

Alfred Robinson, "Life in California before the Conquest" (1846)

On the eve of the Mexican War, merchant Alfred Robinson wrote this account of the climate and society in the Mexican territory of Alta California. How did he characterize the condition of politics under the Mexican administration? What did he mean when he encouraged the United States to extend "the area of freedom" to California? What, specifically, did he think would be the result? Was political freedom or some other form of freedom foremost on his mind?

The resources of California, its magnificent harbors, climate, and abundance of naval stores, would make it the rendezvous for all the steamers engaged in the trade between Europe and the East Indies, as well as those from the United States, and the facilities for emigration would be such that soon the whole western coast of north America would be settled by emigrants, both from this country and Europe.

During the anarchy which existed in past years throughout this fertile country, there were many of the native Californians who would have been thankful for the protection of either England or America, and indeed a great many desired it, in preference to the detested administration of Mexico. Perhaps there are many who still feel as they did then, and in this age of "annexation" why not extend the "area of freedom" by the annexation of California? Why not plant the banner of liberty there, in the fortress at the entrance of the noble, the spacious Bay of San Francisco? It requires not the far-reaching eye of the statesman nor the wisdom of a contemplative mind to know what would be the result. Soon its immense sheet of water would become enlivened with thousands of vessels, and steamboats would ply between the towns which, as a matter of course, would spring up on its shores, while on other locations along the banks of the rivers would be seen manufactories and sawmills. . . .

All this may come to pass, and indeed it must come to pass, for the march of emigration is to the West, and naught will arrest its advance but the mighty ocean.