

Edited by DENNIS HALE and JONATHAN EISEN

Tark Twain, Cesar Chavez, Andrew Kopkind, Thomas ynchon, Hunter Thompson, and twenty-five other erary live wires record their impressions of the West bast scene and those who've made it—from the Railbaders and the Forty-niners to Ronald Reagan and the Hippies: a vanguard or a nightmare?

THE
CALIFORNIA
DREAM

Edited by Dennis Hale and Jonathan Eisen



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THE CALIFORNIA DREAM

To the memory of Ambrose Bierce, who had the courage to leave.

"Come Stanford, let us sit at ease, And talk as old friends do. You talk of anything you please, But I will talk of you."

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A Word Before

"But I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally, she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before."

-The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

The temptation to run away to the West seems to trouble each generation of Americans, and ours is no exception. The promise of the West has always been the promise of escape, the chance to "light out" and start life all over, to be reborn. And of the western states, one seems to have kept that promise most faithfully. California has not only attracted the majority of the western immigrants, it has also attracted the most ambitious and the most dissatisfied. It is that land, and few others, that performs the magic of making "boosters" out of drifters; it is from there that the most extravagant reports are mailed to those left behind; and it is California that is rediscovered, about once every twenty years, by some happy (or loony) band of seekers who feel themselves extraordinarily lucky to have "found" such a marvelous place.

There is no denying California's attraction: descriptions of the state have always been lurid in the extreme, and most immigrants—and often chance passersby—have shown a remarkable willingness to become private tourist bureaus in order to attract even more immigrants and visitors. An early Spanish explorer wrote his king that California "was inhabited by robust dark women of great strength and warm hearts" who fought with

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weapons of gold, "and no other metal existed" in the land. Other reports told of "seven golden cities" and similar wonders. This alleged wealth attracted the interest of Spain, Great Britain, Russia, and Mexico, and California was for many years the point around which the great powers disputed their control of the New World. But each gave up when the reality failed to measure up to the expectation. The United States was about to begin her own exploration of California when gold was discovered, quite by chance, near Sacramento in 1848. Californians have been discovering treasures of every sort—both worldly and spiritual—ever since. The recent migration of thousands of young men and women fleeing conventional America is only the latest, and by no means the last invasion of a state whose motto is, appropriately, "Eureka, I have found it!"

California, as a hippy has put it, is a "whole new bag." That may, of course, be a self-fulfilling prophecy, born of the desire to escape and the state's tradition of discovery and innovation. Since California is as far as the seeker can go, he must decide either that he has found his Paradise, or wasted his time. The first is the more comforting illusion, and is supported by another characteristic of the state—its distance from the psychological center of America.

Most Americans are used to thinking of their country as lying within a triangle whose points are Chicago, Boston, and Miami, and of the rest as a sort of "ex-urb" lying on the periphery. California, especially, lies "away," across miles of unknown territory that most Americans (including many who live there) think of as a remote desert province of the East Coast. Beyond the plains, however, lies another land, and a curious mood of exile settles over the traveler from the East or Midwest as he crosses the Rockies and enters "this beautiful, sensuous Land of Mu by the Western Sea." It is easy to imagine why men thought they could get lost there. The frame of mind is suggested by one visitor, who remarked how odd it felt "to have the rest of the world over there [pointing toward China], rather than over there [pointing east]."

As air travel draws California closer, the psychological distance may diminish, as it certainly has, for example, between Europe and the East Coast. And as California grows closer to the "center" it may appear less alien, less bizarre; indeed, the conventional view that America will be tomorrow what California is today may be backwards: California may in fact be growing

more like the rest of the country. At first glance, anyway, the state is more conventional than the visitor has been led to expect. Here are the people, the cars, the supermarkets, the hotdog stands, the streets, the cracked sidewalks, the split-levels, the bouffant hairdos, and the neuroses one encounters everywhere in America.

But these are first impressions; after a while one notices something different about otherwise familiar objects: colors are deeper, metals are shinier, the air is cleaner, and the brilliant California sun seems to jump from every surface. Before long everyday scenes begin to look like Technicolor scenes. If the London fog can make the English "moody and introspective," what must the California sun do to the Californians? Certainly it was this infernal brightness that ruined the Beats: it is impossible to appear ashen and morose in California, even if one tries very hard.

The biggest surprise, however, is the people: no one believes in the "California dream" as intensely as the Californian. Conversations with a native reveal two things: first, that he believes California to be in some sense a "special" place requiring "special" rules; and second, that he is very conscious of being a Californian. Very few people are conscious of being Illinoisans or Dakotans, or even Texans or New Yorkers. But the Californian not only believes the ethos of his state, he lives it, and displays its main outlines in his everyday life. People "welcome" the visitor to California in precisely the same tone of voice used by a European greeting a tourist. They consider it your great good fortune to have arrived, and are doubly pleased if you agree.

Not everyone can consider his arrival in California to be a great good fortune. But because California is far away, both physically and psychologically, it has benefited from a process of self-selection that takes men who want to be far away and repels those who do not. The same process was at work on the earlier frontier—in Kentucky, for example—but in California it has continued steadily since the beginning of the nineteenth century. It will only begin to subside when technology diminishes the distance (and the differences) between California and the East.

Thus California was not simply the recipient of a mass migration, but of a certain type of migrant. The California-bound migrant was not fleeing religious or political persecution, and he did xiv A Word Before

not suffer, in most cases, from actual want. He was not a member of an oppressed minority group breaking out of servitude and seeking, for the first time, a fair and equal opportunity. He was, especially in the beginning, a failure, and he sought, not liberty, but a second chance.¹ The continent, to paraphrase Ambrose Bierce, tipped, and everything that was not tied down rolled westward. The result was a continual upheaval, a constant shifting of cultural authority and experience, created by all the hopeful millions who went to California in search of their undefined "Something."

Now, there are two problems in a society bent on finding "Something." The first is that people seldom find what they are looking for; and the second is that they are driven to keep trying even when all hope is gone. The first difficulty is obvious. People whose searches have gone unrewarded possess a special bitterness toward those whose searches have been (or might be) successful: no one hates the Negro more than the okie, because the Negro will be free when the okie is still a slave. California is infested with broken men who came looking for gold and never found it; Hollywood, as Nathanial West knew, is where the losers go to die, and California, the graveyard of western man.

The second difficulty is the crueler of the two, and is directly related to what might be called California's "youth cult." The "quest" has always been the special province of the young; but in California it is also the moral duty of the citizen, enshrined in the state's motto and implied by all of its history; it is his reason for being, or, at any rate, his reason for being in California. The command is therefore explicit: stay young. The old do not dream dreams, and they do not go on quests. They collect social security checks and get sick. A society bent on fulfilling a perpetual dream, individually or collectively, must reject the aged, the infirm, and the "old at heart"; but in so doing it must also reject, even obliterate, its own past. And since all men age, all men are condemned, and the useful years of life are reduced (according to the current schedule) to thirty. What Tocqueville said of America is true especially of the West, that "not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendents and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever upon himself alone and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart."

¹ Major and important exceptions are the Chinese and the Negroes.

To be sure, this cult of novelty and youth gets an able assist from nature: California induces men to dream great dreams partly because it is so pleasant. In such a world, what could come between man and the Holy Grail? Unlike New England or the earlier frontier, where men came to look upon the world as unremittingly hostile, California presents an environment that is, usually, quite congenial. It encourages grand enthusiasms and great projects. It is, therefore, a state where politics is given an exalted status. Politics is the art of doing: men, and governments, are expected to accomplish things, to prove their worth by fulfilling some dream or plan of action. Californians are said to be "extreme," but it is probably more accurate to say that they are simply excitable in a way most Americans are not. It is significant in this regard that only in California does an amateur "club" movement give serious competition to professional politicians. Because everyone takes politics seriously, a variant of the "priesthood of all believers" is applied to a profession that is elsewhere considered beneath contempt or beyond comprehension.

This may explain the oft-noted "fragmentation of power" in California: the absence of strong traditional authority, the chaotic ideologies, the unpredictable electorate. California politics is "up for grabs" in the literal meaning of that phrase; no one, it is thought, has as yet tied power down or fenced it in with privilege, and a state that encourages men to dream also urges them to organize and to act.

But it offers them no guidelines, no well-worn paths, no venerable authorities. Every man is his own authority. It is perhaps a coincidence, but interesting, nonetheless, that the drug cult is stronger in California than anywhere else. For LSD is perhaps the ultimate application of the Protestant notion that the believer must be his own priest, and interpret the scripture as he sees fit. The shaggy-haired freak, curled in a corner gazing at a candle and communing with the Deity, may seem an alien figure in the land of the Rand Corporation and the Freeway. But if you listen very carefully you will hear him intoning an ancient and honorable, indeed, an official liturgy: "Eureka, Eureka. I Have Found It!"

But LSD is neither the beginning nor the end of our story. *The California Dream* begins with a chapter on what California was and how it got that way; Chapter II examines the formal politics of the state, past and present. Chapter III presents a discussion of Southern California, a subject (some say a state) all by itself.

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The final chapter is a collection of "life styles," ranging from the

mildly bizarre to the totally insane.

We would like to thank the people who helped us put this book together: Jerry Berman and Fred and Allison Kettering, for giving the editors a place to stay and for explaining some otherwise mysterious things; the Bancroft Library at Berkeley, for being such a good library; and finally, Alice Hale and Pat Finlay for advice, assistance, and general encouragement.

DENNIS HALE
JONATHAN EISEN

New York City February, 1968

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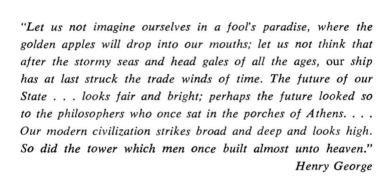
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CHAPTER I



HISTORY AND ANTECEDENTS



California: Notes of a Native Son* WILSON CAREY MC WILLIAMS

ORMALLY, NATURE is mild in California, and the Pacific Ocean deserves its name. Yet the calm is deceptive: nature in California is neurotic, its apparent stability a mask for anguish and anxiety; drought and fire are her most frequent aggressions, but earthquake her constant menace. There is not a Californian who cannot tell you, with a certain perverse pride, where the faults run and which buildings will be likely to go in the next tremor.

The Pacific itself washes over an abruptly falling shelf, which may account both for its seeming "pacifism" and for the ominous feelings it provokes in the mind of the observer. Frost looked "Once by the Pacific" and saw a "night of dark intent." The phrase tells much. The regional literature of New England and the South, dark and gloomy and preoccupied with sin, arouses anxiety about the crimes of the past, ravening in the soul of man. The Pacific, by contrast, especially California's Pacific, arouses fears of man's intent, his dreams and his future, rather than his passions and his past.

California is a land of sepulchral visions; it calls up nightmares of human degeneration and extinction. Huxley saw them in the masses of condoms, flotsam from the Los Angeles sewers, washed up on the beaches of the South. Nathanial West felt the rage of "cheated men," with "fevered minds and emaciated bodies," furious

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