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Go East, Young Man

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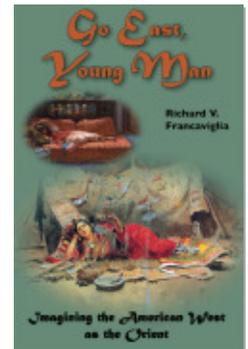
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Syria on the Pacific

California as the Near/Middle East

“The same power which changed the map of the Orient . . . is laying the foundation for civilization in what is to be a modern and glorified Syria of the Southwest.”

William Smythe, “San Diego Owns the Future” (1905)

IN ADDITION TO DEVELOPING AN ASIAN IDENTITY in the nineteenth century, California also became closely associated with the Near East in the popular mind. To Anglo-Americans who first encountered Mexican California in the 1830s and 1840s, the place seemed to be paradise, especially when they looked at their calendars and realized that balmy days could occur year-round. If part of the spell California cast came from its climate, which seemed to have banished winter, especially along the coast and in the low-lying areas, part of the spell also related to a beautiful, idyllic landscape populated by traditional peoples who seemed to have few of the cares that plagued modern civilization.

Although searching for Eden was part of the westward move, there is evidence that Spaniards in the New World had similar ideas long before Anglo-Americans ever reached California. A painting that hung in a church in Tepemazalco, Mexico, for more than two centuries demonstrates how an artist could render an Eastern theme in the landscape of the Mexican highlands. Titled *The Expulsion from the Garden*, this painting features Adam and Eve being driven out of Eden, along with the serpent, in a landscape that is not Middle Eastern but rather central Mexican. In this painting dated to 1728, the expelled humans and serpent move across the foreground while in the middle ground, horses, lions, and other creatures—some fanciful—peacefully coexist along the shores of a huge lake which appears to be Lake Texcoco; in the distance, volcanic peaks loom, and these too are right out of the Mexican landscape. In a scene that effortlessly interchanges Old World

and New World icons, the archangel Michael looms overhead with his fiery sword, as does the dove of the Holy Spirit. This stunning painting was recently returned to Mexico by the San Diego Museum of Art, which had acquired the painting unaware that it had been stolen several years earlier. The website Exploring Colonial Mexico describes the return of the painting under the title “Tepemazalco: Paradise Regained.” As the website concludes, “Although clearly stylized, the earthly landscape is surely intended to represent the Valley of Mexico and Lake Texcoco as they might have appeared in the early 1700s—a theme echoed in the recently discovered early 16th century mural at Tlatelolco, in which the lakeside environment is also nostalgically pictured as an idyllic Garden of Eden.”¹

The Spaniards settled California rather late (1769), and only gained a foothold fairly close to the coast. By the 1830s as part of Mexico, the California mission system was pretty much in ruins. By the late 1840s California became part of the United States and Anglo-Americans began to arrive in great numbers, bringing a long legacy of looking westward for opportunity but looking eastward, often as far east as the Orient, for inspiration. These westward-moving Anglo-Americans found that reaching California in the 1840s and 1850s was both costly and dangerous, and a look at a map revealed why. Getting there required either a long sea voyage or an overland trip across vast deserts and over towering mountain passes. California thus became part of the North American consciousness as a paradise that required going through hell to reach. After the mid-1840s, that made California all the more irresistible—provided one was up to the challenge.

The “extreme West,” as D. G. W. Leavitt called it in an 1845 issue of the *Arkansas Gazette*, was reached at a time when the Bible was the most common book people owned, and when stories of the Middle East were frequently used as metaphors. In describing the ill-fated Donner Party under the heading “THE FATE OF THE LAST EMIGRANTS,” for example, the *Californian* of Monterey observed that “it is a most horrid picture of human misery: such as has not been witnessed since the siege of Jerusalem.” Given the awful facts of cannibalism that emerged as the remainder of the snowbound Donner Party was rescued, the *Californian* added that “it is said by Jewish historians, that parents subsisted upon the bodies of their children, in time of siege by Titus.” Educated readers would here also recognize Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, wherein Tamora (like a legendary Tyestes) consumes the flesh of her sons at a banquet. The *Californian* went on to report the macabre details of the California version of this nightmarish experience—namely, that “in the Mountains, mothers possessing portions of their dead companions, refused to

divide it [*sic*] with their own children, while *alive*, and when the children died, actually devoured the bodies of their own offspring!" If, as cultural historian Lawrence Levine noted, "by mid-century, Shakespeare was taken across the Great Plains and over the Rocky Mountains and soon became a staple of theatres in the Far West," then we should also add newspapers like the *Californian* to the list of those who freely used the words of the great bard(s) here.²

There was, however, another source of such vivid, judgmental language. Moralizing further about the reprehensible behavior exhibited by the Donner Party, the *Californian* added, "Truly the 'mother may forget her sucking child.'"³ Readers of that era recognized this as another quote right out of the Bible, namely Isaiah 49:15, "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?" That reference to the Old Testament provided a sense of stern Hebraic morality compromised by human failings. It is easy to think of this as only so much biblical or Hebraic literature until we realize that Jews were part of the equation of Orientalism: their ancient literature and arcane, tortured history placed them as the "other" in Orientalist discourse.⁴

For travelers, the interior western deserts of North America, including California, represented a significant perceptual challenge. When they encountered arid land here, especially in the vicinity of salt flats and salt lakes, they were self-consciously aware of its austerity and its resonance as spiritual testing ground. Both depressed and depressing, the valley bottoms were especially mood altering. When the Jayhawkers in 1849 toiled across the Basin and Range country, these naive Gold Rush-bound Kansans thought their prospects would improve with each successive crossing of mountain ranges. And why not? They were, after all, a pretty hardy breed of people who had experienced the prairies of the Great Plains firsthand. Alas, however, in the western Great Basin, they encountered more, or less, than they bargained for. As they trudged westward, they became more and more concerned with each descent into bone-dry valleys. The Jayhawkers finally met more than their match in a valley that broke their spirit and shattered their cohesion. That valley in California turned out to be the lowest (and consequently the hottest and driest) place in North America—282 feet below sea level. The name that they gave it—Death Valley—was not only romantically dramatic; it also resonated in their spiritual lexicon, which was rich in valleys of death, or at least the "shadow of death," as evident in the twenty-third Psalm. Such passages furthered the comparison of the American desert with its counterpart in the Levant.⁵

Things were far brighter for other travelers, though. With its delightful climate and fascinating scenery, California readily served as a source of

spiritual renewal. In addition to its Spanish, or seemingly Spanish, heritage, California has long been portrayed as the “Promised Land.” In 1849, Sarah Royce arrived sick and exhausted from the overland journey across desert and mountains. Upon reaching the Sacramento Valley, and sensing her pending rejuvenation, Royce stated that she had found “our promised land.” Interestingly, this metaphor persisted well into the twentieth century, though “Holy Land” is sometimes substituted—perhaps to give this land an even more sacred or blessed quality.

Then, too, one could live a very different lifestyle in California, one as Arab as American. In 1850, British writer Sidney Smith offered a fascinating, Orientalist explanation of California’s almost magical powers. “California,” as he put it, “is notoriously the region of gold, and also of that most desperate of all classes of men, gold finders.” Having set up that tension, Smith went on to wax poetic about what awaits the traveler here using a characteristically long Victorian sentence: “To the bold and intrepid, to all who are imbued with the spirit of adventure, to that frame of mind which is essentially gipsy, Kalmuck, and Arabian in its desire for a wandering and restless life, these regions offer the inducement of a climate which admits of constantly living in the open air, of productiveness which renders rough substance easy with little labour, and of the chances of getting rapidly rich by the lucky acquisition of the precious metals.” Smith was convinced that California offered “a life that may become easy to Americans on the borders of civilization, [but which] would be full of anxiety and difficulty to a European and ought not to be encountered under any circumstances whatever.”⁶ Note here, though, that Smith casts Americans who seek freedom through unfettered mobility as, among others, Arabians. More importantly, that tendency to be Arabian is not, in his subversive reasoning, all bad; it was in fact rather liberating.

As California was settled in the 1850s and 1860s, the herculean task of connecting the state to the rest of the nation called for some powerful metaphors. In the spirit of Orientalism that prevailed in the Victorian West, the completion of the transcontinental railroad was also given an Arabian twist. In its flyer titled “What the Religious Press of New York Says of the Pacific Railroad,” the *New York Independent* noted, “What we demanded has been given. All the resources of the Sultan’s jewel-chests failed to complete the ‘unfinished windows in Aladdin’s tower.’ But, . . .” the *Independent* quickly added, “Aladdin had only to order it, and the work would be done, because Aladdin had unlimited resources behind him.” The writer’s literary hyperbole continued with the following: “Perhaps the projectors of the Pacific Railway were, metaphorically, at least, placed in a position a little like that of Aladdin.

So they have got the work done; and, for the present, that one fact naturally obscures, or event occults, every other in the history of the enterprise." Hinting at the fantastic character of a project as ambitious as connecting America to the Orient using a railway link, the *Independent* reminded readers that "ten years ago it was regarded as a dream, a chimera, a craze."⁷

As several factors—Manifest Destiny, the US-Mexican War, and the Gold Rush—joined forces to transform the West's landscapes and peoples, California proved irresistible. To many nineteenth-century travel writers, California resonated as the exotic Near and Far East. Under the passages titled "The Mirage" in his popular book *Crusoe's Island* (1864), J. Ross Browne described the landscape of the Salinas Valley: "The scene that lay outspread before me . . ." he wrote, "resembled rather some wild region of enchantment than any thing that could be supposed to exist in a material world—so light and hazy were the distant mountains, so vaguely mingled the earth and sky, so rich and fanciful the atmospheric tints, and so visionary the groves that decorated the plain." Even though the word *mirage* could suggest the chimerical, it also referred, especially at that time, to something evanescent. In an age when subjectivity was valued as a hallmark of romanticism, the mirage was something special: the person who experienced a real mirage was not deluded, but actually privileged.

Then, too, a mirage could literally transform one place into another. This surreal scene Browne experienced in California called for comparisons with another part of the world where the mind also played tricks on the traveler, namely, the Near East. Browne noted that "mounds of yellow sand, rising a little above the level of the plain, had all the effect of rich Oriental cities, with gorgeous palaces of gold, mosques, and minarets, and wondrous temples glittering with jewels and precious stones." Seeking a rational explanation as to why a herd of antelope "seemed rather to sail through the air than touch the earth," Browne stated that "by the illusory process of the refraction, they appeared to sweep into the lakes and assume the forms of aerial boats, more fanciful and richly colored than the caciques of Constantinople." As Browne traveled, the scene continued to change as if by magic; a vulture appeared to be "a fabulous monster of olden times . . . lakes disappeared with the islands and fleets, and new lakes, with still stranger and more fantastic illusions, merged into existence out of the rarified atmosphere."⁸ This refraction was both visible and metaphorical, for Browne's imagination was reflecting upon the adventures of earlier travel writers and novelists.

The human population of California was also easy for Browne to Orientalize. Part of this trip was, as he put it, a "dangerous journey." In describing an intriguing "dark eyed, fierce-looking woman of about six-and-twenty,

a half-breed from Santa Barbara,” Browne noted she seemed part animal and that “every glance of her fierce, flashing eyes was instinct with untamable passion.” Strangely attracted to this dangerous woman, Browne observed that “she was a mustang in human shape—one that I thought would kick or bite upon very slight provocation.” Like many commentators who described such tempestuous *mestizas*, Browne observed that “in the matter of dress she was almost Oriental.” Her dress was of “the richest and most striking colors,” and it “made a rare accord with her wild and singular physique.” Her ornate gold-cased breast pin featured glittering diamonds, her ears were “loaded down with sparkling ear-rings,” and her long hair was “gathered up in a knot behind, and pinned with a gold dagger”—all of which made her seem like “a dangerous but royal game-bird.”

Although Browne’s fantasy-filled description is fraught with sexist and racist overtones, it drew on the tradition of the Eastern temptress so common in literature, song, and even the Bible. This woman was trouble, and Browne sensed it. He imagined that she cast a “spell” on men who quickly fell for her, and this gave Browne “a foreboding of evil” that soon played out. As he relates the story, this “belle” was remarkably flirtatious, and one can imagine what was about to happen. Later that evening, two men—a local Mexican and a tall white man dressed in the “picturesque style” of a Texas Ranger—fought over her with fatal results. The Texan, whom she had earlier rebuffed but apparently loved, was stabbed to death. Although this tragic story appears to be overwrought and melodramatic—the type of event that Marty Robbins’ classic “western” song “El Paso” immortalized about a century later (1958)—the point here is that such passionate, irresistible Jezebels are one of the many Orientalist tropes by which Anglo-Americans characterized the American West as man’s country filled with mind-altering mirages and dangerous temptations. As Browne candidly put it, “The rarest charms of scenery and climate” here in California were desecrated by “the worst passions of human nature.”⁹

Despite its idyllic qualities, then, California could still humble travelers and even motivate a scientist to wax poetic about the perils here. In the early 1860s, when geologist Raphael Pumpelly was nearing the end of the first part of his trip that would ultimately take him to the Orient, he ascended the mountains to leave California’s Colorado Desert country, which features one of North America’s largest expanses of sand dunes. This area is comparable to the Sahara in temperatures and aridity, and Pumpelly described it in harrowing terms as he felt his energy sapped and his imagination racing: “All night long,” Pumpelly wrote, “we forced our way through the deep sand of the gorge, winding among countless skeletons, glittering in the moonlight, scorched

by hot blasts ever rushing up from the deserts behind us." Concluding this memorable passage, Pumpelly stated that the experience was like "wandering through the valley of the shadow of death, and flying from the very gates of hell."¹⁰ This too was wording very loosely taken from the Bible, and it brought to mind trials and tribulations in the deserts of the Old World. The reference to skeletons and bones along the way, so common in descriptions of both the Sahara/Arabian and the American desert, only added to the dramatic effect. Pumpelly had plenty of company among other scientists as he equated the interior desert West with its Old World counterparts.¹¹

Given the Victorian imagination, California's abandoned mining towns evoked far-off places. For example, when Robert Louis Stevenson traveled through the northern part of the state in the late 1870s, he wrote down his observations in *Silverado Squatters*. As Stevenson put it, "One thing in this new country very particularly strikes a stranger, and that is the number of antiquities." Noting that "already there have been many cycles of population succeeding each other, and passing away and leaving behind relics," these abandoned mining towns were evocative. As Stevenson put it, "These, standing on into changed times, strike the imagination as forcibly as any pyramid or feudal tower." Stevenson concluded that "when the lode comes to an end, and the miners move elsewhere, the town remains behind them, like Palmyra in the desert." It is significant that even though Stevenson was in a partially forested area of scrub oaks and madrone trees, the use of a fabled desert town in far-away Syria served his purposes perfectly.¹²

If travelers were prone to see the Near East in California, they also carried images of California with them to the Orient. Traveling through Palestine, American writer Bayard Taylor encountered the beautiful landscapes on the Plain of Esdraelon, which looked like a "green sea, covered with fields of wheat and barley, or great grazing tracts, on which multitudes of sheep and goats are wandering." Taylor was struck by the landscape here, which seemed familiar. Pondering the similarities, he realized that it reminded him of what he had explained in the Golden State. As he put it, "In some respects, it reminded me of the Valley of San José and if I were to liken Palestine to any country I have seen, it would be California." The climate of both places, he declared, is "the same, the soil is very similar in quality, and the landscapes present the same general features." Taylor found in Palestine "the same rank fields of wild oats clothing the mountain-sides, the same aromatic herbs impregnating the air with balm, and above all, the same blue, cloudless days and dewless nights." Taylor concluded, "Traveling here, I am constantly reminded of our new Syria on the Pacific."¹³

No small part of the Orientalization of California and the entire American West relates to the way in which irrigation transformed the area into a garden—at least in spots. This was not a feature of the original landscape, though Paiute Indians in California's Owens Valley practiced irrigation. The new irrigation, though, was an aggressive, technologically oriented application of water to land and city that was unparalleled in world history. The diversion of water, in fact, not only gave life to much of California but also helped create water-dependent civilization here not unlike that of the Near East.

Environmental historian Donald Worster observes: "In California and the West has emerged the most elaborate hydraulic system in world history, overshadowing even the grandiose works of the Sassanians and the Pharaohs."¹⁴ Worster's smooth integration of new West and ancient East in this one sentence is noteworthy because it reminds one how even seemingly "modern" works, such as pipelines and mechanical sprinklers, can convey a sense of the Byzantine drama of those mysteriously named "hydraulic civilizations." The American West owes a debt, if we can call it that, to these civilizations along "the Tigris, the Euphrates, and the Nile [which] were then, according to the theory of hydraulic society, the environmental basis for the first authoritarian, complexly hierarchical civilizations."¹⁵

There is something perversely fascinating to Americans about the accumulation of such political and technological power and the seemingly despotic ability to use it at will. True, as Americans who salute the underdog, we can side with the Owens Valley farmers and ranchers whose lands were turned to dust by a water-hungry Los Angeles as the beautiful Owens Lake turned into a dry, salt-filled bowl. But Owens Valley is still dry, while Los Angeles continues to grow—a testimony not only to the city's power but also to our fascination with, and complicity in, a grand scheme that might even put the despots of the ancient Near East to shame.

In western American history, such water engineering schemes were clearly male-inspired, but Worster gives us reason to pause. He correctly noted that the roots of such water piracy can be traced back to "the fabled Assyrian ruler, Queen Semiramis, [who] was reputed to have inscribed on her tomb what may stand as the ecological creed, and the hubris, of the advanced hydraulic civilizations: 'I constrained the mighty river to flow according to my will and let its water to fertilize lands that had before been barren and without inhabitants.'"¹⁶ Worster's suggestion here, of course, is that the aggressive diversion of water in the West is not really Western at all but rather Middle Eastern in origin and spirit. We know much, perhaps too much, today about the downside of such actions, but without them the arid and semiarid West would be

a very different place, devoid of the intoxicating fragrance of orange blossoms in spring and cut alfalfa in summer, not to mention huge reservoirs luring swimmers and boaters and the impressive sight of water coursing through the desert in canals.

California is one of many places that historian David M. Wrobel calls “Promised Lands” that were created in the promotion and selling of the American West. Mixing metaphors a bit in 1885, Frank Pixley, the editor of the *San Francisco Argonaut*, printed a letter that described how “God” would have characterized the area near Riverside, California: “This is the happy Canaan—the holy land; that God, when He made the world, and had gathered the experience of all His efforts, said to himself: ‘I will now illustrate the crowning glory of My Labors with the production of the perfect spot.’” According to Pixley, that spot was both Edenic and productive. It had “wealth of soils and wealth of precious metals,” and “splendid mountains, rich and gorgeous valleys, grand and stately forests.” Adopting the persona of God again, Pixley concluded that in this perfect place “shall be found the highest social condition of which the creation of My image is capable.”¹⁷ This description reminds one a bit more of “the good land” in Deuteronomy than the real, and rather more difficult, Canaan. But then again, *any* biblical reference would suffice to get the point across: God himself endorsed the settlement and the promotion of not only Riverside but also much of the Golden State.

California’s Spanish or Mexican heritage was nominally Christian but was given an Oriental identity by promoters such as Charles Lummis. As an easterner, Lummis had grown up looking westward but romanticizing both the Near and Far East. Never particularly healthy, Lummis sought revitalization in the West by taking a position as a newspaper editor in California. Along the way he fell in love with the Greater Southwest, which was united to California in part by Spanish heritage. In Lummis’s view, however, it was the exotic Moorish heritage of Spain that made that country so different from the rest of Europe—and that Moorish heritage was part of the Spanish heritage in California and the Southwest. As noted earlier, the Moors, though North African, were easy to Orientalize because they were Muslims whose cultural roots linked them to Berbers and Arabs of the Near East. It was thus a Near Eastern rather than purely Spanish heritage that made Lummis’s beloved Southwest and California so different from anything else the United States had to offer.

Lummis was not alone. In fact, some observers claimed that the Moorish heritage of Spain was that country’s only saving grace. Bayard Taylor put it rather undiplomatically in 1904 when he noted, “In Granada, as in Seville and

Cordova, one's sympathies are wholly with the Moors." Even today, as Taylor observed, "The few mutilated traces which still remain of their power, taste, and refinement, surpass any of the monuments erected by the race which conquered them." Using a sentiment that Washington Irving had popularized about half a century earlier, Taylor concluded that "the Moorish Dynasty in Spain was truly . . . a splendid exotic [flower], doomed never to take a lasting root in the soil" of Spain. As a person who romanticized the spread of civilized Islam into Spain from the Near East, Taylor used another, less flattering, biological metaphor of his own for Spain. Moorish culture, he observed "was choked to death by the native weeds; and, in place of lands richly cultivated and teeming with plenty, we now have barren and almost depopulated wastes—in place of education, industry, and the cultivation of the arts and sciences, an enslaved, ignorant and degenerate race."¹⁸ Such sentiments were common, especially among both freethinkers and Protestant anti-Catholics who felt the church and pope in Rome were the oppressors; such sentiments fueled the "Black Legend," which portrayed Spain as the New World tyrant.

As Lummis and others were well aware, that hint of the Moorish in Spain's presence in California was intriguing, and potentially marketable. Although the missions were Spanish (and later Mexican, which was far less mentioned), their architecture included Islamic or Moorish elements. After all, the lands encircling the Mediterranean had a long connection with Islam. And yet many people doubted the Moor's superiority. In some quarters, the racially white qualities of Spain were contrasted with the darkness of the Moors (and by conflation, the American Indians). This whiteness became an important issue in romanticizing and purifying California's Spanish heritage, as opposed to Mexican (which suggests Indian or *mestizo* identity). Much the same occurs in present-day northern New Mexico, where Hispanic residents of small towns north of Santa Fe often emphasize their Spanish heritage and vehemently deny that any "Indian blood" has ever entered their family line. Further complicating this, however, is the presence of an underlying Jewish converso heritage even among some of the purest of Hispanic Catholic families; this, of course, is an Oriental intrusion often left unexamined and unspoken.

In California, though, Lummis's friend and fellow writer Helen Hunt Jackson (1830–1885) subversively undermined whiteness by introducing a novel character as a novel's main character—the fictional Ramona—whose love for a Native American man ultimately helped increase the visibility of California's indigenous peoples. When published in 1884, *Ramona* created a sensation. Although not written as an Orientalist story per se, *Ramona* reminds us of the power of fiction to affect reality by reshaping attitudes toward

race—and helping to create regional identity based in part on Orientalization of the subject matter.¹⁹

References to the Orient run like a subliminal undercurrent in *Ramona*. When Jackson describes the coastal hills of Southern California as “like nothing in nature except the glitter of a brilliant lizard in the sun or the iridescent sheen of a peacock’s neck,” she plays with the same exotic imagery that authors used to describe the East. Similarly, when she observes that “the wild mustard in Southern California is like that spoken of in the New Testament, in the branches of which the birds of the air may rest,” Jackson gives the Golden State’s natural history the stature of its biblical counterpart. The many shepherds in *Ramona* appear ageless, actually biblical, in their ancient occupations; even Ramona herself is described as having “just enough of an olive tint in her complexion to underlie and enrich her skin without making it swarthy.” Her Indian lover, Alessandro, is darker—an Indian cast in the role of the Moor wooing a Spanish beauty.²⁰ But what makes *Ramona* especially interesting is Jackson’s ability to render California, and Californios as they were then called, into America’s own version of the Orient, with its timeless villages, tribal distinctions, petty squabbles, rigid religious authority, Byzantine intrigue, and the timeless oppression of fatalism. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, Jackson romanticized the state’s history. In 1883, she claimed that the character of Californios embodied a kind of alchemy. As she put it, “Simply out of sunshine, there had distilled in them an Orientalism as fine in its way as that made in the East by generations of prophets, crusaders, and poets.”²¹

One more example will suffice to show how California becomes East and how Westerner becomes Easterner. In her classic book *The Land of Little Rain* (1903), Mary Austin was prone to see the East in the West’s shepherders and its Indians. Of the former, she notes that “it appears that shepherds have not changed more than sheep in the process of time.” Austin quickly adds that “the shy hairy men who herd the tactile flocks might be, except for some added clothing, the very brethren of David.” Note here that one character from the Bible is strongly defined enough to serve as a surrogate for all herders past and present. Moreover, the shepherds need a place, that is, landscape, to help define them as biblical in age. Place and time conspire to reset, as it were, the western American drama in the East—or rather, transform the American West into the East. As Austin puts it, “When the fire kindles and savory meat seethes in the pot, when there is drowsy bletcher from the flock, and far down the mesa the twilight twinkle of shepherd fires, when there is a hint of blossom underfoot and a heavenly whiteness on the hills, one harks back without effort to Judea and the Nativity.”²²

To complete this allusion to American West as Holy Land, Austin needed one more ingredient—woman. In describing a basket-making Paiute woman in California, Austin notes: “In her best days, Seyavi was most like Deborah, deep bosomed, broad in the hips, quick in counsel, slow of speech, esteemed of her people.”²³ This is Orientalism at its most flattering, or rather self-flattering, for Austin is here confessing that the noble shepherds and Indian women are in effect her own ancestors. By placing them—and us—in this new Western setting, Austin transforms the American desert into the Holy Land. She also mythologizes the New World desert by weaving it into an Old World narrative whose roots sustain the tree of Western culture. Popular beliefs about California’s Middle Eastern Old World countenance also appeared in other guises. The culture of Anglo-American California was well primed to see Oriental messages in the marketing of this new yet very old paradise. Consider, for example, the exuberant labels on fruit crates for a wide variety of semi-tropical products—dates, oranges, grapefruits, figs—which reveal something of California’s fascination with the Orient. One in particular, Bradford Bros. Miracle Brand (fig. 6-1), features what appears to be a genie—or perhaps it is Aladdin himself—holding a tray of large, luscious oranges. The man is clearly Middle Eastern: dark, handsome, with a downward gaze that conveys a sense of “Eastern” contentment and mystery.²⁴ His face, while undeniably male, also has an androgynous quality, in that his features are fine and his countenance serene. This sexual mysteriousness is a hallmark of Orientalism. The magic lantern present in the lower left-hand portion of the label is also noteworthy, a literary reference that serves as a subtle reminder that magic was required to make the scene a reality. For Southern Californians who could remember when these semiarid lands were barren in 1900, the labels from the 1920s and 1930s confirmed that the genie had granted their wishes.

In *California Orange Box Labels* (1985), Gordon McClelland and Jay Last demonstrate how art and advertising work hand in hand to give places and products new identities. The California citrus industry used a wide range of images to advertise its citrus products: “Their purpose—to rapidly catch the attention and interest of prospective purchasers—was the same as for advertising posters developed in the 1880s and 1890s.” The labels were intended to reach the wholesaler, who would in turn sell the product to the public. Over eight thousand distinct designs were introduced, many of them emphasizing the exotic, even sensual, quality of citrus fruit. According to McClelland and Last, “naturalism” dominated from 1885 to 1920. These labels often featured local scenes, such as palm-treed landscapes, bridges, and orange groves, but the area’s romantic Spanish history (missions and vaqueros) and images of



Author's collection

Fig. 6-1. Citrus labels such as those on Bradford Bros. Miracle Brand Oranges featured exotic imagery that helped Orientalize California—in this case referencing the popular Arabian Nights story “Aladdin and the Magic Lamp.”

Indians were also popular. At this time, too, images of attractive women were in vogue and remained so “throughout the years.” It is here that one glimpses not only beautiful Anglo or other European or other women but also more exotic women, as exemplified by the Gypsy Queen, Chinese Girl, and Geisha Brand labels. By the early 1900s, commercial growers were using the pyramid (complete with sphinx, date palms, and camels), and by the 1920s, the labels were full-blown commercial art appealing to national tastes. It is no surprise that they mirror some of the popular interest in “Oriental” subject matter, hence a proliferation of Egyptian, Cleopatra, and Sheik brand images; in the 1930s, the Endurance brand featured a caravan of camels, and a queen series that included Esther (complete with Egyptian-style servants) and Rebecca.²⁵ Orientalism was clearly an influence here. Through these labels, we see that California citrus producers at first manufactured a California image or identity. That identity, however, was soon supplemented, if not supplanted, by

more foreign—usually Oriental—motifs. In this sense, we see Orientalism as intersecting, and sometimes vying, with attempts at creating nativistic identity.

In 1920, when California orange crate labels celebrated mythical characters from well-known stories such as the Arabian Nights, the spectacular Samarkand, Persian Hotel and spa in Santa Barbara opened its doors to a public long enchanted with the Orient. Located in the rugged, chaparral-covered Samarkind Hills behind the city, the facility transformed a struggling boys' school into a posh Oriental wonder. The setting—which was formerly grazed but now becoming part of Santa Barbara's tony tourist scene, was evocative. The name Samarkand was legendary, said to be Persian for "Land of Heart's Desire." Moreover, that fabled city's name was a household word as it was the locale in which the ingenious Scheherazade had told her fabulous 1001 Arabian Nights stories. At its grand opening, the Samarkand Persian featured a troupe of "Hindi dancers." It was said that they "captivated the audience, but the Samarkand captivated the dancers." This was no surprise, given the hotel's setting and beautiful Persian gardens and fountains. To further perpetuate the exotic southwestern Asian ambiance of the place, the hotel's administrator Charles B. Hervey was known as "the Caliph of the Samarkand."²⁶ That title was perfect as it suggested a mysterious and powerful Oriental potentate—in this case a Muslim potentate—who could orchestrate the magic, and provide a sensual, out of the ordinary experience.

California's search for a regional identity explored numerous Old World alternatives. One that proved irresistible attempted to recapture a nearly lost and allegedly noble Spanish heritage. This, in a sense, was distinct from a "Mexican" heritage, which had also characterized California, but at a later period (1821–1848). However, whereas *Mexican* suggested a mixing of Spanish with Native American, the concept of *Spanish* seemed purer, that is to say, purely European. That, as suggested above, was problematic for at least two reasons. First, *Spanish* itself suggested a Catholic tradition that was, to many Protestant Anglo-Americans, not pure at all but rather sullied by papal corruption and idolatry. California could overcome this anti-Catholic bias only with the increasing liberalization that occurred in the later nineteenth century as Irish Catholics and others began to assimilate. As part of those liberalizing attitudes, as well as a growing fantasizing about the romance of old California, the Spanish heritage was embraced by Anglo-Californians. And yet that California Spanish identity always had as one of its ingredients an underlying Moorish/Islamic heritage that was both fascinating and troubling.

This ambivalence requires greater clarification. Half a century before Lummis, Anglo-Americans during the mid-nineteenth century were well

aware that Spanish architecture was not purely European. In 1849, when US-Mexican War veteran Mayne Reid wrote about his experiences in the *Saturday Evening Post*, he described the city of Puebla, Mexico, as “indeed a glorious picture . . . The eye is struck with the heavy half Moorish style of its architecture—the dusky color of its terraced roofs—the quaint old cupolas of the churches.”²⁷ A similar situation prevailed north of the border, where ordinary Anglo-Americans were fascinated by the Moorish look of architecture.

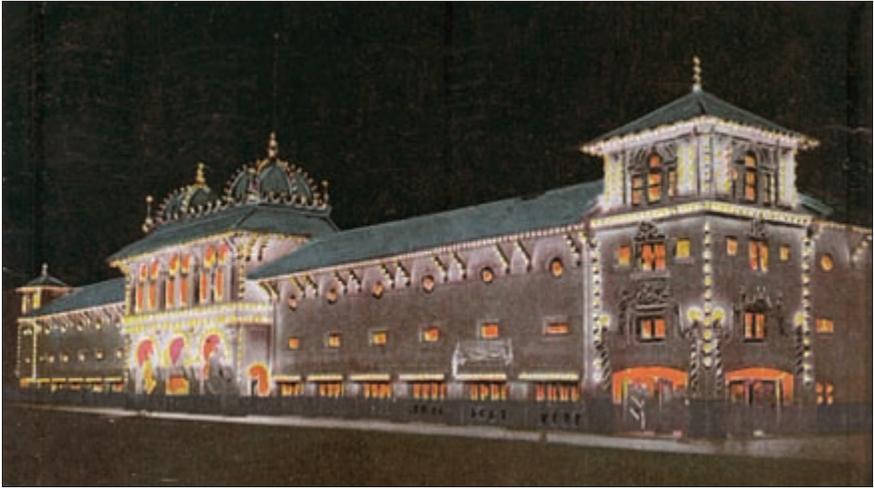
Lummis, though, became the most persuasive promoter of California’s exotic heritage. He had a major role in the rise of mission-style architecture in California in the early to mid 1890s. This represented a significant trend in American architecture, for it spread eastward quickly. Moreover, it involved the diffusion of faux Spanish design to areas never visited, much less settled, by the Spaniards.²⁸

As Lummis was well aware, Moorish-style architecture was both evocative and seductive. Some of Spain’s most exquisite buildings, such as the Alhambra in Granada and the Alcázar in Seville, were built during Muslim occupation and are in fact largely Middle Eastern rather than European in design. Although the public had little difficulty conceiving the mission style to be Spanish, and hence Catholic (Christian), in origin, these buildings resonated on two levels. On the surface, they were Spanish and hence European, but just below the surface, they were Moorish and thus connected to a widely held fascination with Orientalism. For example, revival-style buildings like Scotty’s Castle in Death Valley, built by Albert Johnson and named in honor of that eccentric desert dweller in 1925–26, were often called Spanish but were clearly also Moorish. That made them interesting as well as somewhat threatening. The Moors—as all educated people from sixteenth-century Spaniard Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca to the Protestant Anglo-American Spanish revival architects of early twentieth-century California knew—were the North African Muslims who had lived in Spain for about seven centuries before being driven from Iberia in 1492. Their roots are Middle Eastern and their religion is Islam. The missions represent not only Spaniards per se but Easterners who conquered Spain. To further complicate any interpretation of Spanish revival, then, it should be noted that Spain’s heritage attracted (and sometimes repelled) Protestant mainstream America not simply because it embodied an esoteric Catholic quality (which was, in their eyes, bad enough) but precisely because it also resonated with an exotic Islamic, Middle Eastern character. This made Spanish revival architecture doubly intriguing. It was loved by some and despised by others precisely because of its connection to the more mysterious and exotic Arab world and Islam.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sophisticated Californians were well aware of the Orientalist component in their otherwise “Spanish” idyll. Author Helen Hunt Jackson herself said it best when she observed that California peculiarly combined “an almost dreamy, otherworldly Orientalism with a frenetic Anglo American Bustle.” As suggested above, Jackson was an appreciative Orientalist. However, she was also as conflicted as she was idealistic—beholden to the technological prowess of modern society to share her increasingly subversive beliefs about that society’s impacts on indigenous people. Her epic *Ramona* helped gain support for Native Americans whose culture and heritage had been savaged by aggressive “Yankee” development.²⁹ As a former Yankee herself, Jackson had fallen under the spell of a California that was at once West and East,³⁰ and used that Orientalism to support social reform.

On the Pacific coast, San Diego was widely touted for its similarities to southern Europe. But even though writers often compared it to Naples, Italy; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; and Nice, France; that was not exotic enough. Rather, in developing the grounds for the Panama-California Exposition of 1915–16, a large urban park (Balboa) would be transformed into a fantasylike landscape based on the Spanish cities of Salamanca, Seville, and Toledo—all of which exhibit Moorish influences—as well as the Mexican cities of Guadalajara, Mexico City, and Taxco. The exposition’s more imaginative proponents, especially that now-famous regional magpie Charles Lummis, were more likely to draw parallels with the Middle East. The Southwest, as Lummis portrayed it, was no Spanish imitation. It was, as he put it, the real thing—“an exotic land equal to the Orient of the Nile River Valley in Egypt.” In ensuring that the cultural exhibits in the exposition would be authentic, Lummis threw his support behind ethnographer Edgar Hewett, who believed that “Native Americans retained a culture and way of life as significant and unique as the classical antiquity of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia.” To Hewett, “the Southwest beckoned as the Greece, Mesopotamia, and Orient of North America.” But the similarities did not stop there. As Hewett claimed in 1915, archaeological study of ancient Central and South America revealed the presence of a once-grand classical world. In America, Hewett stated, “the brilliancy of the new race suggested another Orient,” and, more to the point, “the ruins of Central American cities seemed to entomb another Egypt.”³¹

So much has been written about the seemingly Spanish (but, in reality, simultaneously European and Oriental) California mission style that full-blown Oriental revival architecture in the Golden State has been neglected. Here, as in many other locales, developers built huge assemblages of buildings



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Fig. 6-2. In an evocative night scene that hints at pleasure palaces in the Near East, a postcard mailed in 1910 shows the ornate Bath House in Redondo Beach, California.

that played on an unabashedly Eastern theme. Consider, for example, the seaside resort of Redondo Beach, which featured a stunning 225-room hotel. Built in 1890, that huge hostelry was topped by turrets and towers right out of an *Arabian Nights* tale. Then, too, the incredible Auditorium and the Plunge Bath House in Redondo Beach featured “the largest indoor salt-water-heated pool in the world.” Built in 1909 and served by the ubiquitous “red cars” of Henry Huntington’s Pacific Electric Railway, this was one of Southern California’s landmarks (fig. 6-2). California’s Ocean Park (Santa Monica) and Casino/Natatorium (Santa Cruz) also featured Oriental-style buildings, which, like Utah’s Saltair, provided carfree pleasure in an exotic setting.

At the height of the popularity of Oriental architectural splendor, California blossomed with public buildings that provided a touch of the Near and Middle East. The Santa Fe Railway, in particular, built several large stations in this style over about a thirty-year period, including the La Grande Station on Second Street in Los Angeles (1893) and the fabulous San Bernardino Station (1918). In an attempt to capture the flavor of the Orient, these impressive buildings featured large domes, ornate turrets, and spectacular arches. Just northeast of Los Angeles, the ornate Pasadena Grand Opera House on South Raymond Avenue (built in 1888–89) featured several Orientalist flourishes—including Islamic pointed arches, ornate “Arabian” window trim, and spectacular towers capped by multicolored domes—all of which gave a Middle Eastern character to an otherwise Victorian building.

Yet the very thing that made structures like this so exciting—namely, their fantastically ornate “Arabesque” or “Oriental” architecture—proved terribly expensive to maintain. Alas, in Redondo Beach, the seaside resort buildings were mostly gone by the 1930s—torn down to avoid costly taxes and potential liabilities as people found other, new diversions. Only a few such ornate buildings—for example, the Santa Fe Railway’s huge, Turkish-style San Bernardino Station—remain in the twenty-first century, but those that do are now appreciated for their elaborate, eclectic Oriental style.

These Oriental-style buildings were part of a broader trend. It is telling that they coincided with lavish Victorian-era architecture. It should be noted that rather than being the sole style of architecture, these Oriental gems represented one of numerous styles—for example, Italianate, Romanesque, Venetian, Mission—that flourished during a time when Californians tirelessly experimented with their identity. This was a time when entrepreneurs were liable to try anything novel, anything interesting, anything exotic, in order to attract patrons or customers to their business enterprises. Residential developers too created exotic styles of homes for enthusiastic homebuyers. Thus it is that even the bungalow style, which proved very popular in California and spread elsewhere, also plumbed an Oriental motif, namely, the architecture of colonial India. With its rustic look and ornate veranda-style porch, the bungalow suggested a tropical climate and exotic surroundings. It also introduced yet another Oriental element into the English language: the word *bungalow* is of Hindi origin and may be derived from Bengal.

Although it is likely that few people really thought these Orient-inspired commercial and residential buildings were authentic, they certainly helped create, and then sustain, the impression that California was both exotic and innovative. The most ornate of the faux Oriental buildings are what environmental design professor Dean MacCannell calls “ideological castles.” These huge, elaborate edifices are part of the mythology that sustains Western culture, though some critics like Roland Barthes consider the myth an inherently parasitic aspect of culture that “‘nourishes itself’ on history, and distorts language for its own ends.”³² That interpretation suggests something sinister—a common response by cultural critics. However, one might take the opposite stance—namely, that business culture is based on borrowing and trading, whether it be capital, products, services, or advertising. Moreover, even culture itself represents a synergy of different forces and influences in constant flux.

Architects found the ornate skylines of Islamic cities, with their graceful domes and tall spires, irresistible in the Victorian period. Those ornate Oriental-style buildings were visually exciting, as they suggested the fairy

tales of the *Arabian Nights*. Small wonder they became so popular for amusement parks and waterfronts like Redondo Beach, Santa Cruz, and even Utah's Saltair, for all these places further associated the Orient with amusement and pleasure. Of course, the real structures in the Orient are as likely to be associated with religious or civic life, but when translated into American popular culture, they serve very different purposes more in line with the needs of the Orientalist imitators.

In the United States and other Western countries, these ornate buildings filled an important niche in the collective psyche that viewed foreign countries as sources of products and pleasures unavailable in industrialized and otherwise civilized nations. To this end, the Columbian Exposition in Chicago (1893) featured a midway lined with fanciful Oriental-style buildings. In 1894, J. W. Buel published *The Magic City*. Buel began this booklet by noting that "there are magicians still who rival the proudest conceptions of imaginary demons with realities as splendid as ever Oriental fancy painted." He then added an even more immodest but revealing idea—namely, that "this is not an age of miracles, but is one of works, in which the powers of human genius transcend the beauty and opulence of Arabic dreams, when the airy unsubstantials of intoxicated reveries seem to be fabricated into living ideals of grandeur more magnificent than any that every Rajah or Caliph beheld in vision or fact."³³

This was a presumptuous but honest sentiment: it was Buel's way of positioning the imaginering of popular culture icons above their prototypes—a clearly arrogant but necessary philosophical stance in the Gilded Age, when image trumped substance. Buel's surprisingly candid statement is central to the concerns of postmodernism. With little modification, one could replace Buel's "Magic City" with Disney's "Magic Kingdom" (1955) or—for that matter, today's magical city, Las Vegas—without missing a beat. That is what makes Orientalism, which was a nationwide phenomenon, so perfectly suited to the American West. As historian John Findlay observed, the West could reinvent itself on occasion, encouraging and then sustaining extreme innovation.³⁴ Although Orientalism was one ingredient in that creative process, it was among the most important and persuasive for developers.

California emerged early on as a land that imported and embraced the best of the exotic. As opposed to New York or Illinois, though, California's physical environment could in part justify the tradition. Its incredible climate, or rather climates, helped sustain the feeling that people were experiencing something akin to the original, and with good reason. The state possesses the widest variety of landscapes and climates of any US state. Somewhere

in the state, one could probably find climate types that represented most of the Orient, except the sultry coastal climates of Southeast Asia. It is one thing to experience an Oriental-style building in the eastern or midwestern United States, but quite another to experience it in California. The point here is that Oriental-style amusement parks in the East and Midwest went only so far in pulling off the total effect. However, on a balmy March evening in Los Angeles, with snow-covered mountains looming in the distance and the incredibly potent fragrance of orange blossoms scenting the air, it was far easier for crowds to imagine that they had been transported either to Babylon or Eden.

The search for the Garden of Eden in Spain's (and Mexico's) far northwest—which is to say California—intensified well into the twentieth century. In *Orange Empire: California and the Fruits of Eden*, Douglas Cazaux Sackman makes it quite clear that California presented a new kind of Eden in the nineteenth century. As Sackman put it, this was a “second edition of Eden,” which “was not meant to be a sacred place, walled off from the world of commerce.” This Eden would, as Sackman states, or rather understates, “have economic functions.” It would become part of an economy linked to “material dreams”—a garden featuring “the most worldly delights.” This California Garden of Eden, Sackman concluded, “contained the seeds of empire.”³⁵ And yet the seduction of citrus also depended on the appeal of an Eden that was particularly primal—much like the original Garden of Eden. Sackman astutely observes that orange crate labels frequently used sex to sell the product, as in the Tesoro brand, whose label used a provocatively dressed woman who reached “into the treasure chest between her legs and pulled out a golden fruit, seductively displaying it as an object of desire.” As Sackman observes, “To have an orange is also to ‘have’ a woman.”³⁶ This woman is Eve, who continues to tempt long after her, and our, expulsion from the garden.

Sackman's observation that Eden is a troubled place regardless of who is to blame is insightful. As he puts it, “The Fall—whether we blame the snake, the woman, the man, or the god—splits the harmony between humans and the rest of creation.” This act ejects people from that garden. However, “the dream of a return has persisted,” despite the fact that “such a garden has always been a fabrication.” Sackman concludes that “there is no Eden,”³⁷ but that negative sentiment is as easy for an academician to claim as it is difficult for a culture to comprehend. The Garden of Eden, the garden of earthly delights, is a Middle Eastern concept deeply embedded in three major faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). It is synonymous with *paradise*, an originally Iranian concept that is both a place and a state of mind, even a state of grace. In

one sense, it is a time of innocence before the responsibilities of adulthood—personal, cultural, or national—confound us with choices that are ultimately moral or ethical. For our culture to disavow such a garden, it would have to both discard its soul and abandon its hope. That realization makes it easier to understand the West's fundamental and perennial connection to the East. Paradoxically, although the Orient is a foreign place, it is also the source of many of our deepest beliefs and most enduring myths.

Paradise, whether here or there, deserves one more comment that sets it in a broader cultural context. The fundamental difference between the West (by which I mean the Western world) and the East (the Eastern world) is not the belief in paradise, which both espouse, but rather whether or not that Eden is attainable in this life. As historians Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit note in their seminal book *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of its Enemies*, the West is committed to finding, or even creating, that Eden in the here and now. By contrast, the East knows that paradise is only attainable either by separating oneself from the material world entirely (Hinduism and Buddhism) or, in the case of Islam, by dying. Buruma and Margalit contend that the hatred of the West by the East, which is fairly recent, involves considerable essentializing of the Occident. A core belief of Occidentalism is that Westerners are soft and weak. They seek comfort in this life—and hold on to life tenaciously, even desperately. By contrast, Easterners (as exemplified in the extreme actions by Islamist terrorist suicide/homicide bombers) gladly embrace death as offering the real paradise.³⁸

If some people believe that only detachment or death brings entry into heaven, Californians set out to prove the opposite, namely, that earthly paradise could exist in the here and now. When the second International Irrigation Congress met in Los Angeles in 1883, it chose as its motto a line from Genesis: "A river went out of Eden to water the Garden." Historian Donald Worster noted that the congress combined secular and religious zeal in its mission to irrigate the West. As Worster put it, the delegates met "for five days of speeches, soaring hymns, and fervid, sustained applause." Their mission was both bold and biblically inspired: "They too wanted to capture a river flowing out of Eden and create a garden where the American Adam and Eve could live in perfect harmony." To leave little doubt about what the congress hoped to create, Worster notes that they envisioned not only a land "where there would be no work" but also a land of secular bliss where there would be "no sin," and "no one saying no." But not everyone at the congress agreed, especially the key speaker. That dissenting voice was provided by John Wesley Powell, the former New Englander turned western guru, who undiplomatically warned

them that they were piling up a “heritage of conflict of all waters.” In this, his last public appearance in the West, Powell threw diplomacy to the wind. Stating that it did not matter to him whether his message would make him “popular or unpopular,” Powell repeated his hard-learned mantra that “there is not sufficient water to supply those lands.” As Powell evidently predicted, the message stunned and angered the congress. As a consequence of his straight talk, Powell’s popularity in the West fell—at least for the time. As Worster notes, however, Powell is a hero vindicated by time.³⁹ But for every Powell, there were a million westerners who thought the waters limitless and sin wageless. The myth of Eden and its rivers was an irresistible legacy of the West’s Eastern roots.

Among irrigation’s many proponents, few were as ardent as William E. Smythe (1861–1922), a transplanted New Englander who traveled extensively in search of stories that demonstrated how progress could enhance both the individual and the nation. As a prolific writer, Smythe traveled westward for examples, and his experiences in Nebraska and New Mexico brought him face to face with the challenges agriculture faced in semi-arid and arid lands. Smythe was impressed with how water could transform arid lands—so impressed, in fact, that he founded the magazine *Irrigation Age* in 1881. Gaining a comprehensive understanding of how irrigation had transformed the Near East, Smythe envisioned transforming the American West. His book titled *The Conquest of Arid America* (1899) became so popular that several editions were printed. In researching his book, Smythe came to know much of the Southwest. In the process, he was lured by the charm of San Diego, and, as might be predicted, soon became one of the city’s foremost boosters. But it was what lay on the other side of the mountains from San Diego, namely the Colorado Desert, that naturally intrigued Smythe. In addition to promoting San Diego as a new version of Syria, therefore, Smythe also envisioned his adopted city serving a new hinterland—California’s Sahara-like Colorado Desert, the very wasteland that had been cursed by so many travelers, including Raphael Pumpelly. In Smythe’s vision, this infernal desert would succumb to irrigation. Smythe, of course, was not the first to envision such a transformation, but he could articulate it better than most. As he observed, or rather predicted, in a 1901 article titled “The Blooming of a Sahara” in *World’s Work* magazine: “Under the magic influence of national prosperity and Oriental expansion a new impulse of development is sweeping over our Farthest Southwest.”⁴⁰

In this context, Southern California’s most truly Middle Eastern environment, namely the Coachella and Imperial Valleys, was easy to Orientalize.

The climate here is, as Smythe and others claimed, fairly similar to portions of the Arabian Peninsula and adjacent North Africa. Moreover, the presence of the Colorado River helped further equate this area with Egypt. As geographer Robert Sauder observed, "With its delta in the desert, the Colorado [River] has no parallel in the Western Hemisphere, but in the Old World the lower Nile Valley is a fitting correlative." Both rivers rise in distant mountains in summer, deposit "fertile soil in the midst of barren deserts through which they flow," and are extensively used for irrigation. "It is because of these similarities . . ." Sauder concludes, "that the Colorado River is often referred to as the American Nile."⁴¹

This American Nile would help transform the Coachella and Imperial Valleys just after 1900, when careless construction work sent waters from the Colorado River sweeping into the formerly dry Imperial Valley sink.⁴² What followed was a modern miracle, or at least an example of people miraculously turning disaster into economic and touristic opportunity. After the leak was plugged by the railroad workers dumping everything they could find into the opening, the resulting scene was very evocative. Like the Nile, the Colorado River had given life to this area, as those branding it with an "Oriental" identity were well aware. In 1916, the Imperial Farm Land Association recognized the appeal of the exotic, changing the name of a stop on the railroad from Imperial Junction (formerly Old Beach) to Niland—a combination of Nile and Land.⁴³ But the area that the river had inundated also reminded observers of a similar environment in the Near East. By the early twentieth century, with the waters of the Colorado River lying like a blue mirror on the Imperial Valley's floor, this huge depressed desert trough took on a new identity based on an Old World counterpart. At the northwestern edge of the Salton Sea, the otherwise businesslike Southern Pacific railroad imaginatively named a train-order station Mortmere, a slightly corrupted rendition of "Dead Sea" in French. Through the years, the dramatically named place was given a different spelling, Mortmar,⁴⁴ which means much the same thing in Spanish. Within a few years, the resulting inland sea became a tourist haven, and the enterprising agricultural industry took advantage of the subtropical climate to produce a garden spot filled with Middle Eastern and Mediterranean crops, including date palms and citrus.

The feeling of a Middle East imported into this area may be fanciful, but it is not without merit. In terms of environmental surrogates, the Salton Sea is about as close to the real Dead Sea as one can get in North America. The fact that the Salton Sea now fills the bottom of the valley, its surface well below sea level, helps people equate it and its surroundings with the area near the

Dead Sea. Even the name “Salton” Sea, however, must be considered carefully, for this fabricated name has more than a little subliminal resonance as the word *sultan*. Following the creation of the Salton Sea, the valley responded to a themed boosterism that emphasized its exotic landscapes, desert vegetation (including native palm trees), and subtropical climate. Given the propensity for westerners to create surrogate landscapes, it seemed inevitable that portions of Southern California would take on an “Arabian” identity almost overnight—no surprise in that all of the “Southland” sought exotic identities associated for the most part with the Mediterranean and the Near East.

The date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*) played a role in helping to transform the California (and Arizona) desert into a Middle Eastern oasis. Native to Egypt and much of the Middle East, it is an enduring symbol of the West’s connection to the Orient. The first date palms were brought to California by the Spaniards, but it was the Anglo-Americans who would help make them a premier symbol of the new Near East in Southern California. These palms were, in a word, exotic. Although the American Southwest does have native palm trees, namely, the California or Washington palms (*Washingtonia filifera*), which thrive in the tropical and subtropical lower desert of the United States (notably the palm oases of Southern California’s Colorado Desert as far north as Twentynine Palms, and in southwestern Arizona’s Kofa Mountains), these do not yield edible fruit nor do they have the exotic aura of the date palm.

The low deserts of the American West, in Southern California and adjacent Arizona especially, seemed perfect places for the dromedary date of the Middle East to thrive, and it did just that. Within a decade or two, the early twentieth-century landscape of the Coachella and Imperial Valleys was awash with orderly groves of date palms. Like all palms, which the Arabs astutely claim “stand with their heads in sun and their feet in the water,” these palms contrasted beautifully with the arid landscapes of the hottest of deserts. Whereas the region’s native palms were (and are) found in well-watered locations where fault lines permit the plants’ roots to be constantly moistened by groundwater, the newly planted date palms depended on a network of man-made irrigation canals and ditches—much like their counterparts in Middle Eastern locations like Israel, Jordan, Arabia, and Egypt. The Muslim Arabs placed date palm trees high on the list of meaningful creations, claiming that they represented the material that was left over immediately after God created humankind. To Californians, however, date palms meant big business both for the agricultural products they yielded and the exotic, Near Eastern locales they suggested.



Author's collection

Fig. 6-3. Introduced to California in 1890, commercial date growing had become well established by the early 1930s, when the verso of this postcard claimed that “the dates grown in California are found to be superior to that of Arabia, Egypt, and Palestine.”

Most of the dates produced in the Middle East are important foodstuffs locally, though some of the finest are imported. Most of the dates grown in California and Arizona, however, are shipped far and wide, and their marketing played on an exotic Middle Eastern theme while promising a home-grown product. By the 1920s and 1930s, the date producers in the Southern California desert were using Middle Eastern iconography to promote their “succulent” and “nutritious” dates. Stylized lettering that appeared Arabic, silhouettes of camels, and mosquelike towers were favorite themes, lending an exotic *Arabian Nights* quality to the product. As travelers encountered the Imperial Valley, they were treated not only to the delicious dates themselves (an energy-packed food containing some protein but very high in sugar) but to exotic innovations like “date shakes”—that is, milkshakes containing dates blended with milk and ice cream—which also drew tourists. A color postcard of “Date Palms” contains the message on the verso that “hundreds of thousands of pounds of dates are shipped every year from the gardens of the Southwest, where the climate, like that of Egypt and Arabia, is most conducive to the raising of this delicious fruit.”⁴⁵ The verso of another equally colorful postcard, circa 1920 (fig. 6-3), goes even further, claiming that “the dates grown in California are found to be superior to that [*sic*] of Arabia, Egypt, and Palestine where for centuries it has been a highly prized food for King and

Peasant alike.” Note that Californians are here appropriating and attempting to surpass the real Middle East. This may be hyperbole, but it was part of a seamless process in which agriculture and regional image building worked hand in hand to transform this part of the desert West into a Middle Eastern oasis—at least in the popular imagination.