In The Chinatown War, Scott Zesch provides a thorough examination of the 1871 lynching of eighteen Chinese men in Los Angeles. Drawing primarily on court documents and newspaper accounts, Zesch painstakingly recreates the horrific incident and explores the trials that ultimately failed to deliver justice. While academic scholars may desire more contextualizing and analysis than Zesch provides, the author is to be congratulated on producing such a lively narrative, and those interested in Los Angeles, the history of vigilantism, and Asian American studies will find much of value in the book.

Zesch’s book is organized in two parts. In Part One, Zesch examines the Los Angeles Chinese community in the years before the massacre. Several themes emerge. First, Zesch argues that Los Angeles’s Chinese residents enjoyed few successes in establishing meaningful connections (economic, social, or cultural), with other Angelenos. Second, while some Anglo Americans expressed a disdain for “John Chinaman” and his cultural attributes in the 1860s, virulent anti-Chinese sentiment only took off when the Los Angeles News, the town’s first daily, launched a significant editorial campaign against the relative newcomers. Finally, rival Chinese district associations (known as “companies”) fought for influence in Los Angeles’s first Chinatown, an enclave centered along the Calle de los Negros. The fighting tongs, mafia-like organizations that dominated the Chinese vice industries and whose leaders often worked with the district associations, operated in and contributed to an atmosphere of corruption and lawlessness, as Los Angeles’s police force was only beginning to show the first signs of professionalization.

Part Two narrates the events leading up to the massacre, describes in vivid details the attacks that took place on the night of October 24, and recounts the aftermath. Readers will be captivated by Zesch’s skillful storytelling and his masterful use of primary sources to reconstruct the events on the night of the lynching. Disputes between rival district associations simmered for a year before the henchmen of the Hong Chow Company killed a hired tong fighter. Police responded to the incident and discovered a gunfight in the street. In their attempt to intervene, Chinese gunmen shot two lawmen, one mortally. News of
the shootings brought a mob of whites and Latinos to Chinatown, where they surrounded the Coronel adobe, in which was congregated a group of Chinese bystanders as well as the Chinese gunmen. Police officers at this moment made the fateful decision not to break up the mob, instead choosing to seal off the Coronel adobe in the hope of trapping those responsible for the shootings. (Although the mob and police officers were not aware of it at the time, most of those Chinese who had participated in the gun battle had already escaped.) Eventually, a mob of as many as five hundred people stormed the building, and over the course of several hours tortured and lynched eighteen Chinese men. While local jurors in the ensuing trials did find eight men guilty of manslaughter, the California Supreme Court overturned the convictions on a technicality.

Zesch makes a compelling argument that the violence in Los Angeles had little to do with economic conflicts between Chinese workers and their fellow Angelenos. Few ethnic Mexican or white workers were in direct competition with Chinese laborers, Zesch asserts, and lynch mob members’ pronouncements against Chinese labor on the night of the massacre represented “a thin veil concealing raw hatred of a specific group of immigrants whose ways were different” (p. 177).

Still, some readers may wish for more analysis of what motivated those who participated in the lynching. Even if white workers in Los Angeles were not directly competing with them, could the Chinese nevertheless have constituted the “indispensable enemy” (to borrow from Alexander Saxton, whose book of that name is curiously absent from Zesch’s bibliography) against whom whites identified themselves? Indeed, questions of racial and ethnic identity abound. Zesch’s book describes a town in transition, where ethnic Mexicans still held some political power (including the mayor’s office at the time of the massacre) but where Anglo Americans had clearly made political inroads. The Mexican political elite’s days were numbered, though, as more Anglos were arriving in Southern California and as legal and environmental difficulties ate away at the Californios’ land base. Zesch does not explore what role, if any, these changes may have had on ethnic Mexicans’ participation in the massacre.

In the end, Zesch concludes, the massacre changed little, as the perpetrators escaped punishment and anti-Chinese violence would continue in California and the West. Zesch has done an admirable job bringing to light a tragic yet commonly overlooked incident. In so doing, he may help correct a historiographic overemphasis on San Francisco in California’s anti-Chinese movement. Future scholars may build on Zesch’s work by explaining how the story of the massacre alters our understanding of race and violence in the West.

Reviewed by Alan Renga, Archivist, San Diego Air and Space Museum.

For most Americans, the story of aviation in our country has a definitive starting point: Kitty Hawk, North Carolina in 1903, when the Wright Brothers made their famous flight. However, many San Diegans do not know that this story has roots much closer to home, and has a local hero. Quest for Flight is a thoroughly researched book which takes an in-depth look into the life of one of America’s less celebrated aviation pioneers, John J. Montgomery. Not only do the authors discuss Montgomery’s life, but they place him in the larger context of the early days of aviation in California and the United States.

Quest for Flight examines why Montgomery’s 1884 glider flight, which was the first made by a heavier-than-air machine in the Western Hemisphere, was not well known or publicized at the time. The authors also do a superb job of detailing what Montgomery did in the years following his first tests until his experiments resumed in earnest after the Wright Brothers’ famed flight. If you are familiar with Montgomery, or have seen the very stylized version of his life presented in the 1946 movie Gallant Journey, you know that his story does not appear to have a happy ending. The events leading up to his death in 1911 while flying the Evergreen glider are thoroughly covered.

Through the course of the book we are introduced to other famous men involved in early aviation: Octave Chanute, Victor Loughead, and the Wright Brothers, among others. By the end of the monograph, it is clear how influential Montgomery was, and how he influenced other pioneers, both those experimenting with heavier- and lighter-than-air designs. This point is driven home in the book’s epilogue where Montgomery’s legacy is discussed. The epilogue also looks into the genesis of the “Montgomery Controversy,” in which some have doubted the validity of Montgomery’s claims of having made a flight in the 1880s. Those specifically interested in San Diego’s past will find the epilogue of special interest, as it focuses on Montgomery’s place in local history. In addition, there is a helpful glossary of aviation terms for those not familiar with “airplane speak.”

The most impressive aspect of Quest for Flight is the amount of research that went into writing it. The authors, Craig S. Harwood (great-great grandson of John J. Montgomery’s father) and Gary B. Fogel (the author of Wind and Wings: The History of Soaring in San Diego) visited archives all across the nation while writing the book. This research is documented in an extensive notes section, as well as
a comprehensive bibliography. It is the details they discovered while doing this research which really set *Quest for Flight* apart from many aviation biographies. Even if Montgomery weren’t a famous aviator, his family’s story is still fascinating. Without divulging details, it involves childhood tragedy and political intrigue.

After reading *Quest for Flight*, it is clear that the popular bias towards the Wright Brothers is overdone, and that Montgomery, and the West Coast, should get more credit for their roles in making the dream of flight a reality. Montgomery had many factors conspiring against him to keep him from attaining the fame and fortune of his contemporaries. However, the authors make clear that Montgomery was a man of science, and the reader is left with the impression that he would have been happy with the realization of how valuable his contributions were to the progress we have made in aerodynamics. Perhaps Montgomery’s story does have a happy ending after all.


Reviewed by Michelle M. Jacob, PhD, Associate Professor, Ethnic Studies, University of San Diego. Faculty Fellow, Center for Native Health & Culture, Heritage University.

*Reimagining Indian Country* provides readers with a well-researched account of the shifting definitions and meanings of “Indian Country.” Nicolas Rosenthal draws from a rich diversity of primary and secondary sources including community, tribal, and institutional publications. Each chapter focuses on a different aspect of the social changes that accompanied the migration patterns of American Indians between “cities, towns, rural areas, and reservations” (p. 3). Rosenthal’s main purpose is to explain these patterns by “showing how American Indians used Los Angeles and other cities throughout the twentieth century and how these uses fit into their larger social, cultural, and economic strategies rooted in migrant networks” (p. 5). Chapter 1, “Settling into the City: American Indian Migration and Urbanization, 1900-1945,” provides historical context for the larger migration movement of American Indians between reservations and urban centers. American Indian readers will recognize the patterns and similarities of our own family stories, as decisions around education and employment drove much of the movement.
Rosenthal’s analysis rightfully situates indigenous peoples as agents who define and redefine their roles and surroundings based on a complex meaning-making process. For example, Rosenthal draws from primary and secondary sources to explain indigenous perceptions of federal boarding schools, federal relocation and vocational programs, and performance opportunities at Disneyland and in Hollywood – all of which were used by indigenous peoples as tools to seek a better life during the process of reimagining Indian Country. What makes Rosenthal’s analysis unique is the strong emphasis on centering indigenous people’s perspectives throughout the telling of these complex stories of engagement and resistance in mainstream U.S. society. The discussion around performance and representation (Chapter 2, “Representing Indians: American Indian Performance and Activism in Urban America”) is especially useful in demonstrating the contradictions and complexities involved in challenging stereotypes of the “vanishing Indian” but doing so within a largely paternalistic structure rooted in the legacy of colonialism.

Some of the book’s most captivating data were drawn from interviews that the author conducted with people involved in key political and social movements. Randy Edmonds is one of Rosenthal’s interviewees, and San Diego-area community members will enjoy Randy’s insights into self-determination movements, such as when he discusses urban Indian organizations taking charge of Indian policy-making and programming in Chapter 3, “From Americanization to Self-Determination: The Federal Urban Relocation Program.” “We were a lot more knowledgeable about our own people. It was American Indians running the program for American Indians. Whereas the BIA was more bureaucratic and their approach to individuals that were coming off the reservation was that they were just numbers to them” (p. 74).

A major strength of the book is the skillful way in which the author draws from multiple sources of data. The strongest examples are the narratives from indigenous people themselves, including compelling stories in Chapter 4, “Postindustrial Urban Indians: Life and Work in the Postwar City,” which explains how American Indian activism targeted higher educational opportunities to “create a generation of professional Indians attuned to the pragmatics of working for their communities in conjunction with local, state, and federal agencies” (p. 99). However, Rosenthal also includes three tables of quantitative data to help explain the dramatic demographic changes among American Indians in the post-World War II experience. These tables help to show, in a quantitative snapshot, the urbanization of the American Indian population; however, two key cities within the book’s analysis (San Diego and Portland, Oregon) are not included in the tables. This omission is puzzling, but despite this shortcoming, the tables remain a helpful resource.
Rosenthal’s book will appeal especially to people interested in San Diego and Southern California history, as the book documents and analyzes movements from San Diego County reservations and discusses key, but often overlooked, examples of local Indian political organizing, such as the Mission Indian Federation. The exceptional photos will captivate any audience, as they provide a visual representation of the Hollywood Indian, aircraft manufacturing worker, consumer, policy advisor, and community activist, thus enriching the story that Rosenthal tells about the shifting meaning of Indian Country.

BOOK NOTES

Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA. By Ronald L. Mize and Alicia C. S. Swords. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2011. Tables, glossary, references, and index. xlii + 294 pp. $28.95 paper. This history of Mexican migrant labor to the United States and Canada in the second half of the twentieth century examines the Mexican worker within the contexts of the politics of production and consumption. Corporations, consumers, and governments encouraged Mexicans to migrate when labor markets were in short supply and discouraged them in times of economic downturn. Consuming Mexican Labor sheds a critical light on the important role Mexican labor plays in the North American economy at a time when the immigration policy debate seems to lack precisely that insight.

The Fall and Rise of the Wetlands of California’s Great Central Valley. By Philip Garone. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. Illustrations, maps, appendix, notes, bibliography, and index. xvi + 442 pp. $39.95 cloth. Philip Garone’s book history chronicles the environmental degradation of the Central Valley’s wetlands as well as recent conservation efforts that have helped restore some measure of ecological integrity. Irrigation projects and large-scale farming threatened the wetlands’ viability as crucial habitats for aquatic life and migratory birds.

In Pursuit of Gold: Chinese American Miners and Merchants in the American West. By Sue Fawn Chung. Foreword by Roger Daniels. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011. Illustrations, maps, tables, notes, bibliography, and index. xxvii + 258 pp. $55.00 cloth. Sue Fawn Chung explores the relationships between the Chinese and non-Chinese merchant community in two mining towns in the American Northwest at the turn of the twentieth century. She argues that rather
than remain isolated and insular, the Chinese community interacted with the white community to create economic relationships and avoid the anti-Chinese violence that plagued other mining towns. *In Pursuit of Gold* adds long overlooked voices to the historical record and reshapes perceptions about Chinese miners in the West.

*The Making of Yosemite: James Mason Hutchings and the Origin of America’s Most Popular National Park.* By Jen A. Huntley. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, and index. xi + 232 pp. $34.95 cloth. James Mason Hutchings led the first group of tourists into the Yosemite Valley in 1855 and became an early advocate of its scenic beauty. Huntley argues that Hutchings, while often dismissed as an opportunist and overshadowed by John Muir as the “father” of Yosemite National Park, deserves credit for bringing this landscape to the attention of Americans.

*Mexico and Mexicans in the Making of the United States.* History, Culture, and Society Series. Edited by John Tutino. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012. Maps, tables, notes, bibliography, and index. x + 320 pp. $55.00 cloth. A common perception of Mexico limits its influence to the United States border, often in criminal or supplicant terms. But the contributors to *Mexico and Mexicans* argue that the country of Mexico and its people have been at the center of United States history from colonial times to the present. This volume includes cultural, historical, and sociological perspectives, suggesting that the United States and Mexico have a shared history that includes production, politics, social relations, and cultural understandings.

*Saving San Francisco: Relief and Recovery after the 1906 Disaster.* By Andrea Rees Davies. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012. Illustrations, maps, tables, appendix, notes, bibliography, and index. x + 220 pp. $29.95 paper. In the aftermath of the earthquake and fire that devastated San Francisco, Davies argues, locals attempted to mold reconstruction efforts to meet the needs of various constituencies. While Progressive reformers, people of color, and advocates of the city’s working class entered the public sphere in these efforts, Davies maintains that the rebuilding programs typically reinforced hierarchies of difference.