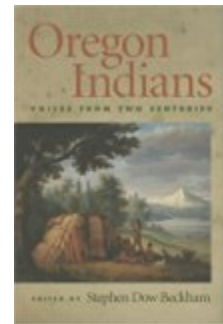


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Stephen Dow Beckham, ed. *Oregon Indians: Voices from Two Centuries*. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2006. 608 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87071-088-9.

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## Documenting the Indian History of Oregon

Stephen Dow Beckham's *Oregon Indians* is an important collection of texts that documents Indian history of Oregon from the arrival of the first Europeans through the end of the twentieth century. Beckham, a scholar of Oregon Indian history for over forty years, includes some texts that are available elsewhere, such as the famous 1879 speech of the Nez Perce leader Chief Joseph in Washington, D.C., but most selections are little known and many previously unpublished. The sixty-five documents are mainly written statements or recorded words of Oregon Indians, but Beckham also includes white voices, both sympathetic and hostile. The result is a volume that gives readers access to Indian experiences and perspectives and sheds new light on the history of Indian/white relations in Oregon.

The book is organized chronologically and thematically. There are seven sections, each prefaced with a helpful introductory essay that provides historical context. "Encounters" documents Indian/Euro-American interactions from the earliest meetings in the late eighteenth century through the mid-nineteenth century when the United States formally claimed Oregon. "Treaties and Warfare" and "Removals and Reservations" cover the 1850s to the 1870s, years during which whites invaded Indian lands, disease and violence took their toll on the Indian population, and the federal government pressed Oregon Indians to cede their homelands and move onto reservations. "Walking the White Man's Road" shows how Indians adapted to and resisted a world now dominated by whites. It includes several texts by and about Indians who spoke out against the abuses of

reservation life and the federal government's failure to fulfill its treaty promises. Two sections document Indian responses to the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act and the Termination Policy of the 1950s. These include a lot of valuable new material, some of it from Beckham's own files from his years assisting tribes seeking restoration. The final section, "Restoration of Hope," documents the efforts of Oregon tribes to defend their treaty-protected fishing rights, secure the settlement of land claims, and protect their religious rights and ancestral remains.

Certain themes reverberate throughout the volume. Again and again, Oregon Indians tell whites of the fundamental importance of land to tribal life and identity. At a treaty council in 1851, the Santiam chief, Ti-a-can, declared that his people's "hearts were upon that piece of land, and they didn't wish to leave it" (p. 119). Over one hundred years later, the Cow Creek chairman, Ellis Buschman, repeated this truth at a 1979 congressional hearing: "The Indians' belief is that the most meaningful thing the Great Spirit gave to us was our land. The removal of the Indians from this land was like the removal of the spirit from the body" (p. 521). These documents repeatedly remind readers that the pain of dispossession was, and is, acute and deep.

Beckham's selections also show that Indians in Oregon have continually sought to hold the federal government accountable for its failure to fulfill treaty promises or properly compensate them for lands taken. At a meeting in 1871 to discuss allotment, Kalapuya Indians protested their treatment at the hands of reservation

agents and asked that the government provide the necessary goods and services promised to them. Joe Hutchings declared: "When the treaty was made many things were promised us. We never got any of them" (p. 321). And, in one of the strongest statements in the collection, Howard Barrett Sr., chair of the Confederated Tribes of the Coos, Lower Umpqua, and Siuslaw, condemned the American government before the United Nations in 1956 for seizing 1.7 million acres of tribal lands without compensation under an unratified treaty. As he put it, by allowing settlers to move on to his people's lands, the government effectively sanctioned "the unchristian, unlawful and larcenous treatment of these Indian tribes at the hand of the white man" (p. 452). Indeed, given the federal government's appalling record of mistreatment and betrayal that is well documented in this collection, one is all the more impressed when reading this volume by the extraordinary persistence of Indian people in pressing their claims for justice in—and beyond—the U.S. legal system.

In addition, Beckham wants to make readers understand the depth of violence and hatred to which Oregon Indians have been subjected. He includes, for example, an 1856 account by John Beeson of the atrocities perpetrated against Oregon Indians in the Rogue River War. A rare white American defender of Indian people, Beeson vividly described the wholesale slaughter of men, women, and children by volunteers and asked his readers to "suppose ourselves treated as the Indians were—that our property was taken away, our families scattered and destroyed, our people wantonly murdered, and ourselves made outlaws in our own land" (p. 165). Another grim report, written by Indian agent, F. M. Smith, details the massacre of a Coosan village by miners in 1854. By including these statements, Beckham allows these writers to bear witness again. Further, Beckham makes the point that the violence perpetrated by whites went hand in hand with the dehumanization of Oregon Indians. He accompanies accounts of murderous assaults with a selection from a 1925 history textbook in which Oregon Indians are described as "savage and barbarian," lacking "even the rude beginnings of civilization" (pp. 360-361). The persistence of such views is, unfortunately, all too evident in the 1976 statement by Forrest L. Meuret, an opponent of Indian participation in fishery management, who asserted that before "the coming of the white man ... the Indian ... had no written language, no wheel, nor beast of burden, and was not progressing" (p. 489).

As an editorial voice, Beckham pulls no punches. He condemns nineteenth-century reservations, for instance,

as "death camps for the displaced and dispirited natives of western Oregon" (p. 234). He is particularly strong in his denunciations of the "disastrous policy of termination." He points out that Oregon Indians, though in many respects acculturated to white American society, suffered from low levels of income and education in addition to poor general health. When termination rendered Oregon tribes ineligible for Bureau of Indian Affairs educational assistance and Indian Health Care Services, and subjected them to heavy tax burdens that they were usually unable to pay, their living conditions further deteriorated. For many Oregon Indians, termination was, in Beckham's words, "the quick road to oblivion" (p. 438).

A reading of this rich collection suggests issues for further research. One topic, about which I expected more editorial comment, is the ways in which Indian voices have been translated and recorded over the years. Certainly, Indian anxieties about how whites recorded their words surface again and again. Fear of white American use of the written word is evident in an 1857 statement made by Jim, a chief of the Tootootenays band at Grande Ronde: "This Tyee is writing our names on paper. We hope that paper will be sent back to us. We are afraid to have our names on it. If it should be lost we will all die" (p. 239). Concerns about the ways in which white Americans used language are also raised in Joseph's speech: "The white man has more words to tell you how [things] look to him, but it does not require many words to speak the truth. What I have to say will come from my heart, and I will speak with a straight tongue. An-cum-kin-I-ma-me-hut (the Great Spirit) is looking at me, and will hear me" (p. 331). The contrast drawn here between the pure speech of Indians and the more artificial and implicitly less trustworthy speech of whites played into longstanding American ideas about the purity of "primitive" speech, but it also spoke to Oregon Indians' historical experience of communicating with white Americans. In this case, the story is even more complicated (although Beckham does not note this), because the text of Joseph's speech was not a direct translation and transcription of anything the chief might have said, but most likely a product of a collaboration among Joseph; his translator, Arthur Chapman; the superintendent of Indian Affairs in Oregon, Alfred Meacham, who arranged Joseph's trip; and General Nelson A. Miles.[1] The documents in Beckham's collection prompt further questions about the history of cross-cultural communication in Oregon: How did Euro-American use of the written word affect Indian/white interactions? What stylistic conventions did interpreters use to represent Indian

speech, how did whites speak to Indians, and how and when did this change over time?

Another issue worthy of further exploration is religious change. The reference to the “Great Spirit” or “An-cum-kin-I-ma-me-hut” in Joseph’s speech is intriguing in this regard, as are other references to God, the Creator, the Great Spirit Chief, and indigenous spiritual figures scattered throughout. It is also evident that several Indians recorded in the volume either identified as Christian or had adopted elements of Christianity. Questions of how, when, and why Oregon Indians accepted or rejected Christian beliefs and practices, and how their choices affected—and were affected by—their changing relations with white American society require further research. Unfortunately, in this volume, the history of Indian interactions with missionaries are represented only by documents relating to an 1843 attempt to impose laws on the Cayuse and Nez Perce by the missionary turned Indian agent, Elijah White, and by documents concerning the killing of the Congregationalist missionary Marcus Whitman and others by the Cayuse in 1847. There are no selections relating to Indian responses to Christian evangelization. Some material on the Indian Shaker Church that gained a significant following—and attracted significant opposition—on Oregon reservations in the twentieth century would also have been a valuable addition to this volume.

Of course, any edited collection will be subject to criticisms about inclusions and exclusions, such as the ones I have listed above. Clearly, Beckham had to make some difficult choices, and as he admits, his selections are “the tip of the iceberg” (p. xi). It should be noted, though, that

Beckham relies heavily on public documents, such as testimony from legal hearings and council proceedings, particularly in the latter part of the volume. While such documents record the major challenges that have confronted Oregon Indian tribes and while it is true that many of them do contain personal stories, most of these documents record Indians speaking to whites in relatively formal contexts. More personal, autobiographical, and quotidian material to convey more of the texture and diversity of Oregon Indian life would have provided an important personal component to the volume. Another serious omission is maps. A map showing the extent of tribal territorial ranges prior to contact and a map showing the locations of reservations today would have been particularly useful.

That said, this is a rich and suggestive collection that gives readers a deeper understanding of the history of Oregon Indian people across a broad expanse of time. It also will be a valuable resource for teachers and researchers looking for sources documenting Indian responses to particular developments and policies over the last two centuries. We can only hope that other historians will be moved to produce similar collections for other regions.

#### Note

[1]. For a fascinating account of the production, use, and broader ideological significance of Chief Joseph’s speech in relation to the subjugation of the Nez Perce, see Thomas H. Guthrie, “Good Words: Chief Joseph and the Production of Indian Speech(es), Texts, and Subjects” *Ethnohistory* 54, no. 3 (Summer 2007): 509-546.

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