

JAMES J. RAWLS

California: A Place, A People, A Dream

"In the imagination of the twentieth century, California is the quintessential Promised Land," James J. Rawls (b. 1945) writes as he explores the California dream and its place in American mythology. But though the dream "is simply a vision of the good life," Rawls cautions, it also contains a paradox: With the high promise of its glittering reputation, can California always deliver? And if it can't, what disillusionment may follow? A long-time interpreter and chronicler of the California experience, Rawls teaches history at Diablo Valley College, is the author of several books, including *Indians of California: The Changing Image* (1984) and, with Walter Bean, *California: An Interpretive History* (1998), and is editor of *New Directions in California History* (1988) and *California: A Place, A People, A Dream* (1986), from which this essay is taken.

The California Dream—you can sense it in the crisp air of the High Sierra, taste it in the ocean spray at Malibu, feel it in the sun-drenched skies of the Central Valley, glimpse it in the mist and fog of Muir Woods. It surrounds and envelops you, engaging your senses, permeating your soul. The California Dream is a love affair with an idea, a marriage to a myth, a surrender to a collective fantasy. Unbounded by time or space, the California Dream is transcendent, creating a unity, a whole, a merging of past, present, and future in the total California experience. It's quite impossibly everything—and quite possibly nothing at all.

I suppose that there are as many versions of the California Dream as there are dreamers—or as there are essayists who try to capture its essence on paper. For most of us, the California Dream is simply a vision of the good life. It once was seen glittering in the California gold fields. Today it may be fashioned from images of California ranch houses, redwood decks and patios, outdoor barbecues and kidney-shaped swimming pools. The California Dream—whatever its present form—draws its power from universal human needs. Founded on expectation and hope, the California Dream promises to fulfill our deepest longings for opportunity and success, warmth, sunshine and beauty, health and long life, freedom, and even a foretaste of the future.

Opportunity and success—these promises are at the heart of the California Dream. When Stephen Wozniak and Steven Jobs launched Apple Computers a decade ago, they were acting in a long tradition of visionary California entrepreneurs. Forty years earlier, two young Stanford graduates named William Hewlett and David Packard founded in a Palo Alto garage a company destined soon to become one of the nation's premier electronics firms. The list of California successes is embarrassingly rich and endless. Before high technology and aerospace, there were motion pictures, oil fields, citrus groves, real estate, railroads, and, of course, gold. It's as though a special deity watches over California, for in each generation a new re-

source or new industry develops, reaffirming once again the identity of California with opportunity. California is America's own New World, a land of incredible enterprise, fortune, and good luck.

Warmth and sunshine—more glowing promises of the California Dream. The image of California as a land of perpetual sun—"It Never Rains in Southern California" so the song goes—has an obvious appeal to snow-bound Easterners and Midwesterners. It's easy to identify with the sentiments of one Midwestern newcomer who wrote in the 1930s: "I'd get letters from friends that had settled here. . . . I'd hear about the orange groves and palms, . . . sunny days and cool nights, and how the only snow you saw was miles off in the mountains, and—well, I was sick of the prairie landscape and stoking the fire all winter and frying all summer, and first chance I got, I boarded a train to find out if this country came up to the brag." I've always suspected that the annual New Year's Day telecast of the Rose Parade in Pasadena—cameras panning healthy, tanned men and women sauntering in shirt sleeves under palm trees and clear skies—accounts for a sizeable share of the yearly migration to California. As if the seductive climate weren't enough, the mere mention of California conjures up images of stunning natural beauty. Endless blue skies and spectacular seacoasts, magnificent groves of giant sequoia, gentle hills and soaring mountains—all are part of the overwhelming vision of Beautiful California.

With such a salubrious climate, so it's said, California is also a particularly healthy place to live. Today's "fat farms," tanning booths, and longevity institutes are modern expressions of the same fitness impulse that was evident in the sanitoriums and health resorts of the nineteenth century. During the 1880s, southern California welcomed thousands of invalids who erroneously believed that the region's warm, clean air would cure their tuberculosis and ensure them a long and healthy life. Such healthfulness even brought on predictions that a new and superior "California race" was emerging here. As early as 1866, Charles Loring Brace claimed to have seen evidence of positive physical changes among those who had arrived in California. The superiority of *homo sapiens Californium* seemed to be confirmed by the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. Under sunny blue skies, young Californians won the gold, silver, and bronze in vastly disproportionate numbers. A product of their own environment, how could they do less?

With visions of healthy, attractive, fit Californians in mind, it's easy to recall another suggestive promise of the California Dream—romance. "Sex and California," declared a recent *Los Angeles Times* article—"the two seem to go together." The identification of California and romance has taken many forms over the years. Malibu Barbie became, for a time, a popular icon for half the preteen population of America. Meanwhile, a line of cosmetics called California Girls offered the chance for older sisters to achieve at least the surface glow of a genuine Californian. And of course for everyone, there's Hollywood. Its glitter and allure have added an unmistakable glamour to the image of the Golden State. Romantic opportunity is the theme of countless Hollywood films, from *San Francisco* to the *Bikini Beach*

series, where bronzed and nubile youths frolic to the music of Frankie Avalon. The lyrics and pulsating rhythms of the California Sound, pioneered by the Beach Boys in the early 1960s, capture the sensuous simplicity of life on the California beaches. And what did the Beach Boys write about? "They wrote about the beach and girls and cars, and that was it," remembers David Crosby. "All we really cared about was girls in the first place, and cars were a way to get from your parents and get the girls — and the beach was the place to go. And those were the main elements of our consciousness." Freedom, outdoor living, and romance — those are also the bright lights of the California Dream.

Freedom — in California it's a promise that allows unconventional political movements, personal eccentricities, and unusual fads and fashions to bloom unmolested. "Almost anything might work in California," Carey McWilliams once observed, "you never know." Free from the restraints of tradition and history, California seems uniquely able to shape the nature of things to come. A leader in adopting progressive reforms early in the century, California has altered the national political scene with such innovations as the use of professional campaign management firms, the techniques of image management, and the use of Hollywood celebrities as campaign fundraisers — or as candidates themselves. The idea of California as the harbinger of the American future — from campus turmoil and tax revolts to community colleges, freeways, and shopping malls — is by now a popular cliché.

Promising so much to so many, California is forever being described in superlatives. In the imagination of the twentieth century, California is the quintessential Promised Land. "Why *should* anybody die out here?" asked a character in Steward Edward White's 1920 novel, *The Rose Dawn*. "They'll never get any closer to heaven." And forty years later, Brian Wilson, one of the founding brothers of the Beach Boys, explained: "All good teenagers go to California when they die."

It's tempting to stop here, having neatly summarized and categorized the promises of the California Dream. But that would leave the great misimpression that the California Dream is somehow static and fixed. It would ignore the very essence, excitement, and energy of the dream. The California Dream can't be contained by neat categories. Like California and its people, the dream is alive, an ever-changing and turbulent dynamic. It's made not only of promises but also of paradoxes, the joining of seeming opposites. The paradoxes are what give the dream its dynamism, for in California there is an ongoing dialectic in which new syntheses are born from the paradoxes of the past.

We see this dialectic at work in what might be called the paradox of expectations. The promises of the California Dream raise the expectations of the millions who come to California, hoping that their lives here will be better than what they leave behind. California is to them their best — or perhaps their last — chance for success. "There is no more new frontier," the

Eagles have told us. "We have got to make it here." Many of those who come find what they are looking for. They become enthusiastic boosters of the Golden State, recruiting friends and relatives to join them. Yet California doesn't fulfill the expectations of all those who come. Many find that life here isn't at all what they had hoped or dreamed that it would be. Despair, isolation, and disillusionment arise out of the newcomers' experience, turning would-be dreamers into bitter antagonists who denounce the false promises of the California Dream.

Obviously there is a paradox here, for California is at once a land of great expectation and disappointment, lauded and damned with equal intensity. While the major chords in the California Dream have been affirmative and celebratory, audible too, usually in the background, are the minor chords of doubt and disillusionment. If only because California promises so much, its failure to live up to expectations has been especially vivid, conspicuous, and dramatic.

The gold rush experience itself was forged on this paradox of expectation. Hundreds of diaries and reminiscences extoll the charms of the golden land, but others speak of the painful contrast between California's vaunted promises and its actual conditions. "I really hope that no one will be deterred from coming here," wrote one disappointed argonaut in 1850. "The more fools the better — the fewer to laugh when we get home." And a popular gold rush ballad ended with the bitter refrain, "Oh land of gold you did me deceive, and I intend in thee my bones to leave."

California's writers have often provided a counterpoint to the myth of California as the land of boundless opportunity, success, and romance. The alleged failure of the myth became a major preoccupation for the writers of the 1930s, powerfully expressed in the works of Nathanael West, Aldous Huxley, and John Steinbeck. Today's California writers are still using the California Dream as a foil for their work. Much of the appeal of their work lies in the fact that the dream is always there, if only to be denied. In "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream," Joan Didion tells the pathetic story of a desperate woman, living in the San Bernardino Valley, who is convicted of the murder of her husband. "Of course she came from somewhere else, came off the prairie in search of something she had seen in a movie or heard on the radio, for this is a Southern California story."

A new genre of anti-California literature — the minor chords now in concert — appeared in gloomy force in the late 1960s and 1970s. "California — Has Dream Gone Sour?" ran a headline in the *Los Angeles Times*, and the Pacific News Service syndicated an article captioned "Shades of the Sunbelt Shift: California Dream in a Body Bag." Books appeared with titles such as *Anti-California* and *California: The Vanishing Dream*. California seemed to be its own worst enemy as the impulse to debunk was powerfully stimulated by a bizarre set of "California events" — the Berkeley FSM,¹ the Watts riot, the

¹Free Speech Movement. [Eds.]

flowering of Haight-Ashbury, the Manson cult murders, the Patty Hearst kidnapping, the People's Temple mass murder-suicide, and the assassinations of San Francisco mayor George Moscone and supervisor Harvey Milk.

In this dire outpouring of pop commentary, the promises of the California Dream are still present, but they have been turned inside out, frisked for clues as to what went wrong. The image of California as the land of opportunity becomes a *cause* of California's multiple tragedies. The gold rush syndrome — high hopes, soon dashed — makes California especially susceptible to the appeal of crackpot schemes of self-proclaimed messiahs. Even California's climate is at fault — all that warmth and sunshine attracts “emotionally unwrapped” people to the state. In these bleak analyses of the 1960s and 1970s, California is no longer seen as a land of health but as a dark precinct of social pathology. Wide publicity is given to the state's rate of alcoholism, drug abuse, and suicide — clear evidence that California is now the land of failed dreams and broken promises. California, land of romance, becomes California, land of rampant immorality and sexual deviance. As for California's social freedom — by clear consensus — it is a case of too much of a good thing. America take heed! Freedom from tradition leads to disorientation and rootlessness, tolerance attracts the unbalanced and antisocial.

The minor chords in the California Dream, always present, reached a crescendo in the early 1970s. Then, just as this climax was passing, we began to hear something new. California came to be the subject of a remarkable new body of descriptive literature, what James D. Houston elsewhere calls the New Anatomy of California. Finally we began to see a clear-sighted portrait of California, a balanced appraisal of the state's virtues and accomplishments as well as its faults and failures. Kevin Starr's *Americans and the California Dream* (1973) signaled the emergence of this new perception, identifying the “best possibilities” of the state's regional culture rather than dwelling on the half-truths of contemporary cliché and stereotype. Five years later James D. Hart's *A Companion to California* was published. This encyclopedic work neither boosts the California myth nor belabors the state's excesses. It is a straightforward catalogue of California people, places, and things, from Abalone to Zukor. . . .

Another paradox in the California Dream is the paradox of growth. Here too we see the dynamic quality of the dream — the workings of a dialectic and the emergence of new forms. After more than a century of phenomenal growth, California became the nation's most populous state at the end of 1962. Today it leads New York, its closest rival, by more than eight million people. Throughout California history, growth has been thought of as the greatest good. We happily measure our success by it, for it reassures us that faith in the California Dream remains strong, that its promises are being fulfilled. Yet as the California Dream succeeds in attracting ever greater numbers of people, the ability of California to fulfill its promises diminishes.

This paradox of growth isn't just a phenomenon of our own times; it cuts across the state's history. With news of gold in California, “the world

rushed in.” By the end of 1848 some six thousand miners in California had wrested \$10 million worth of gold from the foothills of the Sierra. By 1852, the peak year, the output was \$80 million but the number of miners had risen to a hundred thousand. In just four years, the per capita yield of the California mines had been cut in half. Quick and easy wealth was the promise of California, yet as more and more hopeful miners arrived, the prospects for the promise being fulfilled dimmed accordingly. . . .

It's only been in recent years that Californians generally have come to appreciate the nature of this paradox. When California became the most populous state late in 1962, many residents joined in a statewide celebration of “Population Day,” but it was apparent even then that growth had its price. In great rings around the state's cities, the geometry and monotony of tract development were replacing open space, green fields, and orchards. The state's parklands, hopelessly overcrowded, were in danger of being loved to death by vacationing Californians. Urban freeways, built as pathways for automobility, were becoming monuments to immobility.

Out of this paradox of growth — in which the ultimate success of the California Dream would mean its utter demise — there emerged a new synthesis. California, the most populous state, dedicated itself to the control of growth. Starting with a Petaluma ordinance in 1973, communities across the state began to take steps to limit further growth. Cities as diverse as Stockton and Belmont, Saratoga and Santa Cruz, passed ordinances controlling growth, and growth-control candidates were elected in such rapidly growing counties as Santa Clara, Orange, and San Diego. The growth-control movement represents a radical reversal of traditional values. California, once so proud of its phenomenal growth, is now home to the movement to limit growth. Apparently Californians have come at last to appreciate the wisdom of former governor Earl Warren. “Mere numbers,” Warren remarked upon the occasion of California's emergence as the most populous state, “do not mean happiness.”

Still there's another paradox in the California Dream — the paradox of plenty. From the gold rush to the present, fulfillment of the dream has most often meant getting rich. Money-making is a kind of fixed mania for many Californians, and the evidence of California's riches is plain enough. A stroll down Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills should convince the most skeptical — stretch limousines at the curb, haberdashers offering their four-hundred-dollar cotton shirts, display windows adorned with bedspreads made from the fur of the Mongolian gray fox. Today California ranks third among the states in personal income, a full 13 percent above the national average. If California were a separate nation, it would be one of the world's major economic powers, ranking twelfth in the value of international trade and eighth in gross national product.

Yet the pursuit of wealth in California has not been unopposed. California has long been a battleground between the forces of economic development and environmental protection. Here, where the environment is so magnificent and the drive to achieve economic success is so strong, the

impulse to protect and defend the environment has been most powerfully aroused.

Whenever the state's environment has been threatened, from the days of John Muir to the present, Californians have risen in its defense. In 1969 an offshore well of the Union Oil Company sprang a leak and smeared the beaches of Santa Barbara with oil. Two years later, a pair of Standard Oil tankers collided in the fog just inside the Golden Gate, spilling their cargo of oil into San Francisco Bay. Both of these incidents, and countless others, provoked an impassioned and vigorous response from outraged Californians. The sight of beaches littered with the oil-soaked bodies of dead seagulls and dying marine mammals added tremendous emotional fuel to the environment movement.

Out of this intensely charged struggle between the forces of economic development and environmental protection has come the search for non-polluting, renewable sources of energy. Solar, wind, and geothermal power represent ways in which economic development may proceed with a minimum of environmental damage. (They also are ways, of course, of reducing dependence on foreign oil.) Here again is evidence of the California dialectic at work. From opposing forces a new synthesis is being formed. Today California is *the* solar state in the union, containing more than 40 percent of the total United States solar collector capacity. San Diego, Santa Barbara, and Santa Clara counties are the first in the country to require solar water heating in new residential construction. California also leads the nation in the harnessing of wind and geothermal power. The world's largest wind energy project is being built by PG&E in the rolling hills of Solano County, while Sonoma County is the home of the nation's first commercial geothermal power plant. All are new solutions, born of the paradox of plenty. . . .

25 Promise and paradox are at the center of the California Dream. In spite of the withering analyses of the past, the promises of California remain undiminished, bringing new generations of newcomers from around the world. The paradoxes find resolution through a dialectic in which new perceptions, relations, and ways of life are forever being created. The emerging syntheses are informed by the virtues of balance, control, restraint, and the willingness to experiment and seek innovation. It is through the pursuit of these virtues that we ensure the survival of California — a place, a people, a dream.

Understanding the Text

1. Summarize in your own words the classic image of the California dream as Rawls describes it.
2. How does Rawls see popular culture as contributing to the image of California?

3. What does Rawls mean by the "paradox of expectations" (paras. 10–12) created by the California dream?
4. How, according to Rawls, do the slow-growth and environmental movements relate to the "paradox of growth" (paras. 17–20)?

Exploring and Debating the Issues

1. In your journal, brainstorm your own version of the California dream. Share your entry with your class, and discuss how the class's versions compare with Rawls's description of the dream.
2. Rawls wrote this essay in 1986. Write an essay in which you argue whether his description of the California good life is still valid, supporting your position with current evidence.
3. Does Rawls's version of the California dream apply to all residents of this state? In class, discuss whether there are any groups of individuals who may be excluded from this version. Then, drawing on your class discussion, write an essay in which you argue the extent to which the California dream includes all its residents.
4. Write an essay in which you support, refute, or modify Rawls's statement in the concluding paragraph that "the promises of California remain undiminished." To develop your essay, consult the other selections in this chapter, Chapter 2 on immigration, or Chapter 6 on California's economy.

MALCOLM J. ROHRBOUGH

Days of Gold

"Don't call it Frisco," San Franciscans will tell you when speaking of their beloved city by the Bay, preferring simply to call their home "the City." But as **Malcolm J. Rohrbough** suggests in his historical portrait of San Francisco at the height of the gold rush, "the City" may be too tame a label for this raucous, unconventional town, which still is unlike any other major city in America. An historian whose many works include *Aspen* (1988) and *Trans Appalachian Frontier* (1989), Rohrbough is also the author of *Days of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the American Nation* (1997), from which this selection is taken.

Experiences on shipboard or on the California Trail that sometimes called on the forty-niners to come to terms with their values and standards of behavior and conduct were only a prelude to the range of choices and temptations that began at the docks in San Francisco, on the streets in Placerville (or Hangtown, as it was called in those days), and in the diggings along the Feather or American Rivers. From the moment of their arrival, the forty-niners acknowledged that California was different. It was different in its opportunities; it was different in its standards of doing business and of