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Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *Rush to Gold: The French and the California Gold Rush, 1848-1854*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013. xii + 342 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$40.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-300-18140-1.

Review by André M. Flèche, Castleton State College.

In recent years, the growing trend toward transnational history has prompted calls from historians to situate the American past in a global context. This new international perspective has led scholars to reconsider some of the most iconic moments in U.S. history. The California Gold Rush has been no exception. It has become increasingly commonplace to note that the Gold Rush was an international event. Many textbooks now point out that news of the gold strike at Sutter's Mill spread as quickly to Mexico, Peru, Chile, and China, as it did to the East Coast of the United States. Still, few historians have thoroughly examined the impact that the Gold Rush had abroad. Malcolm Rohrbough breaks new ground by examining the role that the Gold Rush played in French history. In *Rush to Gold*, Rohrbough, author of a highly-regarded general history of the Gold Rush, this time tells the tale of California gold primarily from the perspective of France and the French. With the aid of extensive research in French archives, he thoroughly describes the response of the French people and the French government to the news of American gold, often skillfully tracing the journeys of ordinary individuals from France to California and then back again. Rohrbough's work makes it quite clear that the California Gold Rush was an important event in the history of not only one, but at least two countries, the United States and France.

Rohrbough begins his book with the assumption that the Gold Rush was a global event. "The series of events that we refer to as the California Gold Rush," he writes, "captured the attention of peoples and governments around the world" (p. 2). Within two years of the strike at Sutter's Mill, he notes, news of the discovery of gold had reached most nations around the globe. Rohrbough argues that most countries responded according to "local interest," with some suppressing the news and others encouraging it (p. 1). France was one country in which the news of the discovery of gold elicited a vigorous response among private individuals and government authorities alike. Rohrbough argues that the imperial ambitions of the French government, the desire for increased trade among the nation's merchants, and dreams of prosperity among average French citizens all combined to ensure that the French would participate actively in the events unfolding in California.

Rohrbough divides his book into five alternating parts, each of which is set in either France or California. In part one, Rohrbough examines the "pushes" and "pulls" that led the French to participate in the Gold Rush. The news from Sutter's Mill first arrived in France in the late autumn of 1848, as a year of revolutionary turmoil was coming to a close. Rohrbough argues that a stagnant rural economy and the failure of the revolution to address the hopes of the most liberal revolutionaries created an environment in which emigration might prove attractive. The French press, he shows, first reacted to the news with suspicion of American exaggeration and "puff." Doubts, however, quickly gave way to enthusiasm. Within a short time, many newspapers were filled with stories of the wondrous effects that the discovery of gold had produced in California, including "the disappearance of a servant class" and the "rise in wages to extraordinary levels for the most menial kind of work" (p. 29). French citizens

responded with enthusiasm, as individuals prepared to set out to find their fortunes, and dozens of companies sought investors to fund operations that would profit off the Rush, either by mining gold or selling French products to California miners. Rohrbough concludes his first section with a chapter presenting compelling stories of ordinary people preparing for departure by securing passports, raising or borrowing funds, and planning journeys, either by going alone or travelling as members of a company.

Rohrbough's second section shifts the scene to the Americas. He describes the long journey to California, which either rounded Cape Horn or crossed the Isthmus of Panama. He then discusses the experiences of the French forty-niners as they landed in San Francisco, journeyed to the mines, found work, or staked a claim for themselves. In general, Rohrbough allows individual Frenchmen to speak for themselves, piecing together evidence from letter collections and published accounts to tell the stories of ordinary men and women. His findings demonstrate that the French experience in California varied, as some men failed, some earned a reasonable living in the mines, and others took up other occupations in San Francisco. Very few of the French forty-niners, however, found the quick, easy fortune they had expected.

By 1850, despite the varying fortunes of the first French migrants, gold fever had taken hold at all levels of French society, as Rohrbough shows in his third section. He describes a second wave of business activity in France, as new companies formed, some of which planned to branch out into banking and real estate. The government itself also joined the Rush by launching a bizarre scheme to raise money through a national lottery to fund the voyages of "deserving" Frenchmen to America. The "Lottery of the Golden Ingots," as it was called, commanded attention and excitement throughout France for more than a year. Rohrbough also includes a chapter reviewing French stories and images of California, which were disseminated throughout the country in humor magazines and works of fiction.

Rohrbough returns to the gold fields in his fourth section, which includes rich chapters describing the lives and careers of the French miners in America, the treatment they received at the hands of the Americans, and the arrival of the last wave of gold-seekers, most of whom had been shipped at government expense. Rohrbough finds that though, by the early fifties, many French observers "had agreed that California was a wonderful place to make money," few had found unequivocal success (p. 177). Many Frenchmen found assimilation particularly difficult. Because most miners had planned to return to France after finding a quick fortune, few learned English. In San Francisco, some found decent livelihoods selling French imports or working in restaurants, hotels, brothels, and saloons, but many companies failed, especially because they had not expected to pay tariffs on French goods. In the mines, conditions proved even more challenging. The French complained about the unexpected difficulty of the work, the high cost of living, and the scarcity of female companionship. They found the rough frontier democracy that passed for government in the camps to be confusing and often oppressive for minorities. The increasingly xenophobic behavior of the Americans proved even more troubling. American miners made several attempts to evict foreigners from the gold fields, and in 1850 the California legislature passed a tax on foreign miners. The Americans, the French soon learned, "were in the process of creating an empire" and "expansionist" tendencies formed "the striking feature of American behavior" (p. 201).

By 1854, Rohrbough concludes in his final section, most of the French forty-niners had returned home. They returned with stories to last a lifetime, but, in most cases, with empty pockets. Still, Rohrbough argues, the legacy of the Gold Rush lived on in France for many years. A wave of lawsuits followed the collapse of many of the California companies. The experiences of the French in California provided material for writers and novelists, including Alexandre Dumas. At the same time, the impulse that had led Frenchmen to California led to further imperialist ventures in Mexico and elsewhere. All in all, Rohrbough demonstrates that the California Gold Rush set forces in motion that reached far beyond the borders of the United States.

Rohrbough's work has much to commend it. Most importantly, *Rush to Gold* should provide a model to follow for practitioners of transnational social history. The work is grounded in extensive archival research in both English and French-language sources. The most compelling evidence comes from the rich collections of letters written by French miners that Rohrbough reviewed. Rohrbough pieced together the stories of ordinary individuals with amazing success, allowing him to follow their experiences in both France and California. Though *Rush to Gold* tells us most about the impact of an American event in the history of the French nation, Rohrbough's work also reveals quite a bit about American history. His chapter on the interaction between the French and the American miners does an especially fascinating job of showing how Americans sorted out the meaning of empire amidst diversity. Rohrbough at times also usefully contextualizes the French experience in California by making reference to France's imperialist ambitions in Algeria and Mexico. Though the work might have made even more of France's longstanding interest and involvement in Mexico, which would culminate in Napoleon III's attempt to revive a "Latin" empire in the Americas only a decade after the end of the Gold Rush, Rohrbough effectively makes the point that involvement in California should be viewed as part of the wider imperialist ambitions of both France and the United States. *Rush to Gold* also provides a fantastic resource for those who wish to do further research into the relationship between France and the United States during the mid-nineteenth century.

Rohrbough's work covers French engagement with the Gold Rush in incredible detail. It identifies dozens of French companies, individuals, writers, and newspaper editors that commented on California or were involved with the Gold Rush. Rohrbough thoroughly analyzes the positions many French periodicals took on California, America, and Americans. It is not hard to imagine that the sources he identifies might yield insights on a variety of other topics.

Rush to Gold is accessibly written and thoroughly researched. It contributes to our understanding of both the history of France and the history of the United States. It provides a groundbreaking transnational history of the Gold Rush, and it employs an approach that might be emulated by future researchers. *Rush to Gold* should find a wide audience among students and scholars alike.

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