

*For Honor or Destiny: The Anglo-American Crisis over the Oregon Territory*, by Donald Rakestraw. New York: Peter Lang, 1995. xii, 240 pp. Illus. US\$44.95 cloth.

In the years prior to 1846, the Northwest Coast — an isolated region scarcely populated by non-Native peoples — was for the second time in less than a century the unlikely flashpoint that brought far-distant powers to the brink of war. At issue was the boundary between British and American claims in the “Oregon Country.” While President James Polk blustered that he would have “54’40 or Fight,” Great Britain talked of sending a powerful fleet to ensure its imperial hold on the region. The Oregon boundary dispute was settled peacefully, largely because neither side truly believed the territory worth fighting over. The resulting treaty delineated British Columbia’s most critical boundary; indeed, without it there might not even have been a *British* Columbia. Despite its significance, though, the Oregon boundary dispute has largely been ignored by BC’s historians, leaving it to their colleagues south of the border to produce the most substantial work on the topic.

This most recent analysis is no exception. *For Honor or Destiny: The Anglo-American Crisis over the Oregon Territory*, by Donald Rakestraw, began its life as a doctoral thesis completed at the University of Alabama. Published as part of an American University Studies series, Rakestraw’s book covers much the same ground as did that of his countryman Frederick Merk some decades ago. By making extensive use of new primary material, Rakestraw is able to present a fresh, succinct, and well-written chronological narrative of the events leading up to the Oregon Treaty of 1846.

Rakestraw begins by describing the “seeds of controversy” in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which left Britain and the United States advancing conflicting claims to, while agreeing to joint occupation and use of, the territory. The subsequent chapters give a detailed description of the progress of the dispute, focusing on the politics behind the two governments’ respective positions and the various diplomatic conferences on the issue. The half-decade prior to the Oregon Treaty receives the most attention, and Rakestraw at times gets bogged down in day-to-day events.

Rakestraw shows that the issue was left to drift dangerously, escalating until Britain and the US almost inadvertently found themselves close to war. The irony of the situation was that neither side valued Oregon for itself, at least certainly not enough to go to war over. However, and this is Rakestraw’s main argument, Oregon became transformed into an issue that pitted notions of American “destiny” against notions of British “honor.” In the US, Oregon was incorporated within the rhetoric of expansion and “manifest destiny”; this irresistible force met an immovable object in British imperial honour, which even Lord Aberdeen, the chronically pacific foreign secretary, defined as “a substantial property.” Fortunately for both sides,

the war scare of 1845-46 was defused, as cooler heads prevailed, and the Oregon Treaty was signed just as the US was turning its attention to larger conquests involving Mexico.

Without explicitly saying so, Rakestraw underscores the point that this dispute was settled far away from Oregon itself, by politicians and diplomats who had never seen the region. Rakestraw's study is largely a diplomatic history; he works within the "realist" tradition and adopts a geopolitical perspective. London and Washington are the venues of action (and repositories of primary sources). From reading his acknowledgments it seems possible that, like the diplomats who decided the dispute, Rakestraw himself never visited the Northwest.

By taking such a global perspective, Rakestraw gives too little attention to the situation on the ground in Oregon. He argues that the influx of American settlers played a crucial role in the dispute, and he makes tantalizing suggestions about the establishment of territorial governments in the region, noting that they received support from both American and British/Canadian settlers. He also recognizes the crucial role played by the Hudson's Bay Company in the region and alludes to the beginnings of the demonization of the company by American settlers (a motif that would persist in Oregon historiography for decades). However, much of this treatment is based on secondary sources and remains suggestive rather than in-depth. Indeed, Rakestraw could easily have devoted a whole chapter to the evolving situation within the Oregon Country. Did American settlers exert any real pressure north of the Columbia, given that they remained almost exclusively south of the river and, according to Merk, did not expect to gain possession of the other side? What were the relations between the American and British/Canadian settlers — and, in turn, between these communities and the region's Native peoples — particularly in light of the emergence of local government? How, in the end, did the Oregon dispute and settlement play out within Oregon itself?

Rakestraw is no doubt correct in asserting that the Oregon boundary was decided by diplomats and politicians representing far-distant powers. And in clearly delineating the geopolitical forces behind the Oregon dispute, *For Honor or Destiny* makes a significant contribution to the history of BC and the Pacific Northwest. But what made the Oregon boundary a reality was the occupation of the respective sides of the border by non-Native people under different political jurisdictions. This determined that one side would remain American and the other British, while also shaping the contours of the respective history of each. Perhaps historians closer to the ground might best tackle this topic.