

THE OREGON MISSION AND THE ABCFM

by Jonathan H. Webster

Not all the problems of Protestant missionaries in the Pacific Northwest stemmed from their neighbors. It often seemed as if their sponsors simply did not understand the circumstances of the region. The author teaches history at Walla Walla Community College; his article was not a part of the conference but was delivered earlier in the sesquicentennial observance.

THE WHITMAN MISSION began one hundred fifty years ago as the offspring of a new age of American Christian evangelism.¹ It was that religious fervor, more than the irresistible westward surge of American nationalism or the wanderlust of youthful pioneer spirits, which brought Marcus and Narcissa Whitman and their colleagues Henry and Eliza Spalding, along with pioneer missionaries of the Methodist and Catholic churches, into the Pacific Northwest. They came to convert Indians to Christianity, the delegates of a missionary nation sent forth to save heathen souls. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, a joint Congregational-Presbyterian agency, in 1836 sent Whitman and Spalding with their wives to establish an outpost of New England's Protestant church in the wilderness of Oregon.

The history of the American Board mission to Oregon is a central part of the story of this nation's origins in the Pacific Northwest. Its missionaries helped introduce American cultural influence in the region and inaugurate the era of American conquest of the Northwest. The success of the mission in those regards should not, however, distract attention from the troubled and conflict-laden history of that evangelical effort.

Two conflicts faced by the Whitmans are well known. Their controversy with the native Cayuse resulting in the terrible massacre of 1847 is familiar to all students of Northwest history. And the dissension among the Oregon missionaries—between Whitman and Spalding, between them and the missionaries who were sent later to join their work, and between the Protestant and Catholic missionaries—is often recounted. But a third conflict swirled around the Oregon missions that is much less

known: the disagreement that existed for years between the Whitmans and Spaldings and their employers on the American Board. Although historians have paid much less attention to that conflict than to other aspects of the Whitmans' struggle, it often must have seemed to the missionaries the most important of the controversies affecting their success.

The relationship between the American Board and its workers in the Northwest was marked by prolonged disagreement over both the means and the purpose of the evangelical venture into remote Indian country. When the Whitmans and the Spaldings were recruited for the Northwest they were in agreement with the American Board on the primary goal of converting western Indians to Christianity; but when they arrived in the Oregon Country and confronted the realities of their mission, their position began to change. The ideals of Boston did not often fit the actuality of Wailatpu and Lapwai. Controversy between the missionaries and the Board's directors arose over the amount of non-religious work carried on at the missions, yet that work was necessary to sustain frontier life. The expenses of the Oregon Mission were a subject of repeated dispute, even though the missionaries argued that high cost was inevitable in getting basic supplies to the wilderness. Since they were not paid salaries, these supplies were their only expense to the American Board. The Whitman-Spalding strategy of preaching agriculture first and the gospel second also brought criticism from the Board, despite the fact that the strategy was imple-

¹A version of this paper was presented in the Clifford M. Drury Memorial Lecture Series, Walla Walla, July 11, 1986. The author is grateful for the sponsorship of the Whitman Sesquicentennial Committee and the support of the Washington Commission for the Humanities.

mented to meet the great challenge of bringing Christian instruction to a nomadic people. The very limited evangelical success of the work among the Northwest Indians was a further source of disappointment for the Board, as was the unconcealed strife among its Oregon missionaries after 1838.

These points of disagreement and displeasure provoked an order to close the Whitman and Spalding mission stations in 1842 and impelled Marcus Whitman's historic return east during that winter. In the wake of those controversies, yet another point of dispute would emerge, an even more momentous disagreement over the influence of the American frontier. Should American emigration be welcomed and white settlement encouraged in the Pacific Northwest? On this issue, the idealistic arguments and historic insight of the Board directors in Boston could not deter Whitman from the actions that would seal his greater fame and tragic fate.

THE AMERICAN BOARD of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) was the first organizing force behind Protestant America's early-nineteenth-century effort to carry Christianity to the "pagan" world.² Born in the heart of the New England Congregational and Presbyterian churches, the American Board expressed the missionary fervor of a religious age that produced what historian Martin Marty has called "a Soul Rush that outpaced the Gold Rush."³ Although the first efforts of the ABCFM were directed overseas, to India, the Board's interests from the beginning looked to the conversion of the Indians of North America living outside the then United States. (Indian evangelism within the states was the province of assorted "home mission" organizations.) Early ABCFM mission enterprises to the Cherokees and Choctaws were followed by efforts to convert the tribes



Marcus Whitman medallion. Photo courtesy Oregon Historical Society (ORHI 1504).

along the advancing western frontier, notably the Sioux, Osage, and Chippewa. The mixed success of these missions prompted the wish to reach beyond the frontier into the virgin territory of the Far West, there to minister to the native tribes before the corrupting influences of white settlement complicated the task of saving Indian souls.

When sensational news stories in 1832 reported that Indians from the remote Northwest, generally identified as "flatheads," had walked to St. Louis to ask that the white man's religion be taught in their country, the American Board (along with the Methodist Mission Board) began a search for volunteers. In 1835 in upstate New York an ABCFM agent recruited Dr. Marcus Whitman, Narcissa Prentiss Whitman, the Rev. Henry Spalding, and Eliza Hart Spalding to begin the Board's work in the Pacific Northwest. Even though Whitman, a physician, was best prepared to minister to the medical needs of the Indians, the primary purpose of his going to Oregon was to deliver the gospel message and thus convert the natives to Christianity. The Board's Secretary for Indian Affairs, the Rev. David Greene, instructed the missionaries as they departed for their pioneer trek across the Rockies:

²See Clifton Jackson Phillips, *Protestant America and the Pagan World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1969), William Ellsworth Strong, *The Story of the American Board* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1910), and George M. Madsen, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1970).

³Martin E. Marty, *Pilgrims In Their Own Land* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1984), 169.

Let your single aim be seen to be the benefit of the Indians, especially the introduction of Christian knowledge among them and the salvation of their souls. Avoid all secular and political interference with any class of men. . . . Let all your worldly and secular concerns be as limited and compact as your circumstances will permit. . . . Live near to God. Labor for Him, rely on His grace and spirit, and may His promises all be made good to you; and your mission be as life from the dead to the benighted tribes of the remote west.⁴

This charge would provide the Whitmans and the Spaldings with a high calling and a noble ideal for their evangelical work, but also with a nearly impossible challenge to keep their secular activities in balance with their religious work. At their wilderness mission stations the missionaries would have to exhaust themselves in a year-round effort to build a home and farm for themselves and their dependents. Little enough time was available for teaching and preaching.

By every account Whitman excelled at his secular occupations, turning Waiilatpu into what one observer described as "a plantation on the face of that distant wilderness." But here were the seeds of one fundamental dispute between Waiilatpu and Boston, a dispute forced by the basic contradiction in the Board's position. With one voice the ABCFM office called for economy, self-sufficiency, and abjurement of trade and commerce; with another, it called for more concentration upon the fundamental religious purposes of the mission. The contradictory expectations of the American Board put the Whitmans and their associates in a position where it was difficult to satisfy their superiors in Boston. Nevertheless, they strove to fulfill their religious calling to convert the Indians to Christianity.

Their evangelical efforts met with very limited success. In the eleven years of the Oregon Mission, between 1836 and 1847, twenty-one Indians (six adults and fifteen children) were baptized into the Presbyterian church there. Of that number, only one, a leader named Five Crows, was a Cayuse from the Whitmans' Waiilatpu station. The rest were Nez Perce, including the chief Old Joseph, converted at the Spalding's Lapwai station.⁵

The number of baptisms and new memberships in the church is not necessarily a good indication of the number of persons influenced by the faith of the missionaries. Spalding and Whitman held to a very restrictive theology of baptism. Unlike Catholic missionaries in the Northwest, who were at the time reporting impressively large numbers of baptisms on the basis of a simple statement of faith, the Presbyterian missionaries held out baptism rather as a diploma, given after evidence of a good understanding of doctrine and evidence of a real change of heart. Instruction in the faith was the necessary prelude to baptism; the whole laborious educational process of learning the language and giving religious instruction to the Indians had to come first.

Yet the poor showing in evangelizing the Oregon Indians could not easily be explained to the Mission Board. In fact, the Indians, after the early enthusiasm they showed for the Christian message, turned their backs on the evangelists. Certainly in this the Whitmans had misunderstood the Indians' alleged interest in the white man's "Book of Heaven" and their invitation to the missionaries to come among them with their message.⁶ The desire for the gospel message did not reflect, in the main, any general spiritual urge or longing for salvation, as the Whitmans supposed. The Indians sought a religious magic that seemed the secret of the white man's material success. When the Cayuse found that the two were not so directly related and that the missionaries were even opposed to trade in the white man's goods, they lost interest in the missionaries' message.

Furthermore, the uncompromising Calvinism in Whitman's message alienated his Indian

⁴David Greene to Marcus Whitman, March 4, 1836, in Archer Butler Hulbert and Dorothy P. Hulbert, editors, "Marcus Whitman, Crusader," Vols. VI through VIII of *Overland to the Pacific*, 8 vols. (Denver: The Stewart Commission of Colorado College, 1932-1941), 6:196. The complete correspondence between Whitman and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions is published in Hulbert, as is extensive additional correspondence of both Marcus and Narcissa Whitman. A full index of the Whitman letters is contained in Clifford M. Drury, *Marcus and Narcissa Whitman and the Opening of Old Oregon*, 2 vols. (Glendale, California: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1973), 2: appendix 1.

⁵Drury, *Marcus and Narcissa Whitman*, 1:367, 2:108.

⁶Chester Collins Maxey, *Marcus Whitman, 1802-1847: His Courage, His Deeds, and His College* (New York: The Newcomen Society in North America, 1950), 19.

audience. In a letter home in 1840, Narcissa described the unhappiness of the Cayuse:

Husband tells them that none of them are Christians, that they are all on the broad road to destruction, and that worship will not save them. . . . They try to persuade him not to talk such bad talk to them, as they say, talk good talk, or tell some story. . . . Some threaten to whip him and to destroy our crops, and for a long time their cattle were turned into our potato field every night to see if they could not compel him to change his course of instruction to them.⁷

Perhaps Whitman's failure as an evangelist, despite his efforts, was in some part a product of his dislike for that role. In 1840, when the future of the mission was in question, he wrote the American Board that if they closed the Waiilatpu mission, "you will be at liberty to send me to any field where I may be needed as a physician but not as here to fill the place of a minister, a thing I have [tried] in vain to avoid."⁸

A MORE OBVIOUS impediment to the success of the missionaries was the nomadic lifestyle of the Indians. The Cayuse ranged in season from the Columbia River fishing grounds, to Montana for the buffalo hunt, to the Oregon and Washington mountains for digging camas roots. How could the missionaries hope to follow this life-on-the-move and thus reach the Indians for a long enough period to educate and convert them? Whitman and Spalding believed that agriculture was the answer, so farming became a means to their religious objectives. Whitman wanted to teach farming to the Indians in order to transform their lives. Agriculture would give them a reliable basis for survival, ending the cycle of famine that had so weakened the tribe. Moreover, both Whitman and Spalding believed that the acquisition of agriculture was the vital first step in encouraging the Nez Perce and Cayuse to settle down, end their nomadic existence, and thus be more available for the influence of

school and church. Whitman explained this in a letter to the Boston office in 1838:

This field is emphatically white [sic] for the harvest. . . . Although we bring the gospel as the first object, we cannot gain an assurance unless they are attracted and retained by the plough and hoe, and in this way even before the language is acquired, you may have the people drawn around you and ready to hear your every instruction. And why should this not be our method of proceeding? Is it not what Paul meant when he said "I become all things unto all men"?⁹

Asking for more agricultural equipment from the mission board, Whitman wrote:

If the Board cannot approve of such an expense, I do not see how they can afford to proceed without it, for it seems evident that without them we shall not see the Indians at our station for any considerable time. On the contrary, if we had them it would not be long before we should see them located around us with houses, fields, gardens, hogs and cows and their children enjoying the benefit of constant instruction.¹⁰

Such requests for equipment and supplies were matched in the early years of the mission by requests for workers to help harvest the fields of heathen souls. One assistant, William Gray, had joined them belatedly on the historic journey to Oregon in 1836. Gray returned to Boston in 1837 with a request for more assistance to the Oregon Mission; the American Board responded by recruiting seven more workers for the Northwest, three Congregational clergymen and their wives (Elkanah and Mary Walker, Cushing and Myra Eells, and Asa B. and Sarah Smith) and another laborer. This reinforcement arrived in 1838, thereafter assisted at both the Waiilatpu and the Lapwai station, and enabled the founding of a new station ministering to the Flathead Indians at Tshimakain.

Discord among the missionary couples, variously produced by Henry Spalding's authoritarian personality, conflicting evangelical ambitions, and the close, primitive living conditions at the stations, led the mission workers to prefer separate, albeit more lonely and laborious, existences. Thus the 1838 reinforcements tended to multiply and diffuse the missionary work rather than ease the chores for the Whitmans and Spaldings. From time to

⁷Narcissa to her father, Stephen Prentiss, October 10, 1840, in *Transactions of the Twenty-first Annual Reunion of the Oregon Pioneer Association for 1893* (Portland, 1894), 128. Most of the extant correspondence of Narcissa Whitman is published in the *Transactions* for the years 1891 and 1893.

⁸Whitman to Greene, October 29, 1840, Hulbert, "Marcus Whitman," 7:195.

⁹Whitman to Greene, May 8, 1838, *ibid.*, 6:311.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

time the Oregon missions also gained assistance from Hawaiian laborers sent from the Sandwich Island Mission. Two such laborers helped Marcus Whitman with his first building and farming chores between 1836 and 1838.

The need for more assistance seemed constant, however, and Whitman and Spalding believed, as they complained to the ABCFM, that they would have to be given massive aid if the Oregon Mission were to succeed. They wrote to Boston in April, 1838, asking the Board to promptly dispatch thirty ordained missionaries, thirty farmers, thirty school teachers, ten physicians, and ten mechanics—all with wives—to help. Emphasizing their need to promote agriculture as well as the gospel, Spalding and Whitman also presented a long list of needed supplies, including 100 ploughs and 600 hoes as well as iron works and milling machinery.¹¹

THIS EXORBITANT REQUEST to Boston was prompted in no small part by news of Methodist plans for expansion in Oregon. The Rev. Jason Lee and five others had founded a Methodist mission enterprise in the Willamette Valley the year before the Whitmans and Spaldings came to Oregon. In 1838 Lee stopped for a visit at Waiilatpu while returning to New York with an appeal to his mission board for scores of new workers and a plea for American political dominion over Oregon. Inspired by Lee's vision of rapidly expanding religious challenges in the Northwest, the prospects of future American dominion, and an urge to keep up with the Methodists, Spalding (with Whitman's agreement) wrote the request for the American Board's Oregon Mission for vast manpower and material assistance. Lee carried this appeal east.¹² The cost of the assistance they were requesting was not calculated, but Spalding challenged the mission board simply to broadcast its need. "You have only to make the request known, and the men and money are at your command at once."¹³

Such appeals for additional financial support were always a cause of controversy. The ABCFM did not have a predictable income; its

financial resources were based wholly upon voluntary contributions annually solicited by the Board's agents from thousands of eastern congregations. Its annual income often showed wild swings, depending upon economic conditions and the effectiveness of its fund-raising, and its ambitious programs of support to over 400 missionaries by 1840 almost always strained its income beyond its limits. The debt of the American Board of over \$40,000 in 1837 represented over ten times the total costs for the first two years of the Oregon missions. The ABCFM's persistent poverty was a major factor in all of its decisions affecting Oregon.¹⁴

Often the Board wrote to Spalding or Whitman cautioning them to cut costs, noting, as one communique put it: "We are much embarrassed for want of funds, and the expenses of your missions are very great."¹⁵ In July of 1837, Greene warned:

You must permit me here to say that the expenses of your mission hitherto have much exceeded our anticipations, and we cannot but fear that you have not in all cases reflected with what difficulty money is obtained by the Board for its several missions, or how urgent are the claims of other fields. My opinion is that your mission must be sustained hereafter at a less comparative expense than it has been hitherto, or the committee will feel obliged to discontinue it. If the Indians of this continent are all of them ever to receive the gospel, it must be by small economical missions.¹⁶

In many ways the disputes over financial support to the Oregon Mission reflected the deeper dispute between the Board and the missionaries over evangelical strategy. Where Whitman and Spalding sought to establish a broad mission complex based on agricultural instruction, a mission that as Spalding said "points with one hand to the Lamb of God... and with the other to the hoe,"¹⁷ the

¹¹Spalding and Whitman to Greene, April 21, 1838, Hulbert, "Marcus Whitman," 6:306.

¹²Nard Jones, *Marcus Whitman: The Great Command: The Story of Marcus and Narcissa Whitman and the Oregon Country Pioneers* (Portland, Oregon: Binfords & Mort, 1959), 165-171.

¹³Spalding and Whitman to Greene, April 21, 1838.

¹⁴The financial reports of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions are available in Drury, *Marcus and Narcissa Whitman*, 2: appendix 2. See also Hulbert, "Marcus Whitman," 6:20-27.

¹⁵Greene to Whitman and Spalding, January 7, 1837, Hulbert, "Marcus Whitman," 6:261.

¹⁶Greene to Spalding et al., July 6, 1837, *ibid.*, 6:285.

¹⁷Spalding and Whitman to Greene, April 21, 1838.

Board preferred a simple emphasis on evangelism—mission that pointed only to the Lamb of God. As a consequence of this difference in philosophy, the Boston office was increasingly irritable about the requests from the Oregon Mission for financial support for its extensive agricultural operation.

Greene expressed the Board's economic and philosophical objections in response to Whitman's April, 1838, request for massive aid:

Of reinforcements, I would say that your expectations are too high for the means of the Board or for the spirit of the Christian community, or, as it seems to me, for the good of the cause of Christ in your region.

In the first place, he noted, "if the Board should attempt all that you request, it would be equivalent to about doubling the present number of laborers under its patronage, and of course, doubling the expenditures." In the second place, that commitment to agricultural development and other secular activities would be a distraction from the true spiritual purpose of the mission:

To one who witnesses the deplorable condition of the Indians, their miseries, their rapid progress to the grave, and their unfitness for heaven, any delay to make immediate proclamation of the gospel to them all seems criminal and inhuman.

Moreover, Greene counseled, experience in other missions had taught that the less the missionaries did for the Indians in meeting their physical needs, the better:

To a certain extent they need assistance before the spirit of industry and enterprise and self-dependence can be awakened in them and lead them on to provide for themselves; but go one step too far in taking care for them, and you begin to undo what you were aiming to do; they grow inefficient, look to your skill and your abundance for all, and soon become soured if you will not do all.¹⁸

THE FINAL FACTOR in the American Board's loss of confidence in its Oregon project was the strife among the mission staff. Whitman and Spalding had never had cordial relations from the time of their westward trip. Only separation of their chores and their stations

made their affiliation workable. Whitman and Spalding had managed to keep their personal differences from crippling the mission endeavor, but the introduction of the new workers in 1838 threw the Oregon mission field into disarray. Poorly prepared for the nature of their work among the Indians, some of the newcomers fell to bickering about assignments and attacking the methods and the authority of the more experienced missionaries. Henry Spalding was the subject of numerous criticisms addressed to the Boston office by William Gray and Asa Smith during 1840 and 1841.

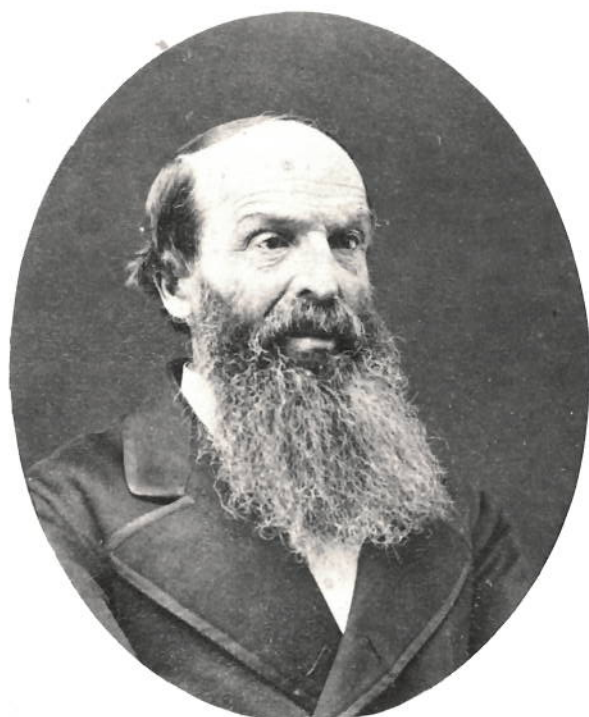
Appalled by the discord among its missionary agents in Oregon and displeased by the expense of their mission (at the end of the previous fiscal year the Board's debt had reached a record high of nearly \$58,000, forcing a cut of forty-seven mission positions worldwide), the American Board decided in February of 1842 to reduce drastically its work in the Northwest. The agricultural preoccupations and limited spiritual success of the Oregon Mission must also have been considerations in the decision. The order was sent out to close both Waiilatpu and Lapwai. Spalding, Gray, and Smith were to be recalled; Whitman was to be reassigned to the station at Tshimakain. Greene wrote the Oregon missionaries:

It is a cause of much grief and disappointment [to the Board], as you may well suppose, that a mission which seemed to promise so great and speedy results, as did yours four years ago, should so soon be brought to such a close. . . . The Christian community, when the catastrophe [sic] becomes known, will also be grieved and disappointed. And we fear that in the eyes of many . . . the missionary work will be dishonored and prejudiced.¹⁹

This communication was delivered to Waiilatpu by Elijah White, who was traveling through to the Willamette Valley to take his position as the U.S. government's first Indian agent in Oregon, seven months after it was written. In the meantime many elements of the strife in the American Board's Oregon missions had been overcome. Whitman and Spalding had met and resolved their differences in what proved to be a permanent reconciliation. The discontented new associates, the Smiths and

¹⁸Greene to Whitman, March 21, 1839, Hulbert, "Marcus Whitman," 7:136-137.

¹⁹Greene to Oregon Mission personnel, February 25, 1842, *ibid.*, 7:257.



Henry Harmon Spalding. ISHS 42.

the Grays, had already decided to move to the Willamette Valley or leave Oregon. Therefore Whitman and Spalding were determined to persuade the American Board to change its order. And so Marcus Whitman made his epic journey east to Boston through the winter of 1842-43 seeking to convince the ABCFM that conditions had changed and that the Waiilatpu and Lapwai missions should be maintained.

Whitman had a second purpose to his trip: to help lead American settlers back to Oregon. He and his colleagues had come to hope that an immigration of godly settlers would provide the best solution to the problems that had limited their effectiveness. New settlers farming the land near the missions would relieve the missionaries of some of the burden of their non-religious chores, making available a supply of food and providing the services that would allow the missionary families to concentrate more on their religious vocation. Moreover it was hoped that Christian settlers would provide a good influence on the Cayuse, showing them how to live sober, hard-working, God-fearing lives.

Protestant emigrants were also wanted to help secure Oregon against the advance of

Roman Catholicism. The surge of Protestant revivalism that gave birth to the American Board and was the setting for the life and work of the Whitmans produced on its dark side an extreme prejudice against Catholicism. The Whitmans and their colleagues all showed an intense hostility toward Catholicism, even though they knew little of it. On their trip west in 1836 the pioneer missionaries had an introduction to Catholicism at the new cathedral in St. Louis, of which Eliza Spalding wrote in her diary: "the unpleasant sensations we experienced on witnessing their heartless forms and ceremonies induced us soon to leave, rejoicing that we had never been left to embrace such delusions."²⁰

The extension of Catholic mission activity into the Oregon Country after 1838 filled the missionaries with apprehension and loathing. Narcissa wrote home in 1842: "Romanism stalks abroad on our right hand and on our left, and with daring affrontery boasts that she is to possess the land. I ask, must it be so?"²¹ The Catholic work that they feared was greatly accelerated after 1840 by the energetic activity in the Columbia Basin of Father Peter John DeSmet, the pioneer Jesuit missionary. After reading the Catholic ambitions in DeSmet's *Letters and Sketches*, Whitman warned the American Board:

I think after a careful consideration of this book . . . you will realize our feeling that we must look with much interest upon this the only spot on the Pacific coast left where Protestants have a present hope of a foothold. It is requisite that more good, pious men and Ministers go to Oregon without delay as citizens or our hope there is greatly clouded if not destroyed.²²

Letters written from Marcus to his mother and other New York State friends reflect his displeasure that the Board was not doing more to counteract the Catholic threat.²³

²⁰Drury, *Marcus and Narcissa Whitman*, 1:167. See also Hulbert, "Marcus Whitman," 7:74-84, for other examples.

²¹Narcissa Whitman to the Rev. and Mrs. A. S. Allen, August 23, 1842, *Transactions*, 1893, 162.

²²Whitman to Greene, May 12, 1843, Hulbert, "Marcus Whitman," 7:303. There is considerable irony in the fact that after their murders the Whitmans were given a Christian burial by a Catholic priest who was the first clergyman on the scene.

²³Drury, *Marcus and Narcissa Whitman*, 2:70-71.

Catholicism in the Northwest seemed to be allied with the political interests of the Hudson's Bay Company and Great Britain, so the anti-Catholicism of the Protestant missionaries was also a form of American nationalism. In 1842 Great Britain and the United States still had not resolved their twenty-five-year-old dispute over control of the Northwest. In the Whitmans' view the choice lay between a Protestant victory and a Catholic, British-Canadian future for Oregon.

In the autumn of 1843, Whitman wrote the American Board:

There can be no doubt but settlers will soon settle in this upper country and what we very much want is good men to settle 2, 3, or 4 in a place and secure a good location and hold a good influence over the Indians, and sustain religious institutions as a nucleus for society and keep back papacy; . . . I do not regret having visited the states for I feel that this country must either be American or else foreign and mostly papal. If I never do more than to have been one of the first to take white women across the mountain and prevent the disaster and reaction which would have occurred by the breaking up of the present emigration & establishing the first wagon road across to the border of the Columbia River, I am satisfied. I cannot feel that we can look on and see papal and foreign influence making its great effort, & we hold ourselves as expatriated and neutral.²⁴

ONE OF THE most remarkable aspects of the missionaries' new plan to "save" Oregon by encouraging an influx of American settlers was the total change that it represented in their attitudes toward white emigration and the moral influence of the frontier. In the early years, their object had been to save the Indians of Oregon before they were contaminated by the influence of the frontier settlements bringing lawlessness, sin, commerce, and whiskey. The Whitmans had expressed pleasure upon their arrival that the Oregon Country had not yet been polluted by those manifestations of white civilization.²⁵ Now the advancing frontier was not a curse, but rather a potential blessing. The only probable explanation for this reversal of opinion was the perception of an even greater evil in the eyes of the Protestant missionaries, the possible



Samuel Parker, from History of the Pacific Northwest.

triumph of Catholicism and the loss of Oregon to Great Britain.

Whitman would have to convert the American Board if his views were to prevail as mission policy. From the beginning of its involvement in the Oregon Mission venture, the Board had been resolved to reach the Indians of the Northwest before the arrival of white settlements. It had also been clear about its understanding of the baleful influence of the American frontier on native Americans. The Board's annual report of 1835 expressed this fundamental challenge for Oregon:

The missions heretofore undertaken by the Board on this continent have been principally among those tribes which were near the white settlements, and where the gospel had to contend not only with obstacles found in the savage character and habits, but also with the still greater obstacles originating in the corrupting and counteracting influences of the border population. The tribes adjacent to our frontiers are rapidly retiring before the advancing whites, or are melting away under their influence. Shall we, then, in our efforts for the Indians, merely keep up with that tide which is overwhelming them, so that we have scarcely time to open the treasures of the gospel to them before they are consumed; or shall we press forward in advance of this tide, and preach Christ to those tribes which are exposed to a less debasing foreign influence, and where

²⁴Whitman to Greene, November 1, 1843, Hulbert, "Marcus Whitman," 7:325.

²⁵Narcissa Whitman to the Rev. and Mrs. Leverett Hull, October 25, 1836, *ibid.*, 6:244.

we may have more time to try the power of the truth upon them before all opportunity for benefitting them shall depart?²⁶

The Rev. Samuel Parker, the Board's pioneer explorer of mission possibilities in the Northwest, put it even more directly in his 1836 report:

The importance of establishing missions beyond the Rocky Mountains is plain, very plain, and if we ever intend to do anything that promises permanency, the Oregon territory is an important field—away from the influence of frontier settlers and away from whiskey.²⁷

The expansion of American economic and political interests into the Oregon Country during the late 1830's led to an increased sense of urgency in the American Board's concern about "saving" the Indians before it was too late. Hearing rumors of American interest in acquiring political control over the disputed Columbia country through negotiations with Great Britain in 1838, the Board expressed its concern:

What we most fear is that, should the country come under the control of the US, there will immediately be a rush towards it by speculators and adventurers, making it a theatre for all kinds of wickedness, leading to the corruption and oppression of the Indian tribes beyond anything that has yet been seen on our borders.²⁸

The American Board's attitude showed more historical understanding than Whitman had of the devastating impact of white frontier settlement on American Indian culture. Unfortunate experiences in earlier ABCFM mission work with Indians gave perspective and insight. The Brainerd mission project in Tennessee with the Cherokee nation had been laid waste by the pressure of white expansion and the forced removal of those Indians from their homeland during the 1830's. Missions to the Choctaws were similarly disrupted, as were subsequent efforts to convert the Osage of Kansas when American settlement overran the missionaries' efforts to reach the pristine American "savage."²⁹

Nevertheless, Whitman's agenda as he appeared before the Prudential Committee of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions on April 4, 1843, included an

appeal for support for American emigration into the Oregon country as well as an appeal for a reversal of the order to close Waiilatpu and Lapwai. His description of the effective work at the mission stations and the new harmony among the workers moved the Board to rescind its order recalling Spalding and closing the stations. Whitman was overjoyed. But he was much less pleased with its reaction to his appeal for support in recruiting emigrants to Oregon. The records of the Prudential Committee meeting state:

Dr. Whitman had a brief interview with the committee. A plan which he proposed for taking with him on his return to the mission a small company of intelligent and pious laymen to settle at or near the mission stations but without expense to the Board or any connection with it was so far approved that he was authorized to take such men, if those of a suitable character can be found. . . .³⁰

Whitman was free to act, but there would be no Board expenditure or endorsement of the effort.

The American Board's refusal to act on the matter makes it clear that in his attempt to get the ABCFM to promote Protestant emigration to Oregon, Marcus Whitman failed. In a later communique responding to Whitman's continued urging that the Board encourage emigrants to head for Oregon, the Board secretary snapped: "I must say that I cannot regard it as my duty to make any efforts at all [to encourage emigrants] in any form."³¹ Even when Whitman minimized his request by saying that he did not expect the Board "to become the patron of the emigration to Oregon" but only to use its "influence that in connection with all the influx into the country there may be a fair proportion of good men of our own denomination,"³² there was no response from the ABCFM. The mission gover-

²⁶Annual Report of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1835 (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1836), 100.

²⁷Hulbert, "Marcus Whitman," 6:128.

²⁸Greene to Whitman, October 17, 1838, *ibid.*, 6:329. Negotiations were not concluded until 1846.

²⁹Phillips, *Protestant America and the Pagan World*, 20-38.

³⁰Hulbert, "Marcus Whitman," 7:293.

³¹Greene to Whitman, March 17, 1848, *ibid.*, 8:252.

³²Whitman to Greene, May 30, 1843, *ibid.*, 7:252.

nors in Boston accurately sensed the consequences for the Indians of emigration. As the Board's 1844 annual report stated:

The increasing number of immigrants to their [Nez Perce and Cayuse] country, together with reports carried by the wandering Indians from this side of the mountains, respecting the encroachment of the white population on the Indian lands, seems to have awakened apprehensions as to what may be their destiny. And much reason, probably, have they to fear that their history is to be brief and calamitous.³³

AFTER HIS MEETING with the ABCFM governors in Boston, Marcus Whitman returned to St. Louis; from there he helped guide an emigrant wagon train of nearly 1,000 people across the Rockies to Oregon. He is well remembered for that role in the history of the Pacific Northwest—enshrined in the United States Capitol for his work in opening the way west for the American people. Whitman did not have to create interest in Oregon; it was already growing wildly with the news of available land and the advance of American political dominion in the region. Nor could Whitman have controlled that emigration, as ever greater waves of American settlers poured through the mission lands in the years after 1843 and changed the Oregon Country forever.

In the last years of the Whitman mission its future was out of the hands of the ABCFM, out of the hands of the Whitmans, swept along by the forces of extensive migration into Oregon. The collision of that aggressive American culture with the Cayuse Indians revealed the tragic error of Whitman's 1843 belief in the benefits of encouraging the emigration of settlers—emigration that brought on the final disaster for the ABCFM mission effort in the Northwest. The waves of white people coming into their lands alarmed the Indians and brought them to suspect that Whitman had invited the movement. The Cayuse foresaw the loss of their homeland, the destruction of their

culture, and the end of their way of life. The emigrants brought diseases that the Indians could not resist and which ravaged their tribe, despite Whitman's medical efforts. In the great measles epidemic of 1847, the Cayuse became convinced that the doctor's magic was the cause, not the cure, of the disease. These circumstances led directly to the terrible end to the Waiilatpu Mission with the murder of the Whitmans and twelve others in the massacre of November 1847. All the American Board stations in the Northwest were subsequently closed.

Nor had the flood of immigrants into Oregon brought relief for the mission so that more time could be devoted to religious occupations. Just the opposite occurred, for the great physical needs of the immigrant trains, the onslaught of poor people and orphans to care for, robbed the Whitmans of the time they had to attend to their spiritual work with the Indians. The Whitmans had come to feel, in fact, that their work among the immigrants, both temporal and spiritual, was the most important part of their "mission" to Oregon; as Marcus wrote his parents in May of 1844, "no doubt our greatest work is to be to aid the white settlement of this country and help to found its religious institutions."³⁴

With the Whitmans' increased attention to the needs of the immigrant trains, the criticism from the American Board mounted. Whitman should not spend so much time caring for and feeding the immigrants, making his station "a great restaurant for the weary pilgrims; . . . such a work is very humane and good work, but the work of guiding men to Christ is a better one and coincides better with the vocation of a missionary laborer."³⁵

This was, in its way, true: a we-told-you-so rebuke from Boston. But it was also unfair, for the Whitmans' central goal had always been to guide men to Christ. The demands of their mission among the Cayuse led them to pursue that goal in unique ways, but their policies were shaped by their spiritual objective of saving Indian souls.

In his last letter to the American Board, written on October 18, 1847, a month before his murder, Marcus Whitman wrote:

³³Annual Report of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1844 (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1845), 213.

³⁴Marcus Whitman to his parents, May 16, 1844, Hulbert, "Marcus Whitman," 7:98-99.

³⁵Greene to Whitman, April 6, 1846, Drury, *Marcus and Narcissa Whitman*, 2:124.

I cannot blame myself that the plan I laid down when I was in Boston was not carried out. If we could have had good families, say 2 or 3 together to have placed in select spots among the Indians, the present crisis which I feared would not have come.³⁶

Perhaps he was right. The Whitmans are not to blame for the fact that emigration did not have the good effects they had hoped for. But to have hoped it would be different would have been to deny all the forces and the history of ultimately incompatible cultures in conflict.

In the last letter that the American Board wrote to Whitman, written in ignorance of his letter and of the massacre that followed, *The irrigation ditch at Waiilatpu, in a modern picture taken at the Whitman Mission National Historic Site. Photo courtesy Larry Dodd.*

Greene noted Whitman's new burdens at Waiilatpu:

You are known to be a missionary man in your relations and profession, and the people expect you to be mainly occupied in that which is peculiarly missionary work. . . . Do not feel that all Oregon is in your hands, and that the planning, providing, and laboring for all its interests are devolved on you.³⁷

But it was too late for Whitman. A new Oregon that was part of the American nation had descended upon the old mission field, bringing an end to his work and his life. ■

³⁶Whitman to Greene, October 18, 1847, Hulbert, "Marcus Whitman," 8:244.

³⁷Greene to Whitman, March 17, 1848, *ibid.*, 8:256.

The irrigation ditch at Waiilatpu, in a modern picture taken at the Whitman Mission National Historic Site. Photo courtesy Larry Dodd.

