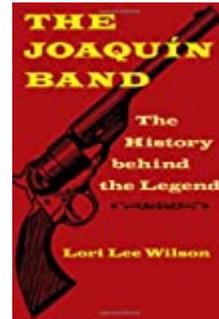




Lori Lee Wilson. *The Joaquin Band: The History behind the Legend.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011. Maps. xiv + 322 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-3461-1.



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Published on H-California (July, 2012)

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From Lori Lee Wilson's new study of the Joaquín Murrieta legend, we learn that Murrieta was a real bandit, though not necessarily a social bandit (the Hobsbawmian bandit who attacks hegemonists and assists subalterns). Or, maybe he was a social bandit. It depends on the perspective of the teller. What we know is that Murrieta was no pure version of Robin Hood, stealing from the rich and giving to the poor. However, he did experience persecution at the hands of Americans during the Gold Rush. Subsequently he (and others) took to robbing and killing Americans, as well as the Chinese and, on occasion, fellow Mexicans. When in Monterey, California, he may have told an American—who published a newspaper story based on Joaquín's "confessions"—that American cruelty had forced him into outlawry, and that he would never kill a fellow Mexican. Be that as it may, his gang showed little compunction about killing anyone. In contrast to earlier scholarship, Wilson presents, for the first time, a comparative anatomy of the Murrieta legend. "I chose to marginalize the story [of Murrieta]," she explains, "in order to feature the voices of sources I encountered" (p. 261).

Northern California Whigs, argues Wilson, used stories of Murrieta to jab at California's Democratic governor in the early 1850s. According to Whigs, the gover-

nor's expenditure on the pursuit of Murrieta (and four other bandit leaders supposedly named Joaquín) was wasted money. The Joaquín hysteria, they insisted, was overblown. After a posse claimed to have killed Joaquín—and exhibited his pickled head in a jar to prove it—one Whig editor maintained that the pickled Joaquín was the wrong man. Oral testimony by those claiming to have known the real Murrieta points both ways. It seems likely, however, that the posse killed the correct bandit.

The Democratic editor of a rival northern California newspaper, not surprisingly, made contrary assertions, playing up the terrors of Murrieta and his gang and lavishly praising those who killed him and, thus, the Democratic governor who hired them. The posse, he insisted, had gotten the right Joaquín, one "Joaquín Valenzuela." The posse's leader, Harry Love, claimed that his men had killed Murrieta, a fact that the editor later reported. What mattered initially, it seems, was not the name, but the fact that a very bad Joaquín had been killed—the worst of the Joaquíns—no matter which of them it might have been.

Democrats also inflated the legend of Murrieta to endorse, at least implicitly, American filibusterers who sought to bring law and order to supposedly oppressed Sonorans. Democrats thus endorsed attacks on Mexico

that mirrored Murrieta's attacks on Americans. Murrieta and his friends, some said, were nationalist guerillas who fought to protest American vigilante terror along with the Foreign Miner's License Tax (which forced Sonorans out of the gold fields), and perhaps to avenge Mexico's loss in its recent war with the United States. Americans, oddly, decried "guerillas" even as they themselves sought to become the same. At least two hopeful filibusterers, William Walker and Henry Crabb, recruited white Californians for forays into Mexico. Walker failed in an attempt to overthrow the government of Sonora and to lead it to independence (or union with the United States), then died during a later attempt to do the same in Nicaragua. Crabb—an ardent vigilante in California—found his grave in Sonora, where Mexicans executed him and his crew after their failed filibuster in 1856.

In Southern California, editors fought a somewhat different newspaper duel about the meaning of Murrieta. One Hispanic editor warned Mexicans (both Californios and Sonorans who had come during the Gold Rush) not to lionize Murrieta, who was a mere criminal, as eager to rob and kill his countrymen as to rob and kill Americans. Another Mexican editor, Francisco P. Ram rez, used his paper (*El Clamor P blico*) to deride American vigilantism. In seeking to bring Murrieta and his fellow bandits to justice, Americans killed innocents. "In Spanish-language folklore," writes Wilson, Murrieta has been depicted as fighting oppression, but in history it was Ram rez who did so (p. 196).

Americans were not the only lynchers in 1850s California. Sometimes Mexicans and Americans held joint "tribunals" and agreed on who to lynch. At other times, Americans, reacting with a mix of hysteria and cold premeditation, lynched innocent Mexicans who were accused of being part of bandit gangs. Such acts both confirmed and extended the racism that in earlier years had given rise to the Foreign Miner's License Tax and attacks on Sonoran miners.

It is somewhat strange, notes Wilson, that only Murrieta made it into folklore. Murrieta was no more active in banditry than others. Several sets of brothers, including Claudio and Reyes F liz, Jos s and Joaqu n Valenzuela, and Bernardo and Francisco "Panchito" Daniel, plied their bitter avocation on California's lonely roads. So did the more famous Salomon Pico, who—with the Murrieta of legend—became the inspiration for the stories of Zorro. Sometimes, the Mexican bands included white Americans. Almost invariably they came to bad ends, often at the end of a rope. Their careers,

like Murrieta's, were exciting, bloody, and short.

What propelled Murrieta into folklore was irony. By inflating Murrieta's powers and the numbers in his gang, Democratic editors helped Chicanos, over a century later, to see a vast army of Mexican guerillas fighting injustice in 1850s California. What also propelled Murrieta into folklore were sympathetic writers of his own time, both Anglo and American Indian. It was the anonymous "Monterey correspondent"—presumably a white American—who lamented the fact that American injustice toward Mexicans gave Murrieta the aura of heroism. Murrieta's popularity, he suggested, revealed the hypocrisy of American ideals—justice, fairness, and democratic equality—that ostensibly stood behind expansion.

John Rollin Ridge, scion of the noted Cherokee patri-archs who signed the treaty that justified their people's removal to Indian Territory, wrote the first full-length biographical account of Murrieta in 1854. Once mocked by justice, maintained Ridge, Murrieta mocked back. The Murrieta story became a proxy for the story of Ridge's own Cherokee people, wronged by Americans and quietly longing for retribution (there is "nothing so dangerous," wrote Ridge in his Murrieta book, "as injustice to individuals—whether it arise[s] from prejudice of color or from any other source" (p. 13). Though Ridge's book sold few copies, the *Police Gazette* published a pirated and amended version that sold widely. Thus—with the help of contemporary Democrats who dramatized Murrieta's crimes, a Cherokee emigrant who made Joaqu n into a surrogate for his people's story, a New York-based scandal rag, a series of twentieth-century pop historians who sought the "real" Murrieta, and, finally, Chicano activists in search of an early hero—Murrieta became the most fabled of early California bandits.

There are some flaws in Wilson's book. The foremost is perhaps the failure to mention another recent treatment of the Murrieta legend: Bruce Thornton's *Searching for Joaquin: Myth, Murieta, and History in California* (2003). The fact that Encounter Books publishes conservative literature (just about all its books take a right-wing slant) makes Thornton's book worth discussing, whether to praise, critique, or dismiss. Too, the rather puny maps in Wilson's book do not appear until the reader is half way through. One desperately longs for a two-page map somewhere toward the beginning of the book showing where Murrieta and others rode, robbed, and died. We do, however, get an index of historical names at the end, explaining which men were associated with which gangs.

That is fortunate, because the names, oh my god, the names, they are legion and confusing (I wrote a book with the same problem; it cannot be helped in this sort of study).

What is praiseworthy in Wilson's book is its remarkable research, clear writing and exegesis, and methodology. Ordinarily, one might note an author's methodology without praising it. The praise stems from the fact that Wilson uses a poststructuralist approach of charting dueling narratives about Murrieta rather than insisting that there must be one "real" story. Everybody in Wilson's book has their own slant on Murrieta, and no one is altogether right or wrong. Early American-era California becomes neither a place of bad Americans and good Californios nor the reverse. It becomes a rhetorical landscape of competing voices, some of which gain temporary hegemony by condemning Murrieta and exaggerating the threat of banditry. Despite that temporary hegemony, it is the anti-hegemonic Murrieta story that took deeper root.

Wilson's book might also be said to look beyond discourse and hegemony to mundane interactions. Most of the events that she charts were decidedly not mundane, but she chronicles interaction and even agreement be-

tween white Americans and Mexicans as well as discord. Race relations, as I argue elsewhere, get created via day-to-day human interaction as well as through discourse (discourse is the product of those interactions, though it shapes them, too). One finds at least some attention to day-to-day interaction in Wilson's book, though we must leave other scholars to study it more closely.

Wilson accomplishes all that without any bows to poststructuralist theorists. Perhaps there was no need. What could any methodological discussion add to all the other methodological discussions in scholarly books? Wilson, moreover, writes for a popular as well as academic audience. She received a grant from the Wild West History Association, an organization not hallowed in academe's halls. Wilson's work is a prime example of what old-fashioned research can accomplish when filtered through the newfangled lenses of discourse, contestation, and multiplicity, even if the filtering goes unacknowledged. "Truth" takes a backseat.

Most lay readers would not deign to buy any self-proclaimed poststructural history. They will likely buy and read Wilson's book, however, without realizing just how her methods resonate with poststructuralism. More power to her.

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Citation: Daniel Justin Herman. Review of Wilson, Lori Lee, *The Joaquin Band: The History behind the Legend*. H-California, H-Net Reviews. July, 2012.

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