



Junipero Serra: California's Founding Father

Steven W. Hackel

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Winner of the Historical Society of Southern California's 2015 Neuerburg Award for the best book on Pre-Gold Rush California

Finalist for the Southern California Independent Bookseller Association's Best Nonfiction Book of 2014

A Zocalo Public Square Best Nonfiction Book of 2013

A portrait of the priest and colonialist who is one of the most important figures in California's history

In the 1770s, just as Britain's American subjects were freeing themselves from the burdens of colonial rule, Spaniards moved up the California coast to build frontier outposts of empire and church. At the head of this effort was Junípero Serra, an ambitious Franciscan who hoped to convert California Indians to Catholicism and turn them into European-style farmers. For his efforts, he has been beatified by the Catholic Church and widely celebrated as the man who laid the foundation for modern California. But his legacy is divisive. The missions Serra founded would devastate California's Native American population, and much more than his counterparts in colonial America, he remains a contentious and contested figure to this day.

Steven W. Hackel's groundbreaking biography, *Junípero Serra: California's Founding Father*, is the first to remove Serra from the realm of polemic and place him within the currents of history. Born into a poor family on the Spanish island of Mallorca, Serra joined the Franciscan order and rose to prominence as a priest and professor through his feats of devotion and powers of intellect. But he could imagine no greater service to God than converting Indians, and in 1749 he set off for the new world. In Mexico, Serra first worked as a missionary to Indians and as an uncompromising agent of the Inquisition. He then became an itinerant preacher, gaining a reputation as a mesmerizing orator who could inspire, enthrall, and terrify his audiences at will. With a potent blend of Franciscan piety and worldly cunning, he outmaneuvered Spanish royal officials, rival religious orders, and avaricious settlers to establish himself as a peerless frontier administrator. In the culminating years of his life, he extended Spanish dominion north, founding and promoting missions in present-day San Diego, Los Angeles, Monterey, and San Francisco. But even Serra could not overcome the forces massing against him. California's military leaders rarely shared his zeal, Indians often opposed his efforts, and ultimately the missions proved to be cauldrons of disease and discontent. Serra, in his hope to save souls, unwittingly helped bring about the massive decline of California's indigenous population.

On the three-hundredth anniversary of Junípero Serra's birth, Hackel's complex, authoritative biography tells the full story of a man whose life and legacies continue to be both celebrated and denounced. Based on exhaustive research and a vivid narrative, this is an essential portrait of America's least understood founder.

Junipero Serra: California's Founding Father Details

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From Reader Review Junipero Serra: California's Founding Father for online ebook

Kathy says

I was raised around the popular history of the California Missions and Junipero Serra as a hero - so now that Father Serra is nominated for sainthood I thought it was time to learn a little more about the man vs. the era. Through this book I learned a lot about Spanish history, Catholicism and the pre-enlightenment era as well as Serra himself. Although at first I thought the book would be apologetic for Serra, the book is well-balanced between the thinking of Serra's time and what we see as wrong now. Serra as seen through modern eyes is certainly controversial. We need to remember that his ideas were narrow by his upbringing and remote style of living. His wiliness and the politics of what he accomplished is fascinating. I am still not sure if his fervent religious belief and his dream of saving lost souls deserves sainthood, but for better or worse he was instrumental in the settling of early California. The later invasion of ranchers and gold seekers was even more brutal than missionizing in many ways. I felt the book was well worthwhile and I loved getting yet another view of California history.

Josh Muhlenkamp says

I got this book as part of Goodreads' First Reads program.

When I first started reading this book, I joked that I didn't like Serra because he was a Franciscan (I went to a Dominican school for undergrad, and there's a rivalry between the two orders). Now that I've finished the book, I still don't like Serra, but it has nothing to do with his religious order.

Serra was an insufferable egotist who made a career out of assuming that Native Americans were stupid and immature, and physically abusing those who he felt didn't live up to his standards. He was an immensely stupid person who managed to convince others that he was intelligent and capable.

This book could have been better if Hackel had simply refused to apologize for Serra's many, many faults and exposed him for the horrible human being that he was. Instead, Hackel attempts to portray him as a tragically flawed hero, and does so unconvincingly.

James of the Redwoods says

Thoroughly documented, well written, and a real eye opener.

As a product of the California public school system, I thought I knew about Father Junipero Serra. As children we were taught about a heroic, larger than life founder of the California Missions.

It turns out that he may have been a short, self-righteous, opportunistic tight-ass. If the accounts presented are to be believed, the only thing he succeeded in doing was to set things in motion that those who followed had to clean up. He had no language skills needed to be a missionary. His knowledge of agriculture was faulty and doomed his secondary mission of getting Indians to become farmers. Then there is that pesky side job working for the Inquisition.

I enjoyed this book. What I learned about the man was that I don't think I would have liked him on any level. Good to know.

Robert D. Cornwall says

Anyone who has lived for any length of time in California knows the name of Junipero Serra, the founder of a chain of Franciscan missions that formed the backbone of early Spanish California. Recently made a saint, Serra is a controversial and complicated figure. A man of his time, a missionary of his time, he believed God called him to convert the Native population of Alta California to Christianity. Because he saw them as children, he treated them as such. While the Native American population had adapted well to their environment, the Spanish believed their agricultural methods and society were superior, and thus not only would they Christianize, they would civilize.

Serra came to be seen as a heroic and saintly figure in the years that followed his death, but in recent years his legacy has been challenged. His methods ended up devastating the indigenous population. While not intentional on his part, such was the case.

Hackel has written a fair, balanced, critical, thoughtful biography of Serra that begins with his own upbringing on the island of Mallorca, a community that had experienced its own forms of occupation that contributed to his sense of purpose and religious sentiment. We follow his life to his death, looking at the whole person and legacy. The epilogue helps us make sense of that legacy, recognizing that his methods were not unique, but they ended up being damaging to the people he sought to help.

Philip says

A balanced assessment of Junipero Serra is a rare find, and this book is it! And a story of his pre-California days is also rare, and here it is. And in addition this books tells of the times: the Bourbon takeover of Spain, the Mexican Revolution, and much else. For a Californian, this is a critical read! It gives new insight into our state and includes more modern thinking, such as the disease deaths of the Indians, the paternalism and, yes, the prejudices of the times.

Korie Brown says

I really appreciated the background and history that Hackel provides - it gave me context. A very interesting read.

John says

This is a dry historical look at Blessed Fr. Junipero Serra, considered one of the founders of the state of California and representing that state as one of the two California statues in the hall of statues in the US Capitol building.

While Serra is being considered for canonization, if today's standards were used to measure his life's work he

most certainly wouldn't qualify. As the American Revolution was unfolding on the East Coast, Serra was busy creating a "ladder" of missions up the California coast on behalf of the Franciscan order and Spanish government. Unfortunately, the approach was one of trying to "civilize" the natives by enticing them to move onto the missions and adopt the Spanish life of farming. Corporal punishment was one of the methods to enforce this goal.

Serra was doggedly determined to baptize and confirm as many of the "heathen" that he could during his lifetime. He began this quest in California at age 57 and never let a painful chronically infected leg deter his walking of the California Coast. This motto "Always Forward, Never Back" remains the motto of Serra International the organization dedicated to promoting vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

I found especially interesting the back and forth jockeying for control between the Spanish governors and the Franciscan missionaries.

The campaign for sainthood may reach a dead end, but the author opined at a recent conference that, in Serra's favor many current Christian Native American's are deeply appreciative of his efforts to bring the faith to their forebears.

Christopher Lonero says

I picked this book to read because I was extremely interested in learning more about our history of California. I grew up in the Bay Area and I remember the statue of Junipero Serra on Highway 280 on the way to San Francisco. This book is a pretty easy read which doesn't get too bogged down in overall detail of names or loose history. I thought the author did a fantastic job of hitting all the major areas of Serra's life and presenting a good understanding of the Spanish Franciscan Friars on the west coast.

Junipero Serra was an intense figure in history. He used to punish himself physically for his sins. He endured horrible pains to his leg where he still managed the long treks back and forth to mission to mission. He highly inspired to be like St. Francis and other past Saints who converted mass amounts of people to believe in Jesus. He thought it his mission and priority to convert the sinful American Indians to accept Jesus Christ and live the ways of the Western European people.

After all of his work and relentless dedication his legacy remains extremely difficult to pinpoint. In today's day and age, he seems to be linked to the mass genocide of the Indians and their way of life. His mission to convert Native Indians led to extreme levels of sickness killing thousand upon thousands of Indians. Nonetheless, many would say that he brought western civilization to California and should be idolized for his work in presenting Jesus Christ to primitive people. This subject I will leave to smarter people than myself to decide or write further on. I do think the author digs into this subject pretty well at the end of the book.

In the end a good overall read which left me questioning whether or not I could justify that Junipero Serra's life should be remembered as good, evil, or just an extremely unfortunate misunderstanding by the Catholic church.

K says

I'm not familiar with Catholic history or theology, but I've visited a number of California missions, and so I thought this book would give me some historical background. Of course, it's more than that, as it starts with

the life of Junipero Serra on Mallorca and doesn't get to his work in California until he was past age 40. As such, it brings depth and breadth to several millennia of conquest and conversion -- most of it nasty.

To the author's credit, he doesn't shy away from actions by Serra and others that we now consider deeply flawed or evil: whippings, murder, land appropriation, and so on. But the author puts it in both the religious context -- Serra was a deep, deep believer in the righteousness of his faith and the need to save "heathens" from hell, but also the deprivations that his native island had faced for centuries. It was a brutal era, and Serra would have had to be super-human (obviously, he wasn't despite his "saint" designation by Catholics) to learn to show mercy instead of discipline towards his flock. In the context of his time, he was pretty merciful, actually.

Anyway, the book really does provide an extraordinary record, given the time in which Serra lived, the distances he traveled, and his utter disinterest in anything personal (he wrote one letter to his parents after he left Mallorca for good, and he scolded a cousin for expecting too many letters when he sent his 2nd letter to him in 15 years). The book also presents his failures or semi-victories, such as his early efforts to convert natives north of Mexico City -- an increase in conversions over his predecessors, but hardly the mass adoption of Catholicism that Serra's early biased biographers claimed.

But with all of my praise for the book, I didn't find it especially interesting. Some of this is my lack of interest in the underlying theology, especially at the level of which saints were depicted in which churches or honored on which festival days. Another problem is that the book has way too many details about Serra's administrative fights with his superiors, his colleagues and govt. officials in the New World. I realize that his skills in winning many of those battles is part of what made him great -- that's how he founded more than a dozen missions in California. But it's sort of boring to read that he wrote a letter, and then another guy wrote a letter, and then they met, etc.

So, this book is fine for a person with a special interest in the subject. But for the general reader, it doesn't quite work. Too much of some stuff, and too little of other.

Michael says

Very informative book on the 18th C origins of the California missions. Focused on Junipero Serra, a Franciscan missionary (now a saint) who founded the first missions in Alta California (between San Diego and San Francisco). He's an interesting and important figure who set in motion a mission system that would have devastating effects on the native population of California over the next half century following his death. Devout and dedicated to the native people in his own way, the mission system that he established brought hunger, disease, and death to 10s of thousands of native people. Very much a story of the unintended consequences of missionary zeal.

Donnie Tognazzini says

Very detailed. Interesting!

Bryan says

I cannot imagine a more thorough biography of Serra. Impeccable scholarship and page-turner readability.

Marvin says

While growing up in California in the 50s and 60s, the name of Father Junipero Serra was well known to every school kid. As the title of this new biography states, he was considered California's founding father. There's a statue of Father Serra gracing the U.S capitol rotunda as a representaton of California's history. He was the person that "civilized" the west coast. His missions still stand as a symbol of the Western exploration and settlement of California. You didn't have to be Catholic to view Serra as a saint which he seems well on the way to becoming after Pope John Paul took the third of four steps to his sainthood by beatifying him on September 25, 1988.

Oh, how myths die hard. Since then, reality has risen up and gave legend a sound slap in the face. While there is no doubt that Serra is one of the most influential figures in the history of North America, he was also a tyrant and a religious fanatic even by 18th century standards. His role in destroying vast populations of Native-Americans is significant. He saw them as "children" and imprisoned them at will and beating them lest they stray from the Christian path. Serra and the Franciscan priests were essential in bringing agriculture to California but this was mainly a ploy to make the California Indian dependent on the mission community and it damaged the culture immensely. Disease and famine followed his successes, decimating the Native-American population of California. Serra was also a member of the Spanish Inquisition and took his role seriously both in the old world and new.

Steven H. Hackel's importance as Serra's contemporary biographer is in his ability to balance both views of the Franciscan priest. He doesn't ignore the dark side yet acknowledges Serra's role in developing the Western regions of North America. He follows his birth and childhood on the island of Mallorca to his education and rise to importance in the church. The author traces Serra's journey to "New Spain" from Veracruz to Mexico City and finally to the task of building a string of missions in Baja and Alto California until his death in 1784. This is a fascinating look at 18th century Mexico and California with no sugarcoating. Zorro need not apply.

Hackel portrays Serra as one of those figures that does many things well and succeeds by the audacity of his ambition. He was an excellent administrator, a wise professorial teacher who inspired his students, and an ambitious seeker of church power that led to many struggles with the Spanish secular government especially in California. One of the thing that amazed me was that Serra did not start his California missions in California until he was 60. One can excuse some of what Serra did as him simply being a typical figure of his time in a racist and religiously aggressive society. Hackel takes time to note that some of Serra's excesses were actually normal procedures for Spanish missionaries. Yet I can't lose the feeling that Serra with all his success may have been "over the top" even then. After all it was eventually the Spanish government that removed his power from the missions and turned them from church dominated areas to secular settlements easing the intense control, even enslavement, that Serra had over the California Indians.

This is the kind of historical books we need; the kind that is honest about historical figures and not afraid to uncover the dirt while noting their achievements. Highly recommended to students of the history of North America.

Mathew Whitney says

I received this book free through Goodreads' First Reads program.

Junipero Serra: California's Founding Father is a detailed account of the life of Junipero Serra, the Franciscan missionary responsible for a great deal of the founding of the series of missions which became the backbone of Spanish colonization in California. Steven W. Hackel uses an extensive breadth of source material to produce a biography of Junipero Serra which attempts to pierce the veil of mystery and legend that surrounds many of the early figures in California's history.

Certainly, despite growing up within 2 miles of a "Father Junipero Serra Rd." and making elementary school field trips to the mission in San Diego, there is a great deal in this book I never knew about him. The author goes into detail about the changing relationship between Serra and his church, his government, his fellow missionaries, and the native people he was attempting to convert to Catholicism.

Serra had a strong vision for California and did much to implement it as he saw fit. His story is very different from those of the founding fathers in the original 13 U.S. states, and this book brings him to life without over-emphasizing the positive or negative sides. I intend to hold on to this book and ask my daughter to read it in a few years, to compare to what she learns about California's history in the next couple of years of elementary school.

Liam says

"Serra's grandparents and parents were indisputably practicing Catholics, but the names Abram and Salom suggest that some of Serra's distant ancestors might have been Jews or conversos." (15)

"The college [of San Fernando in Mexico City] forbade the missionaries to bring with them certain theatrical props for use during sermons, such as crucifixes with attachments and hinges that allowed the padre to make Christ's eyes open and close and his arms and legs move. Apparently, leaders at the college were concerned that some people would be fooled by these contraptions and believe that they had witnessed a miracle." (119)

"Mexican Church officials were horrified by the common Indian practice of associating the drug [peyote] with the most important figures in Catholicism. For example, in 1617, in Mexico City, the drug was referred to as 'Nino Jesus,' or as 'Santisima Trinidad'; in Zacatecas between 1626 and 1665 it was known as 'Nuestra Senora,' and at many times in the first half of the eighteenth century it was referred to in the north as 'Santa Maria.'" (133)

"Every California Indian group has its own creation story. Most share a belief that the world originated in a union between earth and sky and that human beings, in one way or another, originated after a flood or out of some other chaotic situation in which birds or a creator made them out of earth or clay." (163)

"The padres already recognized that Indian villages had their own leaders, but what Neve wanted them to do was replicate in the missions the town councils that characterized Spanish civil government. He was attempting to implement the imperial policy of assimilating Indians into the Spanish political system." (of the New Model for missions, 214)
