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## Compte-rendu : Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *Rush to Gold: The French and the California Gold Rush, 1848-1854*

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and the author of *Apostle of Union: A Political Biography of Edward Everett* (forthcoming, fall 2016).

***Rush to Gold: The French and the California Gold Rush, 1848–1854.***  
By Malcolm J. Rohrbough. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013. Pp. 342. Cloth, \$45.00.)

*Reviewed by Emmanuelle Perez Tisserant*

Even as California was just conquered by the United States, the Gold Rush was a transnational event. Malcolm Rohrbough, who in a previous, now classic work, mainly studied the New England argonauts, focuses on another group of miners in his new book, especially on “the intrusion of California and America into French life with the powerful pull of wealth in the form of gold discoveries” (2).<sup>1</sup> He situates the Gold Rush in a transnational context by describing how gold fever played out in a distant country that sent a large group of immigrants to California. In so doing, his work is part of a larger movement that studies migration by following the migrants from their point of departure to their point of arrival and back. This body of literature studies both the push—what drives the migrants to leave their home country—and the pull—the reasons why they go to a particular place. Scholars have also shown that migrants returned to their country or even made several voyages before settling, a conclusion Rohrbough confirms.<sup>2</sup>

The Gold Rush migrations that began in 1848 took place during an era marked by economic crisis and political upheaval in Europe, particularly in France. In order to discuss that context, Rohrbough bases his analysis on primary sources, but unfortunately he fails to cite some of the important scholarship of the past thirty years, including key works by Maurice Agulhon or Peter McPhee, authors whose works have

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1. Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *Days of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the American Nation* (Berkeley, CA, 1997).

2. See Frank Thistlethwaite, “Migration from Europe Overseas in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century,” in *Population Movements in Modern European History*, ed. Herbert Möller (New York, 1964), 73–92.

appeared in English.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the 1848 revolution in France is not considered in the book as a decisive step in the politicization process that allowed a growing number of French citizens, through voting and participation in sociability structures, to develop a national political consciousness. It also had an Atlantic dimension, as argued by Jean-Luc Mayaud or Marieke Polfliet, in the abolition of slavery and a more radical view of equality.<sup>4</sup> It would have been interesting to see Rohrbough directly tackle such issues in the context of migration.

The book is divided into five parts (sixteen chapters) going back and forth from France to California. The first part, set in France, deals with the French context of 1848 and the French response to the discovery of gold, in particular the spread of news and the organization of companies. The second part focuses on the voyage and arrival to California either by way of Panama or Cape Horn. Upon arrival, it appears that most companies failed to comply with their promise to help the migrants travel to the mines. Like other nationalities, French miners were mostly men, who tended to stay together, as luck governed their success in mining. Returning to France, the third part describes a new generation of California companies, including a lottery aimed at funding the departure of three thousand emigrants to California at a time of great poverty and political uncertainty in France. The organization of such a lottery led to debates about emigration and where it should be encouraged. This is one place when the imperial question arose: Shouldn't the emigrants be led to newly conquered Algeria rather than California? The fourth part takes the reader back to California to witness the lives of the French in the gold mines and to document the arrival of the last miners. It shows that, like other foreigners, the French had to defend their right to mine.

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3. See Maurice Agulhon, *The Republican Experiment, 1848–1852* (New York, 1983); and Peter McPhee, *The Politics of Rural Life: Political Mobilization in the French Countryside, 1846–1852* (New York, 1992).

4. See Jean-Luc Mayaud et Société d'histoire de la révolution de 1848 et des révolutions du XIXe siècle, eds., *1848: Actes du Colloque International du cent Cinquantenaire, tenu à l'Assemblée nationale à Paris, les 23–25 Février 1998* (Paris, 2002); and Marieke Polfliet, "Émigration et politisation : les Français de New York et de La Nouvelle-Orléans dans la première moitié du XIXe s. (1803–1860)," PhD thesis, Université de Nice-Sophia Antipolis, 2013, <https://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-00880222>.

Part five ends the book with some miners returning to France and an evaluation of the impact of the Gold Rush in France and for the French.

Rohrbough has used an impressive body of national and local newspapers. Other sources include publications from the California companies or published and unpublished diaries or letters from French argonauts. His research in the provinces allows him to show the depth of the gold fever in France, although more detailed information about readership and reception would increase its relevance. It is only in the last chapter, however, that one can find long-awaited figures for the demographic impact of this migration. This book also offers a rich inventory of the variety of expectations and experiences of the French argonauts from different places. This variety could be profitably supplemented by a more synthetic overview and more assertive conclusions. Also lacking at times is a dialog between what is found in the sources and where the current historiography stands. Rohrbough often suggests more than he states. Consequently, the reader is left with more questions than answers. For example, Rohrbough hints at an imperial dimension to the French Gold Rush, given the conquest of Algeria, the previous expeditions to the Pacific, and later, the Mexican enterprise. But how this relationship unfolds is not clear: Sometimes the United States appears as a model for imperial expansion; at other times, California emigration is seen as an opportunity to extend French commerce and influence on the Pacific; or on the other hand, it seems to distract from the colonization of Algeria. Rohrbough only alludes to the work by Jennifer Sessions about emigration to Algeria without really engaging with it; it could also be useful to compare the French case to the British management of emigration.<sup>5</sup>

Rohrbough implies that emigration to California gave the argonauts a sense of Frenchness that they lacked before leaving, something that has been demonstrated for other nationalities in migration studies. The California Gold Rush was a particularly cosmopolitan place and time, and it is not always clear in which ways the French were typical or unique. The French appear to have been particularly politicized in the aftermath of the 1848 revolution, and the failure of the new republic was a powerful push to emigration. It seems that politics were still important to the

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5. Jennifer E. Sessions, *By Sword and Plow: France and the Conquest of Algeria* (Ithaca, NY, 2011).

miners once they were in California, but one would like to know more about how French politics were transplanted to the American context.<sup>6</sup>

In conclusion, this book will be useful to scholars interested in the transnational aspect of the California Gold Rush, as well as patterns of migration during this period. The many stories told in the book and the varied sources employed make it a good catalog of how the French lived the gold fever, serving as a point of departure for larger reflections. But readers should complement it with other studies to have a fuller picture of what was at stake during this era and in both places.

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6. For example, Rohrbough does not mention this work about the lottery: Madeleine Bourset, "Une émigration insolite au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Les soldats des barricades en Californie 1848–1853," in *L'Émigration Française: études de cas, Algérie-Canada-États-Unis* (Paris, 1985), 129–88. A useful tool could be Michel Cordillot, François Fourn, and Jonathan Beecher, *La Sociale en Amérique: Dictionnaire Biographique du Mouvement Social Francophone aux États-Unis (1848–1922)* (Paris, 2002).