

HOW THE COURAGEOUS WHITMAN SAVED OREGON.

Dr. Marcus Whitman is one of our national heroes, whose name and fame and grateful memory the American historian will ever love to dwell upon. The perpetuity of his memory is secure, as much so as that of Ethan Allen of Vermont or Dr. Thomas Hooker or Israel Putnam of Connecticut, or Daniel Boone of Kentucky, or George Rogers Clark of Illinois, or Dr. Manasseh Cutler of the ordinance of 1789 and the Northwest Territory.

The trouble with some men who undertake to write history only to belittle it is their unfortunate incapacity to comprehend how one can be actuated by any moral grandeur of motive and purpose outside the common or above the commonplace.

As of course is well known, "Oregon" originally included what is now the three great states of Oregon, Washington and Idaho. This was the vast, vague, mysterious "Pacific Northwest"—until almost up to the middle of the last century a kind of no man's land. Eminent statesmen like Webster and Benton and others almost exhausted their powers of rhetoric in characterizing

ing the supposed worthlessness of that horrible region between the Rockies and the Pacific.

It is a mistake, moreover, to suppose that Oregon was included in the Louisiana purchase of 1803. France never had laid claim to any lands west of the Rocky Mountains, or the "Great Divide." Thomas Jefferson, writing December 23, 1816, said: "The western boundaries of Louisiana is rightfully the Rio Bravo, from its mouth to its source, and thence along the highlands and mountains dividing the waters of the Mississippi from those of the Pacific. On the waters of the Pacific we can find no claim in right of Louisiana."

Nominally by the treaty of Florida, 1819, Spain, which had jurisdiction over land west of the former French colony, including the Pacific coast territory north of latitude 42, gave to the United States to settle with Great Britain what the northern boundary should be.

But apart from this the United States based its claim to the Oregon country on the right of discovery. In 1792 Capt. Robert Gray, a daring New England navigator, sailed around Cape Horn and

up the Pacific to the mouth of the Columbia, taking possession of the country in the name of the United States. Thirteen years later, in 1805, Lewis and Clark reached the mouth of the Columbia on their historic overland trip. In 1811 John Jacob Astor, who, though a great fur trader, never pretended to be a great patriot, established a trading post on the Columbia.

But the Hudson Bay company, one of the most astute commercial companies ever organized, was a factor that had to be reckoned with, when nobody in the United States appeared to have any knowledge of that country and its possibilities, and only dreamed of it as Bryant did in his immortal "Thanatopsis," composed in 1812, as the

Continuous woods
Where rolls the Oregon, and hears no sound
Save her own dashings.
* * * the dead reign there alone.

The ignorance and the monstrous notions which prevailed throughout the country, and even among leading statesmen at Washington, as already mentioned, from Webster down, would

today seem incredible if it were not for the well known declarations now on record. Even the wonderfully interesting official reports of Lewis and Clark remained for years hidden in their official pigeonholes.

For some years there was indeed a kind of academic diplomatic dispute going on between Great Britain and the United States over the settlement of some northern boundary from the Rockies westward. During the presidential campaign of 1840 there were some mock heroes over the watchword, "Fifty-four Forty—or Fight!" But the sound and fury of it quickly died out. There was nothing which either Congress or the people, apparently, cared less about than what might become of Oregon.

Now, what of Dr. Marcus Whitman? Who was he? What did he ever do that his name should be immortal, that his memory should be emblazoned on one of the most historic and picturesque pages in the annals of early American territorial acquisition and settlement; that especially every school history should point the youth of the country to Marcus Whitman as one who, at a most critical time, did something to idealize the American spirit, to signalize American patriotism?

In the first place, Marcus Whitman, a native of Central New York, was a missionary physician, a "foreign missionary," sent out by the American board to the Indians in Oregon. This

great missionary society, the first of its kind in America, regarded that region on the further side of the Rocky mountains as in no sense home missions. Nothing could seem more foreign, except as nothing human could be foreign to the dominating passion of its world wide sympathy. Whitman went to Oregon. He and another missionary, with their newly married wives, made their way on wheels across a desert, plain and mountain; of white men and women together "the first who ever burst" into that awful region. The Indians, instinctively convinced of their good intent, welcomed them. Hide houses were built on the Waila Waila river. One of the first things done was to start a school and to teach the Indians to cultivate the soil. They found there no desert, but a glorious productive country and a most kindly climate.

Whitman was no better than the men associated with him, but he had more vision. He was like what Lord Rossebury calls Cromwell, a "practical mystic." To the last degrees practical and even pragmatical, he at the same time had imagination and was visionary. Seeing as he did the nature of that enormously vast and fruitful Pacific Northwest region, he saw at once what it was foreordained to be. But more than this, he had the sense and sagacity to see, in the time of it, what Great Britain through its Hudson Bay company and its settlements was planning to do to get possession of this

country. Especially what Marcus Whitman in 1842 felt was the imminent danger lest the authorities at Washington, in their strange ignorance of the country, should give it away!

The thought preyed upon his mind. It possessed him. Day after day he prayed over it. Something must be done. It must be done now. It was winter; nevertheless someone who knew the country as he knew it must go and tell the President and others about it—the possibility and the danger of delay. Immigrants must be gathered and conducted overland and over the mountains to create American settlements and establish the American claim, and above all to secure for the vast territory the advantages of the American kind of civilization. If someone must do this, why not he?

It was "in his bones" that he must go, and go he did, with but a single attendant on that strangely venturesome horseback journey in midwinter for many hundreds of miles through the snow, over ways which no white man had ever traversed before. He went on, with as sublime a patriotism as ever an American in any line of high duty has been actuated by, not halting anywhere until he reached Washington and in an interview with President Tyler and Secretary of State Daniel Webster he had explained his mission and the burden of his patriotic message.

From Washington Whitman came on to Boston, where the officials of his missionary society received him rather coolly, being like others slow to see, as he did, what it all meant. But the Whitman spirit got into the air and spread. A popular movement was started. A company of some 800 immigrants were got together through his immediate influence. And in 1844 Dr. Marcus Whitman piloted the first great Oregonian "trek," which, with what Whitman had already done, did have the effect to "save Oregon to the Union."

Narcus Whitman, having with such romantic daring, heroism and patience done what he had set out to do, and insured the great point aimed at, henceforth went quietly on with his missionary work; with never a boast of what he had done, never a thought as to any advantage or any loss to himself.

By whomsoever misled and by whatever falsehoods their minds had been poisoned, certain Indians, to whose benefitting he had given his life, repaid it with massacre. Whitman, his equally heroic wife, and eight other missionaries, perished together.

But the stirring memory of what Dr. Marcus Whitman did to "save Oregon to the Union" will not perish from the annals of America so long as men love truth and revere the deeds of unselfish heroism.—Chicago Record-Herald.

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