

Readers' Guide

*Mountains and Molehills,
or Recollections of a Burnt Journal*

Frank Marryat

Timeline

This outline of notable events will help you place *Mountains and Molehills* in context.

- 1826 Samuel Francis “Frank” Marryat is born in London, England, on April 18. He is the youngest of eleven children of Frederick Marryat, a captain in the Royal Navy and, later, a successful novelist.
- 1832–1835 Frank’s father, Frederick, works as the editor of the *Metropolitan Magazine*. Frederick befriends many literary personages, including Charles Dickens and Washington Irving, who periodically visit the family.
- 1840 Frank Marryat enlists in the Royal Navy at the age of fourteen and becomes a midshipman for the HMS *Vanguard*. He travels with the ship to Syria, where he fights in the Turkish-Egyptian conflict.
- 1842 Marryat returns to England. After a short period at home, he departs on a surveying mission to Borneo, Indonesia, aboard the HMS *Samarang*. Marryat keeps journals of his experiences there, including detailed illustrations of the scenery and native people.
- 1847 Marryat returns from Borneo and incorporates his journals into a travelogue titled *Borneo and the Eastern Archipelago*, which is published the following year.
- 1848 Marryat resigns from the Navy following the death of his father. He also edits and finishes writing his father’s novel *The Little Savages*, which is published that year. James Marshall discovers gold at Sutter’s Mill in Coloma, California.
- 1850 Marryat sets out for California via Panama to hunt game and gather material for another travel memoir. He arrives in San Francisco on June 14.
- 1852 After spending two years hunting and mining in California, Marryat travels back to England and marries. He returns briefly to California later that same year to tour the state with his wife.
- 1853 Back in England, Marryat begins writing *Mountains and Molehills, or Recollections of a Burnt Journal*, which recounts his adventures in California.

1855 *Mountains and Molehills* is published with eighteen woodcuts and eight color lithographs of Marryat's own illustrations. On August 12, Marryat dies of tuberculosis at Mercer Lodge in London at the age of twenty-nine.

Questions to Discuss

1. "To make a mountain out of a molehill" is a common expression for exaggerating the importance of something. Why do you think Marryat chose to title his book *Mountains and Molehills*?
2. How does Marryat's description of gold rush California compare to your previous ideas about the Wild West? What did you find surprising or contrary to what you may be familiar with from books or movies?
3. As Robert Chandler states in the foreword, "Marryat deals in racial and ethnic stereotypes common to the 1850s." How do Marryat's attitudes affect your reading of the book?
4. How does this book compare to contemporary travel writing or any other travel literature you may have read? How well does the book succeed as a travelogue?
5. According to Chandler, "Humor of the time exhilarated in pulling the legs of the greenhorns, subtly disguising the boundary between truth and exaggeration." Give an example of a time Marryat uses this technique. How does this affect your view of Marryat as a narrator?
6. How do you think Marryat's British nationality affects how he portrays Californians and California?
7. In his preface, Marryat says, "I am no button-holder, and would rather, sir that you would desert me at my second chapter, than that you would wade wearily through this volume, and then...say that I have bored you." In addition to frequently addressing the reader, Marryat often warns the reader about his poor writing skills, calling his own book a "printed error." Based on these examples, what do you think of Marryat's narrative persona?
8. What audience is Marryat writing for? How can you tell?
9. Throughout *Mountains and Molehills*, Marryat includes illustrations of pioneer and city life in Northern California and Panama. Which illustration is your favorite and why?

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Suggested Reading

Holliday, J. S. *The World Rushed In: The California Gold Rush Experience*. Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2002.

Kowalewski, Michael, ed. *Gold Rush: A Literary Exploration*. Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1997.

Marryat, Frank. *Borneo and the Indian Archipelago*. London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1848. Facsimile edition, Singapore: Ascanio Books Pte Ltd., 2007.

Marryat, Frederick. *Frank Mildmay, or, The Naval Officer*. Ithaca, NY: McBooks, 1998.