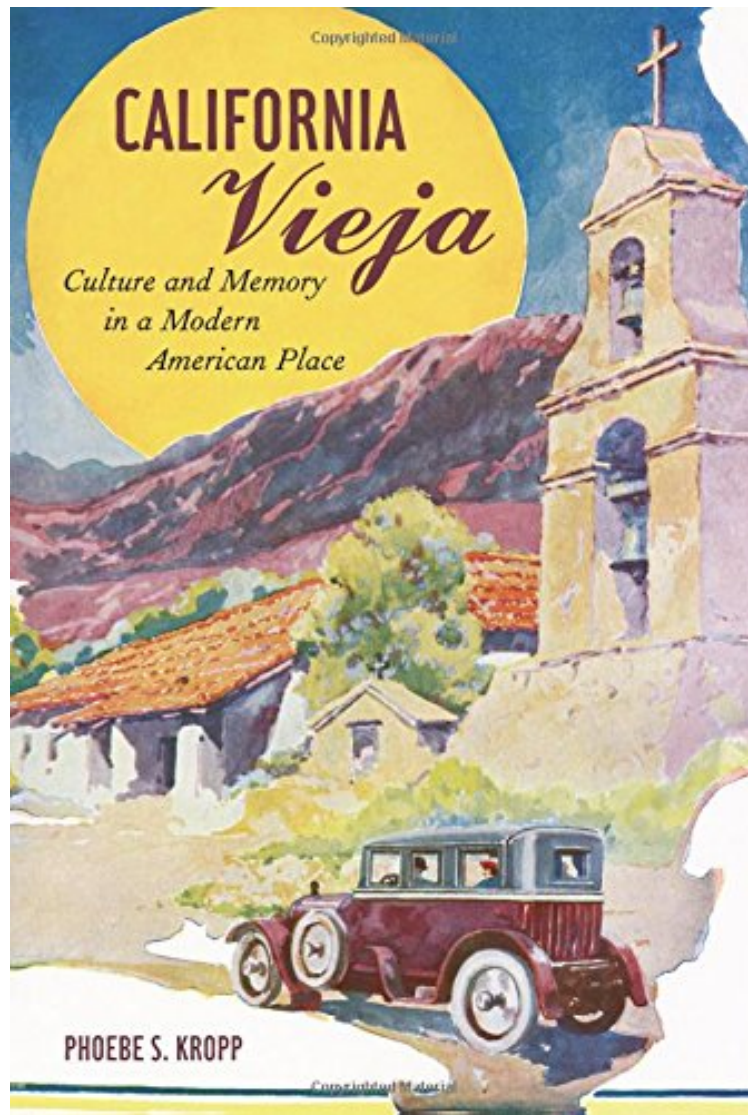


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California Vieja: Culture and Memory in a Modern American Place

Phoebe S. Kropp

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Journal of American History March 2007
California Vieja: Culture and Memory in a Modern American Place. By Phoebe S. Kropp. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006. XX, 364 pp. Cloth, \$39.95, ISBN 0-520-24364-1.) Phoebe S. Kropp's elegant examination of California's built environment from 1880 to the recent past is nothing less than a tour de force of American social and cultural history. It offers deep engagement with the production of history and memory in the nation's most important state. Like the eminent critic Carey McWilliams, Kropp convincingly addresses the Golden State's most vexing cultural dynamic: the simultaneous promoting of Spanish colonial and Native American heritage, finding of security amid modernity in nostalgic commercial traditions, and disdaining of both American Indians and ethnic Mexicans. In six thematic chapters, Kropp highlights four nationally renowned venues in which this schizoid heritage took physical form: the promotion of the El Camino Real and preservation of the California missions; the San Diego Panama-California Exposition of 1915-1916; the development of the racially exclusive and faux-Spanish suburb of Rancho Santa Fe; and the ersatz historical restoration of Olvera Street in Los Angeles. In the end, Kropp believes that rosy, boosterish efforts were not benign commercial garnishments of Spanish and Indian history. The rise of Spanish "fantasy heritage" speaks to deeper concerns where "memory places are sites of cultural production and venues for struggles over public space, racial politics, and citizenship" in America (p. 15). Kropp firmly places the categories of race, class, and gender in the heart of the California built environment and memory promotion efforts. National fascination with fantasy heritage is usually credited to Charles Fletcher Lummis and George Wharton James, yet the author shows that women and women's organizations stood at the center of that romantic crusade. Similarly, nostalgic architecture and restoration promoters emerge as key memory promoters of Anglo racial succession, racially restrictive suburban covenants, and demeaning racial stereotypes of ethnic Mexicans. On the problem of marrying history to place, Kropp believes that "Olvera Street cultivated this fractional public but at the same time appeared to represent the whole of Southern California. This is why the acclamation of it as pure public space is troubling" (p. 259). The argument unifying *California Vieja*, therefore, emerges from the problem of connecting history to public space in the format of commercialized heritage. The prodigious research and conceptual framing of *California Vieja* is a major accomplishment in California and western history, and the book exhibits few weaknesses, related only to critical temperament. The focus on commercial heritage promotion can be reductive at times, unable to capture the complexity of motivations, sentiments, and interests bound together in the invention of tradition. Certainly, McWilliams believed invented traditions may lead to a social democratic politics. Equally so, Kropp's argument that ethnic Mexicans and Native Americans probably cannot transform the understanding of history in public places might leave some readers asking, "well, why not?" Readers who might want simply to slap the "regional" label on *California Vieja* will be disappointed. Kropp integrates wider theoretical discussions found in European and American historiography and social theory. The author's impressive grasp of foundational *Annales* school work in mnemonic studies, especially the work of Maurice Halbwachs, and the recent work in studies of nationalism and cosmopolitanism is notable. *California Vieja* also brings the concerns of northeastern urban studies and southern history to the task of studying memory and the built environment in the West. Elegantly written, well-illustrated, and fair in its judgements, *California Vieja* is for anyone interested in social and ethnic history, the built environment, urban planning, architecture, tourism, and California and western history.

The characteristic look of Southern California, with its red-tiled roofs, stucco homes, and Spanish street names suggests an enduring fascination with the region's Spanish-Mexican past. In this engaging study, Phoebe S. Kropp reveals that the origins of this aesthetic were not solely rooted in the Spanish colonial period, but arose in the early twentieth century, when Anglo residents recast the days of missions and ranchos as an idyllic golden age of pious padres, placid Indians, dashing caballeros and sultry señoritas. Four richly detailed case studies uncover the efforts of Anglo boosters and examine the responses of Mexican and Indian people in the construction of places that gave shape to this cultural memory: El Camino Real, a tourist highway following the old route of missionaries; San Diego's world's fair, the Panama-California Exposition; the architecturally- and racially-restricted suburban hamlet Rancho Santa Fe; and Olvera Street, an ersatz Mexican marketplace in the heart of Los Angeles. *California Vieja* is a compelling demonstration of how memory can be more than nostalgia. In Southern California, the Spanish past became a catalyst for the development of the region's built environment and public culture, and a civic narrative that still serves to marginalize Mexican and Indian residents.

Excellent and well-researched. . . . Enthralling.