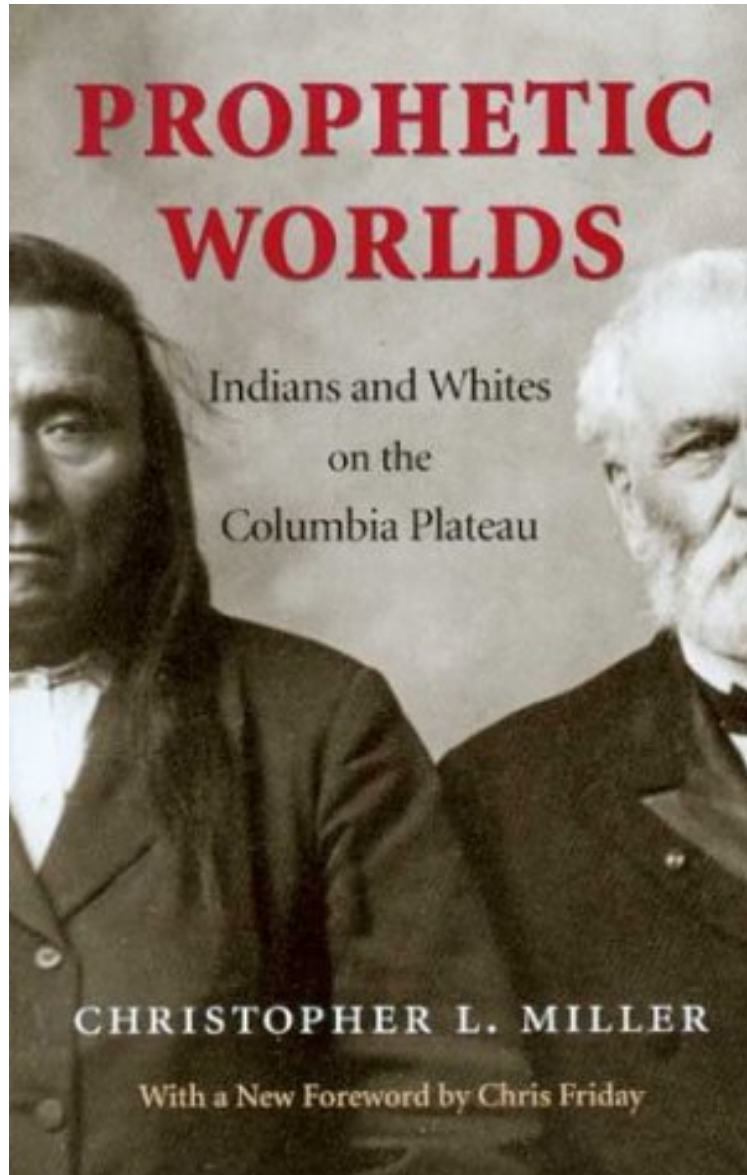


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Christopher L. Miller

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Christopher L. Miller : Prophetic Worlds (Columbia Northwest Classics) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Prophetic Worlds (Columbia Northwest Classics):

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. A Refreshing Addition to Native History of Washington By Dusty J, Summit Christopher Miller begins his book Prophetic Worlds by claiming, "Flagrant disregard for the complexities of human motivation has led us to credit our ancestors with godlike omniscience. This, in turn, has forced us to invent

devious plots or to question the moral fiber of these people in order to explain why they did not act on their all-encompassing knowledge and behave as we think they should have." (p. 2) Such a statement sums up Miller's argument of his short book. He argues that models of western expansion based on the characters of the "ethnocentric settler" and the "noble and graceful Indian" are of no use to us anymore, being that the frontier is long since closed and all we have left is our post-modern conscience trying to explain what happened in a respectful way. Miller is one of a new order of historians who are combining multiple fields of study to better understand our heritage. This multifaceted view is used to explain ethnohistory. Ethnohistory is actually a compellation of history and anthropology that subscribes to methods of a literacist, an artist, an oral historian, and a scholar of mythology. Miller has adopted a form of ethnohistory to reinvigorate the story of the native-white contact of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. Miller has two objectives in his book. First, he wishes to better explain the importance of pre-existing conditions of the native landscape. Miller uncovers many interesting details of the pre-settler native society. He explains the "task group system" (a specialized labor system of sorts) and how it bound natives groups together through an economic system that seems to have pre-dated many tribal systems or systems of an Indian "nation" (in my experience, this idea is unique to this book). He explains how plagues swept through the Indian society leaving them weak, dissolved in numbers, and without a functional "task group system." This population and energy crisis caused native groups to support warrior-chiefs rather than diplomatic chiefs; and thus grew a class of warring and raiding tribes - the image that would be known by the white settlers. Miller's second objective is to elevate the role of prophecy, oral tradition, and ideologies of both the native groups and the white settlers. Miller claims that "myths and folk stories can no longer be passed off as quaint stories dreamed up by the childlike imaginations of "primitives."" (p. 3) Miller highlights a particular prophecy told by a Columbia plateau people in response to a volcanic eruption in the west. There would arrive a new group of people, the prophecy went, who would bring a message and a book that would cause the native world to fall to pieces. Curious - It being that the native world had already begun to fall to pieces (through plague and war) it is no surprise that the arrival Lewis and Clark (and the groups to follow) were both feared because of the prophecy and revered because of the hope that they would bring a new and better way of life. The whites had their own set of prophecies which were articulated by Jeffersonian progressivism and Judeo-Christian ideologies of man's role as a marshal of morals and God's will. Miller echoes the view of Carolyn Merchant, renowned historian of feminism and environmental perceptions. Merchant, like Miller in a way, argued that the western ideas born of the scientific revolution endowed the white man to believing he was to improve and conquer the wild lands of the west. This was personified through manifest destiny. The stage was set; a native society who was willing to accept the new way of life; the settlers who were prepared to tame the land and its' indigenous population (this of course was not always the case - something the 7th Calvary would learn many years later). My only complaint of *Prophetic Worlds* is the author's reliance on "self-fulfilling prophecies" as historical characters and canals in which history had no choice but to follow. As historians, we are charged with explaining and documenting the past transgressions and human dramas and are not ourselves - "prophets." Labeling a fall or rise of a society or individual as a "self-fulfilled prophecy" coming to fruition is nearly as ambiguous a claim as the prophecies themselves and are too vague to ultimately explain anything. This aside, *Prophetic Worlds* is a refreshing new look at the drama of whites and natives in the west and would serve any historian or anthropologist looking for new ways to tackle catastrophic societal collisions.

In his provocative ethnohistory, Christopher Miller offers an innovative reinterpretation of relations between Native Americans and Christian settlers on the Columbia Plateau. Miller draws on a wealth of ethnographic resources to show how culturally-derived perceptions and systems of rationality played more of a determining role in the interactions between these two groups than did material forces. Initially, Plateau Indians and the American missionaries who came to convert them perceived each other as crucial to the fulfillment of their own millennial destiny. When these views were contravened, relations quickly and fatally soured. In explaining this devolution, *Prophetic Worlds* provides a novel and insightful rendering of the cultural understandings that underwrote the mid-nineteenth-century transformation of life on the Plateau.

"The author deftly weaves materials drawn from a wide variety of disciplines to create a tapestry of tragic events born of millenarian visions. The writing is cogent, clear, and graceful." *Journal of American History* "[Miller] has produced a work that is a provocative revisionist assessment of the remarkably parallel worlds of Indians and whites on the Columbia Plateau. . . . Miller's work is tightly crafted and a source of inspiration for readers seeking explanation rather than just description of past events." *Oregon Historical Quarterly* "Miller's revisionist proposal deserves attention for its erudition and ingenuity . . . and as a challenge to reassess one's own reading of this complex juncture of historical and anthropological evidence." *Western Historical Quarterly* About the Author Christopher L. Miller is associate professor of history and philosophy at the University of Texas-Pan American. His recent work includes *Making America: A History of the United States*.