

## DANIEL WEBSTER AND OLD OREGON.

---

The lamented John Hay, Secretary of State under President McKinley, and also under President Roosevelt, and recognized as one of America's most brilliant diplomats, not long before his death awakened comment and interest by saying that the success of American diplomacy had been due to its directness. Mr. Albert Gallatin, of equal fame, perhaps, with Mr. Hay, but of an earlier period of our history, describing English diplomacy said, in a letter to his son: "Some of the Frenchmen say what is not true; here (in London) they conceal the truth." It would be of interest to note the application of these contrasts to the negotiations with England over the Oregon boundary, and particularly to the part taken by Daniel Webster therein; but first we may pertinently direct attention to the fallacy of the popular belief that Mr. Webster was indifferent, and even hostile, to American interests in the Pacific Northwest, and emphasized his real attitude during the years 1842-6 when his influence counted for so much in the settlement of that dispute.

### Webster's Real View.

Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, who ranks high as an historical authority, says: "In regard to the Northwestern boundary, Mr. Webster agreed with the opinion of Mr. Monroe's cabinet, that the 49th parallel was a fair and proper line." (*American Statesmen Series*, Vol. 21, pp. 257-8.) In support of this conclusion, Mr. Lodge would quote from Mr. Webster's speech in the Senate on March 30th, 1846:

"If, on the general notion of contiguity or continuity, this line be continued 'indefinitely west,' or is allowed to run to the 'northwestern ocean,' then it leaves on our side the valley of the Columbia, to which, in my judgment, our title is maintainable on the ground of Gray's discovery. The government of the United States has never offered any line south of forty-nine (with the navigation of the Columbia), and it never will. It behooves all concerned to regard this as a settled point. With respect to the navigation of the Columbia, permanently or for a term of years, that is all a matter for just, reasonable, and friendly negotiation. But the forty-ninth parallel must be regarded as the general line of boundary, and not be departed from for any line farther south." (*Nat. Edit.*, Vol. 9, p. 73.)

He would also quote from a speech in Boston on November 7th, 1845, as follows:

"It is well known that the forty-ninth degree of north latitude is the boundary line between the western part of this country and the British provinces, as far as the foot of the Rocky Mountains. It seems to be natural enough, if the two governments contemplate a change, that they should agree to an extension of this same line westward; that the two should keep on abreast, side by side, with the same line of division till they reach the Pacific Ocean. It is well known that about where the Columbia River crosses the forty-ninth parallel it makes a turn and flows nearly southward. Very well. Suppose it made as sudden a sweep to the northward. England would then naturally say, this river, which has been making westward, sweeps to the northward; instead of making with it a great bend to the north, we will leave it and go on straight to the Pacific Ocean on this parallel of forty-nine degrees. For the same reason, it is not unnatural for the United States to say, since it proves that the river makes a circuit to the south, instead of following that circuit we will go straight upon the forty-ninth parallel till we meet the shore of the Pacific Ocean.

"This very proposition has been made to the British Government three successive times. It was made in '19, in '24, in '26—again and again to follow up the forty-ninth parallel westward from the Lake of the Woods, not only to the foot of the Rocky Mountains, but over the mountains and onward to the ocean." (Nat. Edit., Vol. 13, p. 314 et seq.)

And he would refer to Mr. Webster's declarations in January and February, 1843, through Senator Choate. (See Wash. Hist. Quar., July, 1907, p. 213.)

It must not be understood from this that Mr. Webster was an enthusiastic supporter of Western or Pacific Coast interests, or that he was a strong believer in expansion, though it is by no means proper to say that "the contrary rather is true." He was a New Englander and represented particularly the wealthy business interests of the East; and on that account he deprecated war and rumors of war that would disturb business relations. He was proud of New England against any other section of the country, and his private opinion of the Oregon country was by no means high. But as a statesman considering American rights and claims, he was consistently firm and was active in maintaining the American title to Oregon and anxious to acquire California. It has suited the controversialist to select a fragment of a letter or speech and lead up to an opinion from that, when an examination of the whole speech, or of others in connection with it, leads to a different conclusion; and in this manner the popular idea has become biased.

**That Prairie Dog Speech.**

The speech most often attributed to Mr. Webster, and quoted with sardonic emphasis, is what is termed the "Prairie Dog" speech, beginning as follows:

"What do we want with the vast, worthless area, this region of savages and wild beasts, of deserts, of shifting sands and whirlwinds of dust, of cactus and prairie dogs?"

But students of our history have been for years credulous as to the author of this diatribe, and are coming to regard it as merely another of the vagaries of Rev. H. H. Spaulding and W. H. Gray. It was not Mr. Webster who said it, for his published works and the records of Congress have been carefully searched without success; and it does not ring true. Those who have used it, or continue to use it, are open to criticism as to their care or their scholarship, or the motive for doing so.

**The River St. Johns vs. the Columbia.**

Passing from what Mr. Webster did not to what he did say, we will examine his statements in the Senate in April, 1846, in which he contrasts the St. Johns River with the Columbia. Now, this seems, in the light of our present knowledge and pride, a foolish contrast, and at the present day he would not repeat it. But when we examine the speech itself we find that it was not one derogatory of Oregon, but a defense of the Ashburton treaty and laudatory of the St. Johns River as a valuable asset of that treaty; and the comparison is not with the Columbia alone, but with other well-known rivers. We quote:

"But Maine, I admit, did not look and ought not to have looked to the treaty as a mere pecuniary bargain. She looked at other things than money. She took into consideration that she was to enjoy the free navigation of the St. Johns River. I thought this a great object at the time the treaty was made; but I had then no adequate conception of its real importance. Circumstances which have since taken place show that its advantages to the State are far greater than I then supposed. That river is to be free to the citizens of Maine for the transportation down its stream of all unmanufactured articles whatever. Now, what is this river St. Johns? We have heard a vast deal lately of the immense value and importance of the Columbia River and its navigation; but I will undertake to say that for all purposes of human use the St. Johns is worth a hundred times as much as the Columbia is, or ever will be. In point of magnitude it is one of the most respectable rivers on the Eastern side of this part of America. It is longer than the Hudson and as large as the Dela-

ware. And moreover, it is a river which has a mouth to it, and that, in the opinion of the member from Arkansas, is a thing of some importance in the matter of rivers." (Webster's Works, Vol. 5, pp. 102-3.)

Even the last ten years have not been without exaggerated allusions to the Columbia River and its commerce, and hearing a part of this speech read without knowing the author, one might easily suppose he was merely listening to some newspaper editorial laudatory of the Puget Sound waters as against the Columbia.

#### **Not an Agricultural Country.**

The only part of Old Oregon that Great Britain seriously laid claim to after the year 1818 was that lying north and west of the Columbia River. Another quotation used to show Mr. Webster's ignorance and indifference is a sentence taken from his letter to Mr. Everett (in London), on November 28th, 1842: "I doubt exceedingly whether it (Oregon) is an inviting country for agricultural settlers." At that date the doubt was not an unreasonable one, especially for Mr. Webster, who was considerable of an agriculturalist himself and had his own ideas upon the subject. At that particular time the Oregon question was seriously before him, and he had at hand the reports of the government expedition under Lieutenant Wilkes, whose exploring parties from Puget Sound to the interior traversed for the most part dense forest and trackless plain. Agriculture was then not very prevalent north and west of the Columbia (or in any part of Old Oregon); in fact, a considerable portion of that region has not yet been turned over by the plow, being too mountainous. Even in 1885 the government statistics stated that only one-tenth of the land in the whole State of Washington was good for agriculture. In the seventies people were laughed at for buying what are now the most fertile grain fields in the Walla Walla valley, and without irrigation (not thought of in 1842) the Yakima and Wenatchee lands would still be selling for a song. The Red River emigration in 1841 to settle the Puget Sound country had proven a failure, and the whole Oregon country, in the same latitude as Montreal and Quebec, might well have presented doubts to the mind of Mr. Webster as to its agricultural possibilities in 1842.

#### **Navigation of the Columbia.**

Mr. Webster has also been criticised because of his willingness to negotiate regarding the navigation of the Columbia

River, and one writer has said: "Think of our being in a war with England and she by treaty having the use of the Columbia River permanently!" From the quotation already made, it is easy to get an idea of what might have been conceded to England had it been necessary to do so, namely, the same rights the Americans enjoyed on the river St. Johns. The Columbia River might have been open to England for the transportation of raw material and the passage of boats to and from her own territory, that is, British Columbia; a privilege that would have been of actually no service up to the present time. But think of Mr. Webster advocating a clause in a treaty with England under which she would have the right to bring her warships into the Columbia River while at war with the United States!

#### **Oregon and California.**

The original Spaulding-Gray tale was that Mr. Webster was keen to trade off Oregon for a cod fishery on the coasts of Newfoundland; but when that was found to have been a false alarm the terms of the trade were changed by later writers to make it appear that California was the territorial desiderata. This refers to what is called the tripartite plan of President Tyler ("a dream of policy never embodied" he himself afterward described it), and its consideration belongs properly to a discussion to be entitled President Tyler and Oregon. Mr. Webster did not summarily reject this as impossible, but gave it little serious attention, as shown by his own letters. What we know about it from the diary of John Quincy Adams, entries on March 18-21-25-27 and April 1, 1843, serves to illustrate Mr. Adams' rancorous opinion of Mr. Webster at that time, rather than to give any accurate information about the plans of the administration. Mr. Webster was preparing to leave the cabinet, and his recommendations regarding Oregon and other disputed points with England were already made (see his letter to Mr. Everett, dated March 20th, 1843). Mr. Adams pressed him for information and received—to use an expression popular just now—a lemon, and a squeezed one at that, as far as Mr. Webster was concerned.

#### **In Conclusion.**

Curiously enough, the horizon of Mr. Webster's view of the future greatness of the United States did not include the Pacific Coast, favorable as he was to asserting American claims to it. He shared the careless views of other public men of those days, even of Thomas H. Benton, as to a future Pacific Republic. Wit-

ness a part of his famous speech in behalf of Oregon in Faneuil Hall, November 7th, 1845:

"I am the more confident of this when I look a little forward and see the state of things which is not far in advance. Where is Oregon? On the shores of the Pacific, three thousand miles from us and twice as far from England. Who is to settle it? Americans, mainly; some settlers undoubtedly from England; but all Anglo-Saxons; all men educated in nations of independent government and all self-dependent. And now let me ask if there be any sensible man in the whole United States who will say for a moment that when fifty or a hundred thousand persons of this description shall find themselves on the shores of the Pacific Ocean, that they will long content to be under the rule of either the American Congress or the British Parliament? They will raise a standard for themselves, and they ought to do it. I look forward to the period when they will do this as not so far distant but that many now present, and those not the youngest among us, will see a great Pacific republican nation. I believe that it is in the course of Providence and of human destiny that a great State is to arise, of English and American descent, whose power will be established over the country and the shores of the Pacific; and that all those rights of natural and political liberty, all those great principles, that both nations have inherited from their fathers, will be transmitted through us to them, so there will exist at the mouth of the Columbia, or more probably farther south, a great Pacific Republic, a nation where our children may go for a residence, separating themselves from the government, and forming an integral part of a new government half way between England and China, in the most healthful, fertile and desirable portion of the globe, and quite too far remote from Europe and from this side of the American continent to be under the governmental influence of either country."

And even then a railroad to the Pacific was being talked of by newspaper writers in New York.

C. T. JOHNSON.