for example, turned to letters as well as official communications in order to place the B. D. Wilson *Report* on the Indians of Southern California in proper perspective.[9] Correspondence, albeit mostly official, plays an important part in the interpretations of past events in E. E. Dale's[10] study of the Indians of the Southwest and in George Phillips'[11] account of Indian resistance in Southern California. Sutter's letters in this regard are part of the archival record, and the official replies found in the same collection reveal that Superintendent Henley did not recognize Sutter's self-interest but was moved by his more altruistic motives.

One is reminded that "a letter is an integral piece of writing and stands on its own; it need not be part of a larger work . . . (they) can be long or short, intimate or formal, personal or impersonal, confidential or public, broad or narrow in subject matter, and literate and articulate or semiliterate and unpolished."[12] Sutter's letters cut across this commentary. The letters of Helen Hunt Jackson (of *Ramona* fame) in association with other champions of Indian rights in Southern California, for example, reveal many of these characteristics and provide researchers with insights otherwise not gleaned from only official reports.[13] In another instance I discovered in the archives (now in Laguna Niguel) that much of the unwritten history of Indian opposition to land allotment is reported in the correspondence between special allotting agents and Washington officials.[14] It is worth noting, also, that two significant volumes about the American Indians derive from the collection and editing of letters—Franz Boas' *Ethnography*,[15] based on his field notes and findings, and George Catlin's *Letters and Notes on the North American Indians*.[16]

Despite the existence of diseños of ranchos and many crude maps revealing distributions of native villages, it was with the coming of the Land Rectangular Survey to California in the early 1850s that efforts to delimit and delineate Indian territory, village sites and later reservations took on serious meaning. But several events involving this survey have had long-term implications on the cartographic record of Indian land tenure. For one thing, the

1906 earthquake in San Francisco rendered this map record incomplete. Many of the first editions of the plats, which might have identified many actively occupied Indian village sites, were replaced by a second series that did not reveal such villages later proven to exist by ethnographic reconstruction.[17] Another effect of the greater aritculation by 'range and township' was the ease with which Indian village sites and established reservations by executive order could be relocated to less desirable locales on the public domain.

In terms of the cartographic record, Heizer aptly identified a key fact of wide-ranging implications that persist today:

> . . . no other single event . . . had a more rapid destructive effect on their population and culture than the about-face that the Senate made between authorizing President Fillmore . . . to make treaties and its failure . . . to ratify those treaties.[18]

The lack of ratification influenced, for example, the treatment of the Nisenan under John Sutter's 'tutelage.' It also led to the unconscionable dispossession of Indians from traditional territory and only much later fragmentally restored lands to them as meager reservations. Even with the availability of a highly accurate survey system—indeed, because of its capacity—displacement and fraudulent land acquisition could be more effectively perpetrated on the Indians.

Whether we reconsider the 'artifacts' of research such as registers, letters and maps, or theories, methods and findings, the essential goal is to seek new insights, uncover obscure events, or to sustain existing conclusions. As it happens, without any prompting by the editor, all three papers incorporate the approach of ethnohistory, itself a newer prespective, and they sustain the importance of revisionist scholarship.

Several persons have assisted directly and indirectly in the production of this symposium; those who provided help with the bibliography are acknowledged therein. I wish to thanks my colleagues for their contributions and comments on my efforts and to acknowledge the cartographic skills of Harold Fox, a masters candidate in geography at California State University, Fullerton, Scott Leece, a doctoral student in geography at the University of Wisconsin, and Don Severson, of Portland who did earlier renderings of several maps. Finally, thanks to California State

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NOTES

1. See, for example, the *Journal of Ethnohistory*; Bruce G. Trigger, "Ethnohistory: The Unfinished Edifice," *Ethnohistory* 33, 3 (1986): 253–67.
2. Noteworthy are: Robert F. Heizer, ed., *Some Last Century Accounts of the Indians of Southern California*, Publications in Archaeology, Ethnohistory and History 6 (Ramona: Ballena Press, 1976); *Idem, Destruction of California Indians: A Collection of Documents from Period 1847 to 1865 in Which Are Described Some of the Things That Happened to Some of the Indians of California* (Santa Barbara: Peregrine Smith, 1974).
3. Lowell J. Bean and Sylvia B. Vane, *California Indians: A Guide to Manuscripts, Artifacts, Documents, Serials, Music and Illustrations*, Anthropological Paper, 7 (Ramona: Ballena Press, 1977).
4. Robert F. Heizer, ed., *California*, vol. 8, *Handbook of North American Indians* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1978).
5. See pp. 110–111, this symposium, for titles under California Indians, 1974.
6. Florence C. Shipek, *Pushed into the Rocks: Southern California Indian Land Tenure, 1769–1986* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 64.
7. *Ibid.*, fn. 17, 198.
8. There are several useful studies of the claims cases; see Omer C. Stewart, "Litigation and Its Effects," in R. F. Heizer, *California, op. cit.*, 705–712.
9. John W. Caughey, ed., *The Indians of Southern California in 1852: The B. D. Wilson Report and a Selection of Contemporary Comments* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1952).
10. Edward E. Dale, *The Indians of the Southwest: A Century of Development under the United States* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1949).
11. George H. Phillips, *Chiefs and Challengers: Indian Resistance and Cooperation in Southern California* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975).
12. Barbara Oberg, "Historical Editing: Correspondence," in *Public History: An Introduction*, ed. by Barbara J. Howe and Emory L. Kemp (Malabar, Fla: Robert E. Krieger, Publishing Co., 1986), 87.
13. The Jackson papers are housed at the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
14. Imre Sutton, "Land Tenure and Changing Occupance on Indian Reservations in Southern California," Ph.D. dissertation in Geography (Los Angeles: University of California, 1964), 135ff.
16. George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the North American Indians*, ed. & introduction by Michael Macdonald Mooney (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1975). The original title was *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs and Conditions of the North American Indians* (1841).
15. *The Ethnography of Franz Boas*, comp. & ed. by Ronald P. Rohner (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1969).
17. Sutton, *op. cit.*, 90.
18. Heizer, *California*, op. cit., 704.