

SIR GEORGE SIMPSON'S PLACE IN THE HISTORY OF THE "OLD OREGON" COUNTRY*

I bring you greetings from the neighboring states of Oregon and Washington of the Republic across the boundary. It is fitting that we join in honoring the name of Sir George Simpson, for many years governor in North America of the Hudson's Bay Company, because that name appears often upon the pages of any adequate history of the Columbia River and its tributary streams, the larger parts of which flow south of the border.

It is not within the limits of this occasion to dwell upon the details of Governor Simpson's goings and comings on the Columbia, (1824-41) or his acts of authority there. His was the guiding hand in the conduct of its early commerce. His was the keen mind that attended to every detail of plan and organization, and even at great distance followed the administration of those plans. He was alike commander and servant for he became the executor, trustee and guardian for many officers and men who lived and died on the Columbia. His power was great and his associations were many. The story of it all is for another to tell. Let me refer briefly to the larger place he holds in our common history.

It is said that upon the unfurled flag of the British Empire the sun never sets. America's great orator, Daniel Webster, once gave expression to that wonderful fact in the following words;¹ "A power that has dotted the whole globe with her possessions and military posts, whose morning drumbeat, following the sun and keeping company with the hours, circles the earth daily with one continuous and unbroken strain of the martial airs of England." The man in whose honor we gather today rendered material service in bringing this about. To a certain extent at least Simpson of Canada ranks with Hastings of India and Rhodes of Africa as a builder of empire.

England has always been exceedingly proud and jealous of her commerce. When the English trader pushed his way into unknown lands he did so with the feeling of assurance that his venture would be protected. The fur trader was in large degree the discoverer and explorer of a large part of North America, and his exploration was scientific, not merely that of the itinerant

*Remarks at the dedication of a memorial in British Columbia near Banff, to Sir George Simpson, on September 20, 1928.

¹ In U.S. Senate May 7, 1834.

hunter or trapper. So it came to pass that many of the beautiful and rich hills and valleys of the Pacific Northwest, both British and American, now given over to high culture and commercial activity, were first trodden by men from Canada. And the work of those men after 1821 was under the direction of the man we honor here today.

When Governor Simpson took control in British North America of the large business of the combined Hudson's Bay Company and Northwest Company legal title to the Columbia River Country, or Oregon Country as it was also called, was undetermined. It was realized at once that permanent investment must depend upon future ownership, and the attention of the foreign office at London was forcibly called to the situation. At that time (1818-26) American diplomacy was under the direction of the astute John Quincy Adams, and British under that of George Canning, equally astute. Lines of permanent demarkation between the two nations were quickly laid down, the course of the Kootenay and Columbia by Canning and the 49th parallel of North Latitude by Adams.

To conform to this decision of the foreign office it became necessary to remove the principal depot or place of business of the Hudson's Bay Company from Fort George (now Astoria) to a new location north of the Columbia. That important errand, as well as the reorganization of the Columbia District, first brought Governor Simpson across the Rocky Mountains (by the Athabasca and Columbia River route) in 1824, in company with the new executive for the district, the well known Dr. John McLoughlin. The lower reaches and mouth of the Fraser were first surveyed and it was Simpson who selected the site for Fort Vancouver on the Columbia and Fort Colville in the interior as the principal factories for trade, agriculture and export.

About 1840 another situation had developed in relation to permanency of the business. Final determination of the boundary was still pending under joint occupancy agreement. The supply of fur bearing animals was rapidly diminishing under competition with American traders from St. Louis. The missionary and the pioneer had begun to arrive in the Willamette Valley (and elsewhere) from the Missouri country. Possession was beginning to become a factor in diplomacy. Expansion to California had been authorized and reciprocity arrangements with the Russian fur traders were needed to prevent aggression from the north. These

considerations brought Governor Simpson again to the Columbia (1841), this time by the land route over the nearby mountain pass and the trail near which we now stand. His visit was followed, among other things, by the examination of the harbor that became Victoria and plans to gradually develop there another location for the main business of the Company. This decision soon served a valid excuse for the reservation of all of Vancouver Island under the boundary treaty of 1846 and minimized danger from the American cry of "Fifty-four forty or fight," a demand not really dangerous then but certain to have become so had the existing *Laissez-faire* doctrine of both nations been continued until the mining excitement in the valley of the Fraser ten years later.

Thus did the vision and wonderful insight of Governor Simpson exert an influence in the preservation of a part of the British Empire. His monument in this remote and distant spot stands west of the continental divide in the "Old Oregon" Country and within the watershed of the Columbia, a significant location. It will indicate to passers-by that Canada and the Mother Country do not forget their men of action and vision.

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