



FRANCISCAN FRONTIERSMEN

How Three Adventurers Charted the West

By Robert A. Kittle

Pious and scholarly, the Franciscan friars Pedro Font, Juan Crespí, and Francisco Garcés may at first seem improbable heroes. Beginning in Spain, their adventures encompassed the remote Sierra Gorda highlands of Mexico, the deserts of the American Southwest, and coastal California. Each man's journey played an important role in Spain's eighteenth-century conquest of the Pacific coast, but today their names and deeds are little known. Drawing on the diaries and correspondence of Font, Crespí, and Garcés, as well as his own exhaustive field research, Robert A. Kittle has woven a seamless narrative detailing the friars' striking accomplishments.

Starting with a harrowing transatlantic voyage, all three traveled through uncharted lands and found themselves beset by raiding Indians, marauding bears, starvation, and scurvy. Along the way, they made invaluable notes on indigenous peoples, flora and fauna, and prominent eighteenth-century European colonial figures.

Font, the least celebrated of the three, recorded the daily events of the 1775–76 colonizing expedition of Juan Bautista de Anza while serving as its chaplain. Font's legacy includes some of the earliest accurate maps of California between San Diego Bay and San Francisco Bay.

Garcés, an itinerant missionary, developed close relationships with

Indians in Sonora and California. He learned their languages and lived and traveled with them, usually as the only white man, and brokered dozens of peace agreements before he was killed in a Yuma uprising. Crespí, who traveled up the California coast with Father Junípero Serra, kept meticulous journals of an expedition to reconnoiter the San Francisco Bay area, the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers, and the northern reaches of California's central valley.

This enthralling narrative elevates these Spanish friars to their rightful place in the chronicle of American exploration. It brings their exploits out of the shadow of the American Revolution and Lewis & Clark expedition while also illuminating encounters between European explorers and missionaries and the American Indians who had occupied the Pacific coast for millennia.

Robert A. Kittle is an award-winning journalist who served for nearly two decades as the editorial page editor of the *San Diego Union-Tribune*. Now an independent historian, he lives in La Jolla, California.

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