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# The evolving landscape: Homer Aschmann's geography

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## Book Reviews

### General

*The Evolving Landscape: Homer Aschmann's Geography.*

Edited by MARTIN J. PASQUALETTI. Foreword by JOHN BRINCKERHOFF JACKSON.  
Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. Photographs. Maps. Tables.  
Figures. Notes. Index. x, 445 pp. Cloth, \$49.95.

This honorific collection brings together some of Homer Aschmann's best work. Martin Pasqualetti has selected 31 pieces from among the more than 60 Aschmann published between 1948 and his death in 1992, adding one of his more trenchant book reviews for good measure. The resulting array is highly eclectic in topic and method, ranging from Baja California to Australia, archival work to fieldwork, the precolonial to the postcolonial, vegetation to mining, place names to population, and environmental politics to Apache land claims. This breadth reflects the impact of graduate study at Berkeley when Sauer, Simpson, Borah, Cook, and Kroeber were collaborating in defining a host of new questions and the methods for answering them. Aschmann also adopted another intellectual trait at that scholastic hearth, one that diffuses throughout the apparent diversity of his interests and methods: a persistent concern with the profound changes—particularly changes in population and environment—that native peoples and their landscapes have undergone as a result of colonization.

Historians will best know Aschmann for his work on Baja California. As a pioneering ethnohistorian, his "Desert Genocide" and "Historical Sources for a Contact Ethnography of Baja California" remain landmarks in the development of ethnohistorical method and in the acceptance of higher population figures for the precolonial Americas. Much of Aschmann's other research, such as that on the Guajira of Colombia, provided him with comparative perspectives for his Baja work. In fact, the comparative approach, characteristically with a focus on regions with dry climates, allowed Aschmann to complement his detailed, particularistic research on Baja with more general insights. His observations on mining in the Norte Chico of Chile and in Baja resulted in a model of the "life cycles" of mines, "The Natural History of a Mine" now being essential reading for students of mining history from Atacama to Zacatecas. His work on the human impact on vegetation through intentional burning in places as

diverse as the Canaries and California led to some radical, at the time of publication, policy recommendations for land managers. Yet as historians have become more interested in the environment as a dynamic landscape rather than as a static stage, and as biologists have become more interested in time as history rather than as a teleological progression of successional stages, Aschmann's recommendations against total fire suppression no longer seem as iconoclastic as when Smokey the Bear reigned in the fifties and sixties.

For specialists on California, Arizona, and Baja the collection offers little new; they will already know Aschmann's work, and the many ellipses outweigh the convenience of collecting some of the more outstanding papers into an indexed volume. In general, by honoring a pioneering colleague the authors of the brief introductions to the eight thematic sections as well as Pasqualetti's volume introduction remain true to the purpose of the collection. Many of these introductions also make modest contributions to the history of science by placing Aschmann's work in scholarly and social context.

For the more general reader, though, this volume is a treasure. Aschmann's straightforward writing and Pasqualetti's judicious editing offer a collection essential to any trip to California—Baja or Alta. Traverse southern California from the Colorado River to the Pacific and follow Aschmann's transect through a suite of landscapes, noting the vestiges of a long and varied history of land use and abuse. Or follow the trails south along the Baja peninsula to the date palms at Misión San Ignacio and to the Mina de San Fernando. The maps, diagrams, and photographs make this volume as engaging a field guide to landscapes for the lay person as it is a celebration of an exceptional scholar, perhaps appropriately so given the spirit with which Aschmann conducted his research.

ANDREW SLUYTER, Pennsylvania State University

*Les Européens et la mer au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle: les Ibériques de l'Atlantique au Pacifique.*

By GUY MARTINIÈRE and LAURENT VIDAL. Paris: Ophrys, 1997. Maps. Tables. 137 pp. Paper.

This little book has as its stated purpose to resurrect eighteenth-century Iberian maritime activity from unjustifiable obscurity. The authors believe Spanish and Portuguese efforts on the high seas are too often neglected in favor of the exploits of northern Europeans. This may be the case in France, as the authors say (p. 1), but not among habitual readers of the *HAHR*, who will find little new in the volume.

The book has a curious format. It consists of seven chapters, each of which is built around a short extract from an eighteenth-century document or two. The extracts are followed by contextual material that runs ten to twenty times as long as the documents themselves. With these proportions, the bulk of the book is commentary and context. Each chapter also includes a sizeable bibliography for further reference. In some cases these are woefully out of date, as in a section on the formation of Brazilian society, which offers only Gilberto Freyre (p. 118). In others, the bibliography provides a useful survey of the relevant literature in French, Spanish, Portuguese, and English.