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Engineering Japanese Settler Colonialism in Hokkaido
A Postcolonial Reevaluation of William Wheeler's Work for the *Kaitakushi*

JOHN L. HENNESSEY

In 1876, the *Kaitakushi*, the Japanese government agency responsible for the settlement of the northern island of Hokkaido, hired three Americans from Massachusetts Agricultural College: William Smith Clark, William Wheeler and David Pearce Penhallow. Their task was to establish a comparable institution in Hokkaido, Sapporo Agricultural College, that would spread American-style scientific agriculture among new settlers. Although recent historical research has highlighted the colonial nature of the modern settlement of Hokkaido and other American advisors' role in transmitting modern technologies of settler colonialism, the tenure of these three professors has never been examined from a postcolonial perspective. This article will investigate the writings of engineer William Wheeler, who served as president of the new college for several years and advised the *Kaitakushi* on numerous infrastructure projects, to look for clues about his attitudes towards and role in Japanese settler colonialism in Hokkaido. Textual evidence reveals Wheeler's awareness of and complicity in this undertaking.

Keywords: William Wheeler, Sapporo Agricultural College, Hokkaido, settler colonialism, *Kaitakushi*, *oyatoi gaikokujin*

For years, there was a general consensus that Japan's modern colonial expansion began with 1895 acquisition of Taiwan, but recently, an increasing number of scholars have emphasized the importance of moving the date earlier to the advent of Japanese settler colonialism in Hokkaido (Siddle, 1996; Medak-Saltzman, 2008; Mason, 2012; Inoue, 2013). In 1868, immediately following the Meiji Restoration, the new Japanese government created the Kaitakushi, a colonial development agency in charge of systematically settling Hokkaido with Japanese farmers and exploiting its natural resources. From its inception, the Meiji government devoted extensive resources to the colonization of Hokkaido for three reasons. Strategically, they wanted to solidify their claims to the territory to create a northern buffer zone against Russian encroachment. Economically, they were drawn by the island's abundant resources, particularly coal, timber, fish and farmland. Finally, they saw the colonization of Hokkaido as a way to demonstrate that Japan was a 'modern' and 'civilized' country to the West, where colonial expansion was a key marker of prestige (Medak-Saltzman, 2008; Mason, 2012).

While this plan promised great benefits for Japan, the island's indigenous Ainu people were increasingly dispossessed of their land and livelihood as the Japanese adopted modern settler colonial techniques from Western colonial powers, especially the United States. Japanese leaders were inspired by the example of American settler colonialism during diplomatic trips there. Moreover, they believed that depicting Hokkaido as Japan's 'Wild West' would win goodwill in a country that was still considered a threat 15 years after American gunboats 'opened' Japan. This campaign was ultimately successful, with the American press soon fondly referring to the Japanese as 'the Yankees of the Pacific' (Medak-Saltzman 2008; Duus 1995, p. 431). Although Hokkaido is seldom thought of as a 'colony' in present-day Japan, viewing its history through a postcolonial lens is an important intervention for at least two reasons: it foregrounds the history of the Ainu, which has long been obfuscated in a heroic 'pioneer' master narrative, and it demonstrates that Japanese colonialism debuted directly after the Meiji Restoration, making Japan's modern nation and empire-building simultaneous processes (Mason, 2012, p. 3).

In 1876, three Americans from Massachusetts Agricultural College (MAC – today's University of Massachusetts, Amherst) were hired by the Kaitakushi to establish a comparable institution in Hokkaido, Sapporo Agricultural College (SAC – today's Hokkaido University). William Smith Clark, a charismatic figure and the founding president of both colleges, has become legendary in Japan, in large part because many of his students went on to become important leaders in different fields. Engineer William Wheeler and Botanist David Pearce Penhallow assisted him and each served in turn as president of the college after Clark's

departure. Although the role of other American employees of the Kaitakushi in Japan's colonization of Hokkaido has been studied (Medak-Saltzman, 2008; Yaguchi, 1999) and the later colonial history of SAC has also been explored (Inoue, 2013), the colonial role of these three American college presidents has never been investigated in any detail.

Since he served as president for far longer than Clark and Penhallow and concurrently undertook major surveying and infrastructure projects for the Kaitakushi during his tenure, Wheeler arguably did more for both the development of SAC and the colonization of Hokkaido than his colleagues. Wheeler is the subject of a book-length biography by Takasaki Tetsurō, published first in Japanese and later translated into English, and of a chapter in Masao Watanabe's book on Western science teachers in Japan (Takasaki, 2009; Watanabe, 1976, pp. 330-342). The first of these suffers from its avowed purpose to prove that Wheeler 'was every bit the equal to, if not better than, William Clark' (Takasaki, 2009, p. 196), and neither considers Wheeler's tenure from a postcolonial perspective. This article fills this research gap by examining the clues that Wheeler left about his attitudes towards settler colonialism in Hokkaido in the voluminous private correspondence he and his wife had with his family, his official correspondence with the Kaitakushi, his contribution to the first annual report of the college and an article he authored on 'Japan's Colonial College' shortly after his return to the United States (Wheeler, 1877a, 1877b, 1878, 1880; WWP). It will reconstruct as far as possible his view of and role in Japan's settler colonialism in Hokkaido to provide an important complement to existing, uncritical biographies.

Biographical Sketch

William Wheeler was born into a prominent family in Concord, Massachusetts in 1851. He was a member of the inaugural class of Massachusetts Agricultural College, majoring in engineering and graduating second in his class in 1871. Wheeler worked at an engineering firm for several years before being invited by MAC President Clark to accompany him to Hokkaido in 1876 (Hudson, 1933, p. 226).

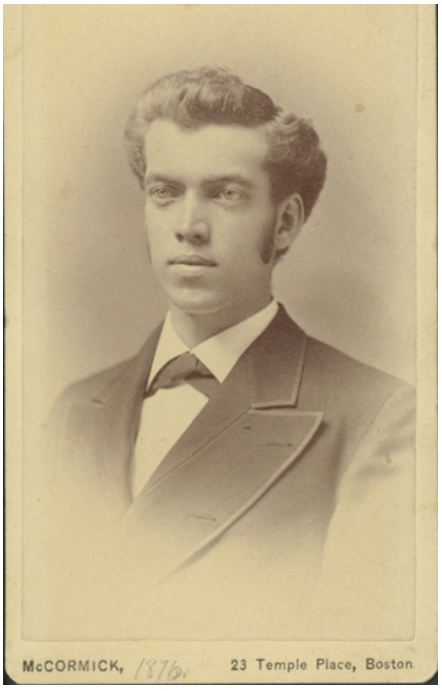


Figure 1: William Wheeler in1876. Photo courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Despite being kept incredibly busy both as 'Professor of Civil Engineering, Mechanics, Mathematics, and the English Language' and as a civil engineer for the Kaitakushi, his numerous letters home reveal that Wheeler was afflicted by severe homesickness throughout his stay (WWP). Wheeler was so valuable for the Kaitakushi, however, that they induced him to stay until the end of 1879. They even granted him an extended leave of absence in 1878 during which he returned to the United States to marry his fiancée Fanny and purchase equipment and books for the college. Fanny Wheeler

traveled with him back to Hokkaido, where she accompanied him on expeditions and helped him with his engineering work (Fanny Wheeler to Mrs. Wheeler, her mother-in-law, 10 December 1879, WWP). During his tenure, Wheeler served as president of the college after Clark's departure in 1877, but also found time to conduct numerous surveying expeditions for roads and railroads, oversee the rebuilding of the imposing Toyohira Bridge, establish a meteorological station, and advise the Kaitakushi on a wide variety of other questions. He was therefore a significant figure in the Japanese settlement of the island.

Wheeler's good relations with the Kaitakushi were marred shortly after his departure from Japan by the failure of a New York firm to deliver scientific equipment and other supplies that had been ordered by Wheeler and paid for by the Japanese government. Japanese ambassador Yoshida Kiyonari wrote him an angry letter holding him responsible and threatening, among other things, to purchase supplies from other countries in the future (Yoshida to Wheeler, 17 September 1880, WWP). Yoshida even wrote to Clark, asking him to look into the matter and threatening that it 'would naturally reflect badly on yourself' if the incident was not resolved, also cajoling him by calling him 'a true friend of Japan, and its progress' (Yoshida to Clark, 20 September 1880, WWP). Wheeler's reply and the conclusion to this incident are not preserved in Wheeler's official papers, but in 1924, much to his surprise, he was awarded the Order of the Rising Sun, fifth class by the Japanese government. After his return to Massachusetts, Wheeler opened a successful private civil engineering firm, where he worked for the rest of his career. He died in 1932 (Hudson, 1933).

Letters from Japan

Wheeler's letters from Japan to his family, as well as his official correspondence with the *Kaitakushi* during his tenure at the college, provide a detailed record of his life and work in Hokkaido, but there is almost no mention of the Ainu or clues as to his personal view of Japanese colonialism. There are a few indications of his views of American expansionism, however. As described below, Wheeler would later praise the railroad as a vehicle of colonial expansion, but as he traveled across the Transcontinental Railroad to California en route to Japan, he showed little understanding or sympathy for the indigenous residents that the railway had displaced. In a letter to his mother, he argues that the common stereotypes of the '"noble red men" and the "heathen Chinese"' should be reversed, decrying the 'Laziness' of Native American men who sent their wives to beg at the train's refueling stations. In contrast, he praises the diligence of Chinese workers in the face of unfair persecution by white Americans (Wheeler to his mother, 19 May 1876, WWP).

This unflattering description of Native Americans notwithstanding, Wheeler would later draw heavily on the colonial trope of the 'noble savage' in his description of how an Ainu guide saved his life during an expedition into the interior of Hokkaido. In a letter to his mother, Wheeler describes in vivid detail how he fecklessly attempted to ford a swollen river and was nearly carried downstream into a powerful rapid. Wheeler's horse was carried downstream but Wheeler's foot caught in a crevice in the riverbed, holding him fast. The Ainu guide 'started to come out to me at the positive and evident risk of his own life, when I ordered him back,' Wheeler wrote (Wheeler to his mother, 12 June 1877, WWP). After the rope that the rest of his party threw to him snapped, he was carried further downstream but managed to grab hold of a log in the center of the current. At this point, the Ainu guide once more risked his life:

> ...the broken trunk of a tree projected out over my head from the edge of the water. Around this the faithful and brave Aino grasped one arm as far out as he could reach, standing with one leg in the water up to his thigh while the people on shore held his other foot. (ibid.)

The guide managed to tie a rope around Wheeler's chest so that he could be pulled to safety. 'No one is blameable [sic] but myself, which I was, for preceding the guide at a critical point,' Wheeler wrote, continuing that 'The Faithful Aino was certainly the agent by which mine [Wheeler's life] was saved, and I have undertaken partially to express my feelings to him in a fit manner' (ibid.). There is no indication what exactly this manner was, but Wheeler had the man photographed in Sapporo. The photo's caption calls him 'Ikasupakuru: The Aino who saved Will's life,' but the term 'ikasupakuru' means 'a man who helps' in the Ainu language, suggesting that it might not be the man's real name (Takasaki, 2009, pp. 115-116). Wheeler sent this photo of 'my brave Aino friend' in his next letter (Wheeler to his mother, 26 June 1877, WWP). In the letter described above, Wheeler reproduces colonial adventure narrative tropes such as the loyal 'noble savage' guide that dominated late-nineteenth-century Western representations of indigenous peoples (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2007, pp. 192-193; Wylie, 2009, p. 68). Hokkaido is presented as a fierce, untamed wilderness, the perfect domain for an intrepid, if sometimes foolhardy, white explorer. The Ainu is 'faithful and brave' in his service to his white master, but merits no further mention.

Indeed, apart from this episode, there are virtually no mentions of the Ainu in the hundreds of pages that Wheeler produced during his several years' residence in Hokkaido. Wheeler doubtless employed Ainu guides on other expeditions and encountered them in Sapporo, for he mentions them offhand on three occasions, when one asked to enter Wheeler's horse in a race, when he notes that 'Bears and deer are found by the natives some miles away' from Sapporo, and when he recounts a bear attack on two Ainu (Wheeler to his mother, 26 June 1877, 10 November 1878, WWP; Wheeler to his sister Irene, 11 February 1878, WWP). Wheeler also describes a trip he made together with Clark in early November 1876 to Tsuishikari, where a group of Ainu from Sakhalin had recently been forcibly relocated by the Japanese government. He notes that he and Clark had been sent to give their opinion on silk production there, returning by means of Ainu ' "dug-outs" ' (Wheeler to his mother, 10 November 1876, WWP). Wheeler tantalizingly mentions that he was requested by the Kaitakushi to provide information on 'relations of Ainos to the government,' apparently with reference to United States Indian policy (Wheeler to his mother, 28 January 1878, WWP), but unfortunately such a report, which would doubtless give much insight into Wheeler's colonial worldview, is not preserved in Wheeler's official correspondence.

It is unclear why the Ainu are so absent from Wheeler's otherwise detailed correspondence. Nowhere does Wheeler show concern for their displacement by Japanese settlement or the effect that his engineering projects or promotion of scientific agriculture through SAC might have on their way of life. At several points, he makes it clear that he views the 'development' of Hokkaido as representing an important advancement for 'humanity.' In a letter to his sister, he writes: 'There is a great need of good work to be done here, and the world needs the sacrifice of unselfish laborers for humanity, wherev-

er and whenever they can be found' (Wheeler to his sister Irene, 11 February 1878, WWP). Shortly before his departure from Hokkaido, he revisited a site he had earlier surveyed for a road and was 'astonished at the excellent manner in which [his] plans of two years since had been carried out,' finding the realization of his advice extremely gratifying (Wheeler to his father, 5 October 1879, WWP). He was a firm believer in the civilizing influence of Western science, writing, for example, that a Western doctor was needed in Sapporo not only to treat members of the local community and teach anatomy at the college but also because

> His official reports, containing the results of his observations upon the sanitary characteristics and conditions of the climate and people of Hokkaido, would also furnish authentic and valuable information upon a point of commanding interest to impending settlers and colonists, the resident officers and people, and to the scientific world. (Wheeler to Zushio [Chōsho] Hirotake, 20 August 1877, WWP)

Here and elsewhere, Wheeler demonstrated a strong desire to see Hokkaido become 'developed' and 'civilized' along Western lines, even if he was not always confident that the Japanese were up to the task.

Wheeler's View of the *Kaitakushi*'s Colonial Mission

Wheeler is more explicit in his thoughts about Hokkaido's colonial 'development' in several short articles he authored, revealing that he was fully aware of Japan's ambitions for the territory and the parallels that Japanese leaders saw between Hokkaido and the western United States. In a report on the weather station that he established, he wrote that meteorological observations 'constitute an element of peculiar [particular] importance in the development of a new section of country, especially if its climatic character is unfavorably belied through ignorance existing within its own realm' (Wheeler, 1877a, p. 87). Here, Wheeler echoes Japanese leaders' goal of countering widespread 'misconceptions' in Japan about Hokkaido, particularly its harsh and forbidding climate, which they expressed in their own publications (Mason, 2012, p. 27).

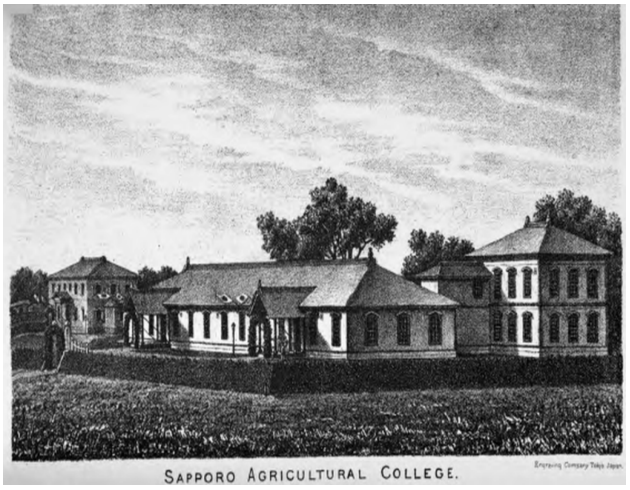


Figure 2: Sapporo Agricultural College in 1877. Source: W. S. Clark, W. Wheeler & D. P. Penhallow. (1877). *First Annual Report of Sapporo Agricultural College* (n.p.). Tokei: Kaitakushi.

In his 'Report on Transportation Routes between Sapporo & Tide-Water' in the same publication, Wheeler strongly advises the Kaitakushi to build a railroad from Sapporo to the port town of Otaru:

> railroads have proved to be, not only the most valuable means of inter-communication between well established communities, as in Europe and the older American states, but... they are regarded also as the true pioneers of colonization – the chief instrumentality in opening up vast territories in western America, South America, India, and Australia – in sections of the country totally devoid of civilized life,

> and less rich in mineral and agricultural resources than is Hokkaido [...]. (Wheeler, 1877b, p. 106)

Here, Wheeler draws direct parallels between Hokkaido and both the American West and the European colonial territories of India and Australia, which he obviously thought could serve as useful models for Hokkaido. American engineers played an important role in building colonial railroads for other empires around the world during this period (Tufnell, 2017), so Wheeler was likely familiar with the examples he cites. That Wheeler writes that these 'vast territories' are 'totally devoid of *civilized* life' (emphasis added) indicates that Wheeler is aware that they are not devoid of *all* human life, but believes that the railroad's 'opening up' of the land is important nonetheless. Later, he repeats this assertion that the railroad is 'especially considered the forerunner of settlement and civilization' and recommends the translation of a pamphlet on American railways for the *Kaitakushi*'s official use (Wheeler, 1877b, p. 110). He even indicates that he sees Hokkaido and the western United States as similarly 'colonial': 'During the last half century, a million of square miles have been colonised through their agency [the agency of railroads] in the United States, and the people living therein contribute annually nearly one-half the products of the nation' (Wheeler, 1877b, p. 122). Wheeler was therefore both well aware of and a strong advocate of the railroad as an essential tool of modern colonialism that Japan would do well to imitate.

Wheeler's view of SAC and its role in the colonization of Hokkaido find their clearest expression in an article he published shortly after his return to Massachusetts entitled 'Japan's Colonial College' (Wheeler, 1880). Erasing the Ainu, Wheeler uses standard colonial tropes of Hokkaido's bountiful natural resources and 'vast areas of undefiled and scarcely explored mountain solitudes.' Curiously, he explains the meaning of the name 'Sapporo' in 'the Aino language' in a footnote without explaining who the Ainu were to his readers, to whom he explains the Meiji Restoration and other basic facts about Japan. The presentation Wheeler gives of SAC is of particular interest:

> Here the Colonial department resolved to plan the nucleus of a system of western civilization, of which that of America was adopted as the most desirable type, which [...] should impart its characteristic impetus to the agricultural, industrial and educational interests and institutions of this part of the empire. (Wheeler, 1880, p. 6)

Here, Wheeler again shows that he is aware that the United States was chosen for emulation in Hokkaido from among numerous potential Western models, and that SAC was intended to be the 'nucleus' of this modeling. In addition to training future 'officers and skilled employees of the Kaitakushi,' SAC serves as 'a sort of advisory commission in the agricultural, industrial and sanitary interests of the department' (Wheeler, 1880, pp. 7, 9). For these reasons, 'few institutions of its modest pretensions enjoy the prospect of stamping so unique and marked an impress upon the future history of so large a state or process' (Wheeler, 1880, p. 9). Clearly, Wheeler, like his former employers, viewed his role as professor and president of SAC and advisor to the *Kaitakushi* as of central significance to Hokkaido's colonial settlement and future (Japanese) prosperity.

Public Praise, Private Prejudice? Wheeler's View of Japan

While Clark and Penhallow strongly supported the Japanese cause in lectures and publications after their return to the United States

(Maki, 2002; Penhallow, 1904), Wheeler's opinion of Japan is far less clear. In their private letters to his family, he and his wife express a deep disdain for Japanese culture and especially its bureaucracy, which seems to have colored their view of the country as a whole. On the other hand, Wheeler sometimes expresses admiration for Japan and is nearly always quite positive in his official letters to the Kaitakushi and published articles. This discrepancy is hardly strange, but nonetheless makes it difficult to determine exactly how he felt about Japan and its colonial project.



Figure 3: William and Fanny Wheeler (center) at the home of fellow American advisor to the *Kaitakushi* Benjamin Smith Lyman (left) in Tokyo, presumably in 1880. Photo courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Wheeler's private correspondence reveals that Wheeler formed strong opinions about Japanese inferiority from early on and largely stuck to these throughout his tenure. He frequently complained about the excessive bureaucracy and wastefulness of the *Kaitakushi,* a problem which was in fact well-known even to its leaders, but tolerated because of its important mission of employing former samurai that otherwise could revolt against the regime. Wheeler applauded the *Kaitakushi*'s later decisions to dispense with a large number of sinecures and to stop engaging expensive Western advisors, writing on the first occasion with evident satisfaction, 'Really this empire is progressing wonderfully' (Wheeler to his mother, 23 January 1877, 3 December 1877, WWP). Fanny Wheeler seems to have come to share her husband's critical views after coming to Japan, but writes that compared to a Western acquaintance of theirs who 'hates Japan and everything connected with it [...] although we are not in love with the Japanese character and are more and more glad to be going back to America, we do not think so badly of everything as he' (Fanny Wheeler to Mrs. Wheeler, her mother-in-law, 10 December 1879, WWP). There is no record of Wheeler actively promoting Japanese colonial interests after his return like Clark or Penhallow, but he did show a long-term interest in SAC and its students. Several years after his return, he expressed joy at the news that two of his former students had received government scholarships in the United States and wrote that 'I have never lost the lively interest which I acquired in the progressive measures adopted by your country.' Although his letters from Japan were pervaded by homesickness, on this occasion he even wrote that he sometimes wished he had not returned to Massachusetts so soon (Wheeler to Mr. D. Suzuki, 20 May 1884, WWP).

Although Wheeler is often intensely critical in his personal correspondence sent from Japan, one could interpret his frustrations with what he viewed as flaws in the Japanese national character as arising from a genuine concern for Japan's future 'progress.' In his various writings, Wheeler often lambasts what he believes to be Japanese backwardness, but attributes this to premodern traces remaining from before the Meiji period. He condescendingly writes that

> No one can comprehend how much these people resemble the rest of humanity in the affairs or sentiments of the heart [...] nor how widely they differ in all those intellectual qualities, which give to the western nations their foremost rank in mental and material progress, without living for a time among them.

He attributes this, however, to 'the stupor which ages of absolute monarchism have implanted into the very life and being of her people,' repeating the classic colonial trope of Oriental despotism in which dictatorial Asian regimes can only uphold social order through harsh authoritarian rule, a system which impedes 'progress' and 'modernization' (Spurr, 1993, pp. 72-73). Nevertheless, he argues that the Japanese are striving to overcome this and will therefore eventually be successful 'if interference from other nations does not diver[t] them' (Wheeler to his mother, 16 August 1876, WWP). Elsewhere, he similarly censures the excessive time devoted to memorizing Chinese characters in Japanese education, but follows this up by writing that 'Now, fortunately, the entire regime is changed: but the seeds of the past cannot be eradicated at once' (Wheeler, 1880, p. 10). He refers to the Meiji period as Japan's 'progressive era' and plainly subscribes to the government's version of Japanese history, whereby the Meiji Restoration represents an important break with the Oriental despotism of the previous Tokugawa Shogunate (Wheeler, 1877b, p. 109). This nuances many of Wheeler's harsher criticisms of Japan, since he views them as remnants of the past that will eventually disappear.

Wheeler is inconsistent in his appraisals of how long it will take Japan to become 'civilized' and whether it could ever 'catch up' with the West. In a letter to his mother, he writes that 'Generations must pass, ere they can travel, unaided, in the march of true progress' (Wheeler to his mother, 18 August 1876, WWP). Elsewhere, however, Wheeler writes that 'Japan is not so far behind the world in acquired wealth or material progress,' noting that 'Only about a century ago, Great Britain had a smaller population, less available wealth, inferior educational facilities for the masses, and fewer examples' in its quest to become modern. Wheeler even notes that Britain had foreign consultants of its own: 'her industries were established greatly by foreigners; she sent abroad for skilled workmen [...]' (Wheeler, 1877b, p. 121). Did Wheeler's position on this question change, or did he merely publish the latter statement to win favor with the Kaitakushi?

Danika Medak-Saltzman has argued that the Japanese attempted to juxtapose themselves against the 'primitive' Ainu in their colonization of Hokkaido in order to portray themselves in the West as a 'civilized' 'race' (Medak-Saltzman, 2008), but Wheeler's writings reveal that he still viewed the Japanese through the lens of classic Western colonial stereotypes of cultural inferiority, even in a context in which the Japanese played the role of colonial overlords. Nevertheless, unlike the Ainu, in whom Wheeler showed little interest and whom he often erased in his accounts of Hokkaido's ostensibly pristine nature, he seems to have viewed the Japanese as at least being on their way towards 'civilization' and Western-style modernity.

Conclusion

The above analysis of the documents he left behind reveal that engineer William Wheeler was a man of his times and an important 'agent of empire' who facilitated the trans-imperial flow of colonial knowledge. Recent historiography has demonstrated that such inter-imperial linkages played an important role in fostering ties between late-nineteenth and early-twen-

tieth-century empires and determining the shape their colonial rule took (Potter, & Saha 2015; Barth, & Cvetkovski, 2015). Wheeler's view of the Japanese, Hokkaido and the Ainu was molded by Western colonial tropes that he took with him from the United States, leading him to understand the Ainu as 'noble savages' and the Japan as emerging from a period of 'Oriental despotism' and embarking on a 'civilizing mission' in Hokkaido, a version of history also actively promoted by Meiji leaders. Wheeler both drew on and reinforced such hegemonic colonial discourses in his interpretations of Japanese settler colonialism in Hokkaido.

Whether or not Wheeler was 'a true friend of Japan,' he certainly did his part to aid its colonial expansion in Hokkaido. The roads, railways and bridges he designed facilitated the extraction of its natural resources and his dissemination of scientific colonial methods abetted its settlement by Japanese farmers. Although Wheeler shows barely any concern for the Ainu and little interest in European theories of colonial management in the remaining source material, the passages analyzed above indicate that he was not unaware of the colonial character of Hokkaido's development nor that of his own country. His advocacy of railroads as 'the true pioneers of colonization' in particular shows him to be an advocate of continental imperialism and settler colonialism, of which he believed Hokkaido and the western United States to be analogous examples.

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