



Mercury and the Making of California: Mining, Landscape, and Race, 1840-1890 (Mining the American West)

Andrew Scott Johnston

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Mercury and the Making of California, Andrew Johnston's multidisciplinary examination of the history and cultural landscapes of California's mercury-mining industry, raises mercury to its rightful place alongside gold and silver in the development of the American West.

Gold and silver could not be refined without mercury; therefore, its production and use were vital to securing power and wealth in the West. The first industrialized mining in California, mercury mining had its own particular organization, structure, and built environments. These were formed within the Spanish Empire, subsequently transformed by British imperial ambitions, and eventually manipulated by American bankers and investors. In California mercury mining also depended on a workforce differentiated by race and ethnicity. The landscapes of work and camp and the relations among the many groups involved in the industry—Mexicans, Chileans, Spanish, English, Irish, Cornish, American, and Chinese—form a crucial chapter in the complex history of race and ethnicity in the American West.

This pioneering study explicates the mutual structuring of the built environments of the mercury-mining industry and the emergence of California's ethnic communities. Combining rich documentary sources with a close examination of the existing physical landscape, Johnston explores both the detail of everyday work and life in the mines and the larger economic and social structures in which mercury mining was enmeshed, revealing the significance of mercury mining for Western history.

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