

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



its own pictures from the text. They are not illustrations, but sensitively related to the spirit of the writing and genuinely complementary to the passages to which they refer. Mr. Adams was exactly the right person to make this addition to Miss Austin's words.

The introduction by Carl Van Doren is superior to most introductions. He has expressed a difficult thing well—the thing everyone who knew her felt in Miss Austin, that more even than a writer, she was a personality of great force. The personality informed her writing, perhaps also it limited it. She was almost two people in one, one might say. But it would be foolish to say further, stumblingly, when Mr. Van Doren has said it exactly and well.

The publishers have done a service in re-issuing "The Land of Little Rain" in so handsome a form and with such distinguished accoutrements.

Oliver La Farge, author of the Pulitzer Prize novel "Laughing Boy," has long been a resident of New Mexico, Mary Austin's country.

Art of the Frontier

THE WEST OF ALFRED JACOB MILLER. Notes by Alfred Jacob Miller and an account by Marvin C. Ross. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press. 200 pp. 200 illus. \$10.

By J. FRANK DOBIE

IN 1837 Captain William Drummond Stewart was about to inherit Birnam Wood, Murthly Castle, a title, and other appurtenances to a great estate in Scotland. He had already made several expeditions across the plains of buffaloes and wild horses and into the Rockies of trapper rendezvous, Indians (comely young women as well as wild riders), grizzlies, clear waters, and everlasting vastness. All of this and more had become a part of his being. He desired to take what he could of it for keeping in his castle. On this climactic expedition his wagons hauled, as usual, port wine along with other comforts and necessities, but now an artist rode with the outfit.

Alfred Jacob Miller was his name. He was a native of Baltimore and had spent two of his twenty-six years studying art in Europe. His employer taught him how to stake a horse, to keep one eye open for Indians while he sketched, and the techniques of shooting and camping. He made sketches and painted in water colors
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Fiction. With the exception of Martha Foley's discriminating selection from magazine writing, "The Best American Short Stories of 1951," marked this year by the prevailing notes of confusion and despair, the fiction reviewed this week is entertaining rather than serious or morbid in intent. In "Swanson," Timothy Pember, an English novelist, provides an adroit satire of California academic life in the person of a placid professor of English who is unjustly jailed as a sex offender and who discovers after his fall from grace that there are varieties of human experience of which he has never dreamed. There is old-time Southern melodrama and folklore in Robert Ramsey's "The Mockingbird" observed through the eyes of a Tennessee boy of eighty years ago. Jean Matheson's "The Cistern and the Fountain" is the story of a group of eccentric and amusing Scotch people who live together in penurious elegance, valiantly breaking any law that inconveniences them in their progress toward futility, and showing a basic goodness of heart.

At the Core of the Times

SWANSON. By Timothy Pember. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 280 pp. \$3.

By MARTIN LEVIN

AT THE OUTSET, "Swanson" seems to be another tired British lampoon of the vulnerable Ameddicans—another glib tour-de-force à la "The Loved One." But after the first few chapters it becomes evident that Mr. Pember's observations are based on something more than a quick look at Times Square and Sunset Boulevard. There is corrosive satire in "Swanson" but not of the externals which strike the literary tourist. Though the locale of "Swanson" is California, no mention is made of the quaint burial customs of the natives, or of their fondness for nutburgers. Mr. Pember is not concerned with surface caricature but rather with the essentials of character and experience. And he manages to retain sufficient human sympathy to make the objects of his satire highly credible.

The namesake of Mr. Pember's novel is a professor of English at a California university. Until a crucial June afternoon, the tenor of his life has been reasonably placid. Then, through one of those farcical imbroglios that have delighted satirists since Fielding, he finds himself jailed as a sex offender on the complaint of an over-imaginative landlady. In sixty days he goes from belletrist to jailbird. Upon emerging from the county prison, ex-Professor Swanson finds that a number of familiar things have disappeared, including his career, his friends, and his social status. His attempts at regeneration seem about to result in a better life, when

fate and his own limitations again collaborate to trap him.

Mr. Pember's compassion extends to the villains as well as to the hero of his piece. The department head who fires Swanson with regret but without hesitation, the trusted friend who greases the chute for his exit from the university: these worthies are delineated with genuine insight. Like Swanson himself, they are hemmed in by circumstance. The final note of hopelessness is all the more flattening because it depends on no one in particular, but stems from the nature of the world Mr. Pember has depicted.

This world has a duality in which the line of demarcation is drawn by Humphrey Swanson's fall from grace. Like one of Sherwood Anderson's foot-loose heroes, he leaves a milieu where his status is certain but circumscribed for one where he is freer to follow his instincts. One sphere is restricted by propriety and conventions; the other is moved only by the more fundamental human drives. In his new status, Swanson discovers several new kinds of human misery as well as a deeper variety of human experience.

Mr. Pember's talents are unusual in that they include both a facility for adroit satire and the ability to endow the commonplace with an almost lyrical quality. His descriptions of the skid-row existence that Swanson leads after he leaves the university again put one in mind of Anderson, both in their mellow tone and in their preoccupation with the virtues of simple people. Unlike most satirists, Mr. Pember has a story to tell rather than an axe to grind. In "Swanson," he has depicted the rocky progress through society of a man in search of his identity.