

## The Whitman Myth

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Professor Bourne

Mr. Edward Gaylor Bourne, Professor History in Yale University, New Haven, Conn., is the author of a book entitled "Essays in Historical Criticism" (Scribner), which is considered authoritative by historical students as to the subject under discussion: the leading essay being that upon "The Legend of Marcus Whitman." Professor Bourne's conclusions are based upon actual documentary evidence as against the conclusions of those who depend upon hearsay evidence, and his views are generally endorsed by the members of the American Historical Association with which he is prominently connected. His criticism of those who exaggerate and amplify events of history, and not of Dr. Whitman as a man or of his record as a pioneer and a missionary. At the request of the editor of the S. S. Times (Philadelphia), Professor Bourne wrote a shorter article upon the same subject, and this article was later reprinted in The Morning Oregonian, of Portland, Oregon, and is now reprinted in pamphlet form.

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### Review of the Testimony as to Marcus Whitman (Reprinted from The Morning Oregonian of) (March 23, 1903)

The story that "Whitman Saved Oregon to the United States," and that his famous winter journey was undertaken for that object, is now regarded by all impartial inquirers as completely exploded. An article on this subject by Professor Edward G. Bourne, of Yale University, published recently in the Sunday School Times, gives the evidence on the subject in the clearest and most succinct form in which we have yet seen it presented. Professor Bourne goes to the original sources of information, neglecting all the glosses of modern myth-makers. As this article has never been published here, we give it entire, viz:

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Was there any danger in 1842-43, that the United States would give or lose what we now think of as the Oregon Country, - that is, the region south of the 49th parallel, - through the ignorance or indifference of the Government authorities? Such a loss could take place only by conquest or by treaty, and for the ratification of a treaty it must have the approval of the President and two-thirds of the Senate.

#### Attitude of President and Senate

First, as to the attitude of the President. In December, 1842, the Secretary of War, in his report submitted to Congress with the President's message, urged the construction of military stations as a protection to the overland route to Oregon, "if we intend to maintain our right to the territories on the Pacific belonging to us, which, it is supposed, does not admit of question" (Exec. Docs., 27th Cong., 3d Sess., I, 126). President Tyler wrote his son, December 11, 1845: "I looked exclusively to an adjustment by the forty-ninth degree, and never dreamed for a moment of surrendering the free navigation of the Columbia...I never

dreamed of ceding this country (that is, between the Columbia and 49th par.) unless for the greater equivalent of California, which I fancied Great Britain might be able to obtain for us through her influence in Mexico, and 'this was but a dream of policy which was never embodied.'" (Letters and Times of the Tylers, II, 447, 448).

Second, as to the attitude of the Senate. On February 3, 1843, the Senate passed the Linn bill, providing for the immediate extension of the laws of the United States over the entire Oregon territory, the erection of courts, and the granting of lands to settlers.

It is clear from these facts that treaty surrendering the southern half of the territory was not in any danger of being ratified in 1843, if Marcus Whitman had not come east.

#### Whitman's Attitude

Again, had Marcus Whitman any reason to suppose, in September, 1842, that Oregon was in any danger of being lost to the United States? In that month Dr. Elijah White, the recently appointed sub-Indian agent of the United States Government, arrived at Dr. Whitman's. After a short visit he went to the Willamette Valley, where he called a meeting "for the purpose of communicating certain information from the Government of the United States, relative to this country." The drift of this communication can be gathered from the first of a series of resolutions drawn up by the meeting: "That we, the citizens of Willamette Valley, are exceedingly happy in the consideration that the Government of the United States have manifested their intentions through their agent, Dr. E. White, in extending their jurisdiction and protection over this country." ("Ten Years in Oregon. Travel and Adventures of Dr. E. White and Lady," etc. Pages 322-325. Ithaca, 1850.) It is in the highest degree improbable that the only representative of the United States Government in Oregon gave Dr. Whitman exactly the contrary impression to that which he gave the settlers in the Willamette Valley a few days later.

#### Why Did Whitman Come East?

If Oregon was not in danger of being surrendered to England, what, then, was Dr. Whitman's motive for his journey? The answer is to be found in the following extracts from contemporary records, diaries and letters.

The prudential committee of the American Board passed the following resolution relative to the Oregon mission stations, February 23, 1842: "That the Rev. Henry H. Spalding be recalled, with instructions to return by the first direct and suitable opportunity; that Mr. William H. Gray be advised to return home, and also the Rev. Asa B. Smith, on account of the illness of his wife; that Dr. Marcus Whitman and Mr. Cornelius Rogers be designated to the northern branch of the mission, and that the two last named be authorized to dispose of the mission property in the southern branch of the mission." (From the records of the prudential committee of the A. B. C. F. M. See also Missionary Herald, January, 1843, page 14, or report of the A. B. C. F. M. for 1842, page 194.)

From An Old Diary

## From An Old Diary

(Extracts from the diary of the Rev. Elkanah Walker, one of Dr. Whitman's colleagues in the Oregon mission.)

"Tuesday, September 20, 1842. - Just as we were about to sit down to breakfast, the long-locked-for express came in with some letters for the doctor (that is, Whitman), and from Mr. Green (secretary of the A. B. C. F. M.). It was stated in Mr. G—'s letters that it was decided that the southern part of this mission was to be given up, and all called home except the doctor, and he was to be connected with the northern branch. The doctor sent Mr. Spalding's letter to us, and we felt that it was wrong in him not to forward it. The doctor requested us to come down immediately. Mr. Gray had left to look out for a place for himself and family, and we felt that we ought to go, and our wives urged us on. We accordingly made preparations to leave.

"Wednesday, 21. - Have felt very much encouraged that the mission would not be given up. Mr. E. — (Ellis) seemed to talk as though, if we were at home, he would remain there, but I have not felt that we did wrong.

"Saturday, 24. - Have had some very strong feelings today in regard to the mission. I could not bring my mind to think that any post was to be abandoned.

Monday, 26. - Rose quite early this morning and made preparations for leaving our camp. We rode quite fast, and reached the station of Dr. W—'s about 10, and found Spalding there. Did nothing of business until evening, when we had rather a session discussing Mr. Gray's case.

Wednesday, 28th. - Rose this morning with the determination to leave, and found Mr. S — had the same view, and was making preparations to leave, as he felt that nothing could be done. At breakfast the doctor let out what was his plan in view of the state of things. We persuaded them to get together and talk matters over. I think they felt some better afterwards. Then the question was submitted to us of the doctor's going home, which we felt that it was one of too much importance to be decided in a moment, but finally came to the conclusion, if he could put things at that station in such a state that it would be safe, we could consent to his going, and with that left them and made a start for home."

(The above extracts are from the manuscript of Mr. Walker's diary, in the possession of the Oregon Historical Society.)

## From Missionary Records

(From the records of the meeting of the missionaries described in the diary.)

September 28th it was

"Resolved, That if arrangements can be made to continue the operations of this station, that Dr. Marcus Whitman be at liberty and advised to visit the United States as soon as practicable, to confer with the committee of the A. B. C. F. M. in regard to the interests of this mission. — E. Walker, Moderator; Cushing Ellis, Scribe, H. H. Spalding."

(Records of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.)

## Mrs. Whitman's Letter

(From a letter which Mrs. Whitman wrote her brother and sister, September 29, 1842.)

"I sit down to write you, but in great haste. My beloved husband has about concluded to start next Monday to go to the United States.... If you are still in Quincy you may not see him until his return, as his business requires great haste. He wishes to reach Boston as early as possible so as to make arrangements to return next summer, if prospered. The interests of the missionary cause in this country call him home."

The next day (September 30), Mrs. Whitman wrote to her parents, brothers and sisters: "You will be surprised, if this letter reaches you, to learn that the bearer is my dear husband, and that you will, after a few days, have the pleasure of seeing him. May you have a joyful meeting! He goes upon important business connected with the missionary cause, the cause of Christ in this land, which I leave for him to explain when you see him, because I have not time to enlarge. He has but yesterday fully made up his mind to go, and he wishes to start Monday, and this is Friday... He wishes to cross the mountains during this month, I mean October, and reach St. Louis about the 1st of December, if he is not detained by cold or hostile Indians. O may the Lord preserve him through the dangers of the way. He has for a companion Mr. Lovejoy, a respectable, intelligent man and a lawyer, but not a Christian, who expects to accompany him all the way to Boston, as his friends are in that region, and perhaps to Washington."

(From the Whitman letters published by the Oregon Pioneer Association, 1903, pp. 165-168.)

## Letters to the Missionary Board

(Extract from the draft of a letter from Mr. Walker to the secretary of the A. B. C. F. M., giving an account of the proceedings of the meeting.)

October 2, 1842 - I have said in as short a space as I could what I thought it necessary to say on the importance of the mission, and the relative importance of the two branches, and I think any one acquainted with the country and the locations of the stations would admit it as correct what has been said, comparing the two branches. With this view of the case, you will be able to understand why we are so unwilling to abandon that part of the mission. We did think the design of your letter had been accomplished by the reconciliation which had taken place. It was a trying time to us. We knew not what course to take, but concluded that it was best that we should wait until we had an answer to their letter sent by the committee stating that the difficulties were all settled. We found, too, that there was a difficulty in sustaining the mission, as so many had left, and as the re-enforcements sent to the mission had stopped by the way. In this state of things, a proposition was made by Dr. Whitman, and supported by Mr. Spalding, for him to return to the States this winter and confer with the committee, and conduct a re-enforcement out next summer. The proposition was made to Mr. Ellis and myself just as we were on the eve of leaving to return to our place. We felt at first that we could not then decide upon it, that we wanted to think and pray over the subject, as it seemed one of too great importance to be decided in a moment. We proposed to return and give the subject our serious consideration, and then write them our views, but were told that that would be too late, as no time was to be lost. After more conversation

on the subject, and feeling that something must be done, and that with as little delay as possible, we came to this conclusion -- that, if Dr. Whitman could put his station in such a situation that it would be safe to leave it, and make proper arrangements, we would consent to his going.

"We do not approve of the manner in which this question was decided, and nothing, as it seemed to us, but stern necessity, led us to decide as we did. It seemed like death to put the proposition in force, and death to remain in the state in which the mission was. I have no doubt that if his plan succeeded it would be of great good to the mission and to the country. It is to be expected that a Romish influence will come in which will be most difficult for the mission, as now sustained, to withstand. As we are now situated, we are much straitened in our mode of operation, and can not exert that influence that we could if we had more men, especially those of the right kind. We need more lay members, such as mechanics and farmers. We want those who are willing to be such all their days, and not, as soon as they get into the field, feel that they can be more useful in some other department. We very much need men of this description, as it is next to impossible to get help in this country, especially in this part of the mission.

"As it is now expected that Whitman will visit you, you will be able to confer with him. We have perfect confidence in his views of missionary operations, and the course best to pursue in regard to settlers. He will be able to give you correct information as to what kind of men is needed and how many. We are not without our doubts that he will fail to get through. In order to repair as far as possible the evil that would result from a failure, a copy of this will be forwarded by the Islands." (From the Walker manuscript in the Oregon Historical Society. A short extract from the letter as actually sent is printed in the writer's "Essays in Historical Criticism," pp. 57, 58. The final form is a little more condensed.)

(Extract from a letter of Elkanah Walker to the Secretary of the Board.

January 23, 1843. -- You can be no more surprised than we were that he (that is, Dr. Whitman) should go without them (that is, the letters). We thought the arrangement was made when our letters should be at his place. We were punctual at the time, unless one day in advance of the specified would be considered sufficient to destroy our punctuality. We sent an express on purpose to take the letters down, and it was so much expense incurred for nothing. You will readily perceive by the letter sent by the Islands -- a duplicate of the one designed to go by Dr. Whitman -- that it was with reluctance that we gave our consent; it was only as it was an extreme case that consent was given. We have but little hope of success, it is not to be expected that such hasty and prayerless undertakings will receive the blessing of God. When we were getting ready to start from Whitman for Walker's, something was said about his leaving immediately. He was told that he could not, that we could not get our letters ready, and that he must not start until he had secured a good, faithful man to go with him, and that it would not be safe for him to go without going to the Willamette and securing a good guide.

"This seemed to satisfy him that he must go to the Willamette first, and the last word I said to him, or about the last, was: 'Doctor, do not start until you are sure you are ready.' I suppose I shall have to bear

my part of the responsibility of his going. Let it be received as it may be by the committee. I am conscious that I had no motive in giving my consent except the good of the mission. If it fails of that, it must be viewed as one of the events in which Providence sees not as man sees. I thought that, if he would wait two or three weeks longer, there would be more time to deliberate upon it and pray over it. In the letter that I wrote to Dr. Whitman at the time the express was sent I stated to him that we prayed he might go, and we prayed he might not, giving him to understand at least that we were in doubt of the expediency of the thing, and showing that we hoped Providence would overrule all things as should be best. But it is not necessary that I should say more at this time on this subject. I regret much that my letter did not go by the doctor, as I think the information it contains would be of service to the committee, and it would second, perhaps, the exertions of Dr. Whitman in inducing the committee to send a re-enforcement to this field, or take some other measures in regard to it." (From Walker manuscripts.)

#### Mrs. Whitman and Her Husband

(Extract from a letter which Mrs. Whitman wrote to her absent husband from Waskopum, March 4, 1843.)

"I have never felt to regret in the least that you have gone -- for I fully believe the hand of the Lord was in it -- and that He has yet blessings in store for Oregon. Yes, for these poor, degraded Indians." Again, from Waililatpu, May 18, 1843: "Wishing you, my dear husband.... as speedy a return to the bosom of your family as the business of the Lord upon which you have gone will admit of." (From the archives of the American Board.) Still again, in a letter to her sister, March 11th, in remarking upon sacrifice of so long a separation from her husband, Mrs. Whitman said: "I can see no earthly inducement sufficiently paramount to cause me voluntarily to take upon myself such a painful trial... But there is one object, our blessed Saviour, for whose sake I suffer all things. It was for Him, for the advancement of His cause, that I could say to my beloved husband, 'Go; take all the time necessary to accomplish His work; and the Lord go with you and bless you.'" (Transcript of the Oregon Pioneer Association, 1893, p. 155.)

(Extract from a letter from Dr. Whitman to his brother-in-law, after he had started on his return, May 28, 1843.)

"My plan, you know, was to get funds for founding schools, and have good people come along as settlers and teachers." Ibid, p. 178.)

Professor Bourne says in conclusion:

"These extracts from the absolutely contemporary written records show clearly that there was no danger in 1842-43 that that part of the old Oregon territory which is now in the United States would be lost to the Union if Marcus Whitman had not come east; that the people of the present state of Oregon were officially informed, in September, 1842, by an agent of the government, who was fresh from Washington, that the Government intended to occupy the country; and that the reason of Marcus Whitman's journey east was to induce the American Board not to abandon, but to re-enforce, his mission station, and that the reason for his great haste was his desire to get to St. Louis before winter set in."

## Mr. Scott

In September, 1902, The Morning Oregonian (Portland, Oregon) contained an editorial from the pen of Mr. Harvey W. Scott, the talented editor of that paper. The Oregonian ranks as one of the best papers of the United States aside from being the oldest and best newspaper published in the Pacific Northwest; and Mr. Scott has been connected with it from almost its beginning. Born and educated in the Old Oregon Territory and personally acquainted with the leading pioneers who helped to make it, Mr. Scott is in all probability the best living authority upon the personnel of its history. Like the late Judge Deady and the late D. P. Thompson (ex-Minister to Turkey), he took his information from the actual participants in the events relating to the settlement and acquisition of old Oregon. He is not a disputant upon the subject, but has been called upon from time to time to express his opinion of the Whitman Saved Oregon Story, and this editorial gives his own conclusions. The "strange Treatment of Original Sources" article referred to in the editorial has since been published in pamphlet form and may be obtained from Mr. Wm. I. Marshall, Principal of the Gladstone School, Chicago, Ill.

From The Morning Oregonian (of Portland, Oregon), September 3, 1902:

## "A Scathing Review"

"It is well to call attention to the article published today on 'The Whitman Myth,' by Principal William I. Marshall, of Chicago. This article is a dissection of the pretensions of Dr. W. A. Mowry as an historian, as exhibited in his 'Marcus Whitman and the Early Days of Oregon.' It explodes completely the theory on which the Whitman myth is built -- the theory, namely, that Oregon was about to be surrendered to Great Britain; that Whitman undertook his winter ride to prevent that result; that his ride 'saved Oregon': that he collected and organized the migration of 1843, directed its march and showed it a wagon route over the plains and mountains. It shows Dr. Mowry following a preconceived idea and purpose of hero-making, has colored the history by his assumptions and misrepresented it by his suppressions. In this article there is close examination of the original sources of information for ascertainment of the origin and purpose of Whitman's ride; there is a review of the condition of the Oregon question at Washington, with positive proof that the assumption that the Tyler administration was indifferent to Oregon was unfounded, and consequently that Whitman could have exerted no influence to change the policy of the National Government toward Oregon; and finally, there is demonstration that Whitman's relation toward the great migration of 1843 was slight and practically unimportant. Great service is done to the truth of history by this review. It is devotion to truth, not hostility to the memory of Whitman, that prompts the effort to clear this subject of its modern accretions of myth and fable."

"Whitman was but one of our pioneers. He was energetic and adventurous, at times far beyond wisdom or prudence; and to his blindness to real danger, which a wiser man would have avoided, the destruction of himself and his family was due. He was apotheosized through his fate. Hero worship, stimulated by religious or ecclesiastical devotion has created his legend or myth, which in earlier or less critical times would doubtless have passed unchallenged. But in our age written and printed

records are preserved and the mythopeic faculty of the human mind receives checks and corrections unknown in the composition of the Homeric poems or portions of the Biblical narratives. But the tendency to hero worship and the love of the marvelous will never be wholly eliminated from the mind of man. Before the invention of writing and the use of printing, people forgot their actual history -- so uninteresting was it -- and remembered only the fables they had built upon it."

"It is not the purpose of the Oregonian to repeat the statements presented in this review, but only to refer the reader to them and to bespeak for them careful examination. This review by no means exhausts the subject. There are other proofs, but Mr. Marshall, in this article, was dealing only with the methods of Dr. Mowry, which he has subjected to a searching and very complete exposure. Incidentally, a great deal of matter has been presented by this reviewer, in a new form."

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(Copied from "The Whitman Myth" pamphlet loaned by Dr. Ira D. Cardiff, Yakima, by H. D. Guile, January 25, 26, 27, 28, 1930.)

(One copy to Click Relander, historian and collector of western Americana, sculptor and newspaperman.)