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IN the history of our continent there is no more heroic nor adventurous period than that of the early exploration and settlement of the West. First came the Spaniards; and, in their conquest of this vast territory, army and church marched together. The soldiers conquered the Indians, then the fathers baptized them and taught them the arts of agriculture. Many of the officers were too illiterate or too occupied with fighting and love-making to leave any account of these expeditions, so that the early history of the West has been told almost entirely by missionary-explorers. The story of the settlement of Sonora and Arizona is recorded in the diaries of Father Eusebio Kino, whose life has been ably recounted in "Pioneer Padre," by Rufus Kay Willis, while Miss Agnes Repplier in her distinguished biography of "Junipero Serra" based her fascinating narrative on the records of that great Franciscan, who built the missions strung along the California coast.

It was another Franciscan, Fray Juan Augustin Morfi, who wrote of the early settlement of Texas. He was a Spaniard who came to Mexico in 1755 or 1756 and then became a monk. In 1777 he accompanied Theodore de Croix, newly made Commandant General, on a tour of inspection of the territory under his command, which included Texas, New Mexico and the Californias. They traveled many leagues, and wherever they stopped Fray Morfi, being of an inquiring mind, searched the archives for documents. He kept careful record of these historical data and a detailed diary as well, which "gives a fairly accurate idea of the social conditions of Northern New Spain at the close of the eighteenth century."

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WHEN he returned to Mexico City his keen interest in Texas was crystallized and he determined to write her history. The charge, in Antonio Bonilla's "Breve Compendio," that the Franciscans were responsible for the failure of several attempts to colonize Texas spurred him on.

In his search for source documents he ransacked the rich archives of the Convent Grande de San Francisco, of which he had been made the guardian, and then widened his search to other institutions. He worked on this material until his death in 1783. He arranged his rough notes and comments on documents in what he called his "Memorias para la Historia de Texas," and then, using this as a basis, he wrote his final history.

Several copies of the "Memorias" were made and are well known to scholars: but Morfi's finished work had remained unknown until, in 1931, Señor Carlos Eduardo Castañeda discovered the manuscript in the National Library of Mexico. He made a translation which has been published by the Quivira Society of Albuquerque in a fine edition limited to five hundred copies. ("History of Texas, 1673-1779," two volumes, boxed, illustrated). Señor Castañeda has edited and annotated it in scholarly fashion and supplied a general bibliography, a biography of Morfi and a check list of his writings.

The Spanish soldiery were a cruel lot and in Morfi's book he did not hesitate to berate them. Through the Southwest there was always friction between the army and the church, and both Padres Kino and Serra complained that they saved the souls of Indian women only to have them seduced by the soldiery. However, it must be acknowledged that when their converts changed their minds and attempted to escape, the fathers never hesitated to call on the army to pursue them and bring them back by force.

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EVIDENCE that these conditions persisted until quite late is to be found in the "Journal of a Voyage between China and the Northwestern Coast of America made in 1804 by William Shaler," with an introduction by Lindley Bynum and decorations by Ruth Saunders (Saunders Studio Press, Claremount, Calif., $3.75). Well designed and printed, it is an excellent example of the fine, spirited work that can be done by private presses.

William Shaler was one of our early adventurous sea captains, who traded in the Pacific in a little boat called the Lelia Byrd. His "Journal" tells his adventures in a graphic and exciting manner, from the time he left Canton in 1804 on a voyage to the California coast to the time he returned a year later. He had fights with Indians when he tried to refill his water casks on the Columbia River, and at San Diego the Spanish fort shelled him, for they wanted no alien traders.

He learned that the seduction of Indian women by the Spaniards, about which Padres Kino, Morfi and Serra had complained, had spread disease at such an alarming rate that at the Mission of Purissima the Indian population dwindled from 7,000 to 50 souls.

Captain Shaler was an intelligent observer and his "Journal," the first known published account of California by an American, is a valuable and interesting historical document. Although printed in 1808 in Philadelphia in Volume III of "The American Register," this is its initial appearance as a separate book.

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RICHARD H. DANA'S "Two Years Before the Mast," which chronicled the visit of a Boston vessel to the California coast to trade for hides, followed the Shaler "Journal" and served to arouse an interest in the great Western territory which had been settled by the Spanish missionaries. As a more or less direct consequence John C. Frémont was sent, in 1842, on an expedition to Oregon and Wyoming to report. He took with him Kit Carson, who had become known as the best scout and most fearless Indian fighter in all the West. Carson also accompanied him on his second and his third expedition, during which their little force assisted in the taking of California by the United States.

Much of Frémont's success was due to Carson's superlative courage and intimate acquaintance with Indian psychology, life and language. Carson was born in Kentucky and at 15 was apprenticed to a saddler. After two years he ran away and joined an outfit going West. For eight years he was a trapper on the Plains and then became meat-hunter for the garrison at Bent's Fort. Later he took his daughter by an Arapahoe squaw to St. Louis to be educated. It was on this trip that he met Frémont.

"Kit Carson's Autobiography" has just been republished by the Lakeside Press of Chicago in an edition of 1,500 copies for private distribution. It has been the pleasant custom of this firm since 1903 to issue a well-made little book to be presented to its friends at Christmas.

The "Autobiography" is a modest statement of the main facts of Carson's life which he dictated to a friend. It is told with much restraint and is an excellent example of understatement. This is his laconic account of a terrific duel to the death with an Indian: "Seeing me by myself, he showed fight and I was under the necessity of killing him." At another place he says his party "killed and scalped" an Indian "and the hunters returned to camp having found no other game." Judging from the number of Indians he disposed of, Carson must have been an exponent of the old theory that "the only good Indian is a dead Indian." With the ruthlessness of his day, he never failed to scalp his victims.

While the "Autobiography" is most valuable to historians of that period, the biographies of Carson make far more interesting reading. In "Kit Carson Days" (The Press of the Pioneers, two volumes, $10), which has been entirely rewritten for this edition by its author, Edwin L. Sabin, there is the full savor and excitement of the great scout's adventures. It gives those relentless days with great fidelity and shows the important part Carson played in the taming of the West and the acquisition of California. The illustrations are not good enough for the book.

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ON Frémont's second expedition, he and Carson and their men struggled through Rocky Mountain snows in midwinter and finally, hollow-eyed and hungry, with two of their men insane, they stumbled into Sutter's Fort in California. John Augustus Sutter nursed them back to health and then outfitted them.

He was an interesting picturesque character and many authors have written about him, including the Frenchman, Blaise Cendrars. Sutter came of Swiss parents and was graduated from the Military College at Berne. In 1834 he left Europe and went to St. Louis. Going from there to Santa Fe he became a trader with the Indians and finally, in 1838, crossed the Rockies. The Mexicans granted him an enormous tract of land, upon which he built a strong fort, called New Helvetia, where Sacramento is now. Here he lived in baronial style, tilling his lands and raising thousands of cattle. Although he served as Mexican Governor of that northern frontier country, he always favored annexation by the United States and was particularly kind to traveling Americans.

It was this annexation that was his ruin, for it brought the gold rush and his men deserted to search for the yellow metal, leaving his crops rotting in the fields and his cattle uncared for. When finally the American Court of Claims, through chicanery, failed to uphold his title to his lands, his ruin was complete.

Julian Dana's account of this dynamic personality in "Sutter of California" (the Macmillan Company, $3.50) is vivid, interesting and written in the graphic manner of modern biography. Not only does it give a well-rounded portrait of Sutter, but it also affords a complete picture of the final step of the United States in her great march from the Atlantic to the Pacific.