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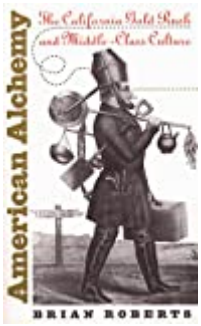

Brian Roberts. *American Alchemy: The California Gold Rush and Middle-Class Culture.* Cultural Studies of the United States Series. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2000. xii + 328 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-4856-2.

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Rush from Respectability

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"Although it took place right in the middle of America's market revolution," Brian Roberts observes, "for the most part, the California gold rush remains resistant to serious analysis, occupying a place rarely visited by sober-minded historians" (p. 271). Roberts's well-written, thoroughly-researched, imaginative, and engaging new study, a revision of his doctoral dissertation, ensures that this will no longer be the case. The rush for gold between 1849 and the mid-1850s, he shows, was central to the cultural making of the middle-class in the antebellum United States.

Through careful and supple analysis of the language and style of "forty-niner journals, diaries, and letters" (p. 10), and of the letters from forty-niner wives back home, Roberts (an assistant professor of history at California State University in Sacramento) rescues the gold rush from the obfuscating, if colorful, anecdotes that have long surrounded it. In doing so, he provides a revisionist history of the rush that is at once a significant and distinctive contribution to the literature on the period's emergent middle class. In his hands, the rush is not an unmediated, or raw, event in the history of the American West but rather, by its participants and distant observers, a highly-interpreted event, mediated by language and intimately connected to a signal development in the history of the East–the rise of the middle class.

Roberts sensibly approaches his topic via a sample of "more than 150 individuals," most of them forty-niners from the Northeast. Literate and in many instances college educated; "married or engaged to be married" in over half the cases; strongly attached to "families, communities, and institutions in the East"; overwhelmingly "white collar" where occupations could be determined from the evidence; and bound by "a background in and a commitment to the period's emerging middle-class standards of success, self-control, morality, and respectability," these forty-niners could not have been more different from the durable mythic image of them as poor, working-class loner-heroes "without past, connection, or moral conscience" (pp. 7, 5).

This surprise is at the heart of Roberts's intriguing and, in light of the evidence he presents and adroitly unpacks, compelling thesis. The gold rush, he argues,

provided middle-class (and would-be middle-class) forty-niners an opportunity to rebel against the repression and respectability that were hallmarks of their class while retaining both their class privilege and class culture. Rather than the stiff, repressed, and respectable middle-class of historians' accounts–symbolized at the time of the rush by Herman Melville's fictional white-collar clerk Bartleby–Roberts finds in the gold rush and its literature a complicated middle class neither "fixed by repression" (p. 275) nor wholly liberated from the same. He uncovers a "Janus-faced" forty-niner, "in constant oscillation between the polarities of repression and expression, refinement and brutality" (pp. 276, 275).

In the gold rush, Roberts maintains, members of the emerging middle class found relief from the strictures of respectability, strictures that could impede one's progress in the new competitive, marketplace world of business. And yet that relief, he astutely emphasizes, could only occur against the existing (and continuing) framework of middle-class respectability itself.

This important insight informs one of the more interesting discussions in the book, Roberts's treatment of the women who, though physically left behind by male forty-niners, were in their own crucial ways (he smartly points out) rush participants as well. Wives ran businesses in the absence of their forty-niner husbands, served as audiences for male accounts from California, and were "key figures in negotiating the meanings of the event" (p. 8). Moreover, Roberts shrewdly argues, it was womenÃs "redemptive femininity" (p. 264) that anchored the pole of respectability in middle-class character, framing and balancing male forty-niners' reversal of respectability, and thereby ensured their reversal did not result in loss of class position. Thus to speak of the gendered spheres of home and beyond as "separate" is to miss the essence of their relationship. As the author states, "In effect, the outward thrust of the frontier world of individualism and excess and the inward pull of the respectable home were not separate or competing impulses. Rather, they were parts of a whole, intrinsic elements of a forming middle-class character that would be balanced between respectability and physicality" (p. 264).

What all of this meant, according to Roberts, was an empowered middle class, powerful precisely because something other than respectable alone–a limiting condition in an intensely competitive marketplace world where success demanded "an ability to cheat, lie, and sometimes steal, an ability to get dirty, to shamelessly promote passions and appetites for the sake of profits" (p. 14). And powerful, above all, because of an ability to engage in "self-denial"–"not…the sort of self-denial that many historians talk about in reference to the middle class" (i.e., sober-minded self-control) but rather, and here Roberts is keenly insightful, "a real denial of one's self, a constant assertion of class privilege, an equally constant assertion that one does not occupy this position." "In effect," he concludes, "the primary characteristic of the American middle class may be its members' ability to create a definition for themselves and then deny that they belong in the definition. Thus their greatest privilege, and their greatest source of power, is an ability to declare freedom from themselves" (p. 274).

Roberts offers a refreshing perspective on both middle-class formation and middle-class culture. He makes an important contribution to the literature on the subject by making the West central to the story of class-making in the East. And his depiction of middle-class culture takes us beyond repression and respectability by attending to the cultureÃs polarities, tensions, and multi-dimensional complexity. It is here that his method of nimbly unpacking the language that made the gold rush, and by extension the eastern middle class, pays handsome dividends (to use a phrase forty-niners themselves might have appreciated). Roberts demonstrates a fine ear for the accents of a middle class both defining and (in the sense above) denying itself. If at times his evidence feels repetitive, it is the very thickness of the evidence that makes the argument it supports so convincing.

Other strengths of this fine study, in addition to the jargon-free clear writing, include attention to forty-niner perceptions of Mexicans and Native Americans (though most readers will likely find few if any surprises there); the way in which it forces us to rethink the chronology of the history of American manhood and masculinity (long before Theodore Roosevelt's day, middle-class American men were clearly questing for authenticity and finding it in the homosocial frontier world of gold-rush California); and a nuanced treatment of how forty-niner men apparently sought "to experiment with alternatives to the pale prescriptions for white middle-class male identity" (p. 103), (as when Roberts offers a fascinating discussion of shipboard transvestitism during the voyage to California).

For all his attention to the gold rush, Roberts's real subject is the same rising northeastern middle class that has preoccupied other historians before him. Though beyond the purview of his study, one wonders about middle-class formation and culture in other regions of the

country, including the West (e.g., places like Denver, Los Angeles, San Francisco). What were the continuities and variations across regions?

Wherever future scholarship on the nineteenth-century American middle class may lead, it will have to reckon with Roberts's work–a work of sophisticated intellectual/cultural history that is perhaps best read alongside Susan Lee Johnson's recent social history of the gold rush.[1] His study is appropriate for upper-level undergraduate courses and above, and will be essential reading for historians of the West, the middle class, gender (including manhood), and the nineteenth-century United States generally.

Notes

[1]. Susan Lee Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000). Roberts, taking issue with an earlier incarnation of Johnson's findings (Johnson, "Bulls, Bears, and Dancing Boys: Race, Gender, and Leisure in the California Gold Rush," *Radical History Review* 60 [1994], 3-37), criticizes what he sees as her adherence to "the idea of a fixed and repressive middle-class" (p. 12) and calls into question her claim that the rush precipitated a crisis among its middle-class male participants, caught as they were (in Roberts's words) "between internal moral codes and external pleasures." "Far from reflecting a crisis," he provocatively suggests, "this middling position may have been what middle-class men had been looking for all along" (p. 204).

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