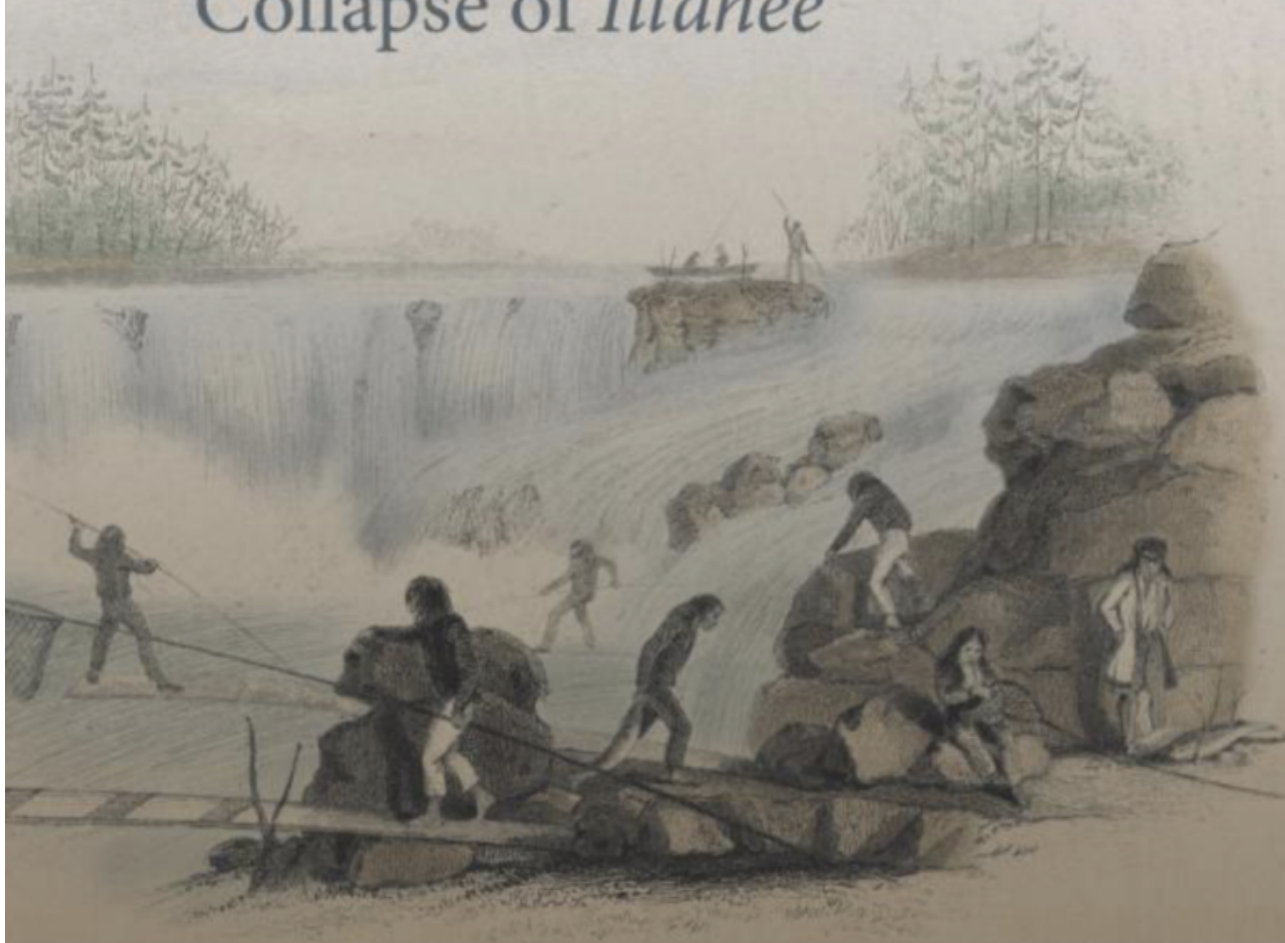


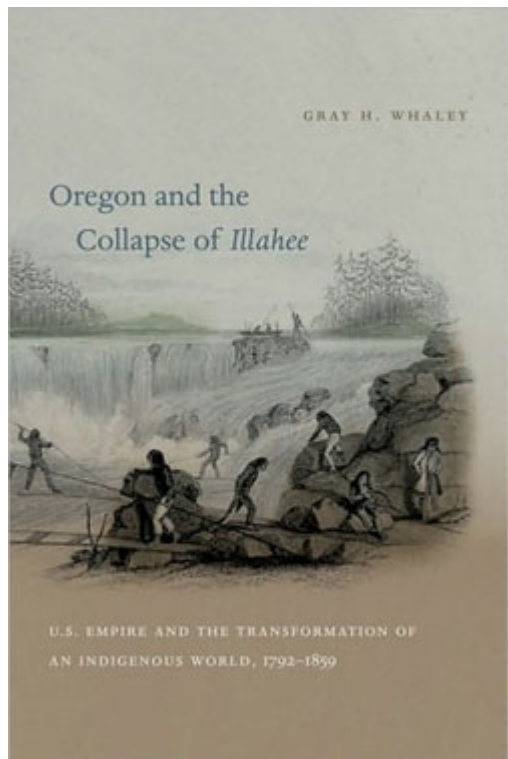
# Reappraising Western History through Empire

GRAY H. WHALEY

Oregon and the  
Collapse of *Illahee*



U.S. EMPIRE AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF  
AN INDIGENOUS WORLD, 1792–1859



Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. 320 pp., \$24.95.

Gray H. Whaley's impressive and ambitious study of the U.S. presence in the Lower Columbia River region and the impact of that colonialism on the Indians living there firmly places the Pacific Northwest into the broader story of U.S. empire. With great skill the author considers the role of merchants, missionaries, settlers, and diverse Indian communities over a period of sixty years of profound change, showing how "westward expansion" was part of a larger imperial project.

Whaley also contributes to Pacific Northwest history by introducing two "metaphors of place" (x). The first, "Oregon," was a space of imperial competition and the destination of American agrarian settlers in the 1840s and 1850s. "Illahee," by contrast, was the Indian conception of the same region. The latter was less a territory than a network of communities, kin relations, spiritual, and cultural relationships. Whaley argues that the relationship between these two conceptions of place were dynamic and dialectical. Oregon shaped Indian life and Illahee helped define the character of the American and British presence, at least until disease and genocide left little room for negotiation. The transformation of Illahee from the dominant conception of the Lower Columbia to the a peripheral fragment of Oregon's colonial society was not the inevitable result of "westward expansion" but was brought on by disease, missionary activities, ideology, settlement, violence, and genocidal warfare.

Between 1792 and 1859, the dialectical relationship between Illahee and Oregon worked out on the ground. The first Americans came to the Lower Columbia in the aftermath of the voyages of the *Columbia*, which sought to bring American commerce into China through the lucrative sea otter fur trade. Whaley focuses

his energies on the relationship between Indians and Fort Clatsop, of the Corps of Discovery, and Fort Astoria, of the fur trading Northwest Company. By the time Americans arrived to Illahee, the Chinook and others had been participants in the global China trade for over a decade. Before the Louisiana Purchase opened up a region of American expansion on the continent, the Lower Columbia was already a region of imperial competition and the home of a nascent colonial society. Life in Fort Clatsop and Fort Astoria for both Indians and American traders was one of negotiation with competing visions, which produced a new society. Fur traders were frustrated by the complexity of Illahee's "many little sovereignties" and threats of violence—both of which cemented the Indians' reputation as "Rogues," and which would justify so much violence in the coming decades (63). Indians also looked on landless and drifting sailors, existing outside of the kin relations that defined Illahee, with suspicion. Yet through prostitution, intermarriage, working together, and trade, the fragments of a colonial society were formed that did not privilege the American vision of Oregon. By the 1830s, increased encroachment on the land and a devastating malaria epidemic turned the balance decidedly toward Oregon, but did not eliminate Illahee's influence on the emerging colonial society.

Whaley proves the endurance of Illahee with two fascinating chapters on the missionary endeavors of the 1830s and 1840s. Optimism about creating an "evangelical empire" (99-102) and a religious colonization of the region turned sour due to the racism of religious and nonreligious settlers, resistance by Indians to Christianity, and the demographic disaster that made a spiritual return on the missionaries' investment doubtful. The difficulties these missionaries faced were symptoms of the growing incompatibility of Illahee and Oregon in a colonial society. Ultimately the colonization of Illahee, virulent racism, and genocidal warfare, culminating in the Red River War of 1855 and 1856, made extermination of the Indians the means to fulfill the ideology of Oregon. Whaley ends the book with a consideration of the survival of Illahee, despite the end of Indian communities, the seizure of their land and property, and massive population decline. Even as the relationship between U.S. empire and Oregon shifted to a new phase with statehood, Indians continued to use the concept of Illahee as a survival strategy. As more local community identities fell away, younger generations knew only Illahee, with Chinook as a common language (initially used by teachers as a transition to English-language instruction).

Readers from many fields of history will be able to mine Whaley's rich text for insights. Aspects of social, environmental, demographic, religious, diplomatic, and maritime history all shaped Oregon's colonial history and Whaley wisely includes all of these aspects into his account. Instead of diluting the text, this complexity adds to his argument and reveals his wealth of knowledge. For example, Whaley has produced one of the strongest accounts of the trading fort known as Astoria since James P. Rhoda's *Astoria and Empire*. By using the published headquarter's log of the Northwest Company's Pacific coast experiment, Whaley writes a fine social history of this short-lived fort. Looking beyond the diplomatic and maritime aspects of Astoria, the author shows

that Astoria was a space of rich social interaction between Indian and white American workers, an interaction that often led to intermarriage between Astorians and Indian women. In the same way, Whaley's account of the demographic collapse brought on by the 1830s malaria epidemic and its impact on missionaries and empire building reminds us that the fate of empire is always contingent on social and environmental forces and cannot be reduced to diplomacy or economics.

Despite taking on a topic as large as U.S. empire, Whaley always remains firmly on the ground. Most of the major players in the fur trade, westward expansion, elected leaders, or government officials remain in the background. Whaley is rightfully focusing on what he calls "folk imperialism": the efforts of individual workers, traders, and settlers in laying claim to the Lower Columbia and the ideologies that drove these Americans. The high politics of competing claims between Great Britain, the United States, and Russia have only a minor role in the much more essential conflict between Oregon and Illahee. Folk imperialism also contained its own ideology, driven by the antebellum market economy, evangelical Christianity, and the emerging unification of American republicanism with an exclusionary whiteness. These popular ideas determined the more aggressive and genocidal aspects of settler colonialism in the region. For Whaley, Indian resistance is also best looked at from the ground. Considering the realities of Indian politics within Illahee, this focus is unavoidable. Despite white settler fantasies, Indians in this region never formed a unified resistance. Instead their resistance took the form of theft and murder. These acts in turn fed white fantasies of a race war in the Oregon territory. Whaley shows white settlers needed little encouragement as most of the justifications for empire were self-fulfilling. An important contribution of this book is to remind readers that the ideology of empire and the workings of empire in a colonial society are intimately connected.

This is a rich book but reminds me of a crucial question facing nineteenth-century historians. What is the place of America in the world during a century dominated by empire building from the Mississippi to the Pacific coast, sectional conflict, and industrialization? With the decline of the sea otter fur trade and the resolution of imperial competition, it seems that the history of the Pacific Northwest turns inward and feeds into the history of American "westward expansion." Whaley carefully detaches himself from the ideological baggage driving those conceptions of Western history through his use of empire.

Nevertheless, the merchants and sailors, such as those populating Astoria, are replaced with miners and farmers, carrying with them the ideology of the republic's continental expansion. Is it true that after the 1830s, the Pacific Northwest stopped looking toward the Pacific? We know from Jean Barman and Bruce McIntyre Watson's *Leaving Paradise: Indigenous Hawaiians in the Pacific Northwest* that the "kanaka" presence in the region remained strong throughout the century. What impact did these people have on Illahee? Was the global story that shaped so much of the Columbia's River early history replaced with an exclusively American colonial society? Whaley does not directly address these

questions but his frame of reference makes it possible to ask these questions by clarifying the place of Oregon's settlement in the centuries-long story of U.S. empire.