

# The Oregonian

C.E.S. Wood and Chief Joseph: an eloquent empathy

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When Chief Joseph surrendered to the U.S. Army on Oct. 5, 1877, a young lieutenant named Charles Erskine Scott Wood observed the Nez Perce warrior with fascination and admiration. A talented artist, Wood made a pencil sketch of Joseph and interviewed him, using a translator.

What Joseph actually said that day is a matter of great debate. The conclusion of Joseph's "surrender speech" -- "From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever"-- is arguably the most famous phrase ever attributed to a Native American. It's also highly unlikely Joseph said anything like it. Among Wood's other talents was writing poetry, and it's more accurate to consider the surrender speech the way George Venn does, as a "disguised heroic sonnet" written by Wood, rather than as a verbatim transcription of Joseph's words.

In his book *Soldier to Advocate: C.E.S. Wood's 1877 Legacy*, Venn makes the nuanced argument that the military campaign against the Nez Perce was a transformative event in Wood's life and that at the surrender he was acting in dual roles: as an advocate for Gen. O.O. Howard, a mentor and father figure who promoted him to aide-de-camp but whose conservative Christianity and high-handed treatment of the Indians differed from Wood's views; and as advocate for the Nez Perce, a people Wood admired for their dignity, courage and individuality.

Venn believes the first sentence of the surrender speech-- "Tell General Howard I know his heart"-- represents Wood serving as Howard's advocate and the remaining 16 sentences are a synthesis of Nez Perce facts, translations "and his own observations and fictions." Joseph and Wood began a friendship that day that lasted the rest of their lives, but Joseph, an articulate man, never confirmed the surrender speech as his own words. Neither did anyone else who was there that day.

Wood spent the next 40 years revising and refining the surrender speech, which he first leaked to a North Dakota newspaper with the help of a Portland journalist and then published anonymously in Eastern newspapers and magazines. The effect, especially when combined with Wood's accurate, evocative drawings, was to bolster Howard's reputation while creating a positive image of the Nez Perce.

Venn, professor emeritus of English at Eastern Oregon University and an award-winning poet, believes the surrender speech is a key to understanding Wood's "legacy of dissent." Wood was the rare 19th-century military officer who did not believe in Manifest Destiny and who recognized the humanity of Native Americans and sought to understand their culture. Venn thinks it is simplistic to dismiss the surrender speech as a clever fabrication; better to see it as Wood's "most imaginative, enduring and articulate dissent," one that "elevate[d] Chief Joseph to the status of a military genius" while defending Howard.

*Soldier to Advocate* is a monograph, printed in a limited edition of 500 copies by La Grande publisher Wordcraft of Oregon. Its contents includes a transcription of Wood's 1877 diary, a year in which he went to Alaska on a scientific expedition before being sent to join Howard on the Nez Perce campaign. The book is full of period photographs and drawings, including numerous sketches by Wood that were discovered by Venn and are in print for the first time since 1877.

Venn got the kind of lucky break that sometimes comes to thorough researchers when he requested microfilm of *The Daily Graphic*, a New York newspaper, and received the bound volumes of the paper instead. He found numerous drawings by Wood, often attributed to "an Officer in the Field." Wood's drawings were the first published images of the Nez Perce.

There's plenty more in Venn's monograph: newly transcribed letters by Joseph, Wood and Howard; previously unpublished poetry relating to war and the Nez Perce by the prolific Wood; a section on the relationship between the Wood family and the Nez Perce in modern times.

Wood lived in Portland for decades, working as a lawyer and establishing himself as a liberal civic leader before moving to California and devoting himself to writing and art. His involvement in the story of Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce is crucial to our understanding of that essential part of Pacific Northwest history, and Venn's work breaks new ground.

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