

APPENDIX 4

THE LITERATURE OF THE WHITMAN CONTROVERSY

An extensive literature has grown out of the Whitman-Saved-Oregon controversy. The October 1908 issue of the *Washington Historical Quarterly* carried an article, "A Contribution towards a Bibliography of Marcus Whitman" by Charles W. Smith, the late librarian of the University of Washington at Seattle. It took fifty-nine pages to carry the list of titles, with annotations, of books, pamphlets, magazine articles, and manuscripts bearing on the subject.

Following the publication of Spalding's *Senate Document* in 1872, Brouillet issued a rebuttal which appeared in the *Portland Catholic Sentinel* and in the *St. Louis Catholic World*, both in 1872. Again Brouillet accused Spalding of deliberate falsification.

Controversy was renewed in the 1880s, with a new generation of writers appearing on the scene. The Rev. Myron Eells, a son of Cushing Eells, published his *Indian Missions* in 1882, in which he endorsed the Whitman-Saved-Oregon story. Beginning with the December 1882 issue of the *New York Observer*, a series of articles by the Rev. William Barrows repeated some of the main points of the Whitman legend as told by Spalding. In his *Oregon, The Struggle for Possession*,¹ Barrows included much of the material which had appeared in his magazine articles. Barrows also wrote an article on Oregon for the 1884 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, where again he endorsed the Whitman story. By this time the Whitman-Saved-Oregon story was so widely accepted that it was included without question in a number of history textbooks for public schools. Later, Edward Bourne, one of the first critics of the legend, wrote: "Never were confiding scholars and a more confiding public so taken in... The propagation of the legend of Marcus Whitman after the publication of Barrows' *Oregon* is simply amazing."²

Among the first to cast doubt upon the authenticity of the Whitman legend was Mrs. Frances Fuller Victor who, together with the Hon. Elwood Evans, collaborated with H. H. Bancroft in the writing of his two-volume *History of Oregon*, published in San Francisco in 1886. Mrs. Victor had accepted the Whitman legend when she wrote her *River of the West*, which

appeared in 1870. Soon afterwards she changed her mind. Elwood Evans also at first had believed the story and had contributed a testimonial to Spalding's *Senate Document*, but he too came to disbelieve the legend.

Recognizing the growing doubt about the Whitman-Saved-Oregon-Story, Myron Eells in 1883 published a pamphlet, *Marcus Whitman, M.D., Proofs of His Work in Saving Oregon to the United States and in Promoting the immigration of 1843*. Eells was more moderate than Spalding in his claims, but was able to set forth considerable evidence that Whitman did much to promote the Oregon emigration of that year. The publication of this pamphlet sparked a controversy which was carried on through the columns of the *Portland Oregonian* during the late fall of 1884 and the following winter. On one side were Mrs. Victor and Elwood Evans, and on the other, Myron Eells, W. H. Gray, and E. C. Ross. The articles of the last three men were reprinted in pamphlet form in Portland in 1885 under the title *The Whitman Controversy*.³

The decade beginning 1890 produced two biographies of Marcus Whitman, both written by ministers who were adherents of the Whitman legend. The first, *The Story of Marcus Whitman*, by the Rev. J. G. Craighead, appeared in 1895. In June of the same year, the Rev. O. W. Nixon published his *How Marcus Whitman Saved Oregon*. Both works are unscholarly, for both authors accepted without question all the main points of Spalding's Whitman-Saved-Oregon story.

In a letter dated March 8, 1898, Nixon explained to a friend: "In fact, it was with great difficulty I snatched the Mo. of April, 1895, to write the Book, & was too busy when it was issued to ever read a line of proof, or many errors of the earlier editions would have been corrected."⁴ The book was written to be a campaign document to help raise funds for Whitman College.⁵ It ran through five editions and became the most widely distributed and most popular book on Whitman of that generation—and yet it was written in only one month! Since Nixon's book got into so many public and church school libraries, it is still being quoted as authoritative by uncritical readers.

The publication of the Craighead and Nixon books inspired another flurry of articles in the *Oregonian* in which Myron Eells, then the foremost defender of the Whitman legend, again figured. The observances of the semicentennial of the Whitman massacre in the fall of 1897 served as another occasion to publicize the legend. A number of articles

on various aspects of the Whitman story, many of which are of real historical value, appeared in the Whitman College Quarterly beginning in January 1897.

The peak of Whitman's reputation, based on Spalding's and Gray's Whitman-Saved-Oregon theory came in 1899 when his name was considered for inclusion in New York University's Hall of Fame. Edward Gaylord Bourne, Professor of History at Yale University, wrote: "Fifty-two years later [i.e., after the massacre], in the most careful appraisal of human achievement in America that has ever been made... Marcus Whitman received nineteen out of a possible ninety-eight votes to be ranked as one of the fifty greatest Americans." This score put Whitman ahead of such well-known national figures as John Charles Frémont and George Rogers Clark. Bourne added: "History will be sought in vain for a more extraordinary growth of fame after death."⁶

WHITMAN LEGEND DISCREDITED

The decade beginning in 1900 brought a sharp reaction to the Whitman-Saved-Oregon story. Two men, Prof. Bourne and William I. Marshall, Principal of a school in Chicago, independently reached the conclusion at about the same time that the story was based largely upon myth and legend and was without historical foundation.

Bourne and Marshall met at the meeting of the American Historical Association held in Detroit, December 27–29, 1900, when Bourne read his paper, "The Legend of Marcus Whitman." Although he had not studied the subject as long as Marshall, Bourne anticipated him in the publication of his findings. Bourne's paper appeared in the January 1901 issue of the *American Historical Review*, and, revised and enlarged, in his *Essays in Historical Criticism* in the same year. Bourne's paper was also included in a volume, *Essays in Criticism*, used extensively in historical research course in colleges and universities. Marshall, who had assembled a mass of detailed information, was unable to publish his findings for lack of funds before he died on October 30, 1906. His two-volume *Acquisition of Oregon*, appeared posthumously in Seattle in 1911.

Together, Bourne and Marshall demolished the Whitman legend although it took several decades before the conclusions of their researches became known and accepted by the general public. Bourne is more restrained than Marshall, who was, at times, vitriolic in his criticisms.

One result of the writings of these two was that Whitman's fame plummeted. Unfortunately the real achievements of Dr. Whitman suffered the fate of the legendary Whitman, and for years little new was written about him.

Among the last works to appear before Whitman's eclipse began were two new biographies. The first was William A. Mowry's *Marcus Whitman*, which appeared in 1901. Mowry, unaware of the researches done by Bourne and Marshall, accepted the legendary views of Whitman. His book was an improvement over Nixon's as he gave some important new material. Myron Eells, who had become acquainted with the findings of both Bourne and Marshall, modified some of his earlier views and became more objective in his writings. His *Marcus Whitman* was published in 1909, two years after his death.

The celebration of the Whitman-Spalding centennial in 1936 awakened new interest in the Whitman story and inspired the publication of many books, magazine articles, pamphlets, etc.⁷ By this time no one arose to defend the old Whitman-Saved-Oregon story although a few echoes of the old controversy were still heard. As has been stated in a preceding chapter, when the effort was made in 1948 to get the Washington State Legislature to appropriate money for the erection of a statue honoring Dr. Whitman in Statuary Hall of the Capitol in Washington, D.C., some opponents of the measure circulated the legislators claiming: "The Marcus Whitman legend is 90% fictitious. It is one of our historical fables..." This was true. Today no reputable scholar claims that the primary reason for Whitman's famous ride East was to prevent the government trading off Oregon for some fishing rights off the Newfoundland coast. Spalding's Whitman-Saved-Oregon story is completely discredited and rejected.

On the basis of new documented evidence, not available or known to earlier writers on Whitman, we are now able to reappraise objectively the real contributions made by Whitman towards the extension of United States jurisdiction over the Old Oregon territory.

APPENDIX 4 FOOTNOTES

- ¹ This was one of the American Commonwealth series edited by Horace E. Scudder. Check index of this work for reference to Barrows, who was a boy in the home of Dr. Edward Hale, the dentist in St. Louis, in the spring of 1843 when he saw Dr. Whitman.
- ² Bourne, *Essays in Historical Criticism*, p. 41.
- ³ A copy of this rare item is in the Library of Congress.
- ⁴ Nixon to S. W. Pratt, Coll. Wn.
- ⁵ *W.C.Q.*, I (1897):1:21.
- ⁶ Bourne, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
- ⁷ See Chapter Twenty-Four, "Whitman Literature."