

The Washington Historical Quarterly

GEORGE WILKES

The republication of George Wilkes' History of Oregon, begun in the Quarterly in October, 1906, is completed in the present issue.

In several ways the book or pamphlet is of much historical importance. It was prepared by a journalist rather than a historian, and with a sincere desire to give accurate information regarding the Oregon Country and the best means of getting there, and without expectation of gain in its publication.

At a time when railroads and railroading were in their infancy, Mr. Wilkes was among the first to realize the importance of long and connecting lines of rail communication, and so far as I have been able to ascertain was the first to publicly advocate the building of a line from the Atlantic to the Pacific by the National Government. He argued against land grants or subsidies to private individuals or corporations. The government ownership of the proposed road was the central idea of part I of the book. It was published in New York in 1845. In 1847 he published another pamphlet entitled "Proposal for a National Rail-Road to the Pacific Ocean, for the Purpose of Obtaining a Short Route to Oregon and the Indies." The latter repeated many of the arguments of the earlier work, in fact had little new material. Both are exceedingly scarce at the present day.

In the preface to the book, Wilkes says: "The second part of the work consists of a journal, prepared from a series of letters, written by a gentleman now in Oregon, who himself accompanied the celebrated emigrating expedition of 1843. They make no pretensions in their style, but are merely simple, conversational epistles, which in their familiar, off-hand way, furnish a large amount of useful practical information to the emigrant, and much interesting matter to the general reader. The author

has done scarcely more to this portion than to throw it into chapters, and to strike from it such historical and geographical statistics as had been drawn from other sources, and arranged in the preceding portions of the work. These letters fell into his hands after the adoption and commencement of his original design; and adapting them to his purpose, by linking them with his own mss., a deal of research was saved him by the valuable and peculiar information they contributed."

Mr. Wilkes did not disclose the name of the writer of the letters, and in fact their authorship was never formally announced, but internal evidence proves they were written by Peter H. Burnett.

Mr. Burnett was born in Nashville, Tennessee, November 15, 1807. The family removed to Missouri in 1817. He was almost entirely self-taught, as in his childhood and youth he had little opportunity of going to school. When about 26 years of age he began the study of law, but continued in other business until in 1839 he abandoned mercantile pursuits and began the practice of law. In 1842 he determined to go to Oregon. May 8, 1843, he left his home in Weston, Missouri, with two ox wagons, one small two-horse wagon, four yoke of oxen, two mules, and a fair supply of provisions. He had a wife and six children. They arrived at the rendezvous, some twelve miles west of Independence, just across the state line and in the Indian country, on the 17th of May. Five days later a general start was made and this historic migration was begun.

An excellent account of the trip is given in Part II of Wilkes' History.

Mr. Burnett was quite prominent in Oregon affairs until 1848, when he was attracted to California by its rich gold fields, and after a time he sent for his family to join him there.

In August, 1849, he was chosen one of the Judges of the Supreme Tribunal of California, and on the 13th of November of that year he was elected Governor. The Constitutional Convention had been held in September and October. California was admitted a state September 9, 1850. Governor Burnett sent in his resignation in January, 1851, and resumed the practice of law. In 1857-8 he served as a Justice of the Supreme Court of the State. Later he engaged in the banking business.

In 1880 there was issued from the press of D. Appleton & Co. the "Recollections and Opinions of an Old Pioneer," written by Mr. Burnett. It is an extremely interesting narrative of his life in Missouri, Oregon and California, and valuable for its history of pioneer life on the Pacific Coast.

In the annual address before the Oregon Pioneers at Portland, in April, 1895, appears the following:

"Perhaps the demise of no one has attracted more widespread at-

tention nor caused deeper sorrow on the Pacific Coast than the death of the late Peter H. Burnett, the first Governor of California, and an Oregon Pioneer of 1843, who had served in the legislature and was one of the justices of the supreme court."

Jesse Applegate was the only other gentleman who was with the 1843 immigration who might possibly have written the letters, but they contain dates, locations and facts that make sure the declaration that Burnett wrote them.

A discussion between William I. Marshall, the author of the "Acquisition of Oregon," and Professor Schafer, of the University of Oregon, regarding this book, the authorship of its letters, etc., was published in the Oregonian in 1903. Both gentlemen seem to have agreed that letters written by Mr. Burnett and by him sent to the New York Herald for publication formed the basis of Part II of Wilkes' book, but they disagreed as to the value of the work as an "Original Source" of history. References to places and affairs in Oregon were quoted in substantiation of their conclusions. In this connection both gentlemen seem to have overlooked a paragraph on page 113 that, to my mind, is more nearly conclusive than the others, as follows:

"The more extended political organization of which I before spoke, is about to take place, and I was waited upon two or three days ago by a party from the Falls, to consult upon a plan of general territorial government, with a legislature of two houses, and a Chief Justice for its first executive officer. This arrangement will embrace all the settlements of the valley into one common government, the representatives of which will convene in general congress, at stated periods, at Multnomah or Oregon City, and there transact all the necessary business for our little body politic. When this plan is adopted, (as it doubtless will immediately be) it will perhaps, be the peculiar honor of your humble servant, to sit in a curule chair of the first Republican Government beyond the Rocky Mountains. We shall then be able to make our own laws, and likewise do our own voting and our own fighting."

A few months later Mr. Burnett was chosen Chief Justice of Oregon, under its provisional government, thus fulfilling the prediction in his letter above quoted.

Wilkes must have written considerable of Part II of his book before acquiring the letters, and then instead of rewriting it he tried to work in the letters. In some places this was quite clumsily done. The first chapter is nearly all fictitious, both in names and facts. Robbins, Smith, Harris, Baker, Brown, McFarley, Wayne and Dumberton were not members of the party, and near the bottom of page 65 Burnett is introduced to Peter

H. Burnett. Why Wilkes should have failed to give the name of the writer is unexplainable. In minor details it was often inaccurate, but in important facts and in giving intending emigrants information about Oregon and those on the way there valuable facts about roads, fords, grass, distances, etc., it was reliable.

Commenting upon the road from the upper waters of the Sweetwater to Fort Hall, Professor Schafer says: "When we inquire into what motive could have induced Wilkes to deliberately deceive his readers with reference to this piece of road, only one natural answer suggests itself. He evidently was doing it in the interest of his railroad scheme."

The writer remembers vividly that part of the road in 1852. A lad of eight years, in common with the women and other children of the party, he trudged afoot along many weary miles of this road, up and down many long and, to his mind, interminable hills, through the biting frost of early morn and the torrid heat of midday, and he can testify to its roughness and manifold difficulties.

Against Prof. Schafer's comment I wish to protest most emphatically. Mr. Wilkes was a man of high ideals, of lofty public spirit. It was impossible for him to "deliberately deceive" anyone. To attempt deceit carries with it unworthy or dishonest motives. A reader of Wilkes' writings, his books, pamphlets and newspapers, will find an entire absence of selfishness or wish for private gain or personal aggrandizement at the expense of anyone.

One writer has described the style of the book as "flamboyant," which is doubtless true, but greater faults than this can readily be forgiven one not more than twenty-seven years of age who devotes his splendid talents, his time and his money to the exploitation of a colossal national improvement that for the period of seventy years ago was of infinitely more importance to the United States, and especially to the Pacific Coast, than the Panama Canal of today. By most people his proposal was thought more impossible of achievement than today would be an effort to establish a line of airships between the earth and the moon. He was a little more than twenty years in advance of his time. The first transcontinental line was completed in 1869 and the scandals that followed its construction served to prove Wilkes' contention about the unwisdom of subsidizing railroads by land grants or money and still permitting private ownership of them.

Particular importance attaches to this book for another reason. The migration of 1843, consisting of about 900 men, women and children, who brought with them large numbers of horses and cattle, fruit trees, etc., was the first large one. It strengthened the hands of the men who had

at all times demanded that the claims of Great Britain to any part of Old Oregon south of latitude 49 degrees should be resisted at all hazards, by force of arms if necessary. The speeches of Linn, Benton, Calhoun, Webster, Clay and nearly all the notable men of the period between 1819 and 1846 show a surprising knowledge of the soil, climate, productions of land and water, its commercial advantages and all the varied details of the grazing and agricultural possibilities of Old Oregon. The record shows that these matters were familiar to these great men before an American missionary or American settler had reached Oregon.

Until many years later no member of that migration published an account of it except these letters to the Herald and fragmentary notes from others. The journals of Burnett and others, so far as they have been given to the public, were jotted down from time to time by men wearied by unremitting toil, who had no time or disposition to record more than the briefest itinerary of the day. Therefore, with all its faults, Wilkes' book is of priceless value as a memorial to Congress about the Oregon of that period and the history of its local events and men of seventy years ago.

To one familiar, as was the writer of this paper, with the remarkable editorials appearing in the Spirit of the Times during all the Civil War period, with their vigorous English, their fervent loyalty and lofty patriotism, the style of the book is not comparable, but in giving the salient facts about the migration and the conditions then existing in the Willamette Valley it is so accurate that an occasional slip of the pen can be readily condoned.

At the time of his death, which occurred September 23, 1885, the New York Herald and the Times each devoted nearly a column to his obituary and other newspapers of that city and other Atlantic cities made more or less extended mention of him and his life.

The Librarian of the New York Public Library has furnished me with photostat reproductions of the obituaries of Mr. Wilkes published by the New York Herald and Times and the Spirit of the Times. The latter article, dated September 26, 1885, is given in full below:

"We regret to record the death, in this city, on Wednesday, of George Wilkes, one of the founders and proprietors of The Spirit of The Times, and for many years its sole editor. Mr. Wilkes joined the staff of this paper when it was called Porter's Spirit. A division of the proprietorship having occurred, he continued its publication under the title of Wilkes' Spirit until 1866, when his name was dropped. He lived abroad for several years, in the enjoyment of an ample income, which enabled him to indulge his cultivated tastes, and returned here a few months ago, as if he felt some premonition of his approaching death, and desired

to rest in his native land, which he loved enthusiastically and served zealously.

“George Wilkes was, in his way, one of the foremost American journalists. He not only founded the greatest paper of its class which this country has ever possessed, but he made it, during the Civil War, as tremendous a power in national politics as it has always been in the departments to which it is more particularly devoted. Among such giants of journalism as James Gordon Bennett, Horace Greeley, Henry J. Raymond, Charles A. Dana and William Cullen Bryant—of whom only Mr. Dana now remains to us—Mr. Wilkes held an equal place by virtue of his remarkable talents. They had daily papers in which to address the public; his paper was published only once a week; but they all conceded the vigor and brilliancy of his writing and his articles in *The Spirit* were republished so extensively that their circulation may be said to have been world wide. His editorials during the War were regularly reprinted in the *Tribune* and some of them were read in Congress. His advice was asked and followed by President Lincoln and the members of his famous Cabinet. Having convinced himself that General McClellan was inefficient, Mr. Wilkes fairly wrote him out of the command of the Army of the Potomac. He was largely instrumental in bringing Grant to take charge of our Eastern armies. He was on most intimate terms with the leading statesmen and generals of the Union.

“Mr. Wilkes went to the front at the outbreak of the Rebellion and witnessed and described for *The Spirit* the battle of Bull Run. In the concluding words of that report he gave the keynote for all patriots by stating that the South had fought so well as to be worthy of being brought back into the Union. Throughout the magnificent series of letters and editorials which illuminated the pages of *The Spirit* this was the text which Mr. Wilkes enforced. He never displayed toward the misguided men who were trying to break up the Union the bitter animosity with which he hunted down the incompetent leaders of the Union side, whose incapacity delayed the restoration of peace and unity. He never doubted the ultimate salvation of the Republic, but he was righteously impatient with those who did not share his faith and agree with him in his opinions of men and measures. He labored ardently to hasten the triumph of the Union as any soldier in the field—as General Grant himself. If he made any mistakes they were on the side of patriotism and were due to his anxiety to hurry on the inevitable victory. One mistake of his in regard to General Fitz John Porter cost that officer his condemnation by Court Martial and nearly cost him his life. But Mr. Wilkes lived to see this error redeemed by the full justice done to General Porter in *The Spirit*, by Grant, by

Congress and by the American people. In the fever and fury of a Civil War such injustices could scarcely be altogether avoided; but Mr. Wilkes went with our armies, saw personally the matters which he criticised, and, in McClellan's camp on the Peninsula, caught the disease which has finally resulted in his decease.

"George Wilkes has been so long absent from editorial connection with *The Spirit* that his death will not affect it in any way. But, like all strong individualities, he has left a permanent impression upon the paper which he so long conducted. His energetic and splendid style of writing elevated the journalism of sports from the slipslop methods of his predecessors. He attempted to banish slang from every department of *The Spirit* and he succeeded. In Shakespeare he found a living well of English undefiled and there he sought for strength and purity of diction. After his retirement from practical journalism, he wrote a commentary upon Shakespeare which is remarkable for its original views and theories. But Mr. Wilkes felt that the work of his life had ended with the Civil War and that thereafter he might take such enjoyment as his broken health permitted. He made business arrangements which left him free to live or travel wherever he pleased and independent of all cares and responsibilities. Never afraid of death and boldly facing it a hundred times in the discharge of what he believed to be his duty, he finally died at home, peacefully and fearlessly."

Allibone's Dictionary of Authors, Vol. 3, p. 2720, quotes the following: "New York, April 28, 1870.—George Wilkes, the proprietor of the *Spirit of the Times*, has received from the Emperor of Russia the Grand Cross of the Order of St. Stanislas, as a recognition for the suggestion made to the Russian Government in reference to an overland railway to China and India by way of Russia. This mark of royal favor entitles the holder to have his male children at the Military School of Russia at the expense of the State."

This great honor from the Russian Government came to him about a quarter century after he had been made the object of jest and ridicule for a similar suggestion backed by sound argument for a railroad across the United States. Scriptural comment: "A prophet is not without honor save in his own country."

The *New York Times* said of him that when the Civil War broke out Wilkes wrote a series of newspaper and magazine articles on the burning question of the hour that attracted wide attention, and gained him the friendship of many prominent men. Secretary Stanton took a personal interest in him, and gave him a great deal of literary work to do in Washington. His articles were very vigorous, well written, and patriotic. They

commanded a wide influence, and besides strengthening the attachment of the author to people who had heretofore been his friends, they had the effect of subduing the belligerence and increasing the caution of his enemies.

In April, 1860, Frank Leslie's "Illustrated Newspaper" published a photograph of him and a brief but complimentary note about him.

In 1849 Mr. Wilkes went to California with David C. Broderick, who afterward became U. S. Senator from that State. Wilkes took great interest in the political fortunes of Broderick, and rendered him valuable services. In 1851 he returned to New York and resumed his career as a journalist.

Early pioneers will remember the wave of indignation that swept over the Pacific Coast when it was known that Broderick had been killed in a duel with David S. Terry. The latter became widely known as Judge Terry, whose tragic death while attempting to murder Justice Field is comparatively recent California history.

The fatal meeting took place September 13, 1859, and Broderick died three days later. Volumes have been written about this duel. It was quite generally believed it was the result of a conspiracy among the leaders of the ultra slaveholding wing of the then dominant party in the State to get rid of Broderick at all hazards.

Broderick's great friendship became apparent when his will was made public. An estate valued at \$300,000 was all left to Wilkes, except one legacy of \$10,000. Considerable litigation between him and the State of California ensued. The ultimate verdict was in favor of the legatee, but the estate had shrunk a good deal on account of the heavy costs of the law suit.

Under date of Washington, September 9, 1913, the Librarian of Congress gave me the following list of the writings of George Wilkes so far as he had been able to find them:

Europe in a Hurry. New York, H. Long & Brother, 1853. 449 pp.

The Great Battle, Fought at Manassas, Between the Federal Forces, under Gen. McDowell, and the Rebels, under Gen. Beauregard, Sunday, July 21, 1861. From notes taken on the spot. New York, Brown & Ryan, 1861. 36 pp.

History of California. New York, 1845. (Note.—It is doubtful if this book was published, as it is not in the Library of Congress and I have never seen a reference to it.—C. B. B.)

The History of Oregon, Geographical and political. New York, W. H. Collyer, 1845. 128 pp.

The Internationale; its principles and purposes. Being a sequel to the Defence of the Commune. New York, 1871. 23 pp.

The Lives of Helen Jewett and Richard Robinson. New York, H. Long & Brother, 1849. 132 pp.

McClellan; from Ball's Bluff to Antietam. New York, S. Tousey, 1863. 40 pp.

"McClellan"; who he is and "what he has done," and "Little Mac; from Ball's Bluff to Antietam." Both in one. New York, The American News Company, 1864. 14 pp.

Project of a National Rail-Road from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean for the Purpose of Obtaining a Short Route to Oregon and the Indies. 2d ed. Republished from the "History of Oregon." New York, The Author, 1845. 23 pp.

Proposal for a National Rail-Road to the Pacific Ocean, for the Purpose of Obtaining a Short Route to Oregon and the Indies. 4th ed. Rev. and repub. from the "History of Oregon." New York, D. Adee, 1847. 24 pp.

Shakespeare from an American Point of View. New York, D. Appleton, 1877.

The Mysteries of the Tombs, a Journal of Thirty Days' Imprisonment in the New York City Prison for Libel. New York, 1844, 64 pp.

Wilkes, George, vs. John F. Chamberlin. N. Y. Supreme Court. The answer of John F. Chamberlin to the complaint of George Wilkes in an action to recover damages for defamation of character. New York, W. J. Reed, 1873. (Diplomatic Pamphlets, v. 16, p. 1.) 15 pp.

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