

The Browns of California: The Family Dynasty That Transformed a State and Shaped a Nation

By Miriam Pawel

Reviewed by Marc Alexander

Miriam Pawel, an independent scholar, award-winning journalist, and author of books about Cesar Chavez and his union organizing crusades, has now written an excellent and leisurely family history of the Browns of California that also serves as a window on the political history of our state. No family has done more to serve and shape California than the Browns. Pat Brown served as Governor, Attorney General, and District Attorney of San Francisco; Jerry Brown served twice as Governor, as Attorney General, as Mayor of Oakland, as Chair of the California Democratic Party, and as Secretary of State; Pat's daughter, Kathleen Brown served as State Treasurer; Pat's brother, Harold Brown, served as Justice on the Court of Appeal; and, Pat's granddaughter Kathleen Kelly is a Superior Court Judge in San Francisco. If one theme unites this extraordinary family, it is a calling to civic service.

With one exception, the book is arranged chronologically. That exception is the opening chapter titled "The Mansion" — an interesting authorial choice for a beginning. The Mansion was the Governor's Mansion — a magnificent house at 16th and H Streets in Sacramento. The house is an avatar of the Brown dynasty, and

symbolic of California's boom-and-bust cycle, as well as the state's and the family's ability to reinvent itself. Pat Brown and his wife occupied the Mansion, and his daughter Kathleen grew up in it. However, Nancy Reagan viewed it as a firetrap, and the Reagans chose to live in a classic estate instead. With his "small is beautiful" philosophy, Jerry Brown, in his first incarnation as Governor, opted to live in a spartan apartment. But in his second term, Jerry 2.0, as Pawel occasionally refers to him, chose to restore the Victorian mansion and to live in it. Thus, the Mansion serves not only as a symbol of the Brown family, but as a symbol of the return to power, as well as Jerry 2.0's recognition of family roots, tradition, and history. "I have a sense of the historic character of California," Jerry said in 2009. "My family came here as pioneers." Jerry's return to the Mansion represents maturation of the younger avant-garde self and a drawing closer to his father's patrimony. And



perhaps the addition of the popular Sutter Brown, the Welsh corgi and First Dog, to the Brown family in 2010, after Jerry's gubernatorial victory, signified a nod to more traditional political trappings.



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The chronology begins with the California arrival from Germany of Pat Brown's enterprising maternal grandfather, August Schuckman, during the Gold Rush. August's grandson Pat Brown was the quintessential go-getter: a man with an ebullient, buoyant personality, a natural politician, a joiner and founder of clubs — a networker long before the concept existed. Pat's mother was a highly intelligent, strong-willed woman who was drawn toward Unitarianism, with its reputation for social justice, and Pat seems to have grown up without a bone of religious, ethnic, or racial prejudice. Pat became a New Deal Democrat, who described his goal as making "life a little more comfortable for the average human being."

Pat had a gift for friendship and surrounded himself with a circle of capable people, such as Mathew Tobriner, whom he eventually appointed to the California Supreme Court, and who became one of California's greatest justices. Warren Christopher served as Special Counsel to Pat, and Fred Dutton, who served as campaign manager and later Chief of Staff, also became a regent of the University of California. Pat's friendships crossed party lines (indeed, at the beginning of his career, Pat was a Republican, and his brother Harold remained a Republican), and he had a long and warm relationship with the Republican Earl Warren, when Warren was Governor, and when he was on the Supreme Court. One feels nostalgia for a time when pragmatic, centrist politicians did not hole up in party silos, but instead worked across party lines to make California a better place to live.

Running again for Governor in 1962, Pat narrowly beat the petulant Richard Nixon, who famously told the press, "You won't have Nixon to kick around anymore because, gentlemen, this is my last press conference." (Wrong on both counts.) But by the time Pat ran against Ronald Reagan in 1966, events were conspiring against him: overwhelming public and realtors' support

for Proposition 14 and its slogan, "A Man's Home is his Castle," which Pat rightly understood to be an appeal to prejudice; and Berkeley student protests and the Watts civil disorders, described by Pawel as "shorthand for a state out of control." Additionally, Pat supported LBJ on Vietnam, and Hubert Humphrey for President, dampening enthusiasm of those opposed to the war. Indeed, there is similarity between Humphrey on the national level and Pat in California, for both were New Deal Democrats, both were patriots who had lived through World War II, and, Humphrey, the "Happy Warrior" had the same progressive's faith in the transformative power of good government as did Pat. In 1966, Reagan, with his conservative politics and movie-star charisma, was swept into office by nearly a million-vote margin (57.5% to 42.3%).

Remembered as a great builder, Pat assigned the highest priority to education: "I felt the greatness of California would depend upon an educated people." In California, a free undergraduate education became a passport to upward mobility. The availability of access to higher education was a powerful draw to the state, and critical to the development of California's economy, as well as its cultural institutions. Fiat Lux! Later, Jerry would go sideways with the University of California, when brutal tax cuts caused painful budgetary constraints, damaging California's educational system. Jerry antagonized academics when he "suggested professors accept lower salaries because their work should provide 'psychic income.'" However ill-chosen those words may have been, they also reflect how a leader's actions are shaped and constrained by circumstances, and it was Jerry's lot to lead at a time when taxpayers revolted.

Much of the fascination of Pawel's book derives from the contrasting nature of Edmund G. Brown Sr. and Edmund G. Brown Jr., who had to be distinguished as "Pat" (a nickname that stuck after the elder Brown wound up his 7th grade

oratorical contest by quoting Patrick Henry) and “Jerry.” “They shared core values,” writes Pawel, yet “they differed fundamentally in philosophy, politics, and personality.”

Jerry was molded by a Jesuit education in the seminary, whereas Pat’s Catholicism was less important to his thinking. Jerry had a cerebral, skeptical, searching, and creative mind. He was an ascetic who displayed little interest in material goods. Jerry opposed the war in Vietnam, viewing Humphrey as “the old guard of the party.” Where Pat favored the Bohemian Club, Jerry might have preferred a Zen retreat.

“I hope I do not seem too much of a glad-handing politician because I genuinely like people and like to talk with them,” Pat wrote to a relative after a campaign cocktail party. Jerry’s mother Bernice described Pat’s old-style campaigning as “low comedy.” Pawel adds, “Jerry avoided it at all costs.” Jerry was not a campaign hugger nor did he want to take money from well-heeled persons wanting favors. Jerry was comfortable with advisors who could express disagreement, for he did not need or want sycophants, and he welcomed robust disputation. Jerry had a missionary zeal and a deeply felt connection to the past and to the prospect of California. In short, he was not a conventional politician.

Circling back to the book’s subtitle, Pawel makes a better case that the Browns transformed California than that they shaped the nation. As Justice Brandeis wrote in *New State Ice Co. v. Liebmann* (1932), a “state may, if its citizens choose, serve as a laboratory; and try novel social and economic experiments without risk to the rest of the country.” Under the Browns, California served as such a laboratory. Pat’s legacy as a great builder includes the educational Master Plan, vast water projects, and state highways. Speaking about his father, Jerry said Pat “just didn’t understand that business of ‘lower your expectations.’” Pat will also be remembered for supporting fair

access to housing, and for delivering a modicum of diversity in appointing government office holders, at a time when California state officials and judges occupied a white male preserve. Jerry will be remembered for navigating between the shoals in an era of limits and lowered expectations, promoting fiscal responsibility, reshaping the judiciary, recognizing the existential threat of climate change, supporting Cesar Chavez and his movement, understanding the transformative effect of the internet, personal computers, and social media, and serving as mayor of Oakland, where he created two charter schools, and worked to renew downtown. Father and son should also be remembered for their shared belief in the positive role government can play in improving the lives of citizens, for their belief in individual responsibility, for their fundamental decency, and for their dedication to a life of public service.

The claim that the Browns transformed the nation is on less solid ground. As Pawel herself points out in closing, on the national level, policies and values have been championed “that ran counter to much of what California had come to represent.” Thus, climate change deniers have been appointed to federal agencies, and strenuous efforts are made to ban, harass, and deport immigrants, and to build a wall on our country’s southern border. National efforts to deregulate run counter to the Browns’ philosophy that government is part of the solution to making people’s lives better. Concerted national efforts to build infrastructure are not on the horizon (unless you include the “Wall”). National efforts to suppress voter participation run contrary to California’s goal of increasing civic engagement by making it easier to vote here. While California, with its evolving demography, Democratic legislature, and Governor, may not be shaping the nation today, it provides its voice in national discourse, by way of counter-example. As Pawel acknowledges, “[t]he Golden state became the counterforce, a hopeful beacon in an era of uncertainty.”