Transposed Tales of a French Missionary among Indians in the Oregon Country

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The Old Oregon Country, whose geographical expanse included much of today's Pacific Northwest both north and south of the 49th parallel, was at best a half-year's journey from post-Revolutionary France. Yet this vast and mysterious region tucked behind the Rocky Mountains was not without a connection to 19th century Restoration France. Euro-American explorations and fur trapping enterprises in this region depended on French Canadians whose Catholic background, enriched by the indigenous traditions of mates, families, and co-workers, determined their ethnic identities. When the first generation of these voyageurs, interpreters, trappers, and traders mustered out and settled in the West, groups of them requested priests. In 1834 and again in 1836, for example, French Canadian retirees in the Willamette Valley called on the bishop of St. Boniface (in today's Manitoba), to send them a resident priest. By 1850 a large proportion of priests serving in the Pacific Northwest both north and south of the border were from continental France and Belgium, where the Restoration had given rise to a surge in vocations. During this same period European Jesuits founded missions among Flathead, Kalispel, Coeur d'Alène, and other indigenous groups in the eastern sectors of the Oregon Country.¹

Tales of these adventuring priests were often published in France, in the form of authentic letters, primarily as a means for garnering financial support and stimulating new vocations. In order to meet the perspectives that their European readers and benefactors held of the American West and its indigenous populations, the published letters were often highly redacted. Like their model, the earlier Jesuit Relations, they did not always reflect the opinions and experiences of the missionaries to whom they are ascribed. In examining a typical case of such slippage, this study compares a letter published in the 1851 issue of the Lyons- and Paris-based Annales de la propagation de la foi with its original.

The letter’s author, twenty-six year old Eugène Cassimir Chirouse (1821-1892), was a scholastic at the Marseilles-based Congregation of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate when he seized upon the opportunity to join four other confrères to serve in one of Old Oregon’s newly established Catholic dioceses. The party of five Oblates departed from Le Havre on 4 February 1847. Following a harrowing two-month voyage across an unforgiving Atlantic, and a 1,300-mile stagecoach and river boat journey to St. Louis, they met up with A.M.A. Blanchet, newly appointed bishop of Walla Walla and three other French Canadian clerics. Together, the nine men, along with two nieces of the bishop, a handyman, and two men paying their own way, traveled by steamer for the start of the Oregon Trail near Westport, Missouri. Journals tell us that the traditional friendliness that existed between French-speaking Catholic priests, commonly referred to as Black Robes, and plains Indians helped protect the 50-wagon caravan from angry bands of Indians, this being the year when more than 4,000 people with upward of 850 wagons crossed the Oregon Trail, the largest number to date. The party arrived at its destination, the Hudson’s Bay Fort Walla Walla on 3 October 1847, eight months after the Oblates’ departure from France.  

The diocese of Walla Walla where the party arrived was one of three dioceses and a number of districts comprising the Ecclesiastical Province of Oregon. In today’s geopolitical terms, Walla Walla and the two districts under the bishop’s authority included all of Washington State east of the Cascades, Idaho, eastern Oregon, and portions of western Montana and western Wyoming, up to the western edges of the Rocky Mountains. At the time of papal designation, the entire Ecclesiastical Province, coterminous with Old Oregon, was (from a colonialist perspective) “jointly occupied” by British Canada and the U.S. From a Catholic ecclesial perspective, the Province of Oregon had until 1843 been a sub-district of the vast diocese of Quebec, and only informally associated with the newer U.S. Catholic hierarchy. Even after the establishment of U.S. sovereignty south of the 49th parallel in 1846, after congressional designation of the area as the Oregon Territory in 1848, and subsequent gradual assumption of U.S. Catholic authority over the Oregon missions, the Catholic populations in the region continued to be served primarily by francophone missionary priests from France, Belgium, elsewhere in Europe and French Canada until well into the 1870s.

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It had been only fifteen months since his arrival at Fort Walla Walla when missionary Father Chirouse wrote the letter that would eventually appeared in the 1851 issue of the *Annales*. Dated 12 January 1849, and written from Holy Cross of Simcoe, the subtitle indicates that it is the extract of a letter that Chirouse wrote to his local Oblate superior, Father Pascal Ricard. Eight long paragraphs in length, the published letter tells of a young missionary suffering and alone in an isolated outpost among scores of threatening, superstitious and potentially violent Indians. The overall impression in the letter is that this young French countryman is caught in a battle between forces of epic dimensions, wintering in a terrestrial Calvary where innocent Indian children are dying of fever and flu, most adults are morally corrupt, and almost all are suffering from famine. With the exception of a particular adversary called Yellow Serpent, the Indians are unnamed, and all are shadow figures, with little substance or meaningful interaction with the missionary.4

In a first paragraph, we read that the chief and his Indians among whom Chirouse was living, desiring to leave for their warmer winter camp, begged that he come spend the season with them. He acquiesced on condition that the Indians build him a shelter at the new location. In this primitive, two-room hut built of willow, he reports in edifying language that pains, miseries, and tribulations of all sorts fall on him. The weather, the letter goes on to describe, “is so intense that several of our hunters were frozen on their horses; the animals also are succumbing to these rigors.” This calamity is only aggravated by general famine and the scourge of a deadly fever or flu: “Dying and dead are to be found in every lodge.”

It is here that the priest has as arch opponent another Indian, *Serpent-jaune* (“Yellow Serpent,” but known in English as Yellow Bird, and more widely as Peopeomoxmox), and his band. The letter states:

He [Yellow Serpent] himself presides over all the abominations that are said or committed in his lodge. A medicine man (*jongleur*) does his best to assist him to get rid of me; irritated that my teachings were contrary to his maxims and diabolical actions, he invented this strange slander to have me put to death: “The Black Robe,” he said, “takes rattle snakes and forces them to vomit a black venom, with which he poisons the tobacco, in the intent of killing all the men.”

On the next page, the threat of martyrdom at the hands of these instruments of the devil becomes even more poignant. The *jongleur*, furious that he is unable to heal any of the sick (unlike Chirouse who has healed five Indians through his own European medical advice), calls on his cohorts to burn the missionary’s hut

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4 R.P. Chirouse à R.P. Ricard, *Annales de la Propagation de la foi* 23 (1851): 75-80. Citations from this version and further references are found on these pages inclusively. This and subsequent references are translated by the author.
and cut off his head. “I cannot conceal the fact, he concludes, that I am truly in danger.”

In addition to the desolation and the workings of the devil to do away with him, the Chirouse of the published letter is faced with having but a dog and two wolves in his larder, and next to no clothing. He nevertheless entertains his readers by telling of his creative resourcefulness:

With my cassock reduced to a torn rag permeable to the winds, I fashioned another from a heavy white wool blanket that I soaked in blueberry juice. It came out purple, and I imagined myself a bishop; but then when the rain washed the color out, my cassock returned to its original white, and there I was suddenly looking like a pope, but a pope so poor that he had lost his only needle, not another was to be found anywhere in my Quirinal palace.

This version published in the *Annales* is half the length, and its content contrasts significantly with the actual letter that Chirouse wrote to his superior. In the original the missionary writes from an accommodating and warm hut, and he emphasizes his good fortune to have followed his host, who takes on the name Kamiakin, to the winter camp: “I have always said that the good Lord loved me too much, and this is certainly true; He has given me yet further proof in leading me to the warmest of the surrounding plains, where amidst the difficulties of the holy ministry, I am nevertheless sheltered from cold and hunger.”

Throughout this original letter, the image of a missionary sheltered from surrounding dangers predominates. Absent is any sense of the epic struggle between transcendent forces of good and terrestrial forces of evil that appears in the *Annales* version.

There are still other striking contrasts. It is in reaches beyond the sheltered plain of this winter camp that one person (not several) died of cold on a horse, and that the levels of snow reach seven to eight feet, there being only a single foot at Holy Cross. Rather than animals succumbing to the cold, the missionary congratulates himself for having convinced fellow missionaries to the north to let him bring the mission animals to winter at Holy Cross:

“Fortunately… I succeeded in having all our cattle and horses brought down to Holy Cross where they remain in good health, living on the tall grasses that surface above the little snow that we have here.” It is the fellow missionaries to the north, who “had not listened to him when I told them again and again to come spend the winter with him, in his big and warm house at Holy Cross” and as a consequence are suffering, he fears, from extreme cold and inability to travel.

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5 Eugène Cassimir Chirouse à Pascal Ricard, in Paul Drouin, O.M.I., ed., *Les Oblats de Marie Immaculée en Orégon, 1847-1860*, Documents d'archives 1 (Ottawa: Archives Deschâtelets, 1992), 39-44. Subsequent citations from this version are located on these pages inclusively.
The same trope of a missionary grateful to be sheltered from surrounding disaster occurs in portions of the letter reporting on the devastating fevers and flu, and the famine. By dint of having them stay warm (even sweating) and refraining from much food, Chirouse cured over a dozen Indians in the space of just four days. And it is his patron, chief Kamiaken whom Chirouse credits for having strongly insisted that he risk trying out this non-indigenous remedy. As for hunger, in addition to having fat cattle for food, Chirouse writes, “When I speak of famine among the Indians, I do not include Kamiakin’s little troop consisting of about a quarter of the camp that surrounds my house. These people have all the acorns, potatoes and wheat they need, but the others are really famished.” In short, without ignoring the harsh realities of the winter of 1849, be it the weather, sickness, or lack of food, Chirouse contrasts descriptions of these surrounding adversities to his own providential circumstances at Kamiakin’s winter camp.

Not only does chief Kamiakin take on relief as a wise leader, protecting his followers and missionary in this original letter, Yellow Serpent also emerges from the shadows. Though still corrupt in the eyes of the missionary, he is hardly a threatening instrument of the devil. Granted, it is in his lodge that all the gamblers assemble and other “abominations occur.” Furthermore, “Never does he come to prayer, and he always speaks poorly of our holy religion.” Yet, these comments comprise but three sentences in a protracted 500-word paragraph that lists all the indigenous groups assembled at the winter camp, including other bands of Yakamas, as well as Nez Percés, Palouses, and groups of people from The Dalles on the Columbia River. In this same paragraph Chirouse writes that an old man from The Dalles rather than Yellow Serpent’s jongleur began the rumor about tobacco and rattlesnake venom, saying that the missionary had tried to obtain it from Americans while visiting his bishop at The Dalles. Furthermore, the intent of the rumor was sexual: “An old man spread the rumor that… I made tobacco medicine in order to kill all the men and keep the women for myself.”

The Annales version not only places this incident front and center in its epic drama, the punch line about women disappears, and this merely entertaining aside at the end of a long paragraph becomes an overarching cause for the potential martyrdom of the missionary. In concluding his original letter, Chirouse makes it clear that, though his situation is not cause for worry, he does need more clothing and sacerdotal supplies, and he tells the story almost word for word of having to use a dyed blanket as cassock.

Although Chirouse’s original letter to his superior appears to be more credible for its historical accuracy than the version published in the Annales, this second version also calls for discernment. For Chirouse, as for anyone recently immersed in an unfamiliar culture, assumptions of one’s own cultural frame of reference tend to color observations and opinions of the “other.” As well, the author's desire to please his more powerful recipient by assuming his views and
expectations may well influence the choice and handling of topics. Considerations such as these, along with the widely varying content of the two versions, call for serious consideration of additional, related documents in any interpretation of the letters. The remaining pages briefly consider four pieces of information from other documents that shed light on the reliability of both the first and the second version: 1) the two named Native Americans in the letters and their relation to Father Chirouse; 2) the objectives of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in publishing missionary letters; 3) formative influences on young Chirouse while still in France; 4) recipient Father Ricard's own circumstances and perspectives.

The journal of Bishop A.M.A. Blanchet offers valuable insights into the two Native Americans named in the letters. The day after his 5 September 1847 arrival at Fort Walla Walla, in advance of the missionary party, Bishop Blanchet notes that Peopeomoxmox (Yellow Serpent), head chief of the Walla Wallas, paid him a visit. Still grieving from the recent loss of a wife and a white man's unprovoked killing of his son in line for chiefdom, Peopeomoxmox was too heartsick that day to talk of having missionaries among his people. The next day, however, he came back better disposed and requested missionaries. Thrilled that the chief of this large group, the namesake of the Walla Walla diocese, wished to host missionaries, the clerics eventually decided that the five Oblates would winter on land Peopeomoxmox provided. By the winter of 1849, the recipient of the second letter, Pascal Ricard, had removed to a location close to the future settlement of Olympia on Puget Sound, and the other Oblates had responded to invitations from various Yakama bands to live among them. Many of the Walla Wallas had joined neighboring Cayuses in a first of the armed confrontations with American settlers that would ensue through the 1850s. Tensions arising from these events between the Walla Walla Chief and white immigrants may well have influenced his state of mind and attitude toward the visiting Missionary Chirouse at the winter camp, though his diabolical representation in the Annales version of the letter is a far cry from what was known of him.

It is in later historical accounts that we learn of Kamiakin. Member of the interrelated clans of Indians living along the Yakima River on the Columbia Plateau, he had become wealthy and powerful through trading in horses and cattle at Hudson's Bay Forts Vancouver and Nisqually and as far south as California; he possessed vast irrigated gardens on his extended lands to the west of the Yakima River, and enjoyed the company of seven wives and multiple

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children. He was one of several Indians, including Peopeomoxmox, who had gained economic and social strength through selected accommodation to the ways of people connected to the Hudson's Bay posts and the increasing numbers of American settlers. As for his accommodation of priests, we can only speculate if he had invited the missionary to live among his people spring 1848, as a status symbol and sign of his wealth, as a means for adopting the strength or protection of the white man's god without necessarily abandoning his own traditions, out of some religious interest in and of itself, or some combination of all three.7

There is no hint in documents related to either Kamiakin or Peopeomoxmox and their followers of the missionary's potential martyrdom described in the Annales version. There had been threats and acts of revenge against some American settlers, including a few Protestant missionaries, in response to their dangerous cult of Manifest Destiny, continued seizure of indigenous lands, and killings on both sides. But there is no record of any Catholic missionary in the 19th-century Oregon Country ever being killed by a Native American. Though these Europeans clearly had their prejudices, and a majority of Indians rejected their teachings, some Indians welcomed and protected the missionaries, if not for reasons mentioned above, then as middlemen and advisors who could speak their languages during the tenuous years of treaty making and negotiations for livable reservations.8 Taken as a whole, this additional information presents a situation that is far removed from the 1851 Annales article, and not entirely in line with the original.

An understanding of the intent of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in publishing its letters may help to explain the liberties that were taken in redacting this letter. The organization was created in 1822 to stimulate missionary recruitment and help support the many clerics from France, Belgium, elsewhere in Europe, and French Canada who made a vocation of evangelizing peoples in politically non-Catholic lands, which at the time included all of North America, much of the Far East, and elsewhere. Pauline Jaricot, daughter of a Lyonnais industrialist, laid the foundations for the society in 1818 when she began to gather together women silk workers at her brother-in-law's factory for

7 See A.J. Splawn, Ka-Mi-Akin, The Last Hero of the Yakamas (Portland: Kilham, 1917). An early white settler who lived among the Yakamas and knew Kamiakin personally, the author bases this biography on personal reminiscences and interviews of mostly Indian contemporaries. See also Richard D. Scheuerman and Michael O. Finley, Finding Chief Kamiakin, The Life and Legacy of a Northwest Patriot by (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 2008). In contrast to the people by that name (Yakamas), the city and the river are spelled with an "i," (Yakima).

Friday prayers and the reading of letters from her brother and other French missionaries in the Far East. To help alleviate the missionaries' desperate poverty, the women contributed each a *sou* during the meetings (at the time worth one twentieth of a franc, or five centimes), an easily affordable gesture that also brought them a sense of meaningful participation in the wider Church. With the rapid growth of the Friday groups, Miss Jaricot formed them into formal *dizaines* (groups of ten). Within four years, the network of readers and contributors, known as the Rédactrices du sacré cœur de Jésus, expanded beyond the factories of Lyons and totaled over 2000 members. In 1822 a group of Lyonnais industrialists voted to assume Miss Jaricot's endeavors under the title Society for the Propagation of the Faith, and in 1826 they published the first bound selection of letters, known as the *Annales*. Membership collections grew to the point that the society became the primary funding source for all Catholic missionaries in “non-Catholic” lands worldwide.9

Unlike the original first-hand missives that Pauline read to women silk workers, the published letters in the *Annales* were the result of several layers of redaction. As the Chirouse letter exemplifies, the original source was frequently a periodic report that missionaries in the field were required to write to their local superiors. The superiors in turn selected and generally edited these reports for submission to their own religious superiors in France. It was not unusual for these superiors to further edit letters they found appropriate both to accompany reports they sent to Rome, and to represent the work of their missionaries in the *Annales*. Editors of the *Annales* then chose and further redacted letters from among these submissions for publication, keeping in mind the need to represent the geographical expanse of missions the organization helped finance, the expectations and interests of its wide readership, and the role of the publication in stimulating Catholic devotion and loosening purse strings.

A brief look at what influenced readership interests and expectations at the time is revealing. Through their widely read books, authors including Chateaubriand and James Fenimore Cooper popularized, often exotic representations of American Indians. Among non-fiction accounts that molded readership tastes at the time were widely circulated reprints of the *Jesuit Relations* and the related *Lettres édifiantes*. These redacted reports from missionaries living among indigenous groups in New France juxtaposed exotic ethnographic observations and stimulating travel accounts with tropes of solitude and grizzly martyrdom at the hands of brutal aboriginals. In publishing letters

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from missionaries still living among Native Americans, the *Annales* sought to model itself on the *Relations*; yet by the mid-nineteenth-century such letters were harder to come by, a government-run and Protestant-dominated reservation system gradually replacing many early U.S. Catholic missions. As a result, a letter such as that of Chirouse was a rarity, prized for its content and invariably subject to reconstruction in adapting to reader expectations.\(^{10}\)

It is important to keep in mind that Chirouse himself would have been among this readership. As a novitiate training at Notre Dame de l’Osier, in addition to stories from the *Jesuit Relations*, young Chirouse likely would have been expected to read issues of the *Annales.* And even before then, like many children in pious families, he likely would have heard his mother or father read from the *Annales* during evening gatherings for prayer. He was reported in fact to have been inspired to the missionary vocation by a letter of Bishop Rosati of St. Louis, published in the 1836 issue of the *Annales.*\(^{11}\)

A frequent contributor to the *Annales* who also would undoubtedly have helped set a framework of expectations in the mind of Chirouse, was the Belgian Jesuit, Father Peter de Smet. The most frequently published writer in the *Annales* during the ten years preceding the Chirouse letter, with a total of over 100 pages to his credit, de Smet offered two predominant images of Indians in his published letters. First, there was the “residue” of Indians left on the arid plains as a result of the tragic American removal of entire tribes from the banks of the Mississippi and the tombs of their ancestors, to exile in the uninhabitable stretches the Far West, where they were plied with liquor and developed an implacable hatred of whites.\(^ {12}\) Then there were those more fortunate people who lived close to their ancestral lands in remote corners of Old Oregon’s Rocky Mountains, relatively protected from white incursions. Here, de Smet wrote that pacific, hard-working Indian neophytes collaborate in maintaining their missions and attend the daily religious ceremonies en masse.\(^ {13}\) The contrast in the Belgian missionary’s articles, between the white-induced degradation of displaced tribes along the Missouri and the almost ideal status of less disturbed tribes of the Rockies, may well have been playing out in the mind of young Chirouse as he engaged with Indians such as Kamiakin and Peopeomoxmox on the Columbia plains, themselves among the more fortunate indigenous groups.


\(^{13}\) P.J. de Smet, *Annales* 15 (1843), 273-80.
These earlier *Annales* reports would also have played into the expectations and perspectives of Father Ricard, the recipient of Chirouse's original report, as would the superior's own more recent experiences in Oregon. A warm-hearted colleague and friend of American settlers, frequently ailing Father Pascal Ricard had by 1849 come to hold a poor opinion of Indians, and all but given up on evangelizing them. He also appears to have shared with many Americans the conviction that American Indians, though once noble, had become a degraded and disappearing “race.” Comments in his letters to France and journal entries of the time, some published later as summaries, are telling: “I ask my reader to forgive me, but these poor people are as dirty as many animals and think nothing of eating their own vermin for a meal or dessert. One can well understand why God alone can ask us to make the sacrifice of living with these poor Indians Every day they diminish in number, and probably, in a short while, there will remain but a few who will serve as witnesses to attest that in former times there were Indians in Oregon.” It is understandable that Chirouse, while reporting on his good fortune in terms of survival during the winter of 1849, may not have wanted to highlight his developing esteem for Kamiakin, and possibly for others in a report to his superior.

This additional information, along with the variations in the letters themselves, all point to the factual unreliability of the letters, their failure to present the truly complex and elusive nature of missionary-indigenous encounters. In later documents we learn in fact of the extent to which the young missionary during this winter of 1849 appears to have begun what would be a lifelong engagement with Northwest Indians. Having become fluent in the Sahaptin dialect of the Columbia Plateau beginning with that winter, and eventual in coastal Salish, Chirouse and other Catholic clerics, including Oblate Father Charles Pandosy, were instrumental in helping the Yakamas and other Columbia Plateau groups negotiate during treaties for larger and better situated reservations than they might otherwise have worked out. As a result of his close association with Yakamas during the ensuing wars, the American government issued a non-gratis status to Pandosy, who spent the remainder of his life among Plateau Indians at a mission to the north of the Canadian border. Following congressional approval of earlier regional treaties in 1849 and the subsequent U.S. Protestant-controlled Bureau of Indian Affairs' removal of Catholic missionaries from most newly established reservations, including the Yakama, Chirouse was assigned in 1859 to the Tulalip Reservation to the north of Seattle. Known affectionately as Papa Chirouse and speaking the coastal Salish of the residents, he continued missionary activities on the reservation until his death in 1892. During the most intensive years of Indian wars in the Northwest, Kamiakin

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emerged as patriot hero of the Yakamas. After several years of desperate wanderings to escape American persecution, he was granted amnesty and settled as a non-reservation Indian near a remote location close to today’s city of Spokane. There, he lived with the wife to whom he was closest, a medicine woman, they had their children baptized Catholics by Jesuits of the nearby Coeur d'Alène mission, and Kamiakin himself eventually sought baptism, though it seems, without abandoning his own traditions.\textsuperscript{15}

As these tales and their historical contexts reveal, the degree to which the people of various indigenous and Christian faiths and traditions in the Old Oregon Country accommodated to one another, or developed syncretistic ways of living and believing, and the reasons for their interactions, remain open to speculation. These tales lend as well to the recognition that history is a non-ending dialogue with an elusive past, calling for the comparison and contextualization of what are frequently multiple and diverging versions of archival documents.

\textsuperscript{15} See Kowrach, Mie. Charles Pandosy, O.M.I; Young, The Mission of the Missionary Oblates; Scheuerman and Michael O. Finley, Finding Chief Kamiakin, 92-100; Selected Letters of A.M.A. Blanchet, 1846-1879, 133-7.