

# Sex Sells: Prostitution on the Lower Columbia River 1813–1821

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*In the early and mid-1810s, as European presence at the mouth of the Columbia became entrenched, the prostitution of women was seen by local Indigenous nations, including the Chinook, to be a natural venture into the emerging capitalist system. The expansion of prostitution happened for multiple reasons and was facilitated by flexible standards of sexuality, women's powerful positions in society, and by the existing networks of slavery. Prostitution was seen as a lucrative endeavor by Indigenous nations, such as the Chinook, and its demise as a prominent aspect of life on the Lower Columbia only came with changing attitudes and sexual standards and the favouring of longer term, more committed relationships. Prostitution on the Lower Columbia was at no point static or easily definable. Limited availability of primary sources and differing sexual norms between Indigenous and western conceptions of sexuality complicate the study of sexual practices on the Lower Columbia, and scholars need to be conscious of them.*

Fort George, at the mouth of the Columbia River, existed at a confluence of different cultures. Sexual relationships, including prostitution, took place frequently. Prostitutes were women, frequently slaves, who engaged in brief sexual encounters for some sort of gain, either for themselves or someone else.<sup>1</sup> However, because of limited primary sources and the differences between Indigenous and Western conceptions of sexuality, scholars must be attentive to not mischaracterize Indigenous sexual practices as prostitution; prostitution on the Lower Columbia was at no point static or easily definable. Prostitution, particularly among the Chinook peoples, emerged as an adaptation to the presence of European men and capitalist economies.<sup>2</sup> The exchange of sex for goods was able to expand readily because of three intimately connected factors: Chinookan conceptions of sexuality, women occupying prominent and influential positions in trade

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1 Gray Whaley, "‘Complete Liberty’? Gender, Sexuality, Race, and Social Change on the Lower Columbia River, 1805–1838," *Ethnohistory* 54, no. 4 (2007): 672.

2 The Chinook were one of the most prominent nations on whose traditional territory Fort George was established.

networks, and because the practice of slavery had established a network of women who could be engaged in the selling of sexual favours.

Two significant challenges exist when examining prostitution on the Northwest Coast: the dramatically different world views that participants possessed and the one-sidedness of sources available. When studying prostitution on the Northwest Coast, problems arise from the distinctly different ways of engaging with the world that Indigenous peoples, including the Chinook, and Europeans had. The European world view was highly patriarchal, and women occupied a distinctly marginalized position. This belief was reflected in the limited inclusion in settlers' journals of the Indigenous women that European men encountered.<sup>3</sup> Also arising out of differing world views and contributing to the challenging nature of this field of study are different understandings of acceptable sexual behaviour and what constituted prostitution between parties. Because of these varying conceptions it is important to not misrepresent Chinookan sexual and relational practices as prostitution, or to "discover" prostitution where there was none. The one-sidedness of the sources that are available to scholars who are exploring practices of prostitution is also problematic because the most accessible primary sources, and the only sources I could locate, are European-authored. My exploration of prostitution is almost entirely missing the voices of both historic and contemporary Indigenous women, which is a significant flaw. Other scholars' minimal engagement with Indigenous-authored sources begs the question if, for Settlers, this remains an ethical field of study, or if solely engaging with European sources reinforces damaging colonial notions of history. My position as a Settler is important in how I engaged with this exploration into the practices of prostitution among Chinookan women; my family settled along the Columbia river in the 1990s, and my relationship to the river contributed to my choice to study a history that was connected to it. I chose to explore the topic of Indigenous women in prostitution because I was interested in the agency that Indigenous women might have been demonstrating, but my ability to respond to this material is limited because I have no personal stake in the hardship or trauma that the Chinook experienced as a result of the expansion of prostitution.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Historian Elizabeth Vibert hypothesizes that it was not mere inattention to the presence of women in the region that contributed to their insignificant representation in European's journals, but rather a deliberate attempt to write Indigenous women, and peoples, out of existence.

Elizabeth Vibert, "Landscaping the Wilds: Traders Imagine the Plateau," in *Traders' Tales: Narratives of Cultural Encounters in the Columbia Plateau, 1807–1846* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 85.

<sup>4</sup> I later argue that Chinook women engaging in prostitution was an exercise of agency, but it is important to remain conscious of power dynamics flowing

Although, as historian Gray Whaley contends, prostitution on the Northwest coast was one of the most common but least evidenced activities that took place in relation to Chinookan women, there is evidence of prostitution that is visible in primary sources such as: Alexander Ross', *Adventures of the First Settlers on the Oregon or Columbia Rivers 1810–1813*, Ross Cox's *The Columbia River*, and Alexander Henry and David Thompson's *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest*. The writings of chief traders Duncan McDougall and Alexander Henry suggest that throughout the early and mid-1810s, as the presence of the Fort and of Western men became more entrenched at the mouth of the Columbia, prostitution became a solidified practice.<sup>5</sup> Some instances of prostitution were clearly recorded, as Cox details:

Numbers of the women reside during certain periods of the year in small huts about the fort from which it is difficult to keep the men. They generally retire with the fall of the leaf to their respective villages, and during the winter months seldom visit Fort George. But on the arrival of spring and autumn brigades from the interior... pour in from all parts, and besiege or *voyageurs* much after the manner which their frail sisters at Portsmouth adopt when attacking the crews of a newly arrived India fleet.<sup>6</sup> Mothers participate with their daughters in the proceeds arising from their prostitution.<sup>7</sup>

Other significant references to prostitution are visible in Henry and Thompson's journal. Henry and Thompson state, "A canotée of prostitutes came here this morning, but were not allowed to land, on pain of being put in irons; this threat, I hope, will keep them off," and continue on to state that the following day another canotée of prostitutes arrived the following day.<sup>8</sup> Prostitution was a significant feature of the fur trade

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between traders, who possessed many desirable goods, and women who engaged in prostitution.

<sup>5</sup> Whaley, "Complete Liberty'?", 677, 684.

<sup>6</sup> "Frail sisters" was a common euphemism for prostitutes throughout the nineteenth century.

<sup>7</sup> Ross Cox, *The Columbia River: Or Scenes and Adventures During a Residence of a Six Years on the Western Side of the Rocky Mountains among Various Tribes of Indians Hitherto Unknown; Together with "A Journey Across the American Continent,"* ed. Edgar I. Stewart and Jane R. Stewart (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), 167.

<sup>8</sup> Alexander Henry and David Thompson, *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest: The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry and of David Thompson, 1799–1814*, ed. Elliot Coues (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1897), 890, 891.

Evidenced in this quote are also some of the unfavourable attitudes that European men held towards Indigenous women, particularly those who were

along the Columbia, most frequently recorded among the Chinook, but such clear references are not common in the European sources.<sup>9</sup> More subtle references such as the following observation, in which Cox notes the payment that a woman received, were more common than openly addressing prostitutes. Cox stated that one clerk at Fort George “was surprised at recognising... an old *chere amie*, who the preceding year had spent three weeks with him in his tent ... decorated with some of the baubles he had then given her.”<sup>10</sup> This excerpt demonstrates that this woman had been compensated, with baubles, for the time she had spent with the clerk in the prior year.<sup>11</sup> Although prostitution was infrequently referenced in the journals left by traders, explorers, and fort managers, prostitution happened frequently around Fort George.

Indigenous conceptions of idealized sexuality were dramatically different from their European counterparts, and non-monogamous or extramarital sex were not viewed as problematic.<sup>12</sup> The Indigenous practice of wife-lending is one example their flexible approach to sexuality. Among the Chinook is a complex history of wife-lending, and the practice had important economic and social consequences. Wife-lending was frequently considered an aspect of reciprocal relationships; although this practice was not considered amoral or adulterous, to traders it seemed indicative of promiscuous sexual behaviour.<sup>13</sup> Traders can be accused of corrupting this traditional practice into outright prostitution. The openness of Chinookan views of sexuality, as seen in the practice of wife-lending, contributed to the spread of prostitution because morally the Chinook did not conceive of a problem with women engaging in sexual activities with the European arrivals. This

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engaged in prostitution.

The following day Henry and Thompson note “A canotee of prostitutes from the Clatsop village arrived” with which they engaged in minor trade. A canotée is an old French word for canoe.

9 Van Kirk, “Enter the White Man,” 34.

10 Cox, *The Columbia River*, 172.

11 Most sources indicate the term “baubles” is frequently used to refer to the payment women received in return for sex. Many instances indicate that they were frequently various forms of ornaments or jewelry.

12 Sylvia Van Kirk, “Enter the White Man,” in *Many Tender Ties: Women in the Fur-Trade Society, 1670–1870* (Winnipeg MN: Watson & Dwyer Publishing, 1999), 33.

It is important to note that, while accepted levels of sexual activity were far less rigid than in a Western world view, sexual liberty was not equated with adultery. Clandestine or adulterous relationships were not sanctioned whatsoever, and a woman who was discovered with a paramour could be punished with physical mutilation or death.

13 Van Kirk, “Enter the White Man,” 33.

potential source of income in the emerging capitalist society, European men’s sexual desires, was quickly taken advantage of by Indigenous peoples. Nations, including the Chinook, adapted their society to take advantage of the valuable commodity that women possessed.<sup>14</sup>

Further than prostitution expanding because of historical roots of flexible sexual standards in Chinookan society, the practice expanded because of women’s active participation in trade networks. Prior to the arrival of European traders, Indigenous peoples were involved in and fostered complex trade networks with each other and with other Indigenous nations, both proximally and distally located. Historically, Indigenous women played important roles in trade networks.<sup>15</sup> With the arrival of Europeans, Indigenous women in the Pacific Northwest expressed clear interest in engaging in the expanded trade networks.<sup>16</sup> Women’s prominent economic roles were frequently noted in journals kept by European traders and explorers, and the powerful position Indigenous women held in societies was repeatedly noted. Contemporary journalists hypothesized that Indigenous women held so much power because they were largely responsible for food production, and in the context of the fur trade explicitly, women occupied important positions because they were responsible for preparing the furs that were to be traded. During the fur-trade period, Chinook women actively bartered for goods at trading posts, and they held important roles in decision making, especially while visiting the fort. In journals, there are scattered references to women trading grass mats, small animal pelts, roots, berries, and other gathered or crafted items, in exchange for knives, metal awls and needles, kettles, and cloth.<sup>17</sup> Cox further expanded on the role of women as he witnessed it. He stated, “for among [the Chinook] old women possess great authority,” indicating that even outsiders could see the value placed in women’s decision making.<sup>18</sup> Ross stated, in specific reference to Chinook women, that they would “trade and barter ... as actively ... as the men, and it is as common to see the wife trading at the factory as her husband.”<sup>19</sup> Even outside the fort, trade with women occurred frequently, as seen

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14 Ibid.

15 Lillian Ackerman, *A Necessary Balance: Gender and Power Among Indians of the Columbia Plateau*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 9.

16 Ramona Ford, “Native American Women: Changing Statuses, Changing Interpretations,” in *Writing the Range: Race, Class, and Culture in the Women’s West*, ed. Elizabeth Jameson and Susan Armitage (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 55.

17 Ackerman, *A Necessary Balance*, 18.

18 Cox, *The Columbia River*, 160.

19 Alexander Ross, *Adventures of the First Settlers on the Oregon or Columbia Rivers 1810–1813*, (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2000), 107.

in the journal of Alexander Henry. Henry stated that “we now daily trade raspberries from the women,” and he repeatedly noted the frequency with which he traded exclusively with women.<sup>20</sup> Women’s significant role in traditional and fur-trade economies contributed to their involvement in prostitution because they were already in a position to be trading the newly popular commodity of sexual favours.

Women were able to express a degree of financial autonomy by extending their trade network into the exchange of sex for goods.<sup>21</sup> Because Chinook conceptions of sexuality varied immensely from Western understandings and idealized versions of the “chaste woman,” the exchange of sexual services for money or goods was not seen as problematic. Rather, the practice of exchanging sex for payment was a natural expansion of women’s role in trade as women possessed a valuable commodity that could be taken advantage of.<sup>22</sup> Income from prostitution became integrated into Chinook community. For example, Cox noted the financial contribution that women were able to make when he stated that, “in many instances, husbands share with their wives the wages of infamy.”<sup>23</sup> Exchanging sexual favours for goods was a practical and lucrative way for Indigenous nations to adapt to and further

20 Henry and Thompson, *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest*, 912.

21 Whaley, “‘Complete Liberty’?,” 686.

It is worth noting, however, that most women who engaged in prostitution were slaves, and were not engaging in prostitution for self-gain, but rather were being mandated to engage in sex-based exchanges for the benefit of their owners.

22 An entirely different school of thought on why prostitution was present on the Northwest Coast exists and is worth acknowledging. American scholar Anne Butler writes about a marginally later time on the Northwest Coast, but she contends by extrapolation that the introduction of the fur trade led to a series of unprecedented changes for Indigenous women on the Northwest Coast. She argues that Indigenous women resorted to prostitution because they had been “totally excluded from ... the economic transformation of the West,” and engaged in sex work to obtain a minimal standard of financial security and autonomy.

The significant flaw with Butler’s argument is that it relies on economic determinism in relation to prostitution, and as Ronald Hyam posits, positions Indigenous women as the “victims of social and economic circumstances beyond their control.” The lack of agency that Indigenous women are provided by Butler is highly problematic.

Anne Butler, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in the American West 1865–90* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 12; Ronald Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience* (Manchester UK: Manchester University Press), 137.

23 Cox, *The Columbia River*, 167.

profit from the presence of an emerging European capitalist economy.<sup>24</sup>

Chinook people intended to adapt to these unforeseen challenges by expanding and altering the role of slavery into one of prostitution.<sup>25</sup> Many, if not all, of the women that served as Chinookan prostitutes were slaves: captured or traded women that had little social status or bodily autonomy in Chinook society.<sup>26</sup> Slavery rendered these women effectively kinless and unbound them from a local or national identity, which diminished the level of respect they merited in communities and their bodily autonomy, both of which contributed to their obligations as prostitutes.<sup>27</sup> From the onset of the fur trade, journals kept by Europeans show the growing number of female Indigenous slaves who were involved in prostitution. Journals kept by Europeans initially noted the restrictions on Indigenous women around fraternizing with crew members, but within a few years of European presence in the region the practice of exchanging sex for goods was frequently noted.<sup>28</sup> Scholar Lorraine Littlefield argues that the demand to produce more goods that were traditionally associated with women’s gender roles contributed to the increased importance of slaves in the economy. Littlefield posits that the increased number of females further contributed to the role of female slaves in prostitution.<sup>29</sup> The practice of prominent women in Chinook society holding slaves was recorded in journals that were written at the time. For example, Alexander Ross noted that “a Chinooke matron is constantly attended by two, three, or more slaves, who are on all occasions obsequious to her will,” including engaging in sexual activities if that was demanded.<sup>30</sup> However, direct conclusions such as Littlefield’s require more work before fully entering discourses surrounding prostitution and female slaves. In conclusion,

24 Jennifer Windecker, “The Prostitution of Native Women of the North Coast of British Columbia,” *BC Historical News* 30, no. 3 (1997): 34.

25 Whaley, “‘Complete Liberty’?,” 690; Jennifer Windecker, “The Prostitution of Native Women of the North Coast of British Columbia,” *BC Historical News* 30, no. 3 (1997): 35.

26 Gray Whaley, “‘Complete Liberty’?,” 676.

In scholarship surrounding Indigenous women’s engagements in prostitution on the Lower Columbia there has not been consensus reached on if the practice took place in relation to both enslaved and non-enslaved women. However, most scholarship indicates that it was predominantly enslaved women who were engaging in prostitution, which complicates the narrative of prostitution being an exercise of agency.

27 Ibid.

28 Lorraine Littlefield, “The Role of Women in the Northwest Coast Fur Trade,” (MA thesis, Carleton University, 1987), 82.

29 Littlefield, “The Role of Women,” 80.

30 Ross, *Adventures of the First Settlers*, 107.



existing structures of slavery contributed to the proliferation of prostitution because the slave trade produced many women who could readily engage in prostitution, willingly, or more commonly, by order.

Ultimately, prostitution was able to expand so readily because there was demand on the behalf of the European arrivals for the sexual favours of Indigenous women. The isolated and exhausting nature of many fort employees' existences "prompted traders, even those who were initially determined not to do so, to seek the companionship of Indian women."<sup>31</sup> Despite European's idealized versions of womanhood and chastity, and European men thinking very little of the Indigenous women they met, as demonstrated by Cox, Ross, Henry, and Thompson, the sexual attitudes and liberties they witnessed aroused them, especially when there were no white women present.<sup>32</sup> The desire to engage in sexual encounters, both brief and long-term, was clearly experienced by European men, which contributed immensely to the proliferation of prostitution.<sup>33</sup>

As evidenced in some of the statements recorded by men like Cox, Ross, Henry, and Thompson, prostitution, and the women who engaged in the selling of sex were not looked upon favourably, and Northwest Company management repeatedly made efforts to stop prostitution around the fort. The desire to eliminate prostitution came primarily from the desire to stop the spread of debilitating sexual diseases, and because marriages *a la façon du pays* were of greater benefit to the company.<sup>34</sup> Prostitution on the Lower Columbia came to be problematic in the eyes of the Northwest Company especially because of its contribution to the spread of sexually transmitted infections. Contemporary journalists believed that disease and suffering were seen to be the "natural consequence" of engaging in such amoral activities.<sup>35</sup> The forts were to be places of proper British morality, yet men continued to engage in sexual activities and contract sexually transmitted infections that decreased their productivity, which the company did not tolerate.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore,

marriages *a la façon du pays* came to be seen as extremely useful to the Northwest Company. The establishment of long-term, committed relationships, as seen in marriages *a la façon du pays* between company employees and Indigenous women, served the company politically and financially. These marriages established a useful link between traders and local Indigenous nations, and one of the reasons that prostitution was discouraged was because the company viewed engaging in casual sexual relationships as a deterrent to getting married. As Robin Fisher states, marriage was encouraged because it better served the company than "having servants disappear over the fort wall to spend the night with Indian women."<sup>37</sup> In the early nineteenth century there were numerous attempts to stop prostitution from taking place on the Lower Columbia. One attempt took place under Chief Factor Alexander Henry. Henry arrived in the region with preconceived misconceptions about Indigenous women and prostitution, and because of his misconceptions he "evidenced little experience with or tolerance for women conducting trade."<sup>38</sup> His fear of furthering prostitution led him to accuse almost all female traders of being prostitutes and refuse to engage with them.<sup>39</sup> Prostitution, however, had become a financially lucrative aspect of the presence of colonials and was not one to be readily surrendered by the Indigenous peoples who engaged in the practice.<sup>40</sup>

By the 1830s rates of prostitution on the Lower Columbia had decreased, as the profession came to be marginalized because of shifting demographics and conceptions of sexuality.<sup>41</sup> While prostitution was definitely taking place on the Northwest Coast, it is important not to overstate its commonness. It is significant that, despite the fact that the fur-trade society can be seen as highly conducive to short term, transactional relationships between European men and Indigenous women, more committed relationships, in the form of marriages *a la façon du pays* were favoured, both by the Northwest Company and by

31 Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict: Indian Europeans Relations in British Columbia 1774–1890* (Vancouver BC: UBC Press, 1992), 41.

32 Ross, *Adventures of the First Settlers*, 106; Cox, *The Columbia River*, 166; Henry and Thompson, 754, 859.

33 Van Kirk, "Enter the White Man," 33.

34 Marriages *a la façon du pays* were relationships that were established between non-Indigenous men and Indigenous women. The marriage practice that emerged was distinct from both Indigenous and European traditions and was initially not recognized by the church or European officials. Varying levels of commitment between spouses are seen in these marriages, but the practice of European men forming these unions with Indigenous women who were proximally located to their forts was common.

35 Van Kirk, "Enter the White Man," 34; Cox, *The Columbia River*, 172.

36 Vibert, "Landscaping the Wilds," 109.

37 Fisher, *Contact and Conflict*, 42.

It is worth noting that attempts to stop prostitution were at times very poorly received by the Indigenous nations they concerned. These attempts frequently had detrimental economic and social consequences for the company; for example when Chief Factor McDougall responded to Clatsop Chinookan chief Coalpo ignoring of his order to "send the girls away," McDougall responded by ordering Coalpo "to be off with the whole of his people immediately" and proceeded to destroy the remains of the Chinookan village at Fort George, temporarily alienating the Chinook and embittering relations.

38 Whaley, "'Complete Liberty'?", 684–685.

39 Ibid, 686.

40 Whaley, "'Complete Liberty'?", 684.

41 Ibid, 672.

individuals.<sup>42</sup> In the early and mid-1810s, as European presence at the mouth of the Columbia became entrenched, the prostitution of women was seen by local Indigenous nations, including the Chinook, to be a natural venture into the emerging capitalist system. To the discontent of Northwest Company managers, the expansion of prostitution was facilitated by flexible standards of sexuality, women's powerful positions in society, and by the existing networks of slavery. Prostitution was seen as a lucrative endeavor by Indigenous nations such as the Chinook, and its demise as a prominent aspect of life on the Lower Columbia only came with changing attitudes and sexual standards.



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42 Van Kirk, "Enter the White Man," 35.