

“The Heroine Martyr of Monterey” by James Gilborne Lyons¹ (1847)

Like “The Angels of Buena Vista” by John Greenleaf Whittier, “The Heroine Martyr of Monterey” by the Reverend James Gilborne Lyons found its inspiration in an eyewitness account of the Battle of Monterey originally published in the Louisville Courier in late 1846. In the letter, a U.S. soldier reported seeing a Mexican woman tend to the wounded of both sides before being shot in a crossfire: “While I was stationed with our left wing in one of our forts, I saw a Mexican woman busily engaged in carrying bread and water to the wounded men of both armies. I saw the ministering angel raise the head of a wounded man, give him water and food, and then bind up his ghastly wound with a handkerchief she took from her own head. After having exhausted her supplies, she went back to her house, to get more bread and water for others. As she was returning on her mission of mercy, to comfort other wounded persons, I heard the report of a gun, and saw the poor innocent creature fall dead. I think it was an accidental shot that struck her. I would not be willing to believe otherwise. It made me sick at heart; and, turning from the scene, I involuntarily raised my eyes toward heaven, and thought, Great God! and is this war? Passing the spot the next day, I saw her body still lying there, with the bread by her side, and the broken gourd, with a few drops of water in it, emblems of her errand. We buried her; and while we were digging her grave, cannon-balls flew around like hail.”² Much reprinted in the nineteenth century, “The Heroine Martyr of Monterey” provides us with a fascinating point of comparison with similarly themed poems by John Greenleaf Whittier and Grace Greenwood. Like Whittier’s poem, this one begins with a short prose introduction that sets the scene.

When the American forces under General Taylor stormed Monterey, a Mexican woman was seen going about among the wounded of both armies binding up their wounds, and supplying them with food and water. While thus employed she fell. She was next day buried by the Americans amid an incessant discharge of shot from the Mexican batteries.

The strife was stern as Monterey,
 When those high towers were lost and won,
And pealing through that mortal fray,
 Flash’d the strong battery’s vengeful gun;
Yet, heedless of its deadly rain,
 She stood in toil and danger first,
To bind the bleeding soldier’s vein,
 And slake the dying soldier’s thirst.

She found a pale and stricken foe
 Sinking in nature’s last eclipse,
And, on the red earth kneeling low,

1. J. G. Lyons, “The Heroine Martyr of Monterey.” In *Friendship’s Gift for 1848*, edited by Walter Percival (Boston: John P. Hill, 1848), 101.

2. The letter is reproduced in George Winston Smith and Charles Judah’s *Chronicles of the Gringos: The U.S. Army in the Mexican War, 1846–1848* (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1968), 90. Apart from the *Louisville Journal*, the letter appeared in numerous other newspapers across the country during the war

She wet his parch'd and fever'd lips;
When, thick as winter's driving sleet,
The booming shot and flaming shell
Swept with wild rage that gory street,
And she—the good and gentle—fell.

They laid her in her narrow bed,
The foemen of her land and race;
And sighs were breathed, and tears were shed,
Above her lowly resting place:—
Ay! glory's crimson worshippers
Wept over her untimely fall,
For deeds of mercy such as hers
Subdue the hearts and eyes of all.

To sound her worth were guilt and shame
In us, who love but gold and ease:—
They heed alike *our* praise or blame,
Who live and die in works like these.
Far greater than the wise or brave,
Far happier than the fair and gay,
Was she who found a martyr's grave
On that red field of Monterey.

Scenes from the California Gold Rush (1848–1851)

James Marshall discovered gold at Sutter's Mill, California, on January 24, 1848. Several months later, word about the discovery began to spread across the nation through the press. President Polk's affirmation of the great mineral riches of California in his final annual address to the Congress in December 1848 fanned the flames of a "Gold Rush" that propelled thousands of people from the United States and abroad to travel to California in search of the "rivers of gold" rumored to be there. The Gold Rush intensified conflict between miners of different ethnic and national backgrounds, transformed the demographics of California, and helped to usher the territory into statehood in 1850.

The City of San Francisco during the Gold Rush³

The population of all kinds, permanent residents, gold diggers on their way to the mines, and miscellaneous adventurers, was between six and seven thousand. There was a show of frame and brick buildings on one or two streets, some of them tolerably respectable in size and architecture, but most of them

3. William S. McCollum, *From California as I saw it; Pencillings by the Way of its Gold and Gold Diggers, and Incidents of Travel by Land and Water* (Buffalo: G.H. Derby and Co., 1850), 122–25.

exhibiting evidence that they were put up in a hurry. Canvass houses and tents completed the landscape of the embryo city, and they were scattered about in profusion, occupying vacant lots and squares, here and there stretching off in some favored locality, and forming detached colonies. It was a ragged, novel scene. There were at least four thousand “dwellers in tents” and canvass houses. It was a busy population, bustling, full of excitement, of bright and buoyant hopes. With the newly arrived adventurer, there was a foretaste of what his imagination could easily convert into a self-possessed reality; there were the glimmerings, the assurances, of the full fruition of his most ardent expectations. The returned gold diggers were there with their “piles,” exhibiting the glittering “lumps” and bags of “scales” and “dust”; elated with their acquisitions; in some instances, giddy with their suddenly acquired wealth—opening to the imagination of the new comers rich “placers” and a wide field bestrewn with the object of their long and tedious journey; weaving upon a warp of reality a glittering woof of fancy. “Light comes, light goes,” is an old adage, and it was well illustrated at San Francisco. There were prudent men among the returned gold diggers, but the majority of them were as reckless of their gain, the product of severe toil and privation, as if they had scooped it from the surface of the earth, instead of delving for it beneath. There was but little coin in circulation—no paper money of course—gold as it came from the mines was the principal medium of exchange and traffic. It was rated at sixteen dollars an ounce, and weighed in all manner of scales; many of them such as our apothecaries would not trust with their moderately high priced drugs. No body thought of disputing weights, or contending against “down weights,” as some of our economical farmers would, when selling their coarse grains. There was not much difficulty growing out of infinitesimal, or homoeopathic fractions and divisions, for there were allopathic prices for everything. Liberality, profusion, was catching: those going to the mines, seeing how flush those were that had been and returned, depleted their consumptive purses as if they had been plethoric. The conclusion was, that when their money was gone, they had only to go out to the mines, stoop down, and pick up more. But ah! that stooping down, that creaking of joints under a new discipline—that forward leaning of the vertebra, till it described a half circle, and keeping it there until it would hesitate to go back to its place, like the bow which has been too long bent; that back-ache and head-ache; there was far less of fun in it, of play and poetry—it was, to tell the truth, more “like work” than had been taken into the account; as the reader shall be told, if his patience will continue with us in our adventures.

Most, of all we found in San Francisco, were from this country, though there was a sprinkling of Mexicans, Chileans, Peruvians, Chinese, Sandwich Islanders, and a very few from England and France. The Chinese were generally, carpenters, laborers, and keepers of rude shops and eating houses. They were not, I should judge, your real “celestials,”⁴ but a kind of half way “outside barbarians,” who acquired a little knowledge with the world, by dwelling in the commercial marts of China. The shop keepers were as keen as if they had taken lessons in our own Puritan, over-reaching, New England; and although the cooking in their eating houses, was generally of a strange hashmedley, I saw no “chop sticks,”—no mourners of the canine species, for their martyred companions; no veritable rat tails in their soups. The Chileans were generally traders and keepers of eating houses; were mostly harmless and inoffensive. The “Kanakas [Kanakas],” or Sandwich Islanders, were common laborers and porters. There were a few native Californians, not to exceed two hundred. The city government consisted of an alcalde, and some kind of city council; the municipal affairs were crude and undigested, as a matter of course; and yet there was a tolerable government, a security of life and property which could hardly have been anticipated; its strength and support being the character of a large majority of those suddenly thrown together, whose self-preservation depended upon the maintenance of law and order.

4. Because China was known as the “Celestial Empire,” Chinese people were called “Celestials.”

There were not less than one hundred vessels in port, mostly American; a few Chilean brigs. The number was rapidly accumulating. When a vessel reached there, it was soon deserted by its crew, and left with its officers; and in many instances officers and all, were off to the mines leaving the vessel to take care of itself. Sailors are proverbially fond of their pursuit—have usually a contempt for land service; but gold, its supposed easy acquisition—in this instance, prevailed over enlistments, engagement, and discipline.

Gold and gold digging absorbed everything. California was emphatically, a country of “one idea.” It was there, the reign of Mammon,⁵—all were his votaries, and they were as absorbed, as “set apart” for his service, as if bound by religious vows. There had been but little of systematic agricultural pursuits, since the breaking up of the mission establishments, many years previous, but, on the discovery of gold, this, as well as all other ordinary pursuits, was abandoned.

Frontier Justice in Gold Country (1850)⁶

A Mexican gambler, named Lopez, having in his possession a large amount of money, retired to his room at night, and was surprised about midnight by five men rushing into his apartment, one of whom applied a pistol to his head, while the others barred the door and proceeded to rifle his trunk. An alarm being given, some of the citizens rushed in, and arrested the whole party. Next day they were tried by a jury chosen from among the citizens, and were sentenced to receive thirty-nine lashes each, on the following morning.

Never having witnessed a punishment inflicted by Lynch-law, I went over to the dry digging on a clear Sunday morning, and on my arrival, found a large crowd collected around an oak tree, to which was lashed a man with a bared back, while another was applying a raw cowhide to his already gored flesh. A guard of a dozen men, with loaded rifles, pointed at the prisoners, stood ready to fire in case of an attempt being made to escape.

After the whole had been flogged, some fresh charges were preferred against three of the men—two Frenchmen, named García and Bissi, and a Chileno, named Manuel. These were charged with robbery and attempt to murder, on the Stanislaus River, during the previous fall. The unhappy men were removed to a neighboring house, and being so weak from their punishment as to be unable to stand, were laid stretched upon the floor. As it were not possible for them to attend, they were tried in the open air, in their absence, by a crowd of some two hundred men, who had organized themselves into a jury, and appointed a pro tempore judge. . . . At the close of the trial, which lasted some thirty minutes, the Judge put to vote the question, whether they had been proved guilty. A universal affirmative was the response; and then the question, “What punishment shall be inflicted?” was asked. A brutal looking fellow in the crowd, cried out, “Hang them.” The proposition was seconded, and met with almost universal approbation. I mounted a stump, and in the name of God, humanity, and law, protested against such a course of proceeding; but the crowd, by this time excited by frequent and deep potations of liquor from a neighboring groggery, would listen to nothing contrary to their brutal desires, and even threatened to hang me if I did not immediately desist from any farther remarks.

5. The personification of wealth and riches.

6. E. Gould Buffum, *Six Months in the Gold Mines: From a Journal of Three Years Residence in Upper and Lower California in 1847-8-9* (London: Richard Bentley, 1850), 107–9.

Mexicans, Chileans, and Anglo-Americans in the Gold Country (1851)⁷

Nine-tenths of the new arrivals were Americans, who resorted, as we did in the first instance, to the Chileans and Mexicans for instructions and information, which they gave them with cheerful alacrity; but as soon as Jonathan got an inkling of the system, with peculiar bad taste and ungenerous feeling he organized a crusade against those obliging strangers, and ran them off the creek at the pistol mouth. Our messes were canvassed to take part in the affair, but declined becoming engaged in any such proceeding, which had like to have led to our own expulsion likewise; in fact, the Yankees regarded every man but a native American as an interloper, who had no right to come to California to pick up the gold of the free and the enlightened citizens.

Ramona by Helen Hunt Jackson (1883)⁸

One of the most popular novels of the nineteenth century after Uncle Tom's Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe, Ramona (1883) by Helen Hunt Jackson was a melodrama set in multicultural California. It was inspired by a real-life murder and the mistreatment of the Mission Indians by Anglo-American settlers and land speculators. At the center of this romantic novel is beautiful Ramona, a half Scottish and half Indian youth raised by a Mexican family of crumbling fortunes. Ramona's husband is Alessandro, a Mission Indian driven to despair by his people's loss of land to unscrupulous new settlers.⁹ The passage that follows describes Chief Pablo and his noble son Alessandro.

Even Pablo sometimes doubted whether he had done wisely in teaching Alessandro all he knew himself. Pablo was, for one of his race, wise and far-seeing. He perceived the danger threatening his people on all sides. Father Peyri, before he left the country, had said to him: "Pablo, your people will be driven like sheep to the slaughter, unless you keep them together. Knit firm bonds between them; band them into pueblos; make them work; and above all, keep peace with the whites. It is your only chance."

Most strenuously Pablo had striven to obey Father Peyri's directions. He had set his people the example of constant industry, working steadily in his fields and caring well for his herds. He had built a chapel in his little village, and kept up forms of religious service there. Whenever there were troubles with the whites, or rumors of them, he went from house to house, urging, persuading, commanding his people to keep the peace. At one time when there was an insurrection of some of the Indian tribes farther south, and for a few days it looked as if there would be a general Indian war, he removed the greater part of his band, men, women, and children driving their flocks and herds with them, to Los Angeles, and camped there for several days, that they might be identified with the whites in case hostilities became serious.

But his labors did not receive the reward that they deserved. With every day that the intercourse between his people and the whites increased, he saw the whites gaining, his people surely losing ground,

7. William Kelly, *An Excursion to California Over the Prairie, Rocky Mountains, and Great Sierra Nevada* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1851), 23.

8. Helen Hunt Jackson, *Ramona: A Story* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1912), 61–64.

9. For the inspiration of this novel, see the document titled "The Plight of the Mission Indians" and accompanying notes in Part V of *The U.S.-Mexican War: A Binational Reader*.

and his anxieties deepened. The Mexican owner of the Temecula valley, a friend of Father Peyri's, and a good friend also of Pablo's, had returned to Mexico in disgust with the state of affairs in California, and was reported to be lying at the point of death. This man's promise to Pablo, that he and his people should always live in the valley undisturbed, was all the title Pablo had to the village lands. In the days when the promise was given, it was all that was necessary. The lines marking off the Indians' lands were surveyed, and put on the map of the estate. No Mexican proprietor ever broke faith with an Indian family or village thus placed on his lands.

But Pablo had heard rumors, which greatly disquieted him, that such pledges and surveyed lines as these were coming to be held as of no value, not binding on purchasers of grants. He was intelligent enough to see that if this were so, he and his people were ruined. All these perplexities and fears he confided to Alessandro; long anxious hours the father and son spent together, walking back and forth in the village, or sitting in front of their little adobe house, discussing what could be done. There was always the same ending to the discussion,—a long sigh, and, "We must wait, we can do nothing."

No wonder Alessandro seemed, to the more ignorant and thoughtless young men and women of his village, a cold and distant lad. He was made old before his time. He was carrying in his heart burdens of which they knew nothing. So long as the wheat fields came up well, and there was no drought, and the horses and sheep had good pasture, in plenty, on the hills, the Temecula people could be merry, go day by day to their easy work, play games at sunset, and sleep sound all night. But Alessandro and his father looked beyond. And this was the one great reason why Alessandro had not yet thought about women, in way of love; this, and also the fact that even the little education he had received was sufficient to raise a slight barrier, of which he was unconsciously aware, between him and the maidens of the village. If a quick, warm fancy for any one of them ever stirred in his veins, he found himself soon, he knew not how, cured of it. For a dance, or a game, or a friendly chat, for the trips into the mountains after acorns, or to the marshes for grasses and reeds, he was their good comrade, and they were his; but never had the desire to take one of them for his wife, entered into Alessandro's mind. The vista of the future, for him, was filled full by thoughts which left no room for love's dreaming; one purpose and one fear filled it,—the purpose to be his father's worthy successor, for Pablo was old now, and very feeble; the fear, that exile and ruin were in store for them all.