



Dora Beale Polk. *The Island of California: A History of the Myth.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. 398 pp. \$15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8032-8741-9.

Reviewed by Kenneth R. Dvorak (Bowling Green State University)

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California Dreams Started Early

California, during the period of European global exploration, symbolized a mythical island. The author traces how this myth emerged, its persistence, and its final resolution. Drawing from literature, psychology, geography, cartography, mythology, and history, the author deftly maneuvers the reader through an analysis of humankind's emerging global awareness. Showing how myths, especially island myths, became fixed in the minds of early explorers, Polk traces their importance, revealing how Europeans viewed themselves and individuals they encountered.

Originating in the thirteenth century, island myths developed from early mariners whose exploits told of fabulous lands of Ind or the Indies. Enhancing these tales were renewed stories of Atlantis, Arcadia, Avalon, El Dorado, or the Garden of Eden thought to exist in the newly discovered uncharted seas. Others sought the pleasures believed to exist in the Pleasure Dome of Kublai Khan. Intriguing for many were the beautiful yet dangerous female Amazons, whose islands contained untold riches for those adventurous enough to undertake the journey.

These dreamstock tales provided early explorers with an identifiable belief system that they took with them on their explorations. Later writers and adventurers published and distributed their works to audiences eager to learn more of these dream destinations. Printed travelogues appeared, such as *Marco Polo's Book*, *The Letter of Prester John*, *Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, and the notable *Ymago Mundi*, or *Image of the World*. They fueled the imaginations of Europeans eager to escape into the

New World. Showing the way were cartographers who placed these dreamstock tales on maps and globes suggestively hinting at their location. Lured by this imagery, many European explorers set sail hoping to find reality within their dreams.

Polk examines the voyages of Christopher Columbus, who she believes took these dreamstock tales to the New World. His search for a westward passage to India and its mysterious islands heightened his expectations. Others followed in his wake including Cortes, Balboa, Cabrillo, Drake, Ascension, and Kino, whose exploits proved that California was the jewel of the so-called mythical islands.

Throughout its early history California came to represent a mysterious island consisting of varied treasures and cultures. The island image of California remained fixed in maps late into the eighteenth century. During the twentieth century, modern science, through analysis of plate tectonics, suggests that California may someday become an island. (In the final judgment the believers in mythical islands may be correct in thinking that California is truly an idyllic dream destination!)

Dora Beale Polk provides a highly effective narrative discussing the evolution of the island myth of California. The book is a welcome addition to the history of California and a necessary book for those interested in the historical aspects of dream destinations. Clearly, "California Dreamin'" is not a new phenomenon.

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