This sizable book, well-written and nicely researched, stoutly bound and illustrated with four sizable galleries of photographs printed in black-and-white, is an admirably recounted “natural and unnatural history of California trees” (p. xx). Inevitably, the subject species picked will chafe those most knowledgeable about California botany and forest history who will dispute the trees that author Jared Farmer, a prize-winning historian, chooses to write about in Trees in Paradise: A California History. As Farmer notes in a concise preface, California includes the oldest, tallest, and biggest trees in the United States. Three of the four varieties he singles out — eucalypts, citrus, and palms — are exotics; only the redwood and giant sequoia are native to California, and even those are sometimes described as refugial species, survivors of a more beneficent climate and habitat of long ago. This engaging read of eight chapters has two for each “tree” — one looking at the nineteenth century, the second concerned with the later twentieth century up through today, an organization that adds background and currency to each study.

The fact is, this book is rather more a cultural history of California than it is a study of specific trees, and Farmer is interested in the reshaping with exotic species of the state’s landscapes in the interest of a triumvirate of causes: aesthetics (eucalypts), economics (citrus, almost solely the navel orange), and semiotics (palms with their Southern California symbology) (p. 432).

Madroño readers may pause, no doubt consumed by the same sorts of doubts that afflicted me in considering Farmer’s choices. What of the bristlecone pine, witness to 10,000 yrs of rigorous climate change? Or of the California bay, or the buckeye? And of the Monterey pine or the same region’s cypress, what? And how, especially, could varied and signature oak species not feature among California’s select trees? No doubt Farmer has faced these challenges and occasional sputters of doubt in press tours and interviews. Yet as a reviewer, I’m given to repeat an adage that I heard one of my teachers, James E. Vance Jr., chuff in aggravation when the reviewer of a book Jay had recently published went on in excruciating and self-aggrandizing detail about how he, the reviewer, would have taken on the subject: a book review best assesses an author’s success or failure with the topic as written about, rather than teeing off at length about how the reviewer might have chosen to approach the theme. And in bits and pieces throughout Trees in Paradise, Farmer does a good job of laying out the reasoning behind his decision to consider trees that brought a different kind of prosperity, and in particular a distinctive look and feel, to California.

To Farmer’s way of thinking, trees connote the California Dream, and the visions of an ideal landscape that colonists coming into California brought with them — though presumably, he is concerned mostly with occupiers of a northern European stripe, perhaps American-British most of all. These settlers were not, he suggests, enamored of a setting relatively bereft of trees. It wouldn’t be hard to argue that Farmer’s predilection for certain trees is bound up in a lot of preconceptions. After all, settlers of Spanish-Mexican origin, who came to Alta California in 1769, were actually very much used to a dehesa of oaks so characteristic of south-western Spain and Portugal, and Mexico has the largest variety of Quercus L. species anywhere on earth (Campos et al. 2013). Farmer claims, “[post-Gold Rush settlers did not feel content with the existing landscape subtly modified by Indians, Spaniards, and Mexicans. It looked deforested. It looked unfinished” (p. 117). Grasslands abounded; so did coastal shrub lands and chaparral. As the author suggests:

From roughly 1850 to 1950 — California’s first hundred years as a state — American horticulturists planted innumerable trees in formerly shadeless locales. To use an old-fashioned term, they emparadised the land. They imported a profusion of ornamental and commercial species and varietals and created moneymaking orchards and picturesque tree-lined streets. In short, tree planters staged a landscape revolution. By the mid-twentieth century, eucalypts defined the look of lowland California, oranges dominated Southland agriculture, and palms symbolized Los Angeles. (p. xxviii)

Certainly, as the Spanish-Mexican era gave way to the “American,” parts of the California landscape underwent a deliberate and profound