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(RE)CLAIM: Manhattan Project – Harley Cowan
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From Hanford to Nagasaki

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Event Title:

(Re)claim: Harley Cowan's *Manhattan Project*
Exhibit Opening & Symposium

Title of Remarks:

"From Hanford to Nagasaki"

Presenter:

Anthony E. Clark

Date & Time:

Friday, 20 September 2024

Location:

Whitworth University Library

Remarks:

Anonymous Japanese Poem after the Bomb

なにもかもなくした手に四まいの爆死証明

Everything lost—
In my hand,
Four atomic bomb death certificates

On August 9, 1945, the Hanford nuclear production site, located on the Columbia River in Benton County, near what we know of as the Tri Cities in Washington state, was forever historically connected with one of the most bitter and grim moments in human history. On that day, a 10,300-pound nuclear fission gravity bomb named "Fat Man" fell for forty-three seconds before detonating on the port city of Nagasaki, resulting in 60-80,000 deaths. Fat Man was produced using the plutonium manufactured at the Hanford Site and was dropped from a Boeing B-29 piloted by Major Charles Sweeney (1919-2004). Three days earlier, the first bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. At 8:15 am on that day, the US bombardier, Major Thomas Ferebee (1918-2000), released an atomic bomb named "Little Boy" that fell for 44.4 seconds before its detonation above the city. In a 1946 *New Yorker* article, John Hersey (1914-1993) described the

appearance of the detonation as a “noiseless flash” that attracted the attention of those below moments before engulfing the city and its population in ruin.

Just as the “noiseless flash” illuminated the skyline, a thirty-nine-year-old Jesuit, Father Wilhelm Kleinsorge, SJ (1906-1977) was sitting on his cot reading on the top floor of the three-story mission residence. Hersey recounts what happened immediately afterward:

Father Kleinsorge never knew how he got out of the house. The next things he was conscious of were that he was wandering about in the mission’s vegetable garden in his underwear, bleeding slightly from small cuts along his left flank; that all the buildings round about had fallen down except the Jesuit’s mission house, which had long before been braced and double-braced by a priest named Gropper, who was terrified of earthquakes; that the day had turned dark; and that Murata-*san*, the housekeeper, was nearby, crying over and over, “[. . .] Our Lord Jesus, have pity on us!”

Father Kleinsorge was so transmuted by what happened on that day, and his tireless efforts to help those suffering around him that he became a Japanese citizen and changed his name to Makoto Takakura. I mention these two bombs, because I want us to remember that what happened at Hanford is inexorably connected to the more than 200,000 people who perished from the two “noiseless flashes” at Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

In the field of history, we aim always to recount both sides of any historical event, what we refer to as an objective dialectic. Only depicting one side of an issue is defined by academics as “propaganda.” But it is difficult to convey a dialectical picture of what resulted in so much suffering and so many deaths as we see in the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The

American bishop, Fulton Sheen (1895-1975), universally denounced the use of the bombs. “The use of the atomic bomb was immoral,” Sheen asserted, because “they do away with the moral distinction that must be made in every war - a distinction between civilians and the military.” In 1959, when General Paul Tibbets (1915-2007), the pilot who dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, met Captain Mitsuo Fuchida (1902-1976), the leader of the first wave of attacks on Pearl Harbor, Fuchida stated that America, “did the right thing (at Hiroshima),” because, as he put it, “the Japanese people of that time were fanatical, and every man, woman and child would have resisted,” even to the complete annihilation of the Japanese people. History is complicated, and few events are more complex than the Manhattan Project that connects the spaces photographed in this exhibit to the spaces incinerated at Nagasaki. As an historian I view photography mainly as a record, but it is also an art, and Aristotle argued that art reveals reality better than history. “History reveals the details,” Aristotle said, “but art discloses what is universal.” Harley Cowan’s incredible photographs of the Hanford Site accomplish precisely what Aristotle advocated, the human encounter with the realities that surround us, happy and horrific. The workforce at Hanford peaked at around 45,000 people, and historians have a summoning photograph of many of these workers gathered at the Western Union office to collect their paychecks. It is doubtful that anyone in that photo had the slightest inclination that what they were doing during their long workdays at the reactor would result in what happened on August 9, 1945, at Nagasaki. That image is an example of photography as record; what we have here in this exhibit is a powerful and noble example of photography as art . . . in the Aristotelian sense that it reveals something far beyond the details of history.

The eighteenth-century poet, philosopher, and historian, Friedrich von Schiller (1759-1805), once wrote in a letter that the more seductive and beautiful the work of an artist is, “the

more the beholder is inclined to get involved with it.” When I first viewed the beautiful and evocative images in this exhibit, I was drawn to the fact that they are at the same time both beautiful and sublime, what Kant called the appealing *form* of beauty, and the mathematical *formlessness* of sublimity. Perhaps this is why I was astonished at my first glance at his photograph of the loading face of the B Reactor at Hanford – I was astonished not only by the incredible artistic vision and craft of the image, but also for the astuteness of the title he has given it: “A Cathedral of Science.” Cathedrals are spaces of appealing beauty, and science tends toward the formlessness of mathematical sublimity. Cowan’s photography is precisely what Aristotle would celebrate in wake of the horrors of what Hanford produced – it reveals the universal that all of us must never forget. Look carefully at Harley’s extraordinary photographs displayed here. They are an intentional exploration of the convoluted relationship between art and history. As he has said of these images, they represent, “Arguably the greatest engineering feat of the 20th Century, and the most terrible, a Promethean altar of science.”

Japanese Haiku after the Bomb by Shigemoto Yasuhiko

The children hunting
a cicada — not seeing
the Atom Bomb Dome