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Making the Past Present: Editor's Note

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Making the Past Present: Editor's Note

Cover Page Footnote

Char Miller is the W.M. Keck Professor of Environmental Analysis and History at Pomona College. Among his recent books are *Hetch Hetchy: A History in Documents*, *Theodore Roosevelt: Naturalist in the Arena*, and *Not So Golden State: Sustainability vs. the California Dream*.

Making the Past Present

Char Miller

Mary Austin was not the first to try to identify the geographical contours of what we call the Eastern Sierra. In the first words of her iconic book, *The Land of Little Rain* (1903), she credits the Indigenous nations with the best framing of these arid lands, their extent, reach, and mystery: “The Country of Lost Borders.” That was considerably more precise than the English word desert, she writes, for “desert is a loose term to indicate land that supports no man.” However “dry the air and villainous the soil,” the Eastern Sierra was never “void of life.”¹

Through her extraordinary use of language, Austin animated the region, capturing its vital beauty, its unsettling energy. “There are hills, rounded, blunt, flat, burned, squeezed out of chaos, chrome and vermilion painted, aspiring to the snow-line.” Out beyond this rolling terrain lie high level-looking plains of intolerable sun glare, or narrow valleys drowned in a blue haze.” Seasonal variation in this “country of three seasons” is almost beyond imagining: “From June on to November it lies hot, still, and unbearable, sick with violent unrelieving storms.” In winter to April, it is “chill, quiescent, drinking its cant rain and scander snows.” From then until June, the land is “blooming, radiant, and seductive.” A “land of lost rivers, with little in it to love,” but love it Austin does (and countless others since), for “once visited must be come back to inevitably. If it were not so,” she confided, “there would be little told of it.”²

Actually, very little of the region’s complex history has been told (and none written with Austin’s penetrating insights and energetic prose!). Of all of the regions in California, it remains the most underappreciated and underwritten. Distant from the state’s centers of power—political (Sacramento) and urban (Southern California and the Bay Area)—the Eastern Sierra as Austin understood more than a century ago was distinct, a place apart.

One way to visualize its remote and elusive appeal is through a camera’s lens, as the evocative prints of such artists as Ansel Adams and Galen and Barbara Rowell suggest. But even their sharp focus and stark images are not sufficient to the whole task. A modest attempt to fill some of that gap is what led the Eastern Sierra Interpretative Association (ESIA) and the Claremont Colleges Library’s Digital Scholarship program to collaborate in the production of the *Eastern Sierra History Journal*. I have the good fortune to be its inaugural editor.

The journal’s geographical parameters range from the Sierra’s eastern slope to the eastern California deserts; its north-south spine is essentially US 395. Among possible subjects the journal explores are the region’s complicated Indigenous histories and the contemporary issues impacting tribal life; colonization, Japanese-American internment at Manzanar, as well as agricultural and industrial development from the nineteenth century to the present. Other enduring themes include public-lands management, water quality and quantity, biodiversity and endangered species, as well as recreation, tourism, and population growth. And everything else.

The of the ESHJ is just as expansive: to encourage historians, writers, scientists, and critics to unearth the region’s complicated past by sifting through its oral histories and traditions, literature

¹ Mary Austin, *The Land of Little Rain* (New York NY: Penguin Books, 1997), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 2.

and poetry, photography, film, and biography, as well as its material culture. And then—here’s the tricky part—to tell the stories and craft the narratives, whether debated or contested, happy or heuristic, that are embedded within these differing forms of evidence.

Apparently, that’s not asking too much, because that’s exactly what the contributors to the first volume of the *Eastern Sierra History Journal* have achieved. Selected from past presentations to the Eastern Sierra History Conference, this first volume features articles that explore how the Eastern Sierra was surveyed and mapped; that weave together words and photographs to examine one family’s fascination with high country and valley floor; that offer a close and interior reading of the Paiute worldview, then and now; that dig into an unusual moment when US Army generals in the midst of World War II went fishing in alpine lakes; that clarify the enduring significance of the Yosemite Grant that later gave rise to a national park; and that reveal the manifold meanings contained in the arborglyphs, tree-carvings, that shepherds left behind. Two shorter essays, first published in the *Inyo Register* in advance of the 2019 history conference, round out the volume.

Whatever their length and regardless of topic, what these essays demonstrate, individually and collectively, is the array of creative responses to and imaginative possibilities that lie within the histories of the Eastern Sierra. Mary Austin would not be surprised, knowing as she did the arid region’s enigmatic presence and magnetic attraction. “None other than this long brown land lays such a hold on the affections. The rainbow hills, the tender bluish mists, the luminous radiance of the spring, have the lotus charm. They trick the sense of time, so that once inhabiting there you always mean to go away without quite realizing that you have not done.”

The region’s hold on our imagination, like that of the past itself, is sticky.³

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³ Ibid. 6.