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LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI AND NANCY J. PETERS

LITERARY SAN FRANCISCO

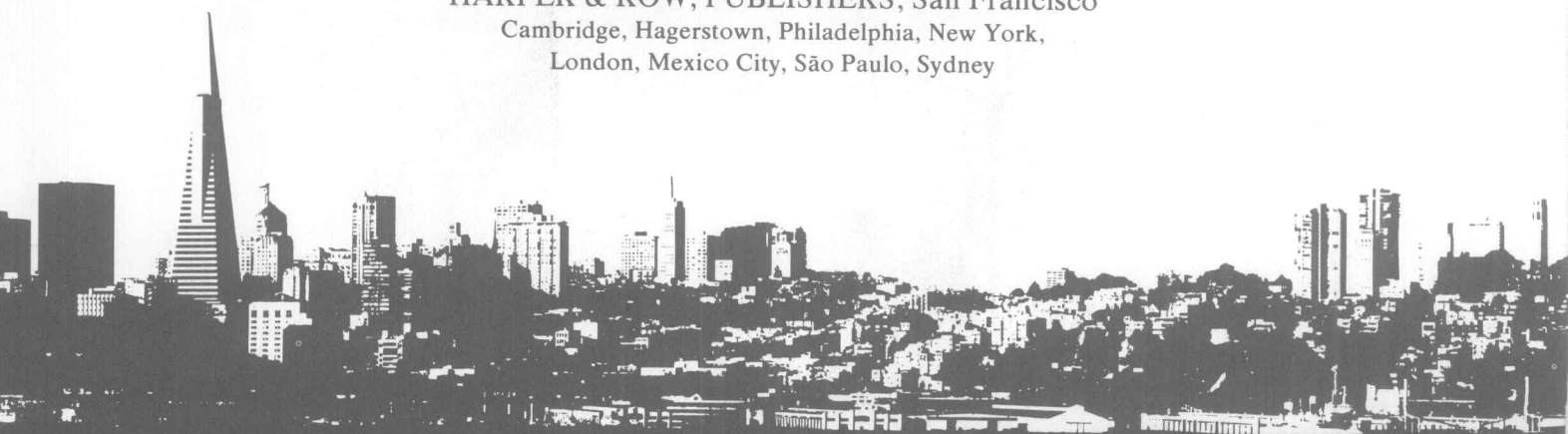
A pictorial history from its beginnings to the present day

Literary San Francisco

*A Pictorial History from
Its Beginnings to the Present Day*

*by Lawrence Ferlinghetti
and Nancy J. Peters*

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Introduction

I

I grew up in New York with the firm view that nothing west of the Hudson really existed. And in that New Yorker's demented map of America, there was a high island sticking up at the far western edge of the great American slough: San Francisco. I came to it as to an island (one of those literary carpetbaggers who rode west in the early 1950s) arriving by overland train and ferry from Oakland. It looked like an island, vaguely Mediterranean, with its white buildings, a little like Tunis from the sea, not really a part of America. That was the illusion. It was very much the place where the West ended, the place where the frontier was first civilized.

The idea of an isolated San Francisco persists: as late as 1971 the Oakland Museum thought it something still to be refuted, with a historical exhibition called "California is not an island . . ."—a quote from a Father Kino in 1708. Still, we would hope this book to be no provincial effusion. For this is no Athens of the West, as some snob dubbed it. Nor is it a northern Florence to the Rome that is Los Angeles. Troy would be closer, and there are those who think

there is some wooden horse here and are forever sending out scouts, political and literary, to discover what will next burst out of it. And perhaps Helen will yet be freed.

II

Eighty or ninety years ago, when all the machines began to hum (almost, as it seemed, in unison), San Francisco was still the only city on the West Coast. Even earlier, in 1851, when John Babsone Soule (not Horace Greeley) coined the phrase "Go west, young man" he could only have had San Francisco in mind. Los Angeles was still a pastoral place of Spanish angels and Seattle a lumberjack port. By 1854, San Francisco had a polyglot population of Americans, Spaniards, French, Italians, Germans, Austrians, Chinese, British, Irish, and Australians mixed with blacks and Amerindians, with thirty-seven resident foreign consuls to serve them. There were twelve daily papers in several languages, more magazines than in London, and theaters in English, French, Spanish, German, and Chinese. This roaring town (which Daniel Webster had called a "wretched whaling

station") consumed more coffee, tea, champagne, and cigars than Boston and boasted that New York dresses better than Paris, and San Francisco dresses better than New York. (It was never a cowboy town—derbies outnumbered Stetsons and sombreros.) There were almost as many hotel rooms, boarding-houses, pensions, cafés, saloons, dance halls, warehouses, restaurants, and theaters as there were single-family houses.

It was not a family town, hardly a bourgeois society. The 1862 census reported thirty thousand men and only five thousand women. Mark Twain, who arrived in 1863, is supposed to have said, "The miner came in '49, the whore in '51, they rolled upon the barroom floor—then came the Native Son." A historian of the 1850s reported,

On any occasion of public excitement, there is gathered together a multitude, which cannot be paralleled in any other place, of stalwart, bearded men, most of whom are in the early prime of life, fine, healthy, handsome fellows. The variety and confusion of tongues and personal characteristics, the evident physical strength, reckless bravery, and intelligence of the crowd, makes a *tout ensemble* that is very awful to contemplate . . . armed, as at all times most of them secretly are, with revolvers and bowie-knives . . . these youthful giants are the working spirits of San Francisco, that have given it a world-wide reputation for good and evil.

Until 1869 (when the Golden Spike was driven and the railroad blasted through to end the West's isolation), San Francisco was the literary capital of a huge frontier territory, with a young culture built neither on American Puritan or European

petty bourgeois models nor on the old agrarian farming base. It was a wide open frontier culture with possibilities for a future ideal society such as had never existed.

But the Golden Spike nailed down much more than a rail. It nailed down an iron direction for that new world in which, up to that time, at every rutted crossroads, on every unfenced range, all possibilities, from anarchism to vigilante fascism, still existed. It nailed the future to the past. It nailed the new western world to the industrial civilization of North America and Europe. The railroad, spreading its tentacles over the West, became that octopus Frank Norris novelized, and it sowed the iron sperm of that industrial monster which rules life today.

By 1871—when the Paris Commune was proclaiming its own version of a new society—the old bourgeois values of family, propriety, property, law & order, were already becoming entrenched in San Francisco. It was no accident that the dominant style of San Francisco architecture was Victorian. It was no whim that made "Don't call it Frisco" the fashionable maxim in Nob Hill mansions looking down on Barbary Coast sailors and hustlers who called it as they saw it and played it as it lay. The Bohemian Club, started in 1872 as a men's club for free-swinging journalists, artistic wits, and part-time poets, gradually became a symbol of what was happening—the *embourgeoisement* of society—becoming in our century an enclave of merchants and bankers, high politicians, military and professional men with some artistic leanings and the politics of the Trilateral Commission, the beating heart (western division) of our military-industrial perplex.

III

It is slightly astounding that no survey of San Francisco literary history in the twentieth century has ever been published. This book is obviously an eccentric shot at it, full of our own predilections and prejudices—for how else to cover the creation of a metropolis from sand dunes and gold dust in 130 years, short of creating a “history factory” like H. H. Bancroft’s? The scope of the book is limited to literary life in the San Francisco area, although literary people in picturesque provincial colonies like Carmel, Big Sur, or Bolinas have been mentioned under our breath. And the life of the theater here has also been excluded; that would take a separate book. Lastly, we should say this is not a “guide,” listing all the literary presses and exact locations of birthplaces, literary plaques, and monuments in the City—that too would take a separate volume.

Naturally there are limits to the photographic essay—the thoughts of the people in the pictures seldom come through. The photos are but the surface-image of the live beings, all that remains beyond

their recorded words. Behind the image, the truth vanishes. We can only guess what was really going on “behind the scenes” in each mirror of time caught here, each a window on the past, with the eternal freshness of a mirror. Were they thinking eternal truths or insipid platitudes? Probably some of each. Who among them really changed the world? They could only change it by changing the way the world saw itself. In these pictures, we see the part of them that watched the world. Some liked what they saw; others decidedly didn’t. Some tried to change it; some were totally consumed by their own private dramas. A few were activist, a few insurgent. Look at them and make up your own interpretation, as we have. After all, history is mostly a fiction made of the memory of sound and fury.

Writing history is a poetic endeavor, akin to astronomy, or its opposite. Looking through the wrong end of the telescope, scanning the past, we see the gesturing figures disappearing over the horizon, into the great night of time. Still, the great voices echo above the hubbub, and do not fade away.

—LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI

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Part One: Beginnings
(Costanoan Indians through 1910)

CALIFORNIA IMAGINED. "Know ye that on the right hand of the Indies there is an island called California, very near to the Terrestrial Paradise which is peopled with black women without any men among them, because they were accustomed to live after the fashion of the Amazons. They were of strong and hardy bodies, of ardent courage and great power. In this island called California, because of the great ruggedness of the country and the innumerable wild beasts that lived in it, there were many griffins such as were found in no other part of the world." So California was first imagined. This is from Garcí Ordóñez de Montalvo's prose adventure, *Las Sergas de Esplandián* (*The Exploits of Esplandian*), written in the late fifteenth century, many years before the Spanish voyagers encountered it on the plane of reality and marked it on charts as an island. That fictional land had no base metals, only gold and precious stones. The California women, led by Queen Calafia and armed with weapons of pure gold, besieged Constantinople with the griffins as a spectacular air force. They were fierce in combat, slew Christians and Moslems alike, and brought men back to their island.

When he translated Vasco de Lobeira's *Amadís de Gaula* (*Amadis of Gaul*) from Portuguese into Spanish, Montalvo attached his own tale to the sprawling romance of knight errantry, wildly popular in the sixteenth century. Today it is remembered as the book that inspired Cervantes's hero to take the name "Don Quixote de la Mancha" and embark on his immortal adventures. In fact, when the barber and the curate sort through Quixote's books in an attempt to root out the chivalric fantasies that afflicted their friend with madness, they spare *Amadís de Gaula*, "for it was the best of all the books of this kind"; however, Montalvo's story about Esplandián, "the legitimate son of Amadís," was the first to be tossed on the fire.

Magical islands, Amazons, fabulous beasts, and treasures were part of an ancient literary heritage; and early navigators fully expected to find the marvelous on their voyages. In 1493, Columbus reported learning of an island of women warriors on his way to the Indies. Later he claimed he had sailed in the vicinity of the Terrestrial Paradise, the literal Garden of Eden. It is almost certain that the California episode of

“submerged in poverty in Sinaloa.” When they reached Monterey, a few stayed; the rest continued on to a place described as “desolating the heart with unutterable gloom,” today the city of San Francisco. in 1776, the year the thirteen Atlantic colonies won their independence from England, the Mission of Saint Francis de Assís, or Dolores, was established on the barren dunes, a forlorn outpost of the Spanish empire. Father Francisco Palóu, “in the name of our sovereign amid many a cannon volley from land and sea and fusillades by the soldiers,” consecrated the Presidio on September 17, “the day being the festival of the Imprinting of the Stigmata of our Seraphic Father Saint Francis.”

Having resolved “to note down whatever has happened and may happen in this new Vineyard of the Lord,” Francisco Palóu (c. 1722–c. 1789) became San Francisco’s first writer. He and Junípero Serra had been inmates of the same religious house in La Palma, Mallorca. They came to America together and shared the rugged task of frontier conquest Palóu records in his biography of Serra, *Relación Histórica de la Vida y Apostólicas Tareas del Venerable Padre Fray Junípero Serra*, published in Mexico City in 1787. In promoting his friend for beatification, Palóu so embroidered upon Serra’s real achievements—distorting facts, slandering secular explorers, and supplying miracles—that this part of his book may be said to qualify as imaginative literature. Certainly his portrayal of the tough conquistador has perpetuated him as a falsely saccharine figure. But in all other respects, Palóu was a sharp observer and prodigious writer; his monumental chronicles (*Noticias de la Nueva California*), not limited to his nine-year stay in San Francisco, stand as the definitive record of the period.



“The Vision of Anza” by Walter Francis



Fr. Francisco Palóu

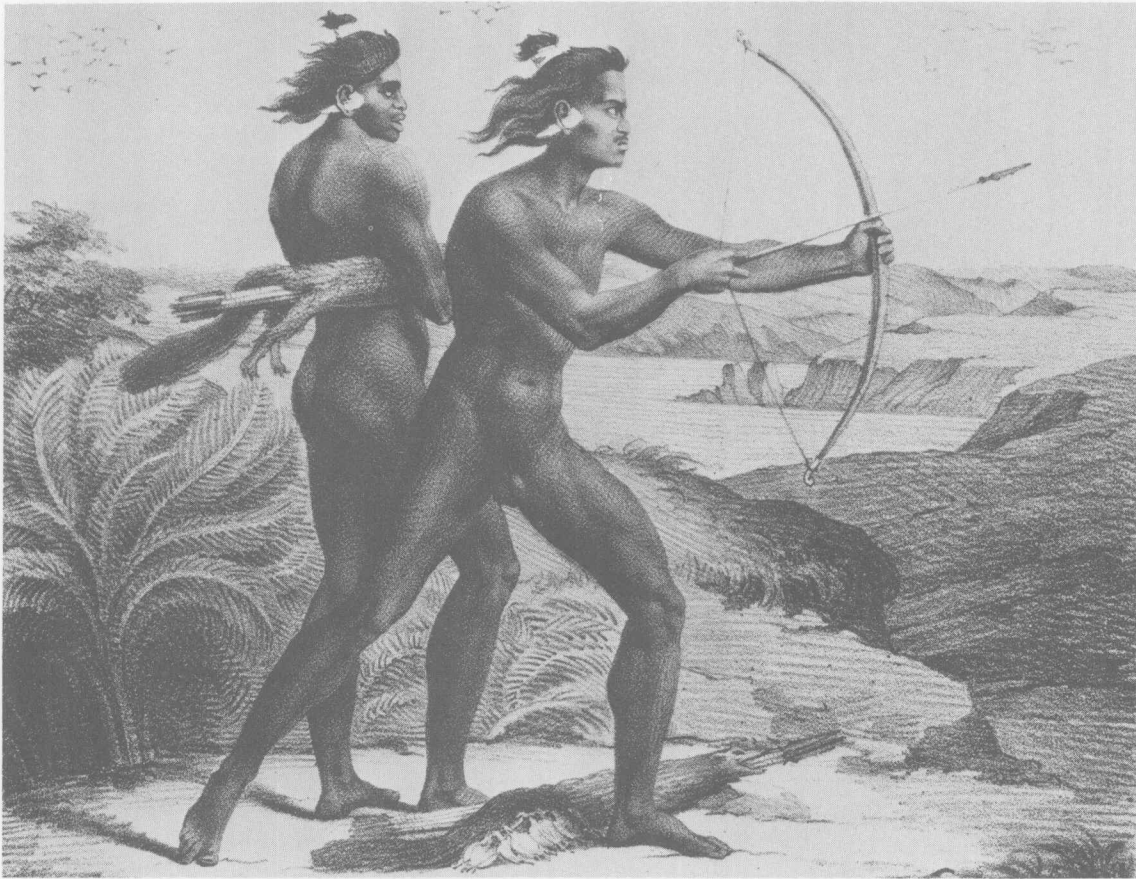


V. R. DEL V. P. F. JUNIPERO SERRA

*hijo de la S.^{ma} Prov.^a de N.^{ra} P.^a S.^{ta} Fran.^{co} de la Isla de Mallorca: D.^{ny} Exc.^o de S.^{to} Ofi.^o Mis.^o
 de S.^{to} Fern.^{do} de Alex.^o Fund.^{or} y Presid.^{ente} de las M.^{is} de la Calif.^a Septentr.^{al}— Murio
 en la forma de sant.^o en la Mis.^o de S. Carlos del Pu.^{erto} del N.^{ro} Monte-Rey a 2 S. de Ag.^{osto} de 1784
 edad de 70 a.^{os} 3 m.^{es} 14 d.^{ias} hab.^{iendo} gastado la mis.^{ma} de su vida en el exerci.^{cio} de Mis.^{ion} Apost.^{olica}*

This frontispiece of the original edition of Palóu's *Life of Junípero Serra*, the

earliest Californian book, has the macabre feeling of Goya's "black paintings."



"In the beginning, the world was covered with water except for the top of a mountain peak (Diablo). Coyote stood there alone. One day he saw a feather floating on the water, drifting towards him. Suddenly it arose. It turned into Eagle and flew to join him. Eagle and Coyote were alone but soon Hummingbird came. They were surrounded by water, so Eagle, carrying Humming-

bird and Coyote, flew to the Sierra de Gabilan. When the water receded, Eagle sent Coyote down the mountain to see if the world was dry yet. He told him to look in the river bed. Coyote found a beautiful young woman lying there. He married her and made her swallow a wood louse, and she gave birth to the first human beings."

—late recollection of a Costanoan myth

COYOTE VANISHES. Although Montalvo's griffins survive in the California condor, *pseudogryphus californianus*, the black Amazons failed to materialize, and the gold discovery was far in the future. Yet for thousands of years, a large population with a traditional oral literature had been living "very near to the Terrestrial Paradise." Of the approximately two hundred fifty thousand Cali-

fornia Indians, an estimated seven thousand lived on the San Francisco Peninsula. The Costanoans (Spanish *costaños*, coastal dwellers) were comprised of several linguistically associated groups—Ohlones, Ahwastes, Romonans, Tulomos, and Altatmos—that moved around within the region's tribal watersheds. They ate the venison, birds, acorns,



berries, fish, and shellfish abundant in the Bay Area; and they had an efficient technology. Authoritarian rule, work for its own sake, and oppressive religion were unknown to them before the Europeans arrived. They were a reasonably peaceable, egalitarian people who feasted, gambled, and danced and sang to the sun, to redwood trees, and to the spirits of the Bay. Louis Choris, the Russian-born artist who visited the Mission and the Presidio in 1816, saw the Costanoans as he has depicted them in these drawings.

The missions were to convert Indians, integrating them as peon labor into Spanish feudalism. The presidios, like Roman frontier forts, were to control the natives and protect settlements from aggressors. The Indians proved not to be pagan Innocents waiting to be subjected to Christ and Crown and soon revolted against cruel discipline, sexual repression, and hard agricultural labor on rocky soil. The missions extinguished a centuries-old economic and social life. Stripped of their language and identity, deprived of freedom, rounded

up by soldiers and kept under guard, the tribes at the Mission of Saint Francis, like other California Indians, died from European diseases and despair.

The Franciscans, at least, regarded them as human, if inferior, beings. After secularization of the missions (1834), in spite of courageous resistance, native Americans were robbed of their land and murdered by ruthless Anglo-American settlers and merchants. In 1850, the U.S. Indian agent was able to find in San Francisco a single Indian survivor, who told him, "I am all that is left of my people. I am alone."

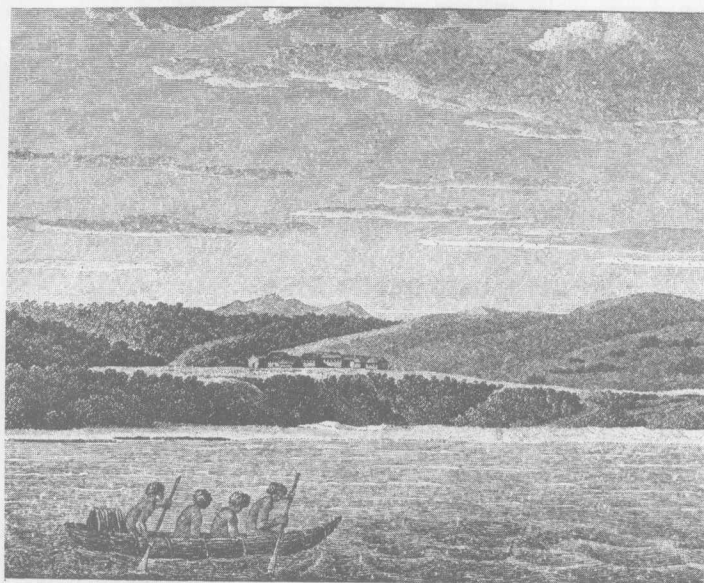
So thorough was the destruction of this ancient people, "dancing on the brink of the world," as a lyric line from one of their dance songs describes them, that almost nothing of their poetic vision survived—only a few fragments of coyote tales and this song, sung by Wood Rat when animals used human speech.

Ka istun xaluyaxe	I dream jump
Ka mas ictunine	I dream of you
werenaKai	rabbit
TceicaKai	jackrabbit
ekenaKai	quail

ROMANTIC INCURSIONS. Sir Francis Drake, plundering ships and cities to “anoy the King of Spain,” stopped at Drake’s Bay and points south in 1579. Chaplain Francis Fletcher, who wrote the narrative record of the *Golden Hind*’s voyage, was the first of many authors to complain of the area’s summer weather: “Wee were not without some danger by reason of the many extreme gusts and flawes that beate vpon vs, which if they ceased and were still at any time, immediately vpon their intermission there followed most uile, thicke and stynking fogges.”

But it wasn’t until the late eighteenth century, when conflicts among expanding colonial empires were well under way, that Europeans were drawn to California. Spain had made the first claim but had only a rudimentary hold on the sparsely populated territory. The Russians were moving down the coast, harvesting seals and otters; the English, French, and Americans were hunting the mythical Northwest Passage. In 1806, Georg Heinrich Langsdorff sailed to the Spanish settlement in San Francisco with Nicolai Rezanov, hoping to secure supplies for the struggling Russian colony in Sitka. Langsdorff’s *Voyages and Travels in Various Parts of the World* provided a romantic theme for generations of future writers.

Though the Spanish were suspicious of Russian intentions, the Presidio offered hospitality; and during their stay, Rezanov and the beautiful daughter of the commandant, fifteen-year-old Concepción Argüello, for reasons of state and of the heart, vowed to be wed. Rezanov set off to report to the Tsar and secure papal approval for the marriage, but he never returned. Concepción waited faithfully, then abandoned hope and entered a Dominican convent. Almost forty years later she learned Rezanov had died in the snows of Siberia before



ever reaching home. Bret Harte, Gertrude Atherton, and M. G. Vallejo’s granddaughter, Francisca McGettigan, wrote versions of the story; and on his 1972 trip to San Francisco, the Russian poet Andre Voznesensky researched an epic poem about the tragic lovers.

Three detailed diaries of the ship *Rurik*, which made an extended stop in the area (1816), furnish an extraordinary record of life at the Mission and Presidio; one by Otto von Kotzebue, ship’s captain and son of Goethe’s reactionary detractor; another by Louis Choris, the young artist whose beautiful drawings and paintings provide a rare visual record; the third by Adelbert von Chamisso, ship’s naturalist and botanist, better known as a romantic poet, creator of the legendary *Peter Schlemihl*, who sold his shadow to the devil.

This engraving of the San Francisco Presidio as it looked when Rezanov courted Doña Concepción was made from a drawing by an unidentified artist on that expedition.