

THE WHITMAN CONTROVERSY*

268 Jayne Street, Oakland, Cal., July 1st, 1912.

Mr. Thomas W. Prosch,
621 Ninth Avenue,
Seattle, Wash.

My dear Friend:

In your letter of June 24th you said you would be glad to receive the papers printed in the Sunday School Times of Philadelphia, Pa., relating to the Whitman controversy. I have been looking them up, and will send them to you, although I have no doubt but that you have already seen them. Pardon my accompanying them with my comments.

Take the one from Professor Bourne first, as he is the principal one who has ever opposed the claim of the friends of Dr. Whitman. I once prepared a reply to his criticism as set forth in his "Legend of Marcus Whitman," and went to Portland, Oregon, at the time of the Fair in 1905, intending to have a public discussion with him, but it happened, unfortunately, that while there I was invited to accompany a niece of mine on a pleasure trip to Alaska; we were gone twelve days, and during that time Professor Bourne had been there and gone. I was very sorry, for I wanted very much to meet him.

I was prepared to show that in his "Legend of Marcus Whitman" he had been very unfair, as he had quoted everything he could find, or could twist, to bear against Doctor Whitman, and omitted to quote anything that could possibly be construed in his favor,, although there was much within his reach. I was prepared to show where he had done this in many places, and if I now had my copy of his book I could give the pages. I remember one expression he made—I do not remember the exact words, but give the substance—that he could not understand why so many people of sound mind could be so deceived in regard to Doctor Whitman. I wrote on the margin of the leaf: "This reminds me of the story of the lone

*The following letter, from General J. C. Strong, one of the early pioneers of Washington (1859), now living at Oakland, California, in his 87th year, is given by the person addressed to the Washington Historical Quarterly for publication. It is one more, and the latest, of a vast number of papers and books published for or against the legends of Oregon being saved to the United States by the efforts and representations of Doctor Marcus Whitman. Aside from its value as a historical paper, this letter has interest from the facts of the personal acquaintance of its author, and his kinsman, Doctor Strong, with the martyred Whitman seventy years ago. Readers of the Quarterly will be glad to see it. T. W. P.

juror, who, when the judge asked the jury why they couldn't agree, said, 'Judge, there isn't any use, eleven men on this jury haven't any brains.' "

I feel confident that if Professor Bourne had not occupied the high position he did, his "Legend of Marcus Whitman" would have fallen flat. When a person who claims to be a searcher after truth in history—as Professor Bourne does—finds a disputed point, he is expected to examine both sides fairly, and weigh the evidence with honest scales; if he does not, his conclusions are of little value and should be considered unfair and unreliable.

When I went to Portland in 1905, I was prepared with facts to show that he had been unfair in his criticisms, and with some questions which I think would have troubled him to answer even to his own satisfaction.

First: Why did Doctor Whitman go to Washington before going to Boston to see the Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions if his errand was not political? For a long time the Anti-Whitmanites declared that he did not go to Washington at all, and not until it began to look too absurd to deny, did they admit it; knowing that the government at Washington had nothing whatever to do with the missions; and even then, Mrs. Frances F. Victor, who was one of their best writers, assumed to put into the Doctor's mouth just the words he used to the President and Mr. Webster.

Second: Why did Dr. Whitman never speak of going East until after Doctor White's visit?

Third: And if settling Oregon with American families was not a part of his errand, why did he get Mr. Lovejoy, who had just come to Oregon with Doctor White, to go immediately back with him?

It certainly could not have been for his influence in getting the A. B. C. F. M. to change its order; and why did Mr. Lovejoy stop at Fort Bent and work strenuously to get Americans with families to go to Oregon, unless that was just what Doctor Whitman and he had agreed upon before starting? It seems to me that when the friends of Doctor Whitman reinforce their direct proof that his main errand East was political, with the fact that he went to Washington before going to Boston, it establishes the fact that he went East on some political errand, and throws the burden of proving what that errand was upon those who deny it, and they should prove what it was, not negatively, but positively.

Professor Bourne, in his letter published in the "Sunday School Times," after asking the question, "Was there any danger in 1842-3 that the United States would give up or lose what we now know as Oregon?" says, under the head of "Attitude of President and Senate":

"President Tyler wrote his son December 11, 1845" (two years after Doctor Whitman had been to Washington), "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 parallel) "unless, for the greater equivalent of California, which I fancied Great Britain might be able to obtain for us through her influence in Mexico."

Here is one of the many instances of Professor Bourne's unfairness. Why does he not say,—to account for the foregoing:—unless, that at the time Doctor Whitman went to Washington there was in existence a tri-party agreement between Great Britain, the United States, and Mexico, by which the United States had bound itself to cede all her interests in the Oregon Country to Great Britain for the greater equivalent of California, and the only reason it had not been done was because Mexico was slow; and that after Doctor Whitman had been to Washington and convinced the government of the great value of the Oregon Country, our government stopped urging Great Britain to use her influence with Mexico, and the matter was dropped to give the government further time to look into it, which resulted in keeping Oregon as part of the United States.

Of course, Professor Bourne knew of the Triparty Agreement, but does not mention it. Why? Because that being the case, the Oregon Country was really in danger, and that would tend to favor the claim of Doctor Whitman's friends.

Again he says: "Second. As to the attitude of the Senate. On February 3rd, 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."

This is another instance of unfairness. Professor Bourne knew that the Linn bill hung fire, and did not become a law until seven years after Doctor Whitman visited Washington.

Again, under the head of "Why did Whitman come East?" he says: "If Oregon was not in danger of being surrendered to England, what then was Doctor Whitman's motive for his journey?"

He then makes such extracts from the contemporary records, diaries, and letters, as he thinks will best air the trouble of the Mission with the A. B. C. F. M. No friend of Doctor Whitman denies that the mission was having trouble with the Prudential Committee of the A. B. C. F. M., and that that trouble was one of his objects in going East; but if that was his only object, or his main one, why did he give the Board in Boston the go by, and go on to Washington, where he knew he would not, and could not, get relief?

Professor Bourne concludes his letter by saying: "And that was the reason for Marcus Whitman's journey East," (as if he could not have but one reason, or object) "to induce the American Board not to abandon, but to re-enforce, his Mission Station."

Then why did he go to Washington first? It is not natural for a man to go miles out of his way to reach persons, who, as I have said, he knew had nothing whatever to do with his grievance; and if he had two reasons or objects in view, and that he had is conclusively proven by his friends, would it not be in accordance with all natural law, that he should attend to the one he deemed of most importance first.

Professor John Porter Lamberton sends two letters to the Sunday School Times. He advances nothing new, but relies entirely upon Professor Bourne's criticisms as absolutely conclusive; and as I have replied to Professor Bourne, I will only notice one item in his letters. He says: "There is record that very few in Oregon believe it, and the officers of the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions discountenances it. The early numbers of the "Missionary Herald" are silent about it. The record of Whitman's life there given is very brief."

He was probably not aware of the fact that the answer to that criticism tended strongly to prove the political nature of the Doctor's journey, as I will show later on.

Rev. Edward E. Strong, DD., (who is a cousin of mine, and with whom I have often talked on this subject, was the Editorial Secretary of the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions at the time Doctor Whitman came East in 1842-3), sends a letter to the Sunday School Times, from which I quote in part:

"The chief argument against the claim in behalf of Whitman is based on the incompleteness of contemporaneous accounts. There is a reason for this incompleteness. Whitman was well aware, as were the supporters of the American Board at that time, that the officers of the Board had a strong feeling that he was devoting his attention to political rather than missionary ends. He came from Oregon without permission of the Committee, and was well aware that his scheme did not have the full sympathy of those at the missionary rooms. It was most natural, therefore, that he did not say much in his letters or in his personal interviews about his convictions or his plans. He was more far-seeing than his directors, and notwithstanding the divergence in their views, he held to his convictions. This certainly would be enough to account for the meagerness of the records of our Board in regard to this incident; but I think I can say that in what records we have, there is nothing to contradict the common version of the Whitman story. The fact that that story is not told in our records is far

from furnishing convincing evidence that the story was not true." Does not this fully answer Professor Lambertson's criticism on this point?

The Editor of the *Sunday School Times* wrote to Docotr Strong for a second letter, to which he replied as follows:

"In response to your letter of December 31st, I may add a little to the statements made in my letter which was presented in the *Sunday School Times*, affirming that there is nothing in the records of our American Board which militates against the claim made that Marcus Whitman saved Oregon to the Union. The records of the Board show that Doctor Whitman came to Washington, and that he subsequently appeared in Boston, very much to the surprise of the Secretaries, having left his mission without the authorization of the Committee. He had his own plans for the Board's mission in Oregon, and for conducting a party across the mountains to settle in that territory. Though the Prudential Committee had not favored the scheme which he had proposed, it is evident from the records of the Committee, at its meeting of April 4th, 1843, that Whitman's personal statements carried conviction in regard to most of the points he had on his mind. They approved of Doctor Whitman's ideas respecting the conduct of the Mission. The minutes of that day also mention the presentation by Doctor Whitman of his plans for taking with him, on his return to the Mission, a company of 'intelligent and pious laymen to settle at or near the Mission Station, but without expense to the Board or in connection with it.' This plan is given approval if the right men can be found."

The reluctance of the Prudential Committee to connect the Board with any political movement, or any enterprise not strictly missionary in its character, was doubtless the reason why so little is said in its records about that side of Whitman's work. But the action taken on that 4th of April, 1843, is conclusive as to what Whitman's plan was, and especially of his purpose to take the company of immigrants across the mountains to Oregon. That he carried out this plan and took such a company is a fact sufficiently established. The feat was a most remarkable one, but the American Board never discussed the political side of it. How much the plans and achievements of the heroic missionary had to do with saving Oregon to the United States is a point which, of course, could not be decided by reference to the documents at the missionary rooms."

Professor C. W. Darrow, of Tacoma, sends a letter to the *Sunday School Times* against the claim made by the friends of Doctor Whitman. He merely quotes from Reverend H. K. Hines, D. D., who says: "Whitman's coming and work was antedated by two years by those of Jason Lee, Cyrus Shephard, and P. S. Edwards. Their place as the pioneers of American life in Oregon can never be disputed by any fair historian.

Whether their services or his were the greater after his arrival in Oregon it is not the object of this article to discuss. Those who claim that his were such as to enable him to be exalted as the one man who "saved Oregon to the United States," rest that claim on two assumed facts, namely: First—The influence he had on the course and conclusion of the negotiations between England and the United States, commenced with the Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1842." He then asks: "What then did Doctor Whitman actually have to do with the Webster-Ashburton Treaty?" Here is where Doctor Hines made a great mistake. It is not claimed by the friends of Doctor Whitman that he ever had anything whatever to do with the Webster-Ashburton Treaty. Why should he? That treaty had nothing whatever to do with the Oregon Country. It only settled the northeastern boundary line between England and the State of Maine, New Brunswick et al., as can be seen by reference to the treaty, which can be found among the "Treaties and Conventions between the United States and other Powers" in any reference library. The treaty that settled the title to the Oregon Country was the James Buchanan and Richard Packenham Treaty made June 15th, 1846. Doctor Hines is also mistaken in thinking that any friend of Doctor Whitman would for a moment think of detracting one iota from the services of those noble and self-sacrificing missionaries, or of depriving them of the honor of being the pioneers of American life in Oregon.

But that is not the question. The claim made for Doctor Whitman by his friends must stand or fall upon the one question, i. e., Did his going to Washington in the spring of 1842-3 have any effect upon the action of the government in regard to the Oregon Country?

Then again,—as to his having anything to do with the immigration of 1843, no friend of Doctor Whitman ever claimed that he was the only man who raised the immigration of 1843; there were many working for the same object; but that he originated the idea, planned the arrangements, and was General-in-Chief of it, is proved conclusively.

Principal William I. Marshall in the *Portland Oregonian* of August 24th, 1906, claimed that the statements made by some of the Whitmanites were untrue, and if he quotes them correctly, they certainly were untrue. If human testimony can be relied upon to establish a fact, if upon reliable evidence a man can know anything to be true of which he has no personal knowledge, it certainly is a truth that the Hudson Bay Company never opposed the coming of missionaries, regardless of denomination or nationality, but always assisted them in getting a start at self support.

The Company, however, did not like to see the country filling up with American traders or settlers, which feeling caused much friction between it and the early settlers and made it many enemies.

In 1906 Marshall wrote a book in which he says that "Whitman could have given no essential information in 1843 not already in the hands of the government at Washington." It is not claimed by the friends of Doctor Whitman that he went to Washington for any other purpose than to amplify the value of the Oregon Country. The extravagant and unreliable writings of Spalding and Gray—and some others—were of great detriment to the Whitman claim. Mr. Eells could not admit that Doctor Whitman did not originate the immigration of 1843, as stated, as that is contrary to all the proofs. It is claimed by the Anti-Whitmanites that Oregon was not in danger, but none of them mention the Triparty Agreement between Great Britain, the United States, and Mexico that was in existence at that time. If, as claimed by some of the Doctor's opponents, Whitman must rest his title to fame not upon any political services rendered, but upon his work as a pioneer, then he has none, as he was antedated two years by Jason Lee, Cyrus Shepherd, and P. S. Edwards, good and faithful missionaries, who did as good work among the Indians as Doctor Whitman.

But the letters of Reverend Doctor Strong, hereinbefore quoted, who was the Editorial Secretary of the American Board, and who was a highly educated man, prove conclusively that Doctor Whitman had two objects in view in coming East, one political and the other for the benefit of his Mission; and Dr. Strong explains why the records are silent upon the political side of the question, and he, being Secretary, had a much better opportunity to know the truth than any outsider.

Professor Henry W. Parker, son of Reverend Samuel Parker, who enlisted Whitman as his associate missionary to Oregon, sends a letter to the Sunday School Times, from which I quote in part:—

"There is one incidental fact that has been overlooked by others and myself as bearing on what Doctor Whitman accomplished in Washington. A part of his report, as given by him to many worthy witnesses, was President Tyler's promise to send Colonel Fremont to accompany or follow the migration of 1843. The significant fact is that the orders to Fremont were countermanded just as he was leaving the frontier. Why so, if it was only a scientific expedition that merely happened to start that year? Why, unless the opponents of Oregon, in those years of fierce controversy about it, secured the countermand in connection with the migration? Mrs. Fremont, true to her pro-Oregon father, Colonel Benton, suppressed by delay the countermand. We have the facts that Fremont made his first expedition beyond the mountains that year; that he left the frontier with his armed escort only a week after the great migration; that he went to Doctor Whitman's Station and down the Columbia, and a second time to

Doctor Whitman's. All this, confirmed by the countermand, agrees with the Doctor's report after visiting the National Capitol. Such incidental facts go far to substantiate the whole story, already sustained by indubitable direct testimonies. The fact that the Secretary of War did recommend military posts on the route, and that Senator Linn's bill for encouragement of settlers passed the Senate, do not show that Oregon was in no danger of being lost. There is abundance of documentary proof in Congressional Records and in contemporary newspapers that efforts for Oregon were fiercely contested for many years. Columns could be filled with quotations, if at all necessary. As to Linn's bill, why suppress the fact that it hung fire until seven years after Doctor Whitman's ride to Washington?

In regard to merely negative evidence marshalled forth in long extracts from missionary letters, it is not only susceptible of quite another interpretation, but it has another, according to their testimonies. They avoid any reference to Doctor Whitman's chief purpose for the reasons they mention,—sensitiveness to reproach for anything outside of their religious work, and prudence in regard to the Hudson Bay Company; not to speak of presumable prudence, at that stage of the matter, in writing to friends of the American Board. These facts illustrate the fallacy of confining the questions to documents written at the time, and that happened to survive after sixty or seventy years. That method would throw out much of well settled history. The numerous testimonies of persons who knew Doctor Whitman and were familiar with him, and others of no less high character whom he met, are first hand testimony, agreeing in all important respects, and all together constitute a mass of the best possible proof, and go back to Doctor Whitman's return to Oregon, and thence onward.

William A. Mowry sends the Sunday School Times the following statement from the pen of Rev. Myron Eells, D. D., son of Reverend Doctor Cushing Eells, from which I quote in part:

"As to the danger of losing Oregon, or a part of it, from the diary of J. Q. Adams, and the Life of President Tyler, we learn that there was a tripartite plan on hand for which Tyler and Webster were working in 1842 and 1843. England, Mexico, and the United States were the three parties to it. If carried out, England would have taken all Oregon north of the Columbia River; the United States was to obtain California, so far south as thirty-six degrees; Texas was to become independent; and England was to furnish certain sums to help the United States purchase the land from Mexico. England and the United States had agreed to this, but Mexico was slow, not giving her consent until about the time, or after, Doctor Whitman was in Washington. Tyler wrote about it evidently

early in 1843:—'The assent of Mexico to such a treaty is all that is necessary as to all its parts, a surrender of her title is all that is wanting.' (Tyler's Life, Vol. II., page 261.) Again: In February, 1843, President Tyler had made such propositions to England as would make it impossible to have signed a bill granting any lands to settlers in Oregon."

Professor Wilder Fairbank of Boston sends a letter to the Sunday School Times containing an affidavit from Reverend Cushing Eells, D. D., who was the associate of Doctor Whitman in his missionary work in Oregon, and who was one of the men who authorized Whitman's leaving his Mission to go East: "September, 1842, a letter written by Doctor Whitman addressed to the Reverend Messrs. E. Walker and C. Eells at Tshimakin, reached its destination, and was received by the parties to whom it was written. By the contents of said letter a meeting of the Oregon Mission of the A. B. C. F. M. was invited to be held at Waiilatpu. The object of said meeting, as stated in the letter named, was to approve of a purpose formed by Doctor Whitman, that he go East in behalf of Oregon as related to the United States. In the judgment of Mr. Walker and myself, that object was foreign to our assigned work. With troubled thoughts we anticipated the proposed meeting. On the following day, Wednesday, we started, and on Saturday afternoon camped on the Touchet at the ford near the Mullan Bridge. We were pleased with the prospect of enjoying a period of rest, reflection, and prayer, needful preparation for the antagonism of opposing ideas. On Monday we arrived at Waiilatpu and met the two resident families of Messrs. Whitman and Gray. The Reverend H. H. Spalding was there. All the male members of the Mission were thus together. In the discussion the opinion of Mr. Walker and myself remained unchanged. The purpose of Doctor Whitman was fixed. In his estimation, the saving of Oregon to the United States was of paramount importance, and he would make the attempt to do so, even if he had to withdraw from the Mission in order to accomplish his purpose. In reply to considerations intended to hold Doctor Whitman to his assigned work, he said: 'I am not expatriated by becoming a missionary.' The idea of his withdrawal could not be entertained; therefore, to retain him in the Mission, a vote to approve of his making the perilous endeavor prevailed. Record of the date and acts of the meeting was made. The book containing the same was in the keeping of the Whitman family. At the time of their massacre, November 29th, 1847, it disappeared. I solemnly affirm that the foregoing statements are true and correct according to the best of my knowledge and belief, so help me God. (Signed) Cushing Eells."

"Sworn and subscribed before me this 25th day of August, 1883. (Signed) S. E. Kellogg, Notary Public, Spokane County, Washington Territory."

Query: Was such a meeting held at the Mission, and did Doctor Whitman say, "I am not expatriated by becoming a missionary," and did he look upon the saving of Oregon to the United States as of paramount importance and say he would make the attempt to save it, even if he had to withdraw from the Mission; or has Reverend Cushing Eells deliberately sworn to a falsehood (which is unthinkable)?

If then it is true—accompanied by the fact that when he arrived in the States he went immediately to Washington—does it not prove beyond question that the saving of Oregon to the United States was one of the objects he had in view, and the main one for going east in the winter of 1842-3.

Doctor Whitman personally interested me in Oregon and influenced my coming, which was in 1850, and having known his mother and his relatives in Rushville, N. Y., the town where we all then lived, I became very much interested when I heard of the controversy and took great pains to examine all the evidence, pro and con, relating to the saved Oregon story, and have come to the conclusion that he is entitled to all that his friends claim for him.

I send you with this all the papers I have that were sent to the Sunday School Times during the Whitman controversy; also a letter from a relative of his giving some interesting information in regard to Doctor Whitman's family.

JAMES CLARK STRONG.