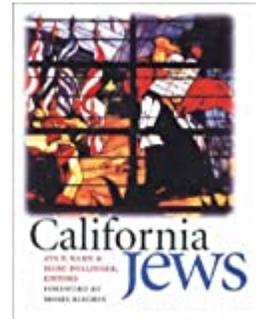


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Ava F. Kahn, Marc Dollinger, eds. *California Jews*. Hanover: University Press of New England, 2003. xviii + 196 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58465-060-7.



Reviewed by Lynn Downey (Historian, Levi Strauss & Co., San Francisco)

Published on H-California (June, 2004)

California has been the Promised Land to myriad groups of people since it first entered the world's consciousness: Spanish and Mexican explorers and missionaries, Swiss entrepreneurs, Russian trappers, American gold-seekers, and so on. The goal of *California Jews* is to add another group to this mix, and in doing so, the editors have enriched our understanding of the state's lure for the hopeful and the dispossessed. Edited by Ava Kahn and Marc Dollinger, *California Jews* is part of the Brandeis Series in American Jewish History, Culture, and Life and fits well within its scope of titles. The book is a collection of essays covering a vast array of topics whose breadth of subject matter reflects Kahn and Dollinger's belief that there is a distinctive California Judaism, which lies apart from the American Jewish experience as a whole. Their aim is to balance the shelves of books devoted to the lives of New York Jews with this new work on their fellow Californians.

Their method is not to focus on the big names usually associated with California Jewish history, nor those whom we know because of their extraordinary success or accomplishments. They decided to spend some time on historically obscure or marginally successful examples from California's past. This concept works beautifully, and those discussed in the book end up being powerful representatives of California Jews as a whole.

The foreword by Moses Rischin sets the stage for the essays. In an overview of his own career as an Eastern-born teacher and historian who built his reputation in the Golden State, Rischin demonstrates how such experiences created his self-definition as a Californian. Kahn and Dollinger's introduction uses this same technique; they personalize the larger story by using their own family histories as a starting point for the book, and this works very well. Titled "The Other Side," this essay sets up the volume's main thesis: that California's physical environment, cultural diversity, and (mostly Anglo) inclusiveness allowed the distinct culture of California Judaism to be born and flourish.

The individual essays follow these opening chapters and range widely in subject matter. The history and culture of Jews in southern California gets a bit more play than San Francisco, the other major geographical area under discussion. Six essays are concerned primarily with the southland: "Through the Lens of Latino-Jewish Relations," "Jewish Space and Place in Venice," "Kibbutz San Fernando," "Jewish Leaders and the Motion Picture Industry," "From Minyan to Matriculation," and "Shlomo Bardin's 'Erezt' Brandeis."

Los Angeles and San Francisco (as well as other cities in the Bay Area) share space in "Early Synagogue Architecture," "Civil Rights and Japanese American Incarcera-

tion,” and “The Counterculture.” San Francisco is the focus of “Jews and Catholics Against Prejudice.” “The Challenge of Family, Identity, and Affiliations,” “Joining the Rush,” and “120 Years of Women’s Activism,” survey the important themes of demographics, the Gold Rush and women’s participation in civic life. And finally, there are two lovely photo essays about the intersection of art, culture, and faith: “Ketubot of the Golden State” and “Contemporary Art Glass.”

The editors were not shy about including subject matter that is either controversial or not particularly flattering, and these essays are among the strongest in the book. “Jewish Leaders and the Motion Picture Industry” is especially relevant considering the recent coverage of Mel Gibson’s film *The Passion* and his stated religious views. “Civil Rights and Japanese American Incarceration” walks a fine line between condemnation and com-

passion, presenting this sensitive topic with grace and intelligence.

The value of *California Jews* lies in its range of topics, formats, and sweep of time (from the Gold Rush to the present). Each chapter has end notes, and there is also an excellent bibliographical essay, which not only provides background on the basics of California Jewish history but also pays homage to the works that provided the foundation for California Jews. Short biographies of each of the contributing authors are also provided, and the index is extensive and useful.

Many of the book’s themes are covered in other works, but the conciseness of the essay form and the convenience of having them all in one place makes this book a good starting point for anyone interested in the history of Jews in California.

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Citation: Lynn Downey. Review of Kahn, Ava F.; Dollinger, Marc, eds., *California Jews*. H-California, H-Net Reviews. June, 2004.

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