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A Country Strange and Far: The Methodist Church in the Pacific Northwest, 1834–1918

Benjamin L. Hartley
Seattle Pacific University

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A Country Strange and Far: The Methodist Church in the Pacific Northwest, 1834 – 1918, by Michael C. McKenzie. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2022. Pp. 330. \$65.

Benjamin L. Hartley

The Methodist mission to the Pacific Northwest that began in 1834 was a defining venture for the Methodist Episcopal Church's new mission society, which had been established in 1820. No missionary destination in the first generation of the Mission Society received more attention – in terms of both financial support and personnel – than the Oregon mission. This fact alone makes Michael McKenzie's book a welcome addition to the historical literature concerning Christianity in the Pacific Northwest. The book's analysis is not limited to the first generation of Methodist work in the region. McKenzie's aims are more ambitious. He examines the challenges Methodists faced in the Pacific Northwest through almost a full century of activity in both rural and urban spaces. The book is primarily a narrative of failure and decline. Unfortunately, this reviewer found that emphasis on decline to be so dominant as to sometimes cause a few successes and experiences of growth – or at least survival – among Native American peoples and others to be downplayed or ignored.

One of the strongest aspects of the book is the beautiful way McKenzie writes about the landscape and climate of the American West. His writing is reminiscent, at times, of authors like Wallace Stegner who similarly sought to emphasize how the dry climate, vast distances between European settlements, mountains, and deserts all made it exceedingly difficult for newcomers to understand and thrive in the American West. McKenzie's discussion of his own experience growing up in Washington adds a personal dimension to the book that most readers will find helpful in engaging with the text.

In his discussion of the beginning of the Methodist mission in Oregon, the author argues at length that Methodist missionary Jason Lee made a bad decision about where to settle due to a kind of migration-induced trauma from his arduous journey west. The strengths and weaknesses of the settlement site may be debated, but that Lee was mentally compromised does not stand up to scrutiny. The author seems to suggest that Lee was making decisions entirely alone instead of being accompanied by two other missionaries who would have been part of the decision-making. The chosen site in the fertile Willamette valley was also close to an established settlement of retired French fur traders and their Native American wives. It is conceivable that this would have been attractive to the Methodists as these persons may have been seen as helpful cultural intermediaries. Finally, a generation ago, historian Robert Loewenberg noted that it had been the Methodists' plan before the trip to establish an agricultural and administrative center in Oregon before branching out to locales more suitable for evangelistic efforts.¹ That, in fact, is what happened in 1838 with the establishment of the Methodist mission at Wascopam near The Dalles on the Columbia River.

In chronicling the history of Methodist in the Pacific Northwest in the second generation of missionaries the author rightly focuses on Methodist preacher James H. Wilbur who worked mostly among the Yakama people between 1847 and 1882. McKenzie notes that this book project began as a biographical study of Wilbur, and his discussion of him is one of the strongest parts of this book. Wilbur was probably the most savvy and successful Methodist missionary preachers of the second generation of Methodist effort in the region. Church growth at Fort Simcoe among the Yakama exceeded Native American congregational growth at neighboring Walla Walla or The Dalles. Wilbur's work in Fort Simcoe suffered steep decline after his departure in the 1880s.

¹ Robert J. Loewenberg, "Not... by feeble means": Daniel Lee's Plan to Save Oregon, *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (1973): 71.

McKenzie does not provide much information about Methodist work in other reservations where Wilbur did not live. Methodist congregations existed on several reservations in the region in the late nineteenth century, including among the Siletz on the Oregon coast, the Klamath in southern Oregon, and among the Nooksack in the northwest corner of the state of Washington. None of these places are even mentioned in the book's index, and the contributions of Native American Methodist pastors who are also mentioned in Methodist Episcopal Conference journals for this region in this period are similarly not explored.

There remains rich potential to learn from the region's tribal historians about what happened to Methodist congregations and specifically the descendants of Native American Methodist pastors. Some indigenous persons whose ancestors were Methodists likely joined Pentecostal, Shaker, or any number of other Christian congregations (including, perhaps, Methodist ones) that remain on or near reservations in the region. Historical anthropologist Robert Boyd has even suggested that the Methodists' and other Christians' messages about resurrection and Christ's second coming inspired subsequent nativistic prophetic movements.²

Turning to Methodist ministry efforts in Pacific Northwest cities in Chapter Five, McKenzie continues the well-established narrative of decline. Unfortunately, the author does not provide statistical information about the ways Methodist congregations grew and declined as the cities exploded in the late nineteenth century. A few charts illustrating membership growth and decline in these cities would have paired nicely with one chart of Native American congregational growth and decline the author provides earlier in the book. Historians of urban religion in other regions of the country also would have found comparative data for the Pacific Northwest useful.

² Robert T. Boyd, *People of The Dalles: The Indians of Wascopam Mission: A Historical Ethnography Based on the Papers of the Methodist Missionaries*, Studies in the anthropology of North American Indians, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 216.

Despite its weaknesses, this book remains a helpful introduction to Methodism in the Pacific Northwest. Regional histories like this one add nuance to the varied ways the Christian movement adapts or fails to adapt with changing cultural realities. More work is needed comparing Methodist work in other regions to what happened in the Pacific Northwest and to adequately tell the story of Christianity in the Pacific Northwest that includes but also goes far beyond the Methodist contribution. May this book inspire such further explorations.