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Power and Control in the Imperial Valley: Nature, Agribusiness, and Workers on the California Borderland, 1900-1940

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Benny J. Andrés, Jr., *Power and Control in the Imperial Valley: Nature, Agribusiness, and Workers on the California Borderland, 1900-1940*.

Reviewed by Nathan F. Sayre, University of California, Berkeley

The Imperial Valley, straddling the United States-Mexico border from the mouth of the Colorado River north into California, must be considered one of the most extraordinary cases of agro-industrial transformation in the world. Benny Andrés, Jr. has produced a remarkably detailed chronicle of this world historic transformation, based on a wealth of primary materials. He condenses the period from 1900 to 1940 into just 161 pages, followed by a short Afterword that considers this history from the perspective of the present, when “the Imperial Valley is infamous for its flagrant water waste, unsustainable farming practices, feeble economic output, endemic poverty, and debilitating pollution” (p. 163).

“Imperial-Mexicali Valley’s history,” Andrés argues, “is the quest for power, control, and profits” (p. 66), reflecting “a peculiar mental inclination” (p. 4) to dominate and exploit nature and people alike. He shows how an unholy alliance of capitalists, landowners and politicians, increasingly enabled by government policies and largesse at all levels, conquered one of the hottest and driest places in North America by means of irrigation, agricultural science, chemical pesticides, legal-bureaucratic chicanery and outright violence.

Moving in broadly chronological fashion, Andrés explores how the Colorado River was diverted to irrigate the valley (chapter 1); how soils, plants, insects and animals were forcibly manipulated and persecuted to produce ever more crops (chapter 2); how racist ideologies and tactics were mobilized and resisted in creating strict (if also dynamic) hierarchies of social domination (chapters 3 and 4); and how all of these transformations shaped four decades of brutal repression of farm labor organizers, activists and advocates (chapter 5).

The strength of *Power and Control in the Imperial Valley* rests on the fine grain of its empirical materials, ranging from the engineering of groundwater drainage and salinity control to the cross-border micro-politics of the Mexican Revolution. Specific details enrich the narrative throughout, bringing an almost visceral quality to droughts, floods, farming practices, police and vigilante violence, perverted justice and contorted logic. Although the diversion of the Colorado River has received comparably detailed treatments before, to my knowledge no one has chronicled the region’s social history so richly until now.

It is a daunting task to fit so much detail into such a short book, however. Within each chapter, events twist and turn so quickly, with so many causal and contingent factors invoked or alluded to, that basic facts sometimes become elusive. How much were farm wages over this period? Were they paid by the hour or the day? How often were they paid at all? More tables and maps would be helpful. Similarly, the chapters

often cover overlapping time periods, without as much cross-referencing and analysis as there could be. Finally, there is little room for Andrés to situate his case relative to the wealth of literature about the history of California agriculture elsewhere, making it hard to assess the uniqueness of the Imperial Valley story apart from its location on the border. On balance, however, the empirical value of the book will be lasting.