

ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS, III: MARCUS WHITMAN

by Tom Cox

Of all those after whom rooms in Pocatello's First Presbyterian Church have been named, Marcus Whitman is the most widely known. Yet there is irony in his being honored by our church: he was not an ordained minister, his dreadfully unsuccessful missionary activity ended in disaster, and he never resided in what became Idaho, let alone the southeastern reaches thereof.

Still, Whitman's story is worth remembering — and commemorating. Dorothy Johansen's classic history of the Pacific Northwest devotes over five pages to him, other histories even more; one of the finest institutions of higher learning in the region, Whitman College, bears his name (and its women's dormitory his wife's) even though the school has never had Presbyterian connections; and his bust is one of two representing the State of Washington in the National Statuary Hall in Washington, D.C.

Whitman was a central figure in the first group of Presbyterian missionaries sent out by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions to the Oregon Country. A medical doctor by training, he hoped to use medicine to open the way for the Gospel among the Indians of the Far West. Equally devout, his wife Narcissa came west gladly, full of enthusiasm for the cause. In 1836, they established their mission at Waiilatpu ("Place of Rye Grass"), a few miles west of present-day Walla Walla, Washington.

There were problems from the beginning. The Cayuse, among whom Whitman established his mission, were proud and aloof — or "arrogant," as observer after observer put it. More interested in the material advantages that they could get from Whitman than the ideas he had to offer, they were difficult to proselytize, and while they turned to agriculture, they did so on a limited scale without giving up the seasonal migrations of their traditional hunting-gathering lifestyle. Most crops were raised by women or slaves. Aggressive and upbeat, Whitman plunged ahead. Determined that others should accept his point of view, he used harsh discipline to enforce his will. Little wonder that the Cayuse grew increasingly disenchanted.

Nor was this the only source of trouble. Friction with Henry Spalding and the trouble-mongering of William Gray undercut Whitman's efforts, while Narcissa Whitman's growing disenchantment had its own corrosive effects. A devout, observant woman whose graceful writing reveals mission life as few other sources do, she threw herself into working with Indians who came to the mission and making the mission itself a model Christian home. But she lacked understanding of the Cayuse, indeed of any mentalities not her own. Lonely and frustrated, she became increasingly sharp-tongued, especially after the drowning of her two-year old daughter. Fear of Indians slowly grew in her, and forebodings of disaster bore her down. In the end, the forebodings proved justified; in 1847 the Cayuse, angered because Indian children treated by Whitman continued to die of smallpox, turned on the mission personnel and, in a fury, massacred them, bringing the mission to an end. The Whitmans quickly gained the status of martyrs — and in the process acquired more saintliness than ever they had possessed in real life.

In spite of all this, Whitman's work was important. During the winter of 1842-43, he made a desperate — and successful — trip to the East Coast to convince the American Board to reverse its order terminating the missions at Waiilatpu and Lapwai and to plead for American occupation of the region. He talked with government officials about the importance of Oregon Country and championed it to numerous audiences already afflicted with "Oregon Fever." On his return, he helped guide wagons of the Great Migration of 1843. William Gray, seizing on these events, wrote a popular history in which he described how Whitman "saved" Oregon for the United States; many a subsequent generation of elementary school children learned the story. Whitman did no such thing; of course; with or without him, the Pacific Northwest was falling inexorably into the hands of Americans.

But from Whitman's return in 1843 until his death in 1847 — that is, during the greatest years of overland migration to the Northwest — the mission, standing as it did beside the Oregon trail, was a key provisioning depot, rest station, and hospital extending help to needy immigrants pouring into the region. The mission also became a major marketplace for Indians who had cattle, horses, or produce to sell; coming from as far away as the Coeur d'Alene country, they found ready buyers among immigrants stopped at Whitman's mission. The American Board warned Whitman against this secularization, but he demurred, arguing that it was his Christian duty to help needy new arrivals.

In his last years, Whitman came to see his mission as lying in the path of "one of the onward movements of the world"; through it, he would encourage the emergence of a solid society of Christian settlers — like the Puritans, his would be "a city on a hill" that would serve as a light for all people, an example for emulation. The missionary had evolved into a visionary architect of a new society, a society in which Indians — Christian or not — had little place.

Whitman may not have "saved" Oregon for the United States, but he certainly made the path to its settlement far smoother than it would otherwise have been. And if he failed to make much progress in converting the Cayuse — or turning them into farmers — his work certainly served as an example of Christian devotion and charity carried out under the most difficult of circumstances. A room named in his honor is surely more than justified. Nor are we alone: Presbyterian historian Clifford Drury has noted that there are more monuments and memorials to the Whitmans than to any other American Protestant missionaries. And rightly so, he adds.