

# The Great Earthquake and Firestorms of 1906

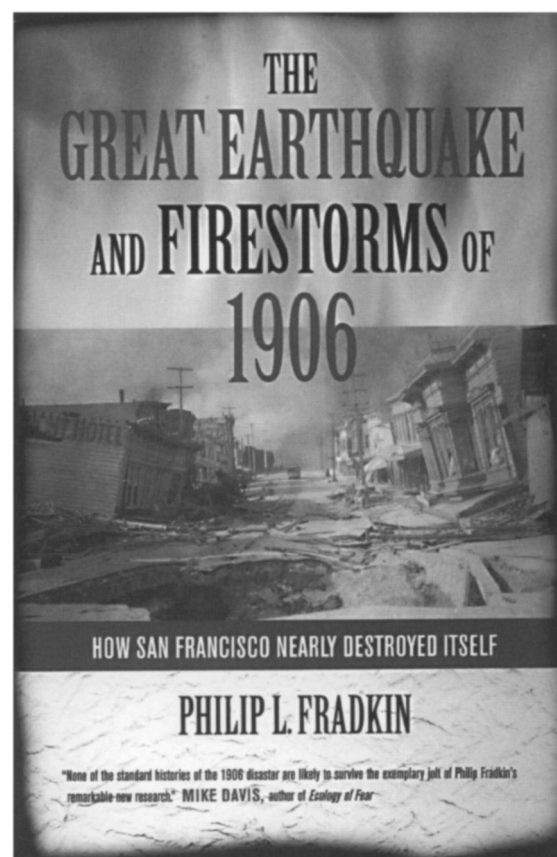
## *How San Francisco Nearly Destroyed Itself*

A Review Essay

BY KEVIN STARR

The Katrina catastrophe has reprised what has fortunately been an infrequent event in our national history: the destruction—outside of wartime, as in the case of Washington, D.C. (1812), Atlanta (1864), and Richmond (1865)—of an American city by natural disaster. Such destruction happened to Chicago in 1871 by fire; to Johnstown, Pennsylvania, in 1889 by flood; to Galveston, Texas, in 1900 by hurricane and flood; and to downtown Baltimore, by fire, in 1904. And now, once again, the destruction of a city through hurricane and flood has happened to New Orleans and, to a lesser extent, to a number of other cities and towns on the Gulf Coast.

At 5:12:05 on the morning of Wednesday, April 18, 1906, the Pacific and the North American plates suddenly sprung over and past each other from nine to twenty-one feet across the 270 miles of the San Andreas Fault. Shockwaves sped across the terrain at seven thousand miles per hour. The first shockwave to hit San Francisco (8.3 on the Richter scale or 7.7 on the moment magnitude scale, it would later be estimated) shook the city in two phases for forty-five seconds. Within the hour, there would be seventeen serious aftershocks. City Hall and numerous other unreinforced brick buildings, together with many crowded tenements south of Market Street, collapsed instantly. Façades fell from homes, revealing the furniture within. Less sturdy homes crumpled completely.



*By Philip L. Fradkin (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2005, 418 pp., \$27.50)*



*Crack in the Street*  
*Folsom Street, San Francisco*  
CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, FN 26472



*Union Square from Post to Powell Streets Before Fire*

CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, TN 5850

In anticipation of the centenary of the destruction of San Francisco in April 1906, the University of California Press turned to environmental historian Philip L. Fradkin, who shared a Pulitzer Prize while on the staff of the *Los Angeles Times* connected to the coverage of the Los Angeles riots of April/May 1992. Not only is Fradkin a respected environmental writer, with a half-dozen books to his credit, he has also covered, on the ground, a major social upheaval that was itself a form of earthquake. Indeed, his current study of the April 1906 San Francisco catastrophe derives its central strength from Fradkin's depiction of the social and political causes and results of this cataclysm. As

bad as the earthquake was a geological fact, Fradkin argues, it was even more catastrophic in the social and political behavior that followed: behavior that had its dynamics in the very DNA code of San Francisco in that era. Just as Katrina revealed the underlying dichotomies and dissonances of New Orleans, so too did the earthquake of April 1906 disclose and exacerbate the social fault lines of San Francisco.

Five years ago, when I was serving as State Librarian for California, the State Library made a three-year grant to the Bancroft Library at the University of

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*General View of Burned Area from Ferry Tower*  
*From Stereocard: H. White Company*  
CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, TN-5880



*Examiner Building and Lotta's Fountain*  
CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, TN-5870

California. The purpose of the grant was to locate every possible primary source—first-hand accounts, official reports, newspaper and magazine articles from the period, later memoirs, business reports, whatever—and to digitize them so that they would be available to the general public by the centennial of the great catastrophe. Philip Fradkin, a widely published historian and environmental writer, was chosen to do this work. The archive he assembled of approximately ten thousand digital images and thirty-five thousand pages of electronic text can now be accessed online at <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/collections>. It is a triumph of archival entrepreneurialism. In the course of gathering these documents across three busy years, Fradkin came up with—nearly one hundred years after the event—the true story of how San Franciscans responded to the challenges of April 1906. Fradkin's history follows the pioneering efforts of former City Archivist Gladys Hansen and retired Fire Chief Emmet Condon in their path-breaking *Denial of Disaster: The Untold Story and Photographs of the San Francisco Earthquake and Fire of 1906*, published in 1989 by Cameron and Company.

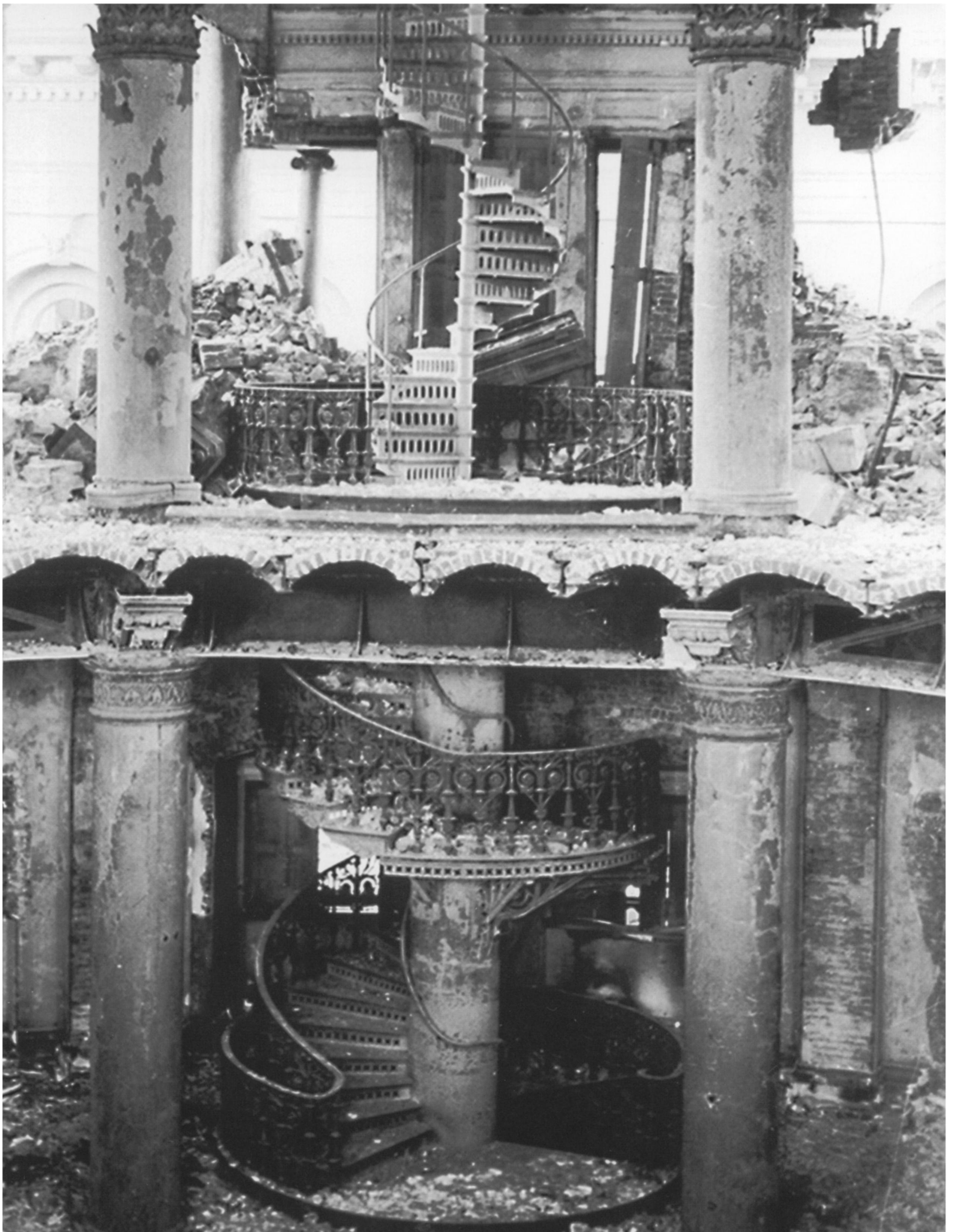
In their history of the earthquake, Hansen and Condon demolished once and for all the notion that only three hundred to four hundred San Franciscans lost their lives in the upheaval. The true figure, they proved through a reexamination of morgue, coroner, and other documents, was closer to three thousand or more. The San Francisco establishment—frightened that the city would never be rebuilt if it was perceived as an intrinsically dangerous place—took great pains to minimize the impact of the catastrophe. Hansen and Condon's thesis was a shocker. It has taken more than a decade, in fact, for their conclusions finally to take hold of the popular account of the catastrophe.

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*Majestic Theatre, 1281 Market Street*  
CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, FN-28963









*Looking South on Third St. from Market St.  
Pillsbury Picture Co.*

CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, TN-5800





*Blowing up of the Phelan Building  
R. J. Waters & Co.*

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Philip Fradkin has some further challenging conclusions for us to ponder. The myth holds that San Franciscans fought the fire effectively, declared martial law because they had to, shot only guilty looters, and in general comported themselves with efficiency and panache. Not true, Fradkin argues, basing himself in a brand new array of primary documents. The entire account of the events of April 1906, Fradkin argues, is more myth than reality.

First of all, there is no evidence whatsoever of wholesale looting. Nor was it the Army that gave the order that looters should be shot on sight. The order was given by Mayor Eugene Schmitz almost spontaneously, despite the absence of evidence that looting was a problem. Many of Schmitz's advisors, in fact, were

shocked by the order. The order to shoot to kill looters had more ominous origins, Fradkin suggests, although he cannot prove this point in its entirety. It came, most likely, from Schmitz's paradigmatic distrust of certain sectors of the population: in particular, minorities and visibly unassimilated immigrants. With the exception of one oligarch shot by a trigger-happy soldier, those who were shot for looting—as far as we can tell—were a relatively small number, hovering around fifteen. This makes us wonder why the order was given in the first place, unless, as is suggested, it sprung from a deep sense of social anxiety on the part of the city establishment represented by Mayor Schmitz. This anxiety also motivated the near folkloric accounts, totally untrue, of human

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*ABOVE: Street Kitchen*

CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, FN 26857

*FACING PAGE: Looking Toward the Ferry, from  
the South Side of Market near Fremont Street*

CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, TN-5760



ABOVE: *Residents of Chinatown*  
*Oscar Maurer: Photographer*  
CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, FN 13248

FACING PAGE: *Grant Avenue from Market Street*  
*San Francisco, April 23, 1906*  
*T.E. Hecht: Photographer*  
CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, TN-5900



ghouls roaming the city biting earlobes to secure earrings from corpses or biting off fingers to secure rings. Nor was martial law ever declared by General Funston or anyone else. Although the city was flooded with soldiers and militia, and hence seemed to be under martial law, Brigadier General Funston meticulously pointed out a number of times that the mayor was in charge of the city. Funston, operating on his own authority, was making the Army available as a supplementary force to assist the police department. Still, the mayor's shoot-to-kill order, the relative disarray of

the police department, the pervasiveness of uniformed soldiers and militia, supplemented by specially sworn in and heavily armed deputies, gave the impression that the city was under martial law. The willingness to accept that San Francisco was under martial law was itself, like the shoot-to-kill order, a symptom of great social anxiety: of a fear that San Francisco was too unstable to handle its own affairs.

San Francisco, Fradkin argues, was literally burnt to the ground through ineptitude. First, the fire department was almost totally neutralized by burst water

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*Looking N.W. from Kohl Building  
Bushnell Foto Company*

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*Refugees Dining on Franklin Street near Fulton*  
CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, GN-01404

mains, although the Navy did manage to lay in hoses from the Embarcadero inland. When fire did break out, moreover, the worst possible decisions seem to have been made—to fight fire with fire, to dynamite buildings in an effort to create a firebreak, or failing that, to counter fires that would beat back the advancing holocaust. For two days, San Franciscans seemed determined to destroy their city. Dynamited buildings merely provided convenient fuel for the fire to advance. The black powder that was used to level many buildings actually turned them into Roman candles. Still, the more this technique failed, the more it was employed. The Army even used artillery to level some buildings. The photographs of the devastated city that we all know so well document not a fire out of control, but two fires that were systematically fed across two days by incendiary dynamiting or the laying down of convenient channels across which the firestorms could advance.

Of interest as well: No one seemed to be in charge of the dynamiting. The mayor authorized it, of course, but he lost control of the process as soon as it began. There was no coherent plan of action or ability to stop the dynamiting when it was proving useless. Authority to dynamite dispersed itself through the Army and militia units, fire battalions, even civilian volunteers. It seemed a kind of frenzy, as if San Franciscans were trying to destroy their city, not save it. The Navy, as I say, never bought the dynamiting strategy and saved the Embarcadero. Certain residents of Russian Hill, risking being shot by soldiers for not abandoning their properties, never bought it and saved their houses.

How does Fradkin account for such confusion, for such a lack of coordination? Part of the answer is in the very random nature of catastrophe itself. We cannot expect the San Francisco of 1906 to have on hand an articulated and well-rehearsed emergency plan when such a catastrophe as was unfolding had never even been imagined, much less planned for. But it also must be faced that the San Francisco establishment that was forced to cope with this catastrophe was deeply divided against itself.

On the one side were Mayor Eugene Schmitz and the supervisors of the recently triumphant Union Labor Party, whose lobbyist, advisor, go-between, and occasional bagman was San Francisco lawyer Abraham Ruef. On the other side were the reforming progressives being led by former Mayor James Duval Phelan, crusading *Call* editor Fremont Older, and activist reformer Rudolph Spreckels, and their chief investigator and muscle-man William J. Burns. (This is the same Burns who later founded the Burns Detective Agency.) Burns was a Secret Service man sent out by President Theodore Roosevelt to investigate graft in San Francisco.

President Roosevelt himself must be seen as one of the contending parties, both in terms of his covert support of investigating graft and corruption in San Francisco and his existing anger at the Schmitz administration and school board for its ongoing program to segregate Japanese students in the public schools of the city, which highly upset the Japanese government. In and among these contending forces were many of the oligarchs and businessmen of the city, who had to go along with City Hall if they wished to do business. At the same time they accepted the risks of providing Abe Ruef envelopes stuffed with cash to ensure favorable votes from the board of supervisors, especially in the matter of streetcar franchises and other public utilities-related developments.

The San Francisco that had to cope with the earthquake was in effect in a state of political civil war. Former mayor Phelan and his fellow reformers had formed the Committee of 100, which became a parallel government in the city, especially after Roosevelt made the decision that federal funds would be channeled through it and not through the office of the mayor. As Fradkin points out, here was a city that in 1851, 1856, and 1876 had been seized by vigilante groups dominated by the respectable, bypassing elected government.

The graft trials that followed the catastrophe eventually sent Abraham Ruef to San Quentin. They constitute the grand saga of political reform prior to the pro-



gressive takeover of the state in 1910. Among other things, the prosecutor was shot in court, his assailant was found dead in his cell under mysterious and suspicious circumstances, and the police chief of San Francisco met a watery end in the bay under equally mysterious conditions. In the course of the trials, half of the San Francisco establishment turned on the other half (Fremont Older found it advisable to resign from the Bohemian Club), revealing a network of corporate bribery for which, crusading editor Fremont Older complained, only Ruef seemed willing to take the rap. Of more than 350 indictments handed up, only Ruef was convicted. Affronted by Ruef's solo conviction—while his bribers sank into their leather chairs in their clubs, cigars in hand, whiskeys at the ready—Older reversed course and successfully campaigned for the early parole of the onetime boss.

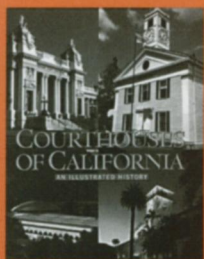
To accept Fradkin's conclusions that much of what we believe about the earthquake is myth does not mean that we have to abandon in its entirety our collective tradition that the majority of ordinary San Franciscans acted with courage, generosity, and panache; and Fradkin documents such good behavior as well. As we anticipate at some future time (and it will come!), let us resolve that we will learn from our mistakes as well as be inspired by our good behavior during those terrible days one hundred years ago when a great city was reduced to rubble and ashes, and human nature revealed its best and worst.

*The Great Earthquake and Firestorms of 1906: How San Francisco Nearly Destroyed Itself* reviewed by Kevin Starr, University Professor and Professor of History, University of Southern California, and State Librarian Emeritus.

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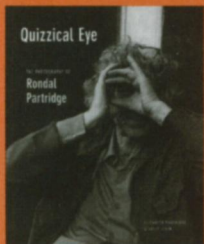
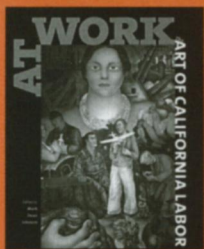
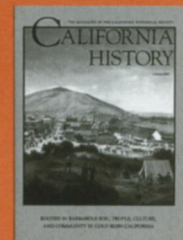
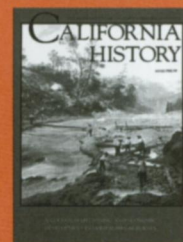
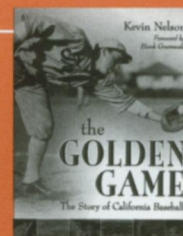
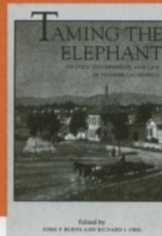
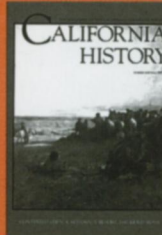
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