



## Opening Up the Blue-Grass State

*JAMES HARROD OF KENTUCKY.* By Kathryn Harrod Mason. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press. 266 pp. \$4.

By THOMAS D. CLARK

THE PERIOD in American frontier history from 1750-1790 is a fertile one for the biographer. Few of the major figures of this era have had good biographies written about them in spite of the fact that their times were exciting, they were colorful, and their records are in existence. Among these neglected figures was James Harrod, who played an important role in scouting along the Ohio and the settlement of Kentucky. In time his settlement, the first in Kentucky, was to become famous as a central base of frontier operation. It was at Harrod's Town that Virginia planted its feet firmly west of the mountains, and it was there that the first step was taken to force Judge Richard Henderson's rival Transylvania Colony out of existence. Harrod was a Pennsylvanian but his settlers were largely Virginians, and he cared nothing for the state rivalries which prevailed between Virginia and Pennsylvania. His interest was good land, and this he found in abundance on the rich plain south of the Kentucky River.

Harrod began his settlement in 1774 but his activities were interrupted by the outbreak of Dunmore's War, and it was not until the next year that he was actually able to make a permanent beginning. In early summer of that year George Rogers Clark reached the Harrod settlement from Pennsylvania and the upper Ohio country. Clark became interested in the possibilities of owning some of the rich land, the rivalry between Harrod's Town and Boonesboro, and Judge

Henderson's intentions. Within a year he had developed a movement which was to dissolve the imperial dreams of the latter, and had set the settlers' feet on the road to ultimate statehood. Before this could occur, however, there was to be a bitter struggle to maintain the white man's foothold against the British and Indian raiders. For seven years the fight was to be an intensive one, in which a most impressive chapter in American pioneering was to be written.

Throughout the whole troubled period of the American Revolution and the arduous period of settling the new country James Harrod was an active figure. He was a natural leader of men, and he possessed real ability for the task which he performed. Harrod was not a brilliant military leader, nor did he display any noticeable political ability. He was a calm, trustworthy man on whom panic-stricken pioneers could depend when their very doors were beset by destruction. Harrod was never as exciting a figure as Daniel Boone, never as good a woodsman as Simon Kenton, nor the leader that Clark was, but, even so, he was as resourceful as they.

Kathryn Harrod Mason had a fit subject for her biography, but she has dealt with him in a less than definitive fashion. Covering a complex period of American history, the author succeeds in bringing not only James but William, Samuel, and all the other Harrods to the fore. She makes the mistake of trying to revolve the times around her subjects rather than modestly to submerge her subjects in their exciting backgrounds.

In placing a secondary figure of history in the midst of so complex a stage as the American frontier the biographer is apt to overemphasize his importance. In handling her de-

tails Mrs. Mason has failed frequently to tell her reader that she has gone from the specific to the general, and when the meticulous reader tries to check her facts he finds that perhaps she has not overshot her general history but she has perverted it by making it apply specifically to Harrod. A good example is her description of Harrod's wedding. Any frontier historian will recognize her account as being the one given by Joseph Doddridge in his famous "Notes" and certainly not as that of Harrod and Ann Coburn. There are other places where the author, though not in general error about what happened, is specifically so by trying to place her subject in the forefront of events.

Mrs. Mason writes with a charming style and she catches much of the spirit of the frontier. Her interpretation of the subject is somewhat akin to the modern musician's attempt to zip up an old folk tune with a little dash of swing. For her the frontier was a romantic place where the inert factor of geography was of little importance. She sometimes places towns at the wrong places; for instance, it will not help a Nashvillian's blood pressure much when he finds that his town is located on the Tennessee River. Nevertheless, the research in this volume was among good sources, and Mrs. Mason's footnotes indicate how far from lost a frontiersman like James Harrod really is to his generation.

The Louisiana University Press has done a splendid job of bookmaking. A considerable amount of pains and money was spent on the maps, which are so necessary to making a book of this type mean something to the reader. In publishing this volume the Southern Biography Series has entered both a new period and area of interest.

Thomas D. Clark is professor of history at the University of Kentucky. His books include "The Kentucky," in the *Rivers of America Series*, "Simon Kenton, Kentucky Scout," and "Pills, Petticoats, and Ploughs."

## Gold Rush Politics

A SELF-GOVERNING DOMINION: CALIFORNIA, 1849-1860. By William Henry Ellison. Berkeley: University of California Press. 335 pp. \$4.50.

By ROBERT G. CLELAND

THIS, THE FOURTH volume in the University of California Press's *Chronicles of California*, deals with the first eleven or twelve years of the state's political history, a period that began, thanks to the huge increase of population and the resultant confusion caused by the Gold Rush, with a government that was "part military and part civil and part no government at all" and ended with California's final acceptance of her destiny as a state in the American Union.

The central idea of the book is clearly expressed in the author's preface: "Throughout the Fifties the people of California, as a result of either their own efforts or the operation of historical forces, were a people unto themselves. In a broad sense the state sought to be, or by fortuitous circumstances came to be, a self-governing dominion."

In support of this thesis Professor Ellison reviews at some length such familiar subjects as the establishment of self-government in California, the work of the Constitutional Convention of 1849, the remarkable accomplishments of the first legislature (humorously but misleadingly called the "Legislature of a Thousand Drinks"), California's admission to the Union, the supremely important and supremely complicated issue of land

titles and land ownership, the tragic neglect and exploitation of the California Indians, the frequently proposed separation of Northern and Southern California, the popular administration of justice—or "Judge Lynch in the Mother Lode Country and in San Francisco"—the activities of the San Francisco Vigilance Committee of 1856 (which the author calls a "Businessman's Revolution"), the rivalry of Gwin and Broderick in the Fifties, and the factors that revived the old dream of a "Pacific Republic" on the eve of the Civil War.

The book reveals the author's comprehensive knowledge of government documents, the works of contemporary writers, and secondary authorities dealing with the period. He has consulted a few newspapers but made virtually no use of manuscript sources. Some of Professor Ellison's conclusions are open to debate, and one regrets that he failed to discuss such relevant items as the origin of the idea of the Pacific Republic, the grave and long-continued problem of law and order in Southern California, and the various filibustering movements that spawned so freely in the "Self-Governing Dominion" of California.

The volume as it stands, however, makes a very real contribution to our understanding of an important, frequently ignored, and sometimes grossly misinterpreted phase of California history. It is written in a clear, readable style and is printed by a press that knows how to make good books.

Robert G. Cleland, a member of the research staff of the Huntington Library, is the author of *"California in Our Time," "California Pageant,"* and other books.

## The Desert's Charm

THE LAND OF LITTLE RAIN. By Mary Austin. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 133 pp. \$6.

By OLIVER LA FARGE

MARY AUSTIN'S "The Land of Little Rain" is a minor but real classic which, in the last twenty years or so, sank into obscurity behind the changing vogue. No writer ever seems so *vieux jeu* as during the period of taste next following that in which he flourished; the next man's crest is for him the deepest hollow of the wave. In time, new periods arise always less antagonistic to the older ones, and good work rises again, oscillating gradually towards its permanent position.

That Mary Austin may be reaching the end of a long, dry cycle such as her deserts know so well is suggested by the present handsome republication of one of her earliest and finest books, reinforced and filled out by Ansell Adams's splendid photographs. I hope so. There may be moments when Miss Austin lingers a trifle too long over a trifle, she may be sometimes seduced by the recondite word or even the awkwardly coined one, or by distorted word-orders, all rather faults of her period, but by nature she was a vigorous, direct, compact, prose writer with the gift of telling simplicity. At its best her prose is timeless. And she has a great deal to say, as worth hearing now as when first she said it.

In "The Land of Little Rain" she took what is generally looked upon as the most God-forsaken desolation in the whole United States and revealed not only its beauty and power, but its intimacy and its charm. To enjoy the howling desert in detail and without discomfort, there is no method of travel as satisfactory as via this book.

It is years since I have read it. Re-reading, I found it fresh and strong, and often genuinely exciting. I would point out, simply as samples of the best, the author's compact, economical treatment of the Pocket Hunter's strange experience with the mountain sheep, and her apparently casual but really artful treatment of the killing of Winnenap, the medicine man. Many writers would have been unable to resist the temptation to elaborate and spoil; very few could have achieved such perfect effects within so exact a compass.

Ansel Adams's photographs deserve discussion by a reviewer better qualified than I. Placed in a separate section, they do not annoy the reader when his mind's eye is busy making

