Appendix 6

Letter from H. K. W. Perkins to Jane Prentiss

While gathering material for my *Marcus Whitman, M.D.*, which appeared in 1937, I found in the archives of Whitman College a copy of an unpublished letter written by the Rev. Henry Kirk White Perkins from Hallowell, Maine, on October 19, 1849, to Miss Jane Prentiss, West Almond, New York. A notation on the copy states: "Copied by M. Eells from Original." Myron Eells wrote on very thin paper; this makes his writing most difficult to read. Recognizing the importance of this letter, I included it as an appendix in my earlier book, and it is here reprinted. All words italicized were underlined in the copy that Eells had made.

Perkins was one of the most capable and conscientious of all members of the Methodist Mission in Oregon and, therefore, his comments must be taken seriously. A good indication of his character is to be found in the firm stand he took against certain members of his Mission, including A. F. Waller and Jason Lee, in the dispute over title to some valuable property at Oregon City. Perkins maintained that Dr. McLoughlin had prior claim and expressed shame over the actions of some of his brethren in taking the property under dispute. (See Perkins letters, Coll. W.S.H.S.)

Evidently Jane Prentiss had returned to her parental home from Illinois after hearing of the death of her sister and brother-in-law. Knowing that Narcissa had spent the winter of 1842–43 at Waskopuin, where the Perkins and Brewer families were stationed, and learning that Mr. Perkins was in the East, Jane wrote to him asking for the causes of the massacre. Perkins was handicapped in his ability to make an accurate and balanced appraisal of the causes which moved the Indians to murder, as he had not met the Whitmans during the first several years they were in Oregon. Hence Perkins was unable to judge the importance of the work the Whitmans had done for the natives during these earlier years of their residence at Waiilatpu. Moreover, Perkins had never visited Waiilatpu after he became acquainted with Marcus and Narcissa and was not, therefore, able to base his judgments on first-hand observations.

Perkins first met Narcissa in the fall of 1842 after she was obliged to leave Waiilatpu following the departure of her husband for the East, and when she was received at Waskopum as a guest by the Methodist families living there. Narcissa was ill at that time and remained so throughout the following year. In June 1843, she went to Fort Vancouver where she remained for two months under the care of Dr. Forbes Barclay, the Company's physician. Then, after a brief visit with friends in the Willamette Valley, Narcissa returned to Waskopum to await her husband who arrived in October to take her back to Waiilatpu. Still sick and depressed in spirits, Narcissa dreaded returning to the loneliness and isolation of their mission station. [See, "Adapted to a Different Destiny," Chapter Seventeen; and "Narcissa, Sick and Discouraged," Chapter Twenty.] Perkins' penetrating analysis of Narcissa's attitude towards the natives was naturally colored by her physical and mental condition during the time he had contact with her. Therefore, allowances should be made for his rather severe judgments. He did not see her at work among the Cayuses during the first six years of her residence at Waiilatpu, nor did he meet her after she regained her health following her return to the mission station. It is true that, with an enlarged household, Narcissa was unable to do much, if anything, for the natives in the school or in other activities after her return.

The contacts that Perkins had with Dr. Whitman were also limited. The two first met in October 1838 when Marcus paused briefly at Waskopum on his way down the Columbia to Fort Vancouver for supplies. On several subsequent occasions, Whitman had opportunity to visit Waskopum. We have no evidence that Perkins ever visited Waiilatpu where he could have observed Whitman at work. Therefore Perkins was obliged to base his judgments regarding Whitman's adaptability as a missionary to the Indians on these brief meetings and on the observations of others.

On the whole, Perkins made an excellent appraisal of Whitman's characteristics. The main weakness of his appraisal is that he failed to indicate the full impact of the measles epidemic as a primary cause for the massacre. He glided over this factor. One can well ask: Would there have been a massacre, admitting all that Perkins had to say about the inadaptability of the Whitmans to their missionary responsibilities, if there had been no measles epidemic? In the author's opinion, the answer is "No." Perkins also fails to mention that the malcontents in

the Cayuse tribe were relatively few; it is estimated that only fourteen took part in the massacre. Contemporary evidence shows that a majority within the tribe, including such chiefs as Stickus, Camaspelo, Young Chief, and Five Crows, refused to join with the conspirators. While it is true, as Perkins pointed out, that Whitman believed the Indians were a doomed race and that the white men would inherit the land, Perkins was mistaken in claiming that white settlers were taking land in the Walla Walla Valley before the massacre.

Actually, Whitman was spending more time with the natives than with the immigrants during those last five years at Waiilatpu. The passing of the immigrant wagon trains through the Cayuse country took about two months. The immigrants who found it necessary to winter at Waiilatpu left for the Willamette Valley as soon as possible in the spring. Whitman had no need to minister to any white people during the seedtime and harvest months of the year. He then was able to give all possible help to the natives. Today, because we have access to Whitman's letters which were not available to Perkins, we know more of what Whitman was doing for the Indians and what he planned to do than did Perkins. The coming of the annual immigrations meant no diminution of Whitman's efforts to help the natives.

Although the analysis of the characteristics of both of the Whitmans is penetrating and most helpful in an understanding of their situation, yet the main assumption that Perkins makes regarding their failures, as being a primary cause for the massacre, is inadequate. The reasons for the massacre, as has been stated, were many and complex. Perkins mentions some contributory factors but does not emphasize the major cause, which was the devastating effects of the measles epidemic.

A praiseworthy characteristic of the Perkins letter is his endeavor to give the Indians' side of the story. So far as the author is aware, this is the first time that this was attempted. The letter, minus a few unimportant eliminations, follows.

Dear Sister:

Yours of Aug. 29 was recd. in due time but owing to a press of business & absence in Boston of late, I have not had time to attend to your request concerning your dear sisters letters until today.

You write that Mrs. Whitman was a dear Sister of yours. She was a dear sister of ours also. The acquaintance we formed with her was very intimate. For several months during her husband's last visit to the U. States, she was a member of our family. The circumstances that induced her to spend so long a season with us, I presume you must be familiar with as she kept up a constant correspondence, I believe, with her friends in the United States. If so you will recollect that even then, her situation among the natives at Waiilatpu was far from being *safe*. The truth is, Miss Prentiss, your lamented sister was far from happy in the situation she had chosen to occupy.

She no doubt felt a strong desire for the salvation of the Indian race & perhaps it might have been said of her: "She hath done what she could," but if I may be allowed the liberty of expressing my opinion, I should say, unhesitatingly that both herself & husband were out of their proper sphere. They were not adapted to their work. They could not possibly interest & gain the affections of the natives. I knew for a long time before the tragedy that closed their final career that many of the natives around them looked upon them suspiciously. Though they *feared* the Doctor, they did not *love* him. They did not love your sister. They could appreciate neither the one nor the other.

The Doctor, I presume, you knew familiarly. And k*nowing him* as *I knew him* you would not need to be told that an Oregon Indian & he could never get along well together. It was "the last place," to use a familiar phrase, that he ought to have occupied. And first, I need hardly tell you, he cared for no man under heaven,—perfectly fearless & independent. Secondly, he could never stop to *parley*. It was always *yes* or *no*. In the 3d place, he had no sense of *etiquette* or personal dignity—manners, I mean. 4. And in the fourth place, *he was always at work*.

Now I need not tell you that he & an Indian would ever agree. How could they? What would such a man have in common with an Indian? How could they symbolize with each other? In connection with some other man, perhaps, Sister Whitman would have done better. Perhaps she would have been more familiar—sym-

pathizing—open hearted. That she felt a deep interest in the welfare of the natives, no one who was at all acquainted with her could doubt. But the affection was manifested under false views of Indian character. Her carriage towards them was always considered *haughty*. It was the common remark among them that Mrs. Whitman was "very proud."

Now I do not really suppose that this was the case or that she ever suspected that she conveyed such an impression. But so the natives always spoke of it. Sister Whitman partook a good deal of her husband's independent spirit. She doubtless supposed also that it was necessary to maintain considerable *reserve*.

What contributed still more, I presume, to increase the distance between her & the natives was her *ill health & increasing nervousness*. Her constitution was a good deal impaired, toward the close of her labors & she could not in reality bear much. Her hopes of success also, were very much weakened and melancholy musings occupied her more than at her first setting out in missionary life.

I wish I could tell you just how it was. And yet I cannot do it, without seeming somewhat severely to reflect upon the Doctor. Again, I am afraid that you will never get at the real truth in the case if I do not tell you. The published accounts of that melancholy catastrophe which cut short so many lives, are all one sided. They fail almost entirely to account for the proceedings of the natives. I will briefly state a few things which ought to be kept in view with the whole affair.

And first, Dr. Whitman in pursuing his missionary labors never so identified himself with the natives as to make their interests *paramount*. He looked upon them as an inferior race & doomed at no distant day to give place to a settlement of enterprising Americans. With an eye to this, he laid his plans & acted. His American feelings even while engaged in his missionary toils, were unfortunately suffered to predominate. Indeed it might almost be doubted whether he felt half the interest in the natives that he did in the *prospective* white population. He wanted to see the country settled. The beautiful valley of the Walla Walla, he wanted to see teeming with a busy, bustling white population. Where

were scattered a few Indian huts, he wanted to see thrifty farm houses. Where stalked abroad a few broken-down Indian horses, cropping the rich grasses of the surrounding plain, he wanted to see grazing the cow, the ox, & the sheep of a happy Yankee community. With his eye bent on this, he was willing meantime to do what he could incidentally, for the poor, weak, feeble doomed Oregonians.

And now, Miss Prentiss, what would be the natural result? Why, what every sensible man must have seen. *Jealousy on the part of the natives*. And in meeting death in the way that he did, it might be said with more truth that he died a martyr to the progress of American civilization than to the cause of Missions.

Had Dr. Whitman given himself up wholly to the interests of the natives, with all his natural unfitness for the place he occupied, he no doubt would have been *safe*, safe as anywhere in Christendom.

(2) It has been said that the natives are dying very rapidly & that Dr. Whitman was suspected as the cause of their rapid decrease. No doubt this suspicion might operate to some extent but then why seek their vengeance on the poor unsuspecting white settlers? The fact was the natives identified the Doctor with the whites. While they were rapidly coming in year by year & occupying their rich lands, they looked upon the Doctor as at the head of the concern. They saw him entering no protest—making no remonstance, but rather aiding & abetting—planning & directing, & all the family of course including Mrs. W. concurring apparently in their displaceance [sic]. What would they do? They would do what they did do—"strike for their altars & their fires." They wanted their lands, their *homes*, the *graves of their fathers*, their *rich hunting grounds & horse ranges*. They did not look upon the man or men who would connive at the usurpation of all these as their real friends. They looked upon the Doctor & wife as not missionaries to them but to the Americans. With these brief statements of facts, I need not add another word explanatory. You see everything at a glance. The result would have hardly been otherwise than it was.

In your letter you remarked that I doubtless have recollections of her (Mrs. W.) which, if expressed, would greatly interest her

acquaintance & friends. Yes, Miss Prentiss, I have recollections of her,—interesting recollections which I shall always cherish. But they are not recollections of her as a *missionary* but as a *woman*. Mrs. Whitman was not adapted to savage but *civilized* life. She would have done honor to her sex in a polished & exalted sphere, but never in the low drudgery of Indian toil. The natives esteemed her as proud, haughty, as *far above them*. No doubt she really seemed so. It was her *misfortune*, not her *fault*. She was adapted to a different destiny. She wanted something exalted—communion with *mind*. She longed for society, *refined society*. She was intellectually & by association fitted to do good only in such a sphere. She should have been differently situated. I think her stay with us, including her visit to the Willamette, the pleasantest portion of her Oregon life. She saw considerable company & really seemed to *enjoy it*. She had leisure also for reading & writing, which she also seemed always to enjoy. She loved company, society, excitement & ought always to have enjoyed it. The self-denial that took her away from it was suicidal. Perhaps, however, more good was accomplished by it than could have been accomplished by pursuing a different course. Certain it is that we needed such minds to keep us in love with civilized life, to remind us occasionally of *home*. As for myself, I could as easily have become an Indian as not. I completely sympathized with them in all their plans & feelings. I could gladly have made the wigwam my home for life if duty had called. But it was not so with Mrs. W. She had nothing apparently with them in common. She kept in her own original sphere to the last. She was not a *missionary* but a *woman*, an American highly gifted, polished American lady. And such she died.

I desire with you her death may be sanctified to the cause of God. I think it more likely to be when the truth in the case is really known. I sympathize with you. I sympathized with her. I would that with her it might have been otherwise. But so it was. May we ever be found in our lot & place that when the Master calls for us, we may be found waiting.

Yours truly,

H. K. Perkins