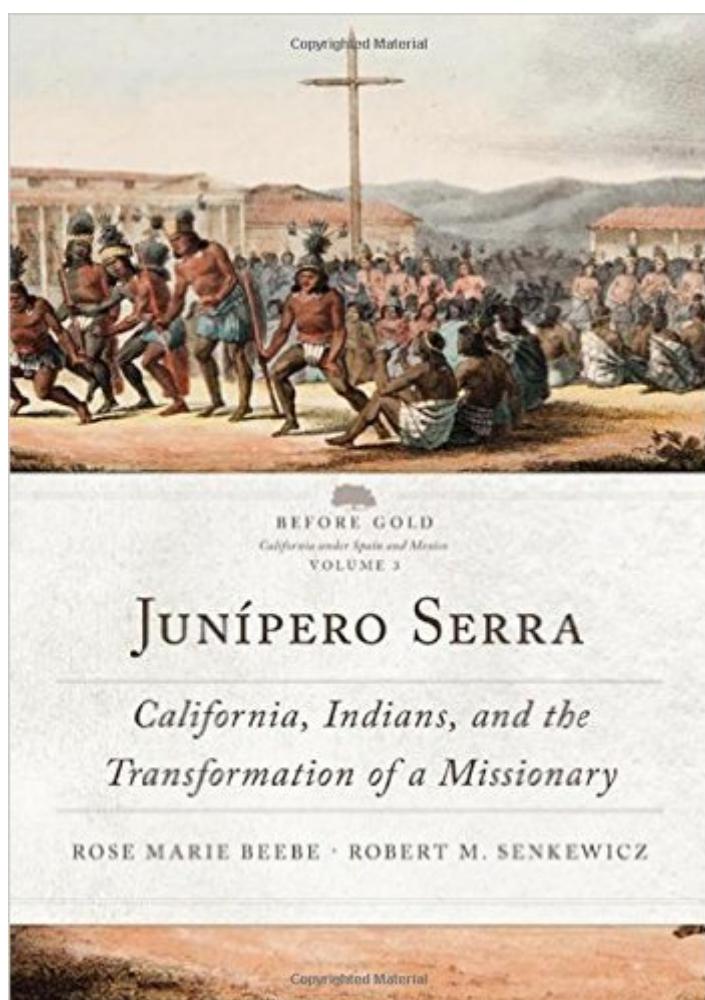


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Junípero Serra: California, Indians, And The Transformation Of A Missionary (Before Gold: California Under Spain And Mexico Series)



Synopsis

Franciscan missionary friar Junípero Serra (1713–1784), one of the most widely known and influential inhabitants of early California, embodied many of the ideas and practices that animated the Spanish presence in the Americas. In this definitive biography, translators and historians Rose Marie Beebe and Robert M. Senkewicz bring this complex figure to life and illuminate the Spanish period of California and the American Southwest. In *Junípero Serra: California, Indians, and the Transformation of a Missionary*, Beebe and Senkewicz focus on Serra's religious identity and his relations with Native peoples. They intersperse their narrative with new and accessible translations of many of Serra's letters and sermons, which allows his voice to be heard in a more direct and engaging fashion. Serra spent thirty-four years as a missionary to Indians in Mexico and California. He believed that paternalistic religious rule offered Indians a better life than their oppressive exploitation by colonial soldiers and settlers, which he deemed the only realistic alternative available to them at that time and place. Serra's unwavering commitment to his vision embroiled him in frequent conflicts with California's governors, soldiers, native peoples, and even his fellow missionaries. Yet because he prevailed often enough, he was able to place his unique stamp on the first years of California's history. Beebe and Senkewicz interpret Junípero Serra neither as a saint nor as the personification of the Black Legend. They recount his life from his birth in a small farming village on Mallorca. They detail his experiences in central Mexico and Baja California, as well as the tumultuous fifteen years he spent as founder of the California missions. Serra's Franciscan ideals are analyzed in their eighteenth-century context, which allows readers to understand more fully the differences and similarities between his world and ours. Combining history, culture, and linguistics, this new study conveys the power and nuance of Serra's voice and, ultimately, his impact on history.

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Customer Reviews

I am a huge fan of Rose Marie Beebe and Robert M. Senkewicz and have read many of their works on early California history including the translated History of Alta California by Antonio Maria Osio and the Lands of Promise and Despair. This book was so different in style from their earlier works I question whether they had full editorial control over the publication. It may be that it is targeted to a wider audience than those interested in early California history but it has the feel of something that was rushed to publication for the canonization announcement and isn't up to the standard of their earlier works. As members of the faculty of a Jesuit institution they have always had some deference to the Jesuit contribution to the founding of the California missions starting with Loreto in Baja California by Juan Maria de Salvatierra. It seems there could have been many more references to their own works which cover many of the same topics and time periods. I counted only two insignificant references to their prior work. Certainly some explanation of the Jesuit expulsion should have been included for it had a catastrophic affect on the missions as documented in their own previous works. It was the expulsion of Jesuits that required the recruitment of Junipero Serra to continue the work the Jesuits had begun in Baja California into Alta California. In terms of style there is a description of the letter followed by the translation of the letter which resulted in a redundancy that became annoying. This technique was used throughout the book and was never employed in their previous works.

I knew little of Fr Serra and the little I did know was of the controversies surrounding his life and ministry in the context of his impending canonization. I do know a fair bit about missiology, the study of mission. This book has drawbacks but I think it is an absolutely penetrating study of the ambiguity of mission done in the shadow of the colonial project. Christianity has already been in Mexico for more than two hundred years when Junipero Serra arrives, so he is participating in an ongoing work, and in the second half of his life in Spanish North America, he is one of the pioneers of Franciscan Catholic missions in what would become Arizona, New Mexico, and (the center of his life) California. His personal sanctity and honesty come through clearly. But his conscious

participation in the Spanish Colonial project is just as clear. Spanish culture and Catholicism were interchangeable even if there were massive conflicts between the civil and religious departments. Serra is shown as a proponent of the goal of making Christian Indians into Spaniards who would be reliable sources of labor for Spanish ranchers, farmers, and other businesses. But it is also clear that he really believed he was there to save souls from hell. He had the misfortune to work alongside colonial administrators whom one can only call small-minded and cover-their-butt bureaucrats. The core of the book are the letters that Serra writes to three groups of people: his Franciscan and ecclesiastical superiors and confreres; administrators in California and in Mexico; and to family and friends in Majorca and elsewhere. The authors have an annoying habit of introducing the material in the letters by summarizing them instead of placing them succinctly in the context of unfolding events.

At his death, the "entire pueblo gathered together and wept over the death of their beloved Padre who had given them birth in the Lord. They loved him more than if he had been their natural father. They all wanted to see in order to ease the sorrow...the throng of people was so large" (p 418) they could scarcely contain them. Indian children brought wildflowers to put on his body. Pieces of his habit were cut from around his ankles and "They even cut some fringes of hair from his tonsure" (p 421). Beebe has gathered every scrap Serra wrote in this magnificent biography, which should prove to be a sharp slap in the face for all those who try to defame Serra, who clearly, in letter after letter after letter, showed nothing but love for the Indians he came to convert. Serra grew up in Mallorca and lived through catastrophic times for farms there, giving him an enduring interest in cultivation of food. Later, his missions would flourish. Serra was a well educated university professor when he decided to become a missionary. He would never see his family again, or his native land, and would endure constant suffering for the remainder of his life. Sailing to America, water was rationed and he wrote "when I would have drunk from the filthiest puddle in the street. I would have drunk anything at all" (p 69). Later, on land, food was scant, or unpalatable, and the trackless paths he stumbled across held a thousand dangers. He "was convinced that the Holy Family, Jesus, Mary and Joseph, had appeared to him" (p 91). The Spanish had already traveled to Baja California and Jesuits had founded seventeen missions between 1697 and 1767. Serra was delighted to take them over.

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