

## REVIEWS

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### ***Grave Matters: Excavating California's Buried Past***

Tony Platt

Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2011.

256 pp., 42 images and maps, bibliography, index, \$18.95 (paper).

#### **Reviewed by Les W. Field**

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Tony Platt's *Grave Matters: Excavating California's Buried Past* accomplishes many tasks that are frequently incompatible in the hands of other, less skilled writers and scholars. Platt has written a highly readable, engaging, and accessible account of several intertwined strands of history focusing on Humboldt County in northern California. His complex narrative is a thoroughgoing, critical analysis of both white settler colonialism in Humboldt County specifically and in California generally, as well as of the development of anthropological and archaeological scholarship with respect to the native peoples of California. This is an excellent and important book, particularly for the many readers (both academic and non-academic) who know very little about California's colonial history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. That so few know very much about these aspects of California's history says a great deal about the 'success' of the state's educational system, of dominant ideas in the popular media, and of scholars and scholarship in obstructing critical questioning about the colonization of western North America.

As I read the book, I tracked four thematic strands that Platt develops through an ongoing and focused attention on an extraordinary place, the Big Lagoon area of the Humboldt coast. Platt became a part-time resident of Big Lagoon in the late 1970s, and during his life there gained a deep appreciation for the Yurok, the native people whose ancestors have inhabited that region for a very long time. In his first two chapters, Platt provides a narrative homage to many things Yurok, written from the perspective of his decades-long association with the Big Lagoon area, and from the many affectionate

memories of the place derived from his own life and the lives of his family members.

While Platt is evoking the unique beauty and ecological diversity of Big Lagoon, in the middle chapters of the book he also provides a vivid account of the history of white genocide inflicted on the native peoples of California, again with a focus upon the Humboldt region. Platt makes excellent use of native accounts of the war waged against them, and in this way acts as a conduit for native voices, rather than imposing his own perspectives. He cites the important historical works written by native scholars in the region that detail the campaigns waged against them; he also confronts official silence concerning the genocide, a silence that once dominated widely-accepted historical accounts of California's history. Platt cites these dominant histories to underscore how efforts to eliminate the native presence in California during the bloodshed of the nineteenth century was followed in the twentieth century by a campaign to erase that presence from the printed page that was just as determined.

Having followed the trail of genocide in Humboldt County, a chronicle that includes the grisly events of 1860 when hundreds of Wiyot Indians were massacred on Indian Island in Humboldt Bay, Platt then describes Native American activism during the twentieth century that responded to the desecration of graves and human remains and defended native ancestors and sacred places. The last three chapters of his book offer a concise and cautiously optimistic overview of the politics of native cultural reawakening in both Humboldt County and elsewhere in California, organized around the defense of native heritage. These chapters would be extremely instructive and useful for both upper-level undergraduate classes in anthropology and for first-year theory classes for graduate students in both archaeology and cultural anthropology.

Throughout the entire book, the themes of genocide, desecration of Native American graves and heritage, and native activism for the protection of that heritage, play out against a deeper backdrop of critical analysis that constitutes the fourth theme of Platt's book. I think this may be one of the book's most important contributions. Platt shows in detail that

both anthropology and archaeology participated in depredations against Native American living and dead in the state of California—particularly against the dead. In an even-handed, nuanced, and careful manner, Platt describes the involvement of very well known—indeed central—figures in the development and growth of the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, in archaeological and ethnological research that was neither planned nor carried out with the interests or values of California Indian communities in mind—to say the least. These figures included Alfred Kroeber, Robert Heizer, and Edward Gifford. Platt is very mindful of the complexity of these anthropologists' careers, and how they—particularly Heizer, but to a certain extent Kroeber as well—were also critical of their own role in the disenfranchisement and erasure of Native Californian peoples, and later realigned with efforts at rectifying past wrongs. While this tale of anthropology's association with the destruction of California Indian peoples is well told, Platt also points out that the

establishment of archaeology and anthropology as academic disciplines, particularly at Berkeley, but no doubt elsewhere as well, involved a deep complicity between academics on the one hand, and amateur archaeologists on the other. Amateur excavators were on the front lines of the destruction of Native American graves and sacred sites. Indeed, Platt's narrative reveals just how close the relationship between the professionals and the amateurs was for many years. Once again, the site of the massacre on Indian Island was ground zero for the most extreme forms of genocidal conduct towards native peoples in Humboldt County, as both amateur and academic excavations plundered the final resting places of the Wiyot victims.

I highly recommend this book for classroom use at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. It is also a very useful tool for raising the consciousness of the general public both in California and elsewhere about the historical and contemporary experiences of native peoples in this state.



## ***All Indians Do Not Live in Teepees (Or Casinos)***

Catherine C. Robbins

Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2011, 385 pp., 24 b/w illustrations, 1 map, \$26.95 (paper).

### **Reviewed by Tony Platt**

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Get beyond the cutesy title and you'll find a book that wants to be taken seriously.

Independent journalist Catherine Robbins is to be commended for taking on what most anthropologists shun: an assessment of the current state of Native American politics, economics, and culture. Later this year, we will get the results of the first United Nations' investigation of American compliance with standards embodied in the

U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Some of the same subject matter is covered in *All Indians*, an exploration of "contemporary American Indians and how modernity and a restorative vision of the past have generated a new energy among them."

*All Indians* is written in a brisk, readable style and is framed around detailed vignettes of everyday life. By aiming her book at uninformed "non-Indians" who think of Native Americans as either getting fat off casinos or being stuck in the uncivilized past, Robbins sets the intellectual bar pretty low. But despite her disclaimer that "readers might find that information is sometimes wanting or insufficient," footnotes and a bibliographic essay promise something more than anthro-lite.

It's an ambitious book, organized into self-contained chapters on the status of post-NAGPRA repatriation; the place of homelands in the native imagination; the social and personal ravages of inequality; battles over

science and cultural beliefs; sovereignty and gaming issues; and cultural renewal in ceremonies, music, and the arts. Robbins' ground-level reporting on a repatriation ceremony in Pecos, the annual Gathering of Nations in Albuquerque, the art scene in Santa Fe, and hybrid Christmas ceremonies in San Felipe Pueblo is sharply observed, textured, and evocative.

Robbins doesn't shy away from such disturbing topics as historical injustice, harrowing poverty, alcohol and sexual abuse, high dropout and suicide rates, alarming health problems, and "hard evidence of despair." But that's not her main focus. There's a persistently hopeful thread running through the book, emphasizing a "spirit of collaboration across Indian country" and the renewal of Native Americans as "weavers of their destiny."

The author's insistence on wanting to tell a positive story sometimes gets in the way of offering a more complicated and contradictory analysis. For example, she

focuses on NAGPRA as a means of cultural recovery, and sidesteps how the promising legislation has become mired in bureaucratic wrangling and is a source of immense frustration to tribes and native communities. Similarly, Robbins welcomes the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian as a high point in "Native cultural expression," but minimizes its failure to adequately deal with the destruction by disease, warfare, massacres, starvation, and humiliation experienced by three-quarters of the indigenous peoples of the continent.

The book opens with a map of the United States that gives an impression that Robbins' scope is far ranging. But *All Indians* primarily focuses on the Southwest, especially New Mexico, the site of the author's home for many years. Here, writing from personal experiences, she has a sure-footed feel for place and people. However, when the book moves on to other regions and national issues, it loses traction.

