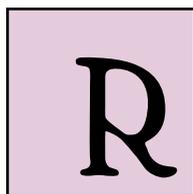


# ROBINSON JEFFERS: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

## THE POET AS ETHNOGRAPHER: ROBINSON JEFFERS IN BIG SUR

BY JOHN WALTON



Robinson Jeffers (1887–1962) settled on the thinly populated coast of central California in the early twentieth century and began writing stories of pioneering families and their majestic surroundings that would define the poet and the place called Big Sur. In the 1920s and 1930s, he became one of the nation's most celebrated poets. His art was the narrative poem, major works running one or two hundred pages and based on the land and legends of the California coast.

Jeffers wrote about real people and places, sometimes by name, often in recognizable fictional characters and settings, always rooted in social context, and plotted in recurrent human dramas. His poetry is suffused with a sense of the place and people of Big Sur. Here, by his own testimony, Jeffers found his poetic mission. As novelist Henry Miller, a long-term resident of Big Sur in a later period, observed, “[t]he rugged pioneers who settled here needed only a voice to make known their secret drama. And Jeffers is that voice.”<sup>1</sup>

A horseman high-alone as an eagle on the spur of the mountain over  
Mirmas Canyon draws rein, looks down  
At the bridge-builders, men, trucks, the power-shovels, the teeming end of  
the new coast-road at the mountain's base.  
He sees the loops of the road go northward, headland beyond headland,  
into gray mist over Fraser's Point,  
He shakes his fist and makes a gesture of wringing a chicken's neck,  
scowls and rides higher.

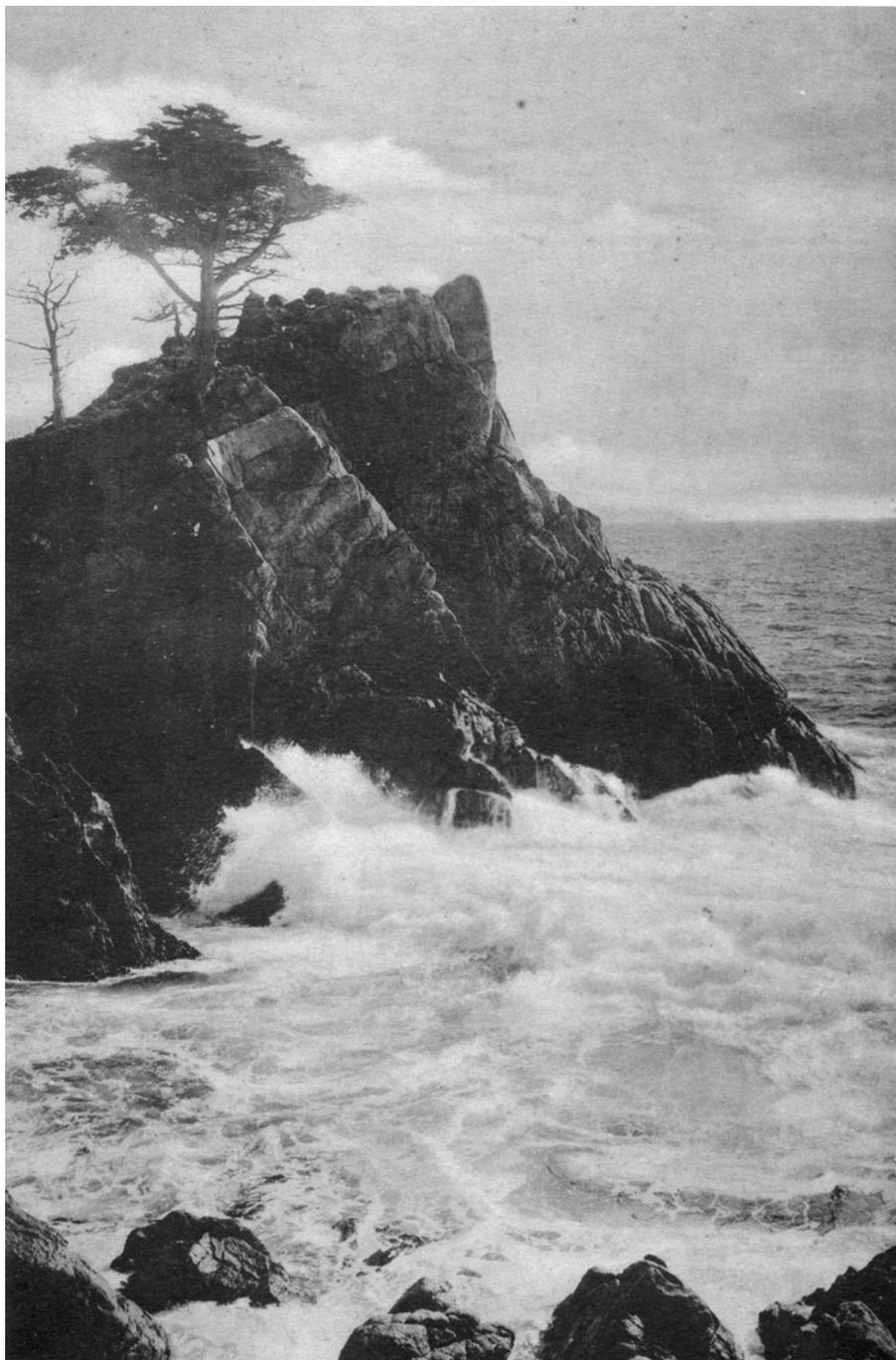
I too

Believe that the life of men who ride horses, herders of cattle on the  
mountain pasture, plowers of remote  
Rock-narrowed farms in poverty and freedom, is a good life. At the far end  
of those loops of road  
Is what will come and destroy it, a rich and vulgar and bewildered  
civilization dying at the core, . . .<sup>2</sup>

In these lines from “The Coast-Road,” written circa 1935, Jeffers describes the construction of a two-lane highway that would open Big Sur to through traffic in the late 1930s and mark decisively a movement already in progress: Big Sur’s transformation from a homesteading community to a scenic redoubt of wealthy ranchers, tourists, artists, and service workers. Jeffers portrayed this transition in moralistic terms: from poor but free frontier to rich and vulgar civilization. Although the road builders and their allies saw the sea change in different terms, all were aware of it. Jeffers illuminated varied individual reactions to it as well as to the broader advance of modernity that affected local society and its moral order.

A perennial issue in historical research is the completeness and validity of sources. Studies of little-known events or remote times and places often suffer from a paucity of primary source material on social practices and individual experiences. Yet in those instances, the historian may find a paradoxically rich case of literary documentation—“fiction” in the form of myths, folk tales, epic poems, or, more recently, the novel. Can such sources inform historical work, and if so, how? Do they have evidentiary value? Stated more rigorously, are there ways in which literary sources may be checked, corroborated, searched, culled, and extended to yield historical evidence?

In this article, I shall argue that Jeffers’ poetry offers such a possibility for several reasons. First, life on California’s central coast in the early 1900s was scarcely documented beyond a decennial census, exiguous voting records, snippets appearing in the Monterey newspapers, and a few recently discovered memoirs.<sup>3</sup> The opportunity to supplement the known record is great. Second, based on the testimony of many contemporary observers, Jeffers was a meticulous student of the Big Sur environment and society.<sup>4</sup> Third, once validated in many particulars, Jeffers’ description of the world contains a “value added”



*The dramatic rock formation Rocky Point—along the rugged coastline near Notley’s Landing—suggests the potential hazards faced by Big Sur travelers who came by sea and wagon road. The uncertainties produced by (and the effects of) the natural landscape directly influenced local residents’ state of mind, Jeffers believed. He asserted, “It is not possible to be quite sane here,” and characterized a landscape that “both excites and perverts its people.”*

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insight into how people experienced it—the joys, fears, and moral sentiments that elude the standard forms of documentation.

I shall endeavor to demonstrate—using Robinson Jeffers as a case study—that under some circumstances and with certain precautions, literature may be used reliably as historical evidence. The argument is not unprecedented. Oxford historian Keith Hopkins has written about “novel evidence for Roman slavery” using the text of *The Life of Aesop* “to sketch the slave’s experience of slavery and the fears and anxieties which slavery evoked in Roman masters.”<sup>5</sup>

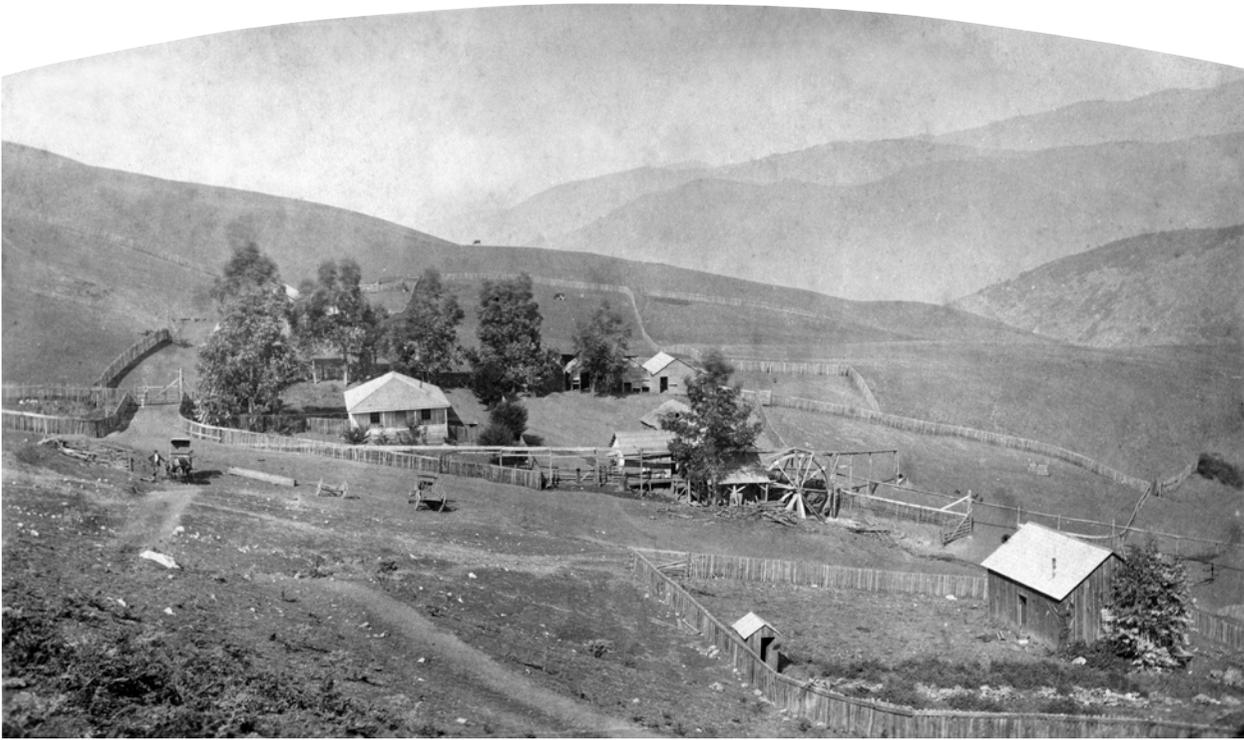
Hopkins argues that Roman stories about slavery are perhaps a better (or no less valid) indicator than surviving records of the Roman senate because they reveal the boundaries of morality, the fears of slave owners, and thus the normative order within which all Romans lived. Conventional history based on diaries, autobiographical accounts, tax records, or criminal statistics should be no more privileged when it comes to interpreting culture than stories, especially those passed down through generations.

Robinson Jeffers’ poems—stories of the scattered and lonely homesteads along the central coast—provide a fount of literary evidence about local society. To demonstrate this claim, I begin with characteristic literary descriptions from the narrative poems and then compare those with complementary historical evidence (e.g., newspapers, memoirs, censuses) about the place and time. Insofar as that comparison validates the reliability of the evidence, or shows that the sources are consistent, I maintain further that literary evidence illuminates social relations in additional ways that are seldom found in conventional sources. This approach provides an account of life *as experienced* that may be interpreted in light of other, more conventional sources.

## THE SETTING

When Spanish colonists arrived on the central coast of Alta California in 1770, they selected a site for their missionary and military headquarters and began putting their own names to local places. The bay and nascent town was called Monterey, after a colonial official; the nearby river and mission site became Carmel, for the Carmelite order of priests; and the vast, unexplored area down-coast was simply El Sur, the south. The rugged coastline and Santa Lucia Mountains were home to 1200 Esselen Indians who lived in small bands and left scant record of their society.<sup>6</sup> Although some of the Esselen were drawn to San Carlos Mission, El Sur remained isolated until the Mexican period (1821–46), when several large land grants were awarded to friends of the provincial governors in a vain effort to settle and hold the land against the encroaching Yankee. Ironically, John Rogers Cooper, merchant and former sea captain born in England, was operating the only cattle ranch and dairy in Big Sur when the United States took possession of California at Monterey in 1846.

As the Native American population declined owing to disease and absorption into the agricultural labor force, a new tribe of Anglo homesteaders slowly settled the Sur. From Alsatia, Michael and Barbara Pfeiffer arrived in 1869 with four children. Manuel Innocenti, an Indian, and David Castro—former *vaqueros* on Cooper Ranch—bought small farms. Many of the settlers were Yankees, including William Brainard Post, who married Anselma Onesimo, a Rumsen Indian.<sup>7</sup> Because Big Sur was isolated and its rugged terrain generally inhospitable to the Mexican hacienda, a good deal of coastal land was still available for distribution under the Homestead Act of 1862 and the Timber Culture Act of 1873. Through preemption, homesteading, timber claims, re-sales, and squatting, a growing number of settlers in the 1870s and 1880s acquired farms, typically beginning with the 160-acre allot-



*Most of the early settlers in Big Sur described themselves as farmers. They maintained modest holdings of a few hundred acres, often on steep headlands, raising cattle and a few truck crops. Commercially produced butter, honey, fruits, and meat were taken by wagon for marketing in Monterey from ranches such as the Hitchcock Ranch (later Brazil Ranch) in Little Sur, circa 1890.*

COURTESY, MONTEREY PUBLIC LIBRARY, CALIFORNIA HISTORY ROOM; PHOTOGRAPH BY C.W. J. JOHNSON

ments for homestead and timber claims. Land moved from public ownership to small private holdings with successfully patented homesteads, and some of these parcels were subsequently consolidated in larger farms and ranches.

By the 1880s, several hundred persons lived on isolated farms along the Big Sur coast. They were mainly subsistence farmers who also earned small cash incomes on parcels ranging from 200 to 500 or even 1,000 acres, although much of the land was steep hillsides suited only for precarious cattle grazing. The Pfeiffer's 500-acre farm was comprised of only twelve tilled acres and 200 cows and pigs, which produced \$1,100 in cash income. Butter and honey were taken to the Monterey market over rutted wagon roads. Farm families had neighbors within a few miles, but the occasional school within commuting distance enrolled perhaps a dozen students in all grades.

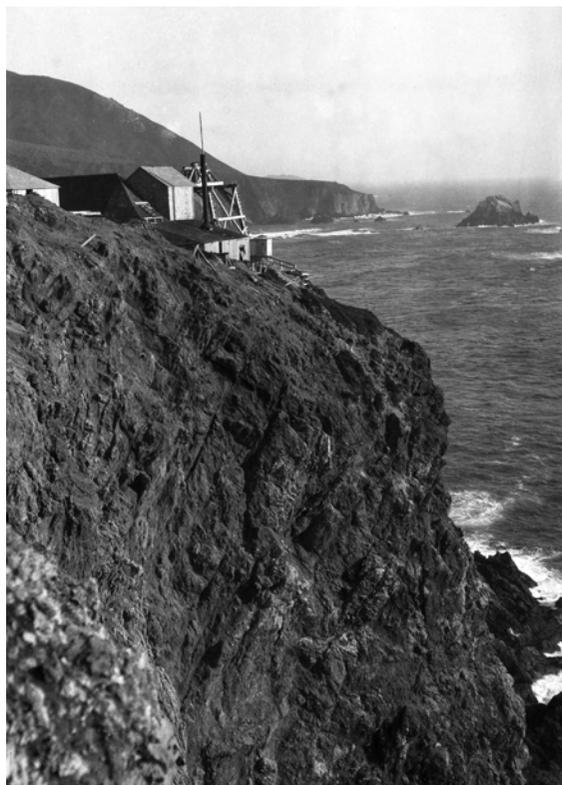
By 1900, Big Sur was changing in ways that supplanted pioneer society just as dramatically

as Indian country had been replaced earlier. Limestone mines and kilns for processing quick lime had prospered for two decades. Elaborate tramways were built to carry the processed lime from kilns on the hills to ship landings along the rocky and treacherous coast. The key industry for many years was timber, principally redwood and oak bark used in leather tanning. Forest products were exported from a series of landings (e.g., Notley's, Bixby's, Partington), or "dog hole" ports, along the coast and carried to Monterey and San Francisco by a regular steamship service. Saw mills flourished at each of these ports. Like mining, however, timber and tanbark faltered as economically accessible supplies were exhausted. The future belonged to the road builders, resort owners (including former pioneer families like the Pfeiffers), gentleman farmers, poets, and artists—all of whom were regarded contemptuously by Jeffers, the greatest of Big Sur poets, as carriers of "a rich and vulgar and bewildered civilization."



*This aerial tramway (above) is hauling limestone circa 1900 above Bixby Canyon. The tramways that moved the limestone and processed lime were elaborate structures given to frequent failure. Accidents from broken cables were common, a hazard that Jeffers included in his poems, such as “Thurso’s Landing.” Timber, lime, and tan bark were loaded onto small ships at landings such as Bixby’s (below). A-frame cranes lowered cargo to ships that often tossed on rough seas. It was dangerous work and abandoned before long as timber stands were exhausted and cheaper methods for producing lime were developed. In 1906, the Monterey Lime Company took over limekiln operations at Bixby’s Landing, whose dilapidated condition was described by Jeffers in “Bixby’s Landing” and which provided the setting for “Thurso’s Landing.”*

COURTESY OF PAT HATHAWAY, CALIFORNIA VIEWS; BOTTOM PHOTOGRAPH BY LEWIS JOSSELYN



## LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Robinson Jeffers settled in Carmel in 1914 with his wife and poetic muse, Una. He had been educated in European schools by an austere father, a professor of theology who supervised his son’s study of Greek, Latin, and the classics. Although Jeffers had already published a volume of poetry,<sup>8</sup> his work was obscure and tentative. But now, Jeffers says, “certain accidents changed and directed my life.” The first was Una, who “by her presence and conversation has co-authored every one of [the poems]. A second piece of pure accident brought us to the Monterey coast mountains, where for the first time in my life I could see people living amid magnificent unspoiled scenery. . . . Here was contemporary life that was also permanent life [Jeffers goes on to describe the people and events that informed his writings] . . . the Indian woman and her white husband, real persons whom I had often seen driving through our village in a ramshackle buggy. The episode [in “Roan Stallion”] of the woman swimming her horse through a storm-swollen ford at night . . . was part of her actual history.”<sup>9</sup>

More outgoing than the brooding poet, Una provided much of the local knowledge that Jeffers wove into his work. Reflecting on their early days in Carmel, she wrote, “[T]he big adventure of our first winter was a trip down the coast on the horse stage with [legendary local teamster] Corbett Grimes, who carried the mail and occasional passengers three times a week. . . . This was the first of a thousand pilgrimages, that we, and later our twin sons with us, have made down the coast and into the back country, where with books and maps and local gossip we have tried to piece together a fairly complete picture of this region: its treasures of natural beauty and vivid human life have been inexhaustible.”<sup>10</sup>

Jeffers’ poems teem with the people and geography of Big Sur. Place settings in the poems often bear their true name (Point Lobos, Soberanes



the people, places, and events through which the dramas are enacted are historical. Henry Miller noted that “Robinson Jeffers is unerring. . . . His figures and their manner of behavior are not falsely exaggerated as some believe. If his narratives smack of Greek tragedy, it is because Jeffers rediscovered here the atmosphere of the gods and fates which obsessed the ancient Greeks.”<sup>17</sup>

## THE STORIES

Although Jeffers’ oeuvre spanned nearly fifty years, beginning with his first published volume in 1912, *Flagons and Apples*, his emblematic work came in the 1920s and 1930s, the years of his great narrative poems, works that defined Big Sur. Jeffers was not the first to write about the region. In 1897, California author Gertrude Atherton had published *Patience Sparhawk and Her Times*, a novel about a girl raised in poverty and backwardness at Point Lobos. Jack London’s 1913 novel *Valley of the Moon* described the bohemians at Carmel and their frolics along the Big Sur coast. Others, including John Steinbeck, Lillian Bos Ross, and Henry Miller, would follow Jeffers. But more than any other, Jeffers portrayed the natural and human drama of Big Sur in a manner that influenced subsequent artists, whether poets, novelists, painters, or photographers such as Ansel Adams and Edward Weston.

In 1916, Jeffers published *Californians*, a minor work, yet one that introduced many of the settings and characters that animated later plots. The poem “Ruth Allison” tells the story of a beautiful farm girl who falls in love with Paul, heir to the vast Alera Ranch, who betrays her by having an affair with the bored adulterous wife of mill owner Manvil. The abandoned limekilns and tramway leading to Manvil’s Landing are vivid images from Jeffers’ first trip down the coast that also recur in later works. Ruth dies of a broken heart: “Had he been faithful she would have been most happy, / Being of her nature beautiful, and bound / To the great nature of that lonely

place. . . .” Meanwhile, a rapacious timber industry has stripped the hills. Nature and economy are ruined, settlers displaced, and homes deserted: “. . . you will see on the bleak ocean-cliff, / Under bare windy hills, a settlement / Of cottages about one building, broad, / Three-storied, capable of many beds; / And thereby an old mill. These vacant stand . . . / And there is hardly a tree for miles around.”<sup>18</sup>

The scene depicted in these last lines is Palo Colorado, site of Notley’s Landing and the remarkable three-storied Swetnam family farmhouse, still occupied today.

“Tamar,” written in the early 1920s, is the first of Jeffers’ long narrative poems. Unlike the innocent Ruth Allison, Tamar is the daughter of a Point Lobos farmer who is having an incestuous affair with her brother, is pregnant as a result, and is an incest rape victim of her despised father, now ruined by age and religious obsession. Two demented aunts and various spirits of the dead also occupy the family’s lonely, storm-battered house. Tamar starts an affair with a neighbor lad to conceal the origin of her pregnancy and incites her brother’s jealousy, ending in a fight and the suitor’s death. Violence, otherworldly interventions, and destruction visit the family, all of whom finally die in a house fire. Jeffers’ biographer, James Karman, describes “Tamar” as “extremely dense. On one level it is a tale of gothic horror. On another, it is a study of what the strange landscape around Carmel can do to people.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Jeffers believed that the awesome natural landscape of Big Sur somehow caused insanity among the people who lived there.<sup>20</sup>

“The Women at Point Sur” continues with themes of fire, incest, family conflict, fanaticism, mysticism, and the ultimate force of nature. Its publication also helped advance Jeffers’ reputation as a poet of great power whose work, nevertheless, was considered tragic, morbid, and too “dirty” for the polite reading public.<sup>21</sup>The prelude



*On September 14, 1924, a lightning storm ignited the 55,000-gallon oil tank leased from the City of Monterey by the Associated Oil Company. The fire that raged for the next three days was visible from Big Sur. On September 15, the Peninsula Daily Herald praised the soldiers of the Monterey Presidio for their firefighting efforts and for opening the Presidio's parade grounds to the public to freely view the spectacle, as depicted in this photograph. Jeffers later used the event and its destructive symbolism to introduce "The Women of Point Sur."*

COURTESY, MONTEREY PUBLIC LIBRARY, CALIFORNIA HISTORY ROOM; PHOTOGRAPH BY C. K. TUTTLE

to this book-length poem sets the scene with a great oil-tank fire in Monterey that lights up the whole region, an actual and long-remembered event of 1924.<sup>22</sup> The Reverend Dr. Barclay abandons his church and family, comes to the coast, and is taken in to the "gaunt" house of a poor farm family near the great rocky promontory of Point Sur. Barclay, who is seeking a power beyond God, believes ". . . I have something fiery / here that will burn the world down to significance." He gathers a small band of followers who share his mission. Barclay's own family joins him including his daughter, whom he rapes, and his wife, whom he torments. Among the other women of Point Sur are the lighthouse keeper's daughter (once pregnant by the farm-family head and despised for having had an abortion) and other relatives who have in common rape, incest, extramarital affairs, homosexuality, or pregnancy. In the end, Barclay dies attempting to lead his disciples into a brush fire that he believes is the route to power beyond human insignificance.<sup>23</sup>

Jeffers was surprised that his early efforts, though regarded as critical achievements, also were considered less spiritually transcendental than morbidly decadent.<sup>24</sup> The works that followed grew richer in local color, plot, human drama, and clarity. "Cawdor" is the story of a farm family living on the steep Big Sur headlands

that takes in a blind father and his daughter (Fera), whose home has been destroyed by fire. Living on Cawdor's farm are his grown sons, George and Hood, and two Mexican servants, farmhand Jesus Acanna and housekeeper Concha Rosas, the "dark fat woman" who has moved into Cawdor's bed, replacing his deceased wife. Cawdor lusts for the beautiful Fera, offering to care for her blind father if she will marry him. Fera agrees for the sake of her father's security. Soon, however, Hood returns from a hunting trip and the two young people develop a chaste attraction. But Cawdor believes Fera and Hood are having an affair and shoots his son in a jealous rage. Mistakenly believing that Hood is dead, Cawdor discovers that there was no affair and in his shame and misery puts out his own eyes.<sup>25</sup>

Infidelity also figures prominently in "Thurso's Landing." The county road builders are working their way toward Thurso's Landing, where the limekilns have been shut down, leaving Reave Thurso and his wife Helen in precarious straits on their farm. Helen is forlorn, exasperated by Reave's dogged attachment to the family's shrinking holding. "Look how I'm stuck in a rut: do I have to live there?' . . . 'I'll not let the days of my life / Hang like a string of naughts between two nothings.'" Then on the trail she encounters Rick Armstrong, who works on the road-building crew. Rick is a vision of sexuality who swims in

*Road crews employed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) during the 1930s cleared the land and built the two-lane highway State Route 1, which opened in 1937. The WPA was responsible for much of Big Sur's infrastructure, not to mention relief for workers. The men in this photograph, employed by the J. L. Conner Construction Company, stopped from their labors to pose on Carmel Hill circa 1930.*

COURTESY OF PAT HATHAWAY,  
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the ocean “Naked and very beautiful, all his blond body / Gleaming from the sea; . . .” Helen and Rick make love and decide to run away together to the desert. Reave pursues the couple, intending to kill Rick, but spares him and returns with the unresisting Helen in tow. Helen’s chance for happiness is doomed, as is coastal life itself. Reave is paralyzed in a cable accident that robs him of his last asset of physical strength. In his weakened condition, Helen forgives him for his obstinacy. In a final act of compassion to relieve his pain, she cuts his throat and kills herself with rat poison.<sup>26</sup>

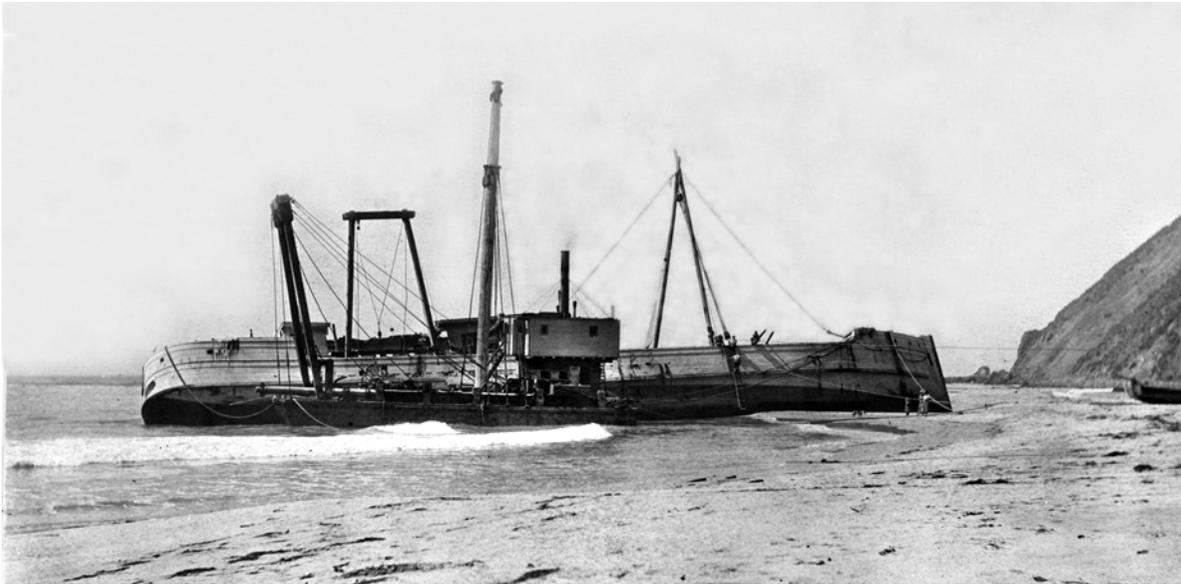
“Give Your Heart to the Hawks” comes near the end of the Big Sur cycle of poems and plays on familiar themes of sex and family violence, but without the metaphysical power of earlier works. Lance Fraser accidentally kills his brother Michael by pushing him off a sea cliff during a drunken party. Michael had been having an affair with a neighbor girl who is pregnant. She goes to San Francisco for an abortion and later drowns herself in despair. Lance is guilt ridden and haunted by Michael’s ghost. Lance’s wife, Fayne,

who is also pregnant, urges they leave the coast to escape the torments of their dysfunctional family. Father Fraser is an abusive parent and religious fanatic who prays for everyone’s punishment. In the end, Lance leaps from the cliffs to his own death, leaving Fayne and his unborn child to “change the world.”<sup>27</sup>

Although the plot parallels the biblical story of Cain and Abel, Jeffers gives it a more decisive ending. As in all his work, Jeffers here makes obvious references to local people and employs actors in real places: Sycamore Canyon; Pfeiffer (“Fraser”) Point; the eponymous Wreck Beach, where a series of ships ran aground; and Drunken Charlie’s, a thinly disguised local moonshine operation during Prohibition that supplies the bootleg liquor which fuels the ill-fated party. Similar to the fates of Lance and Michael Fraser, a number of lives were lost in accidents on the sea cliffs.

#### POETRY AND FACT

Are Jeffers’ stories true? That is, though obviously fictionalized, are the poems based on real events? Do they accurately represent the time,



*On December 5, 1909, the lumber schooner S.S. Majestic was wrecked on the rocky Big Sur coast and washed ashore at Wreck Beach, named for the numerous ships that lay abandoned on its shore from wrecks that occurred off Pfeiffer Point. The incident figured in Jeffers' poem "The Loving Shepherdess."*

COURTESY OF PAT HATHAWAY, CALIFORNIA VIEWS

place, and social circumstance? Do they provide historical information, evidence perhaps, not available in conventional primary sources? Let us take these questions in order, moving from the issue of verisimilitude to interpretation.

To begin with, Jeffers drew freely from actual events. In "The Loving Shepherdess," he writes of survivors of a shipwreck: "Three men came in the door without knocking, / Wherever they moved, water and black oil ran down. There'd been a / shipwreck. I gave them the house, then one of them / Found the axe and began chopping firewood, another went back across wild / rain to the fall of the hill / . . . I ran in his shelter / And saw the great, black, masted thing almost on shore, lying on its side . . . / All that morning / the people came up like ants, / Poor souls they were all so tired and cold, some hurt and some crying. . . ."28

In December 1909, the S.S. Majestic ran aground in a storm at Pfeiffer Point. The schooner was part of the lumber fleet that worked the coast. Twenty-one crew members made it to shore and climbed a bluff. A local newspaper reported, "It was wet and slippery, and it took the half drowned men nearly an hour to reach the

top. . . . A few miles away lay the house of John Pfeiffer, and they made for the place where they received breakfast, dry clothes, and transportation to Monterey. . . . The sailors speak in the highest praise of the treatment they received at the Pfeiffer Ranch."<sup>29</sup>

Devastating fires occur with regularity in Jeffers' poems. As mentioned earlier, Monterey's great oil tank fire of 1924 set the scene for "The Women at Point Sur." On April 12, 1905, a range fire destroyed Vasquez Ranch, in much the same way that Fera's homestead was ravaged in "Cawdor." Like the Point Lobos family home in "Tamar," Notley's Landing burned in November 1905 and Pfeiffer's Resort in April 1910. Jeffers' apparent preoccupation with destructive fires reflects the real hazards that plagued people in the region.

Suicide was a personal risk that people confronted in a world of economic uncertainty and family instability. We may infer that the suicide *rate* in Big Sur was no greater than elsewhere in rural California. Although local public health data are not available, it is known that rural rates were significantly lower than urban rates. California and the northeastern United States have higher

rates than the central and southern regions (owing to greater urbanization). The national suicide rate soared in the early 1900s (especially during the financial panic of 1905–8) but declined and leveled off during World War I.<sup>30</sup> Insanity commitments follow a similar pattern: high in cities and in the northeastern and Pacific states, low in rural areas.<sup>31</sup> Insanity in early San Francisco far exceeded its incidence in rural Monterey County.<sup>32</sup>

Yet, instances of suicide and insanity were well known in Big Sur and were probably more intimately shocking when their victims were neighbors. One of Jeffers' predecessors, the poet Nora May French, killed herself in Carmel to escape a love triangle; Jose Soberanes, son of a prominent ranching family, shot himself after a marital quarrel; Lee Fook, an unemployed Chinese laborer who lived in a shack on Cooper Ranch, was distraught over financial failure and attempted to save face by hanging himself before friends intervened; and the list goes on.<sup>33</sup>

Similar events occur in Jeffers' work, and in several places he inserted an actual suicide. In the poem "Ruth Allison," Manvil is the owner of a lumber mill and ship landing whose wife leaves him as his business is failing: "[W]hen she left the stars were dead to him. Yet he would not have died; but government, / That justly indignant God, waxed hot against him / For tan-oaks on the public lands despoiled / . . . Therefore—he would have slept in prison else, / With shame and loss beyond his power to bear— / He ended, a revolver in his mouth."<sup>34</sup>

In "Thurso's Landing," Helen takes her own life with a dose of rat poison, while old man Thurso, the owner of Thurso's Landing, chose "to pop himself off because he went broke. . . . / Because the lime-kilns failed and the lumber-mill / Ran out of redwood."<sup>35</sup> In fact, Godfrey Notley, owner with his brother William of Notley's Landing and mill, shot himself in a Santa Cruz saloon "in a

fit of temporary insanity, induced by overwork and nervous prostration."<sup>36</sup> There is no record of marital dissolution or government trouble preceding Notley's demise. But the economically available supply of tanbark was declining and cutting trees on accessible public lands may have attracted the ire of government foresters. The business was in trouble and Notley's Landing was sold to a tanning company a few years later.

Events in "Thurso's Landing" turned on the disabling injury Reave suffered while attempting to cut down a cable from the abandoned tramway. In actuality, five years before his suicide, Godfrey Notley himself was badly injured when repairing a ship mooring at the mill. In 1906, Joseph Pomber, one of Notley's employees, was killed by a falling tree.<sup>37</sup> Like suicides, industrial accidents were common and Jeffers wove them into his stories, providing a grounded sense of the risks looming over life in a physically isolated and difficult environment.

Jeffers explains the source of these story ideas in his recollection of the 1914 trip down the coast with Una: "At Notley's Landing we saw the ruinous old lumber-mill (which blew down this present year, after having stood for so many) and heard a story about it. In the gorge of Mill Creek we passed under a rusted cable sagging to a stuck skip, and we were told about the lime-kilns up canyon, cold and forgotten with the forest growing over them. . . . On a magnificent hillside opposite a mountain peak stood a comparatively prosperous farmhouse, apple trees behind it, and the man who lived there had killed his father with rat-poison and married his step-mother."<sup>38</sup>

The factual bases of Jeffers' work go well beyond incorporation of specific incidents. Dating from 1900, the pioneer community of Big Sur experienced a fundamental shift in economy and culture. Although the timber and mining industries were failing, agriculture persisted on the larger ranches, themselves expanding at



*Monterey's luxury Hotel Del Monte provided auto tours along the Seventeen-Mile Drive, where the Pacific Improvement Company, which owned the hotel, also developed real estate. Touring cars, such as this early Mercedes model circa 1906, traveled the rugged coast road to resorts and scenic outlooks. Common today, the excursion was greatly facilitated by improvements in roads and bridges completed in the 1930s.*

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the expense of small landholders and former homesteaders. Even at this early date, the tourist economy appeared with the opening of several resorts and campgrounds. Wealthy outsiders purchased ranches for their scenic appeal. The extensive Cooper Ranch prospered with a dairy, creamery, cattle, and even experimental oil drilling. The ranch defended its expanding borders with trespass warnings and lawsuits against encroachment.

Jeffers was concerned with losers in the modernization process, with corrupt civilization and its powerless victims. He was a Brahmin, the product of a European upbringing and classical education. A theme that runs through all Jeffers' work laments crass modernization that degrades the noble character of nature and past civilization.<sup>39</sup> The loss of land and livelihood is at the root of family hardship in works such as *Californians*, "Thurso's Landing," "Cawdor," and "The Women at Point Sur." In 1906, the Monterey newspaper reported that the Notley Company "[Has] taken the bark from nearly all the ranches in that neighborhood, and residents there estimate that there will be no more tan bark there for the next ten years [while at the same time] the coast section is

becoming more popular yearly with summer visitors and many of the ranchers are building additions to their houses to accommodate summer visitors."<sup>40</sup> The Monterey Lime Company closed its works at Mill Creek in June 1911.

Doubtless, one of the most controversial features of Jeffers' work is the frequent, even obsessive inclusion of rape and incest in his stories. Psychoanalytical interpretations of his work explain this preoccupation by reference to Jeffers' upbringing by a distant father and nourishing mother, and perhaps also by his education in Greek and biblical classics.<sup>41</sup> Obviously, too, Jeffers exploited sensational symbols of human folly against the background of all-powerful nature. Yet, according to biographer James Karman, "Jeffers defended himself by saying that he drew his stories from events that occurred where he lived."<sup>42</sup>

In September 1922, George Leist of Monterey was charged with felonious relations with his thirteen-year-old daughter, Victoria, who was pregnant at the time of the trial. Although Victoria's brother corroborated her allegation of rape, their accounts differed, and a jury voted for acquittal. A second trial charging a similar offense several months later resulted in a hung

*A theme that runs through all Jeffers' work laments crass modernization that degrades the noble character of nature and past civilization.*

jury, despite the presence in the courtroom of a delegation of forty women, in support of the child and prosecutor.<sup>43</sup>

In 1914, Esteban Apestequia, a farmhand on Cooper Ranch, was arrested and charged with the rape of sixteen-year-old Edna Ramos, the feeble-minded daughter of ranch foreman Angel Ramos. The affair had progressed for some time until Esteban began to worry about its consequences and regretfully confessed to his sister, who told Edna's parents. Esteban pleaded guilty and offered to marry Edna, which her mother opposed, but the judge considered it reason for a probationary sentence.<sup>44</sup>

Jeffers used incidents of this sort and their public condemnation to portray the gravity of sexual abuse. Pregnancies lead to suicides, rapes to homicides, and dysfunctional families to mutual destruction, often by fire. In "Tamar," we read the story of Sylvia Vierra and "her man" who "had lived in the little / white-washed farm-hut . . . / two years ago they had had much / wine in the house, their friend / Verdugo came avisiting, he being drunk on the raw plenty of wine they / thought abused / Nine-year-old Mary, Sylvia's daughter, they struck him from behind and / when he was down unmanned him / With the kitchen knife, then plotted drunkenly—for he seemed to be/ dead—where to dispose the body." Riding by the hut later that evening, Tamar noticed a great bonfire and "Saw by the firelight a man's feet hang out of the fire."<sup>45</sup> The story is attributed to an eyewitness account of two girls from Point Lobos who passed it on to Una Jeffers.<sup>46</sup>

Among the most memorable stories of Big Sur is the tragic life of Mary Ellen Pfeiffer Dani. One of eight children of Big Sur pioneers Michael and Barbara Pfeiffer, Mary Ellen (b. 1866) was raped at the age of twenty-two while at home alone and subsequently bore a child. Perhaps as a consequence of the rape, she suffered a mental breakdown, as reported in a local paper: "Miss Ellen Pfeiffer, daughter of Michael Pfeiffer who resides over on the coast below Monterey, was examined by Drs. Tuttle and Trimmer last Monday, adjudged insane and committed to the asylum at Stockton. The unfortunate girl was the victim of a mysterious brutal outrage alone at the home of her parents about 3 months ago."<sup>47</sup>

Following her confinement, Mary Ellen returned home. She kept the child, suggesting perhaps that the father was not unknown (several men including two older brothers and her future husband lived in the area). Seven years later, she married Alvin Dani of another pioneer family and together they had a second child in 1897. But her life never righted itself. Suffering "fits of despondency," she killed herself three years later with strychnine poison.<sup>48</sup>

Although one may question the frequency with which suicide, incest, or insanity occurred, the effects of such traumatic events would have endured in experience and memory. Psychologically salient in people's experience, their prominence in the lore of the region and in local accounts provided Jeffers a means of grounding and growing his work.

#### POETRY AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

Thus far, we have addressed the credibility of narratives and their consistency with the empirical world they purport to describe. The next question concerns their sociological coherence: how they square with the ways in which groups and societies characteristically function. Jeffers' work,



*Isaac and Ellen Jane Swetnam's three-story home, built in the late 1890s, still stands at the junction of Highway 1 and Palo Colorado Road. It was here that Ellen wrote her diary chronicling the daily life of the coastal farm community. The Trotter and Gregg families were subsequent owners. Jeffers knew the house and alluded to it in one of his poems.*

COURTESY OF JOHN WALTON

I submit, displays verisimilitude of people and place. But what does it say about less directly observable social processes? Does it describe an intelligible world?

The society Jeffers portrays, of course, is rural American at the turn of the twentieth century through the lens of Big Sur—a geographically distinct, isolated, sparsely populated coastal community in the throes of social and economic transition. For Jeffers, this is fundamentally a family-centered society. Other institutions existed: rural schools, markets, community gathering places, a Grange Hall, though, interestingly, no permanent churches. Households were too far from one another to provide the nucleus of a residential community. Schools within walking or wagon distance served only a handful of children. Dances at a ranch or mill brought people by horse and wagon; they camped there overnight before the long return trip.

Most people spent most of their lives in the relatively exclusive company of a nuclear family. This is borne out in the manuscript census that lists large-family households with occasional farm hands or relatives attached,<sup>49</sup> but only a few single-male households or worker dormitories

(one exception was the dozen or so Japanese laborers on Cooper Ranch). Every one of Jeffers' poems centers on a nuclear (or surrogate) family, and most of his dramas involve family relations affected by love, jealousy, power, hate, sex, sacrifice, loss, and death. Indeed, the moral conflicts central to so many of the stories—incest, infidelity, and abandonment—represent the most basic threats to family survival. Jeffers' are poems of family morality.

The family-centered character of the Big Sur community is corroborated in a rare diary kept by Ellen Jane Swetnam, who lived with her family at Palo Colorado near Notley's Landing from 1897 to 1905.<sup>50</sup> Isaac Newton Swetnam, Ellen's husband, built their landmark three-storied house that Jeffers mentions in several poems. The Swetnams had eight children, ranging from school age to adults when they were living at Palo Colorado.

Ellen's diary is devoted to daily affairs: farm work, children's activities, making clothes, sickness, household accounts, and the comings and goings of local people. She describes the death of one son killed in Cuba during the Spanish-American War. Another older daughter lives in

*Monterey Bay, circa 1904. Monterey provided the lifeline for coastal residents. Ranchers and farmers, such as the Swetnams, brought their goods and crops to its markets for sale. In the years prior to rail and highway connections, ships delivered manufactured goods to Monterey Bay and departed with lumber, lime, and passengers headed for San Francisco or San Pedro.*

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San Francisco, makes good money, and sends some of it home. Family members visit one another's homes frequently. Ellen keeps in touch with relatives in Kentucky and England but is absorbed on a daily basis with work and the children at home, two of whom marry during these years. One daughter is epileptic and requires close attention, although she marries later. The daughters wed, divorce, and remarry with surprising regularity for the time, all the while maintaining a close loyalty to the family. Together, Ellen, Isaac, the older children, and one or two hired men maintain the farm that supplies Notley's mill and produces butter and honey for the market in Monterey, where Isaac takes their produce every two weeks. Ellen provides accommodation and meals for travelers, which adds to a comfortable family income.

As the diary entries show, Ellen's life revolves around her family. Her only regular involvement outside the family is at the local school, where she plays a key role in hiring and firing teachers. Ellen is a proud and proper woman who would never mention sex or scandal in her diary, although she does chastise farm hands for

drunkenness and suitors who she thinks are no good for her girls. Robinson Jeffers and Ellen Swetnam each describe a world that exists in and through the family, albeit a family that is plagued by intrigue in one case and consumed by work in the other.

Jeffers also sketches a broader context, a world beyond the family that limits and influences the actors. Although isolated and struggling economically, the families have links to the wider society. The coast road, which is penetrating the community in "Thurso's Landing," is bringing new threats and opportunities. World War I, which Jeffers opposed, is taking the area's young men: Tamar's brother-lover, Lee, wants to join the army; Reave Thurso served in France with his brother Mark, who limps from a permanent war injury. Wild youngsters escape to San Francisco and Monterey, the girls for abortions and the boys for boredom-relieving lust; in "Tamar," Lee had "put away the boyish jets of wickedness, loves with dark eyes in / Monterey back-streets, liquor / And all its fellowship, what was left to live for but the farm-work . . . ?"<sup>51</sup>

## Race and Class in Jeffers' Era

In his poems, Jeffers captures the nuances of race relations in California just seventy years after its acquisition from Mexico. Hispanics had been the governors and landowners until immigrant whites steadily supplanted them. Indians were absorbed through intermarriage mostly with Hispanics, though in a few cases with Europeans. Over time, Hispanics and mestizo offspring formed the working class whose racial and occupational status placed them at the bottom of the social ladder. Yet there were nuances and qualifications. Some Hispanic or intermarrying families like the Cooper-Molera clan were

among the landed upper class. Several Hispanic-Indian homesteaders lived along side white households. Race and class interact in the allocation of social honor.<sup>1</sup>

Late-nineteenth-century California's race problem centered less on Hispanics than on the Chinese and Japanese who had entered the country as laborers and stayed on to become successful agriculturalists and merchants despite discrimination and exclusionary legislation.<sup>2</sup> Jeffers seldom touches on Asians, perhaps because they hardly affected Big Sur. In an intriguing exception, the United States Census of 1900 listed a

group of nearly twenty Chinese living on Cooper Ranch and very likely engaged in some labor project, although little is known or spoken of them.<sup>3</sup>

Yet the Asian question loomed large in the surrounding society. Newspapers used unabashed racial slurs, reporting that "chinks get in bad" for gambling, "Japs want school of their own," or "Nigger Sue arrested" for selling liquor.<sup>4</sup> It is another measure of Big Sur's insularity that racial distinctions were played out in the ambivalent Hispanic relations rather than exhibiting common vitriolic attitudes toward Asians and blacks.



*Chinatown near Monterey, Cal.*

C. W. J. JOHNSON, PHOTO.,  
MONTEREY, CAL.

*Chinatown, Monterey, circa 1890. Monterey's several Chinatowns housed a fishing community as well as growing numbers of laborers, peddlers, and service sector workers. Laundries, restaurants, brothels, and gambling dens were denounced by the local citizens as often as they were patronized, including enthusiasts such as Jeffers' young men from Big Sur.*

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The facts support this picture. Monterey newspapers reported regularly on the state of the coast road, describing accidents due to poor conditions, surveys and contracts let for improvements, the thrice-weekly twenty-six-mile stagecoach trip from Monterey to the Sur post office and its gradual replacement by the automobile road. Telephone service arrived in 1912. Local boys went off to war, and the conflict in Europe competed with local news. Ellen Swetnam's diary portrays an unexpected interest in international affairs, from Cuba to the Philippines and South Africa. Yet, it is in the family that these influences come together.

Closer to home, Big Sur families lived among neighboring farmers and the Hispanic working class. Jeffers accurately represents these social facts, which may also be inferred from the manuscript census, which itemizes households with a wife and husband, three to six minor children, as well as the Hispanic "hired man" or female "servant."<sup>52</sup> Several Hispanic ranch owners boasted ancestry and social status dating from the colonial era. Jeffers' eye sweeps the social landscape. In "Cawdor," Concha Rosas, the "dark, fat . . . Indian-blooded woman" is housekeeper and mistress, but always inferior to the young white Fera, who replaces her in Cawdor's harsh affections. When Fera first notices Concha, she asks, "Who's that wide-lapped dark o' the moon." Thurso's farm employed "the dark Spanish woman Olvidia" and the mestizo Johnny Luna. The "Indian house-girl, Maruca" appears in "The Women at Point Sur." In that poem and several others, Onorio Vasquez has a farm in the hills and appears often as a mystic or Good Samaritan.

This was a family-centered and relatively egalitarian society, with a network of similarly endowed farm families who knew one another, sent their children to small local schools, and gathered occasionally for dances and the Fourth of July barbeque. Jeffers correctly stresses the relative autonomy of families, but he also situates their

actions in a distinct social context: ". . . Every week-end night / Was dancing and the wail of violins / At Hanlon's place. From Manvil's lumber camp, / And from the lime-kiln on the Mill Creek hills, / Men came; and many ranches roundabout, / Or ranchers' sons, with joy for-gathered there / To celebrate the term of week's toil."<sup>53</sup>

A celebratory dance begins the ill-fated affair in "Thurso's Landing." Interfamily romances and infidelities have tragic effects in "Tamar" and "Cawdor." But families also helped one another in shipwrecks and accidents. The homeless are taken in, albeit with unfortunate results.

Interfamilial conflict is a more characteristic Jeffers theme. Reave Thurso quarrels with the road crew that has broken his fence. Claire, the loving shepherdess in the poem of the same name, explains to Onorio Vasquez that ". . . the neighbors / Were never our friends. Oh, they feared my father; / Sometimes they threatened our shepherd, a Spanish man / Who looked like you . . . / But we live lonely."<sup>54</sup>

In fact, Ellen Swetnam's diary records persistent conflicts with neighbors. Cows belonging to the neighboring Smith family break fences and get into their pasture. Ellen suspects poisoning when several of their hogs die mysteriously; her suspicions were grounded. Isaac Swetnam and his son-in-law Horatio Parmelee advertised a \$500 reward for information leading to the arrest of anyone poisoning livestock. Farm animals were maimed and poisoned in disputes among ranchers.<sup>55</sup>

For her part, Ellen is angry over troubles at Palo Colorado school. Smith and Swetnam children quarreled often and Ellen blamed the teacher, with whom she had differences. School politics, the hiring and firing of teachers, was a persistent source of friction and Ellen's uncharacteristic anger. Although Jeffers makes no mention of schools, his overriding emphasis on conflict is accurate.

Finally, family and local society are ruled by Jeffers' all-powerful force of nature. Storms and fires put an end to the feeble schemes of men and women. Rock and ocean are the only permanent elements of their world. In "The Coast-Road," Jeffers compares the growing penetration of the outside world to "an old drunken whore, pathetically eager to impose the / seduction of her fled charms." He then asks, ". . . Where is our / consolation?" His answer is: ". . . Beautiful beyond belief / The heights glimmer in the sliding cloud, the great bronze gorge-cut sides / of the mountains tower up invincibly, / Not the least hurt by this ribbon of road carved on their sea-foot."<sup>56</sup>

Big Sur, in fact, is an awesome landscape that has captured the admiration and fear of residents from the early homesteaders to contemporary artists. Fog, gloom, wind, and storms alternate with brilliant panoramic vistas. In Jeffers' era, people were at the mercy of nature. According to one newspaper account, "Demented man lost in mountains succumbs to cold and starvation," a fate that could be ascribed to a Jeffers character, and to another, "Big flood at Sur, houses are washed away and others wrecked—roads almost impassable . . . the Sur post office was washed up against the hillside . . . piles of driftwood are wedged up against the Palo Colorado school."<sup>57</sup> Nature ruled. The steep canyons that once provided bark, timber, and limestone stopped providing. Fires swept the hills and landslides cut off road access. Wagons and automobiles plunged over unstable cliffs and bridges collapsed.

Although Jeffers turned nature into a metaphysical premise, he did not exaggerate the risks and uncertainties it posed in people's daily lives.

## A JEFFERS STORY?

Sam Trotter was a legend in Big Sur. A big, strong man of large appetites, he built many of the roads and houses that gave shape to Big Sur

and survive today. He loved women, work, food, and family—in about that order. His first wife, Abigail Gregg, died in 1902 after only a year of marriage. In 1905, he married Adelaide Pfeiffer of the pioneer Alsatian family and together they had five children, including four hefty sons. Like most Big Sur natives, Adelaide knew family tragedy, beginning with the rape, insanity, and eventual suicide of her sister Mary Ellen.

Then, on November 9, 1921, Trotter disappeared, the apparent victim of an auto accident on the coast road. Indications were that his car had gone over a cliff and plunged into the sea during a dense fog. When he failed to appear at home, his brother Paul went to the site "with a party of friends and descended the cliff, finding doors, a broken wheel and, more conclusive than either, the private letters and bank book of the missing man strewn around the water's edge."<sup>58</sup> Trotter was presumed dead, perhaps by foul play, although no body was found.

Then the doubts began to grow. Analysis of the scene revealed that the car had been pushed deliberately over the cliff at a slow speed. There were rumored sightings of the missing man in other parts of the state. Eight months later, the front page of the *Monterey Peninsula Herald* announced "Sam Trotter Found Alive"—although "discovered" is a more apt verb. Trotter, who was in financial trouble at the time of his disappearance, had faked his own death. He had absconded to Shasta County in northern California, where he was working as a construction foreman. He did not know whether his family was aware that he was alive. When Adelaide received the news of her husband's desertion, she suffered a mental breakdown, attempted suicide, and one month later was committed to Agnew State Hospital for the insane, where she died eleven days later.<sup>59</sup>

The saga of the Trotter family reads like a Jeffers story. Put another way, Jeffers' poetry exhibits a



*Sam Trotter (foreground, center) was a legendary figure in the early history of Big Sur. With William Notley, he established a timber claim in the 1890s and went on to become a lumberman and builder responsible for many of the initial homes and roads. A man of many achievements, his reputation in later years was colored by his staged disappearance and his second wife's related mental breakdown and death in the state asylum. In this photograph, he poses with fellow workers of the Monterey Lime Company in Bixby Canyon circa 1907.*

COURTESY OF PAT HATHAWAY, CALIFORNIA VIEWS

verisimilitude so striking that we may read it as an accurate description of local life, provided, of course, that we do so with interpretive caution and an eye to other sources for confirmation.

How does this corroborative method work in the case of Big Sur? First, although Jeffers was the region's most prolific writer, he was not alone in focusing on the perils of life on the coast. In Gertrude Atherton's novel set at Point Lobos, Patience Sparhawk's once-beautiful mother

is widowed, becomes an alcoholic, and accidentally sets fire to her house, where she dies while passed out; in John Steinbeck's *To a God Unknown*, farmers in the Salinas Valley are saved from drought when the gods of nature (known to Indians) in the Big Sur mountains are propitiated by human sacrifice; and the classic novel of the region, *The Stranger: A Novel of the Big Sur* by Lillian Bos Ross, ends happily only after Hanna, the mail-order bride, is raped by her backwoods husband, who then has an affair with hot-blooded

Maria (whose Spanish-Indian ancestry excluded her as a potential wife); the couple reconcile when Hanna has a child.<sup>60</sup> Literary descriptions of life in Big Sur consistently stress hardship, threats to families, race, sex, and violent death.

## POETRY AS ETHNOGRAPHY

Returning to the general question that initiated this inquiry, what is the value of poetry as historical evidence? And specifically, what does Jeffers tell us that we would not have known from a study of conventional sources alone?

As mentioned earlier, Historian Keith Hopkins analyzed ancient fables as a method for deriving evidence about Roman slavery. The significance of these stories is found in the emphasis they placed on “the boundaries of morality, or what one can call the penumbra of moral ambiguity. [The stories] help us map out Roman attitudes to morality, just as they helped Romans themselves to sort out what was allowable, legitimate, and praiseworthy. Individual stories do not tell us directly what was normal, but they do indicate which abnormalities met with overt disapproval, and for these purposes . . . it does not matter so much whether these stories were true. It matters more that they were told and retold.”<sup>61</sup>

Jeffers’ poetry is consistent with the facts of time and place—he was there and knew what he was writing about. Yet beyond that, Jeffers also captured the normative order that prevailed in this rural community, the morality illuminated by the fears and sanctions that defined deviant conduct. He may overdo, say, the frequency of incest, but we know that it happened and that it was feared in Big Sur’s isolated, family-centered society. Similarly, sexual anxieties, jealousies, and infidelities were especially threatening and proscribed acts. We learn of them through literature more than from memoirs, in which such taboo events are detectable but also suppressed. Jeffers relayed them in a way that conveyed their potent effect.

Other discoveries flow from this interpretation. The nuclear family was the center and principal arena of people’s lives. Neighbors shared in communal activities but also experienced frequent conflict. Racial considerations suffused local society, albeit in nuanced ways. The physical environment dominated daily life to an extent difficult to imagine today. Morality loomed large in the regulation of a family-centered world and its characteristic forms of deviance. Incest and infidelity were the major offenses people worried about, rather than the robbery or assault that might preoccupy city residents. The dark side for Jeffers is a special kind of darkness. These accounts of the tenor and experience of local life cannot be derived from conventional historical sources or even in personal memoirs that tend to silence any scandal that might affect the family reputation or come back to harm the writer.

Jeffers’ epic poems deserved the celebration they received in the early twentieth century, just as they deserve reappraisal today. Unique in stylistic elegance and indelible voice, Jeffers’ poetry also was true—to its subjects and to the natural world in which they struggled. Read as ethnography, his poetry deepens, complements, and uniquely adds to our historical understanding.

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