

THE BISHOPS BLANCHET AND THEIR ROLE IN THE WHITMAN MASSACRE

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Father Schoenberg, who opened the conference with this analysis of Catholic and Protestant missionaries' relationships that spared neither side, has long been a scholar of the Oregon Province of the Society of Jesus. He is in residence at Gonzaga University.

DURING THE SECOND World War, three Victory ships were named for three Catholic missionaries in the Pacific Northwest: Peter John DeSmet, Anthony Ravalli, and Francis Xavier Norbert Blanchet.¹ The last of these three received other honors in his own lifetime: he was the first Catholic missionary to remain to the end of his life in the Northwest, from 1838 to 1883; the first bishop in the region, appointed in 1843; and its first archbishop, appointed in 1846. His was the second archdiocesan see in the United States, preceded only by Baltimore and followed by the great eastern archdioceses of St. Louis, New York, Boston, and Philadelphia.

The new archbishop used his episcopal influence to secure the appointment of his brother, a canon in the cathedral at Montreal, as one of his suffragan bishops. Augustin Magliore Alexander, or simply A. M. A., Blanchet was designated as the first (and only) Catholic Bishop of Walla Walla in 1846.² This appears to be something like nepotism, a curse of the medieval church; but the older Blanchet was regarded as an exemplary prelate, so no

criticism of his action in this regard has survived the scrutiny of history. Besides, no one else wanted the job.

The two Blanchets were similar in appearance and disposition. Opinionated, harsh with their subjects, intolerant toward people of other theological persuasions, they personified the worst features of contemporary Canadian Catholics as well as the best. They were hard-working prelates, zealous and willing to deny themselves anything at all for the Gospel message. They tended to be rudely critical of Americans, Catholics included.³ Probably because of their simple farm origins, they manifested a sense of inferiority in comparison with eastern bishops, many of whom were noisy Irishmen who waved American flags whenever they emerged from their chanceries or cathedrals. The younger Blanchet, especially, expressed considerable contempt for American customs: on the Oregon Trail, as a member of a wagon train, he refused to provide Christian burial for deceased Protestants.⁴

Both of the Blanchets were handsome men, but in their pictures they appear to be pouting most of the time—perhaps because they took themselves so seriously. They both opposed the use of alcoholic beverages, which did not endear them to members of their own flock, many of whom were former *voyageurs* accustomed to the periodic *regale*.⁵ Most frontier people of their time tended to be excessively individualistic, which in contemporary literature was generally regarded as a characteristic American—and therefore Protestant—virtue. But Catholic *voyageurs*, their Indian wives, and their children were also excessively individualistic; and this did not set well with the two somewhat despotic church-

¹DeSmet and Ravalli were Jesuits, Blanchet a diocesan priest. Blanchet's full name, Francis Xavier Norbert Blanchet, was shortened in time for general usage to avoid confusion with his nephew, Father Francis Xavier Blanchet, who came to Oregon in 1863. Thus the uncle was known mostly as Francis Norbert Blanchet or simply as F. N. Blanchet.

²The Walla Walla Diocese was established by Pope Gregory XVI on July 24, 1846. It was formally suppressed by the Apostolic Brief *Per Similes Nostras* on July 20, 1853.

³Bishop Blanchet's feelings toward American Catholics were freely expressed in his journal. Edward J. Kowrach, *Journal of a Catholic Bishop on the Oregon Trail: The Overland Crossing of the Rt. Rev. A. M. A. Blanchet, Bishop of Walla Walla, from Montreal to Oregon Territory, March 23, 1847 to January 23, 1851* (Fairfield, Washington: Ye Galleon Press, 1978).

⁴Blanchet's views on this subject were not shared by other missionaries. Peter DeSmet, Joseph Joset, and others never failed to provide their services when requested by anyone, and Father J. B. A. Brouillet presided at the burial of the Waiilatpu massacre victims.

⁵The *regale* or "royal privilege" was a half-pint of rum provided to the *voyageurs* on special occasions.



Archbishop Blanchet, from *History of the Pacific Northwest* (1889).

men, who tended to cover their arbitrary decisions with beguiling religiosity. None of this was lost on the Blanchets' wary Protestant neighbors. Happily for the Catholics, perhaps, the Protestants had their own despots, some of them preachers who threatened their communicants with damnation if they imbibed even a little of the contents of the bottle.

There is something very ironic in the presence of A. M. A. Blanchet at St. Ann's Mission near Umatilla when his vicar general, Father John Baptist Abraham Brouillet, buried the bloody victims at Waiilatpu on November 30, 1847.⁶ Blanchet had arrived at Fort Walla Walla just two months earlier to claim his non-existent cathedral.⁷ He had met Dr. Whitman at the fort and, compelled by his isolation as much as anything else, had invited the doctor to his primitive "Episcopal Palace" for dinner. It was this Blanchet and Brouillet who were much maligned in the end by the Rev. Henry Harmon Spalding, the Rev. L. S. Griffin, and William H. Gray.⁸ Brouillet's conduct at the time of the Whitman massacre had been impeccable, if not brilliantly heroic, and he had saved Spalding's life by risking his

own. That was not a comfortable fact for Spalding to live with: saved by a Catholic priest. The priest was in many ways seen by Spalding as his natural enemy, and he could not accept his debt without protest.⁹

Bishop Blanchet's performance was something else. Had the Bishop of Walla Walla acted prudently, or merely pragmatically, when he advised the captured women from the Whitman mission to submit to their Indian captors? He may have had no other options. His conduct in this case, as with the archbishop's in other respects, was doubtlessly determined by conflicting and very complex factors that he and few other recognized. This inquiry regarding Blanchet's baneful influence on later Catholic-Protestant relations is thus of necessity something less than dogma and something more than conjecture.

IT IS CERTAIN that there was bad blood from the very beginning between F. N. Blanchet and the Methodists, who had arrived four years before him.¹⁰ What infuriated the Methodists even more than doctrinal confrontations was the campaign Blanchet waged to "validate" Catholic marriages that had been contracted in the presence of the Protestant ministers before his arrival.¹¹ Blanchet did not even allow couples who had lived together in good faith for many years to occupy the same house until he had "blessed" their marriages. The

⁶Blanchet had arrived at the fort on September 5, 1847, in advance of the wagon train. The massacre occurred on November 29, 1847. The classic work on the subject is J. B. A. Brouillet, *Authentic Account of the Murder of Dr. Whitman and Other Missionaries by the Cayuse Indians of Oregon in 1847, and the Causes Which Led to That Horrible Catastrophe* (Portland, 1869).

⁷Blanchet, accustomed to church practice in eastern Canada, actually expected to find a town of Walla Walla with an established church. What he found—a fur-trading post in the wilderness—dismayed him.

⁸Gray had been associated with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions from 1836 to 1842. His *History of Oregon* first appeared in 1870. Griffin was associated with Spalding in his long campaign to discredit Brouillet's account of the massacre. The best publication on this subject is George N. Belknap, "Account of the Murder of Dr. Whitman: The History of a Pamphlet," which was published in the *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* (1961), 55/4:319-346. It is the definitive piece on the Spalding feud with Brouillet.

⁹*Ibid.*, 320 et seq.

¹⁰The Methodist mission party, under the direction of Elder Jason Lee and his nephew Daniel Lee, founded their mission on the Willamette in 1834. George W. Fuller, *A History of the Pacific Northwest* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1931), 126. A decade later they offered this mission for a bargain price to Father Peter DeSmet.

¹¹Presumably these marriages, or most of them, would have been regarded as valid by the Catholic Church, due to the use of "the extraordinary form" that was licit in certain cases.

Methodists were outraged, but the French-Canadians and their friends the Indians sided with the autocratic Blanchet.

Both sides in their anathemas were guilty of excess. What is relevant here is the continuing practice of the Indians to favor Blanchet and his missionary companions for very basic reasons, which the Protestants recognized and deplored. Exasperating contrasts existed between the two factions, in style as well as in content; and these were noted by the Indians, who often discussed their preferences among themselves.

For example, the priests' celibacy freed them from the desire and need for occupying great parcels of land that the Indians regarded as their own tribal property held in common. The Hudson's Bay Company had some sense of patronage toward the priests, in part because they were Canadian born—unlike the Protestants, who were American born. There was a vast difference in the style of worship; the Catholic liturgy with its greater appeal to the senses, contrasted with the long, often dreary preachments of the ministers, was more satisfying to the Indians.¹² American Protestants were also identified with the ever increasing number of Americans arriving from the east: a few each year until 1842, a thousand in 1843, and after that a flood, all of whom were threats to Indian survival.

Finally, the priests had the Catholic Ladder. It was a remarkable visual aid that provided Indians with the Catholic version of salvation: an illustrated chart displaying the principal

¹²The simple liturgy consisted of the Mass with its colorful mysticism and the use of incense at benediction and other solemn occasions. The candles and the practice of singing long hymns, Canadian style, with the men sitting on one side of the church and women on the other side, gustily singing alternate verses, greatly appealed to the Indians, who were long since used to scoldings like the preachers' from their own chiefs.

¹³Spalding insisted on showing the Protestant Ladder to Brouillet, who wrote: "So I told him I would look at his Ladder with pleasure. He unrolled before us a paper 3 to 4 feet long and a bit wider than 2 feet covered with burlesqued figures to ridicule the Catholic religion and its ministers. Everybody regarded that paper with indifference." Rev. J. B. A. Brouillet, *Blackrobe Buries Whitmans*, in Kowrach, *Journal of a Catholic Bishop*, 154.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁵From 1818 until 1846, during the period of "Joint Occupancy" by England and United States, the Pacific Northwest had no other police force than the Hudson's Bay Company. Dr. John McLoughlin, its Chief Factor in Oregon, was so highly respected by all that his presence alone produced peace and order. After his forced retirement in 1846, the troubles began. McLoughlin's confrontation with Oregon City's Protestants is presented in Edwin V. O'Hara, *Pioneer Catholic History of Oregon* (Portland: Catholic Book Company, 1911), 111 et seq.



BISHOP BLANCHET

Bishop Blanchet, from History of the Pacific Northwest.

doctrines of the church, with two roads, one leading to heaven and a broader one leading to perdition. The Protestants were presented as tortured-looking pilgrims falling helplessly into the flames of Hell. Although Eliza Spalding, in a plucky attempt to disarm this piece in the Catholic arsenal, produced a Protestant version of the ladder with roles reversed—Catholics, including mitred bishops, fell headlong into a flaming Hell—not much came of it. Its appearance was anticlimactic, and until modern times it was neither printed nor circulated.¹³ Prophetically, only one month before his death, Marcus Whitman was heard to say that "he did not love Catholics . . . and that he would oppose their missionaries with all his power. . . . He also spoke against the Catholic Ladder and said he would color it with his blood."¹⁴

All these and more were reasons for Indian partiality toward the priests, who could come and go as they pleased in the wilderness even after the protective strong arm of Dr. John McLoughlin had been cut off.¹⁵ Their preference, more than anything else, convinced Spalding and Gray that the Catholic mission-

aries had entered into some furtive alliance with the villainous natives to dispose of their enemies, the American missionaries.

The Catholic missionaries were not entirely without blame. They had, after all, taught the Indians that Protestants went to Hell. But nineteenth-century Protestants as well as Catholics had been conditioned to think of their opponents as heretics, deserving of death in a bonfire. Gray's charges—in particular, those regarding the role played by the Jesuit "provocateurs"—were so silly that no reasonable person could believe them. The Jesuits in 1847 were a mere handful, most of them two hundred fifty miles distant from Wailatpu and effectively imprisoned by the vast forests and mountains. They were completely harmless. Even after the massacre they were permitted by officials to remain at their posts—much to the chagrin of their Protestant counterparts, who were hastily driven out.¹⁶

The Jesuits' leader in the pre-massacre years had unwittingly confirmed the non-Jesuit archbishop's status with the Indians by being associated with him. Peter John DeSmet, the epitome of the good white man in the eyes of the Indians, took orders from Blanchet in certain matters and represented him as the Great White Father in the church, as Dr. John McLoughlin was the Great White Father in the nearest thing to the state. Since DeSmet's and his colleagues' reputations as champions of Indians' rights were well known in the West, it was not without alleged "evidence" that Gray accused the Blanchets and Brouillet of being members of this "nefarious" order. And the Jesuits, Gray reported knowingly, were the principal conspirators in the tragic climax of Indians killing whites. After all, DeSmet, like Blanchet, had published a Catholic Ladder in his first book, which was widely circulated in eastern America and Europe; and his Protestant heretics met the same fate as Blanchet's.¹⁷

UNFORTUNATELY, THE ALLEGED Jesuit perfidiousness did not evaporate after the Cayuse War began. Like the Blanchets and Brouillet, the Jesuits were still heroes to their followers and thus were bold enough to behave as if they had done nothing wrong. When the

innocent Indian hostages were brought to trial in Oregon City for the murder of Dr. Whitman and the others killed at Wailatpu, it was a foregone conclusion that they would be convicted and hanged. The enraged settlers, thwarted by time and distance and robbed of the presence of the real murderers, felt compelled to take their revenge in any manner still open to them.¹⁸ Goaded on by Spalding, who was safe in his new residence on the lower Columbia—a great patriot to some, a zealot tainted with madness to others—Oregon's white citizens saw their bounden duty and performed it righteously. On their lists for reprisals were not only priests in their immediate area but also the distant Jesuits.

The latter had become more directly involved when the territorial legislature passed a bill forbidding the delivery of all firearms and ammunition to the Indians. The Superior of the Jesuits was then Father Joseph Joset, a gentle, diminutive Swiss whose heart was bigger than his head: a little man of fiery courage when his Indians were threatened. Joset hastened to Oregon City to challenge the bill,

entering a protest against it on the ground of the hardship it would entail on the Catholic Indians, who were peaceably disposed and loyal to the provisional government. These Indians got their livelihood by hunting; moreover, the Flatheads absolutely needed arms to defend themselves against the Blackfeet.¹⁹

One of the legislators was greatly impressed by Joset and pledged himself to seek a repeal of the law. At this point a large consignment of arms for the Jesuit missions arrived at Fort Vancouver, the entire annual shipment for all of the missions in the northern mountains.²⁰ Joset, expecting the repeal of the law, directed

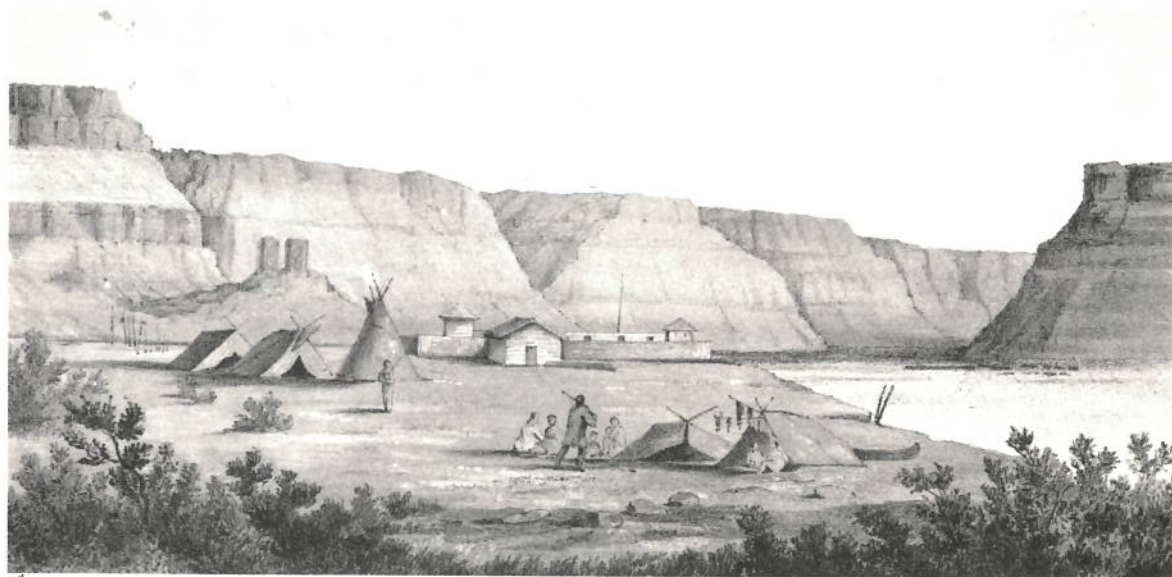
¹⁶Only the distant Jesuits were allowed to remain behind in the war zone. Bishop Blanchet and his priests were ordered out "for their safety." The Dalles was the new frontier on the east.

¹⁷Peter J. DeSmet, S.J., *Letters and Sketches With a Narrative of a Year's Residence Among the Indian Tribes of the Rocky Mountains* (Philadelphia, 1843).

¹⁸The real murderers were all dead.

¹⁹Gilbert J. Garraghan, S.J., *The Jesuits of the Middle United States* (New York: America Press, 1938), 2:345.

²⁰The shipment consisted of "one thousand and eighty pounds of powder, fifteen hundred pounds of balls, three hundred pounds of buckshot, and thirty six guns," scarcely enough to exterminate all the Protestants of the Oregon Country. *Ibid.*, 2:346.



Old Fort Walla Walla, as drawn for the Pacific Railroad Report in 1853. Blanchet's disappointment is understandable.

another Jesuit to forward the consignment to its destination without any attempt to conceal the nature of the shipment. At The Dalles, an officious Lieutenant Rodgers seized the shipment and reported to Oregon City for instructions. Proper authorities ordered it to be returned to Fort Vancouver, after which the whereabouts of the arms was lost in bureaucratic red tape.

The incident, itself [however] was seized upon by prejudicial minds as evidence of an attempt to smuggle arms into the interior to be put into the hands of Catholic Indians for the extermination of Protestants. The preposterous charge was met with widespread credence and anti-Catholic hostility was soon fanned to a white heat. In December, 1848, a petition for the expulsion of all of the Catholic clergy from Oregon was introduced into the territorial legislature but failed of passage.²¹

Meanwhile, the course of white man's justice was zealously pursued. The five Cayuse Indian hostages were convicted of murder with record dispatch. From their dingy cells in Oregon City, more like animal cages to them, they appealed to Archbishop Blanchet for help. Blanchet instructed them in the Catholic faith, baptized them, and accompanied them on June 3, 1850, to the gallows where each one died protesting his innocence. Subsequently, Blanchet vigorously asserted that all five of the Indians were entirely innocent of the

charges for which they had been executed. This priestly intervention enraged some of the settlers even more. If any were willing to admit a mistake, they did not come forward. It seemed, on the contrary, that the priests were to blame after all.

For the next generation a flood of literature vilifying Catholic missionaries, especially the two Blanchets and Brouillet, continued to flow from the pens of Spalding and his supporters. They succeeded in providing the Whitmans with crowns of martyrdom and Spalding with the mantle of Doctor of the Church.

The two bishops Blanchet were granted neither. The humiliations and frustrations they received at the hands of their foes did not seem to make them more mellow or tolerant. The archbishop passed to a less controversial life on June 18, 1883, at the age of eighty-eight. His younger brother, the Bishop of Nesqually since 1850, followed him to the grave four years later in his ninetieth year. Always very pious men, they remained true to their crusty harshness to the bitter end: rigid prelates, somewhat isolated by their intransigent manners and apparently oblivious to the fact that if they had been more understanding and compassionate with their Protestant neighbors, the tragedy of Wailatpu might have been avoided. ■

²¹*Ibid.*