

# UCLA

## American Indian Culture and Research Journal

### Title

Chief Joseph, Yellow Wolf, and the Creation of Nez Perce History in the Pacific Northwest. By Robert R. McCoy

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/83d6p3tn>

### Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 30(1)

### ISSN

0161-6463

### Author

Evans, Steven Ross

### Publication Date

2006

### DOI

10.17953

### Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

**Chief Joseph, Yellow Wolf, and the Creation of Nez Perce History in the Pacific Northwest.** By Robert R. McCoy. New York and London: Routledge, 2004. 272 pages. \$85.00 cloth.

In his preface Robert McCoy states that in his initial view of Nez Perce tribal history the story of Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce people had already been “overnarrated” (xiv). Living in Lapwai, Idaho, the seat of modern Nez Perce tribal government, and having taught tribal history at Lewis-Clark State College for twenty years, I can partially endorse McCoy’s initial judgment. With all of their poignant drama, the 1877 war and the Chief Joseph story seem to attract everyone to want to write their own narrative. Of course there is much more to the Nez Perce story than this war, but too many Anglo writers ignore the ten thousand years or more of plateau tribal existence.

After a careful scrutiny of the history of Nez Perce, McCoy concludes that a study of Anglo-American narratives of Nez Perce tribal history might help explain how a dominant culture can purloin another group’s history and distort it to its own ends. The results of his thinking reveal his suspicions to be correct as he finds the tribal view drowned by a tidal flood of material offered by Anglo authors steeped in cultural misunderstanding and preconceived racial assumptions straight from nineteenth-century conceptions of manifest destiny.

McCoy’s study constitutes a historiographical foray that is formatted in a new approach, an approach aware of the old Anglo bias and respectful of indigenous views. This is a difficult and tedious process, partly because an indigenous view is mostly lacking if only traditional historical documentation qualifies as legitimate source material. The tribal “government(s)” of most of the tribal past were not literate and kept no government “records” in the sense that most Anglos understand the term. McCoy rightly turns to tribal myth for insight into Nez Perce thinking. This new approach constitutes a large leap of faith and, in truth, often entails a tedious process. It may be too large a leap and too tedious for casual readers, but this approach offers valuable insights for scholars—particularly those scholars with a focus on the plateau of northwestern North America.

McCoy embraces the myth of Nez Perce tribal creation “as a metaphor for the experience of the Nez Perce in dealing with the historical productions of Anglo Americans” (xv). His choice is good. The creation story of the Nez Perce features Coyote in a heroic struggle with Monster who inhaled the animal “people.” Coyote challenged Monster into an inhaling contest, which he fully understood he would “lose.” But he had prepared himself with knives and fire to survive and, once inside Monster, Coyote began to destroy Monster and free the animal “people.” Then Coyote cut Monster into large chunks and created the tribes for hundreds of miles around from these chunks. The Nez Perce people were the last created and came from Monster’s heart. McCoy used this myth as a metaphor for the framing of the entire contents of his study; it works. Each chapter begins with a portion of the myth and each of the six main chapters ends with a recitation of a portion of Coyote’s exploits to illustrate the parallel life of the creation myth with the Nez Perce historiography.

In McCoy's analysis, Coyote represents the Nez Perce people and the arrogant Monster represents the manifest-destiny-imbued academic historical establishment and some "popular" history writers. McCoy's concept is not new. The metaphor was implied as scholars ignored the work of people such as Duncan Donald, the mixed-blood Nez Perce who wrote for the Deer Lodge, Montana, *New Northwest*, back in 1878 and 1879, and Edward S. Curtis's study of plateau tribes including the Nez Perce. McCoy's study reveals that Monster indeed took over tribal history, and the reality of that development becomes palpable with exhibits from both professional historical accounts, such as Cornelius Brosnan's treatment of the Nez Perce people in his *History of the State of Idaho* (1926), and "popular" histories such as *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*.

McCoy's historiographical contribution dovetails nicely with this reviewer's own *Voice of the Old Wolf: Lucullus Virgil McWhorter and the Nez Perce Indians* (1996). Accounts of Nez Perce history that I did not cover, such as Brosnan's *History of the State of Idaho*, are thoroughly analyzed by McCoy, and likewise some of the works that *Voice* addressed, such as J. P. Dunn's *Massacres of the Mountains: A History of the Indian Wars of the Far West*, were passed over by McCoy. While casual readers likely do not care about this kind of analysis, serious students of Nez Perce history probably do care, and for those readers both works will prove useful.

McCoy also chronicled how Chief Joseph and his story were enhanced and embellished to create the myth of the red Napoleon, which served the "needs" of the Anglo storytellers for romance and justification of the land thefts inherent in manifest destiny. For an enrichment of his analysis McCoy might have utilized my own master's thesis, "Chief Joseph and the Red Napoleon Myth" (Washington State University, 1969). This is not a major criticism; in fact, our conclusions are similar. Use of the thesis would merely strengthen his case. Likewise, McCoy would have enriched his analysis of the Nez Perce cycle with the work of Alan G. Marshall, "Nez Perce Social Groups: An Ecological Interpretation," (PhD diss., Washington State University, 1977). Again, inclusion would not have negated assertions regarding the Nez Perce cycle but would have added more power and depth. McCoy also would have helped himself with Caroline James's *Nez Perce Women in Transition, 1877-1990* (1996).

There are several factual errors in the text that should be noted. McCoy wrote that "in 1879, Sue McBeth, a Presbyterian missionary, arrived on the Nez Perce Reservation" (13 and 165). Yet later he wrote, "Sue McBeth arrived in Lapwai, Idaho, in 1873 and her sister Kate joined her in 1879" (174). His last entry is correct. The problem probably arose from confusion over the sisters Sue and Kate and too much reliance on a secondary source, which was also incorrect. McCoy listed Joan T. Mark's work, *A Stranger in Her Native Land: Alice Fletcher and the American Indians* (1988). He should have modified his own contention that the allotment agent, Alice Fletcher, believed "deeply in the efficacy of allotment," if he would have studied Fletcher's own serious misgivings about Nez Perce allotment (Mark, *A Stranger in Her Native Land*, 78). One other factual error regards his narrative account of the death of Chief Looking Glass (125) where he states that the chief was killed by friendly

fire. Several Nez Perce people were killed by friendly fire at the Bear Paws battle, but not Chief Looking Glass. In all narrative accounts such as those of Josephy, McWhorter, or a half dozen others, all agree he was killed by enemy fire. Fort Keogh is mentioned as the location where surrendering Nez Perce people were sent after the Bear Paws and that it is in “present-day Wyoming,” but it is in Montana, near Miles City.

Every year brings forth more historical publications regarding some aspect of Nez Perce tribal history, and considering the ever-increasing mass of materials it may be surprising that McCoy had as few errors as he did. The vast majority of his facts, the analysis of authors and motives, and where they fit in the panorama of tribal history will stand, and McCoy should be applauded for the leap he has made in the effective incorporation of the creation myth of the Nez Perce people as insight into the history-making process. His contribution, to put forth point-blank what has been suggestive and slow brewing in the past, is to show the power of a people not only to survive but to take a firm grasp on their own story and regenerate themselves. Even with some great photographs, maps, and truly insightful footnotes, this book is not for everyone. It is a book for researchers of Native America and it will be one that scholars of Nez Perce history will want.

The Coyote and Monster story is but one of dozens of Nez Perce myths. McCoy’s work challenges the Anglo establishment and tribal members alike to reread and rethink every myth as a metaphor and a potential historical framework. Nez Perce people are currently active in interpreting their own story through the Nez Perce National Historical Park and through their participation in the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial commemoration. As this review is being written, Nez Perce warriors under the colors of the United States are serving in Afghanistan and Iraq, and tribal politicians are players in discussions of the future of northwest salmon and nuclear cleanup. As McCoy’s study suggests, much more will be coming forth from the Nez Perce people and from other plateau tribes.

*Steven Ross Evans*

Lewis-Clark State College

**Choice, Persuasion, and Coercion: Social Control on Spain’s North American Frontiers.** Edited by Jesus F. de la Teja and Ross Frank. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005. 384 pages. \$24.95 paper.

Published in cooperation with the Clements Center for Southwest Studies at Southern Methodist University (SMU), *Choice, Persuasion, and Coercion* features cutting-edge scholarship on the Spanish presence in the United States and northern Mexico from the 1760s to the 1820s. The eleven original essays in the book evolved out of a unique collaborative process in which invited scholars traveled to SMU’s Fort Burgwin campus at Taos, New Mexico to discuss drafts of the essays that they had read in advance. Later the authors came to the SMU campus in Dallas to talk about their revised essays in a conference