

THE WHITMAN MYTH

I make reference to the Whitman massacre in *Reflex Influence*, chapter 6, part 3, Missionary as Martyr, pages 287-8.

In 2017 I attended the reinstallation of six statues of famous Presbyterians at the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia. One of the six, the only missionary, was Marcus Whitman.

I was disappointed. I don't think Whitman was a great missionary. I can think of several Presbyterian missionaries whom I admire and would rather see there.

Yet Marcus Whitman has been a famous missionary. Visit a University library and you will probably find more biographies of Whitman than any other missionary. WorldCat lists at least 34 published biographies of Marcus and Narcissa Whitman (his wife), several have been reprinted numerous times, some for over a century. The last time I drove into Prattsburg, New York, I was greeted by a sign identifying the town as the birthplace of Narcissa (Prentiss) Whitman. Why are the Whitmans famous?

First, let's look at their missionary service. The ABCFM sent Marcus and Narcissa Whitman to the Indians of Oregon Territory in 1836. They established a mission to the Cayuse near the location of the modern city of Walla Walla. The story is told that the American Board contemplated closing the mission. So Whitman traveled overland to Boston to plead his case for the continuation of the mission, and he succeeded. In 1843 Whitman returned to the mission, leading or participating in a large wagon train that established the Oregon Trail. The Whitman Mission became a stop on the Oregon Trail. Whitman's ministry to settlers increased, as his ministry to the natives decreased. In 1847 the Indians killed the Whitmans and twelve other whiter settlers.

At the time of the massacre, the ABCFM through the *Missionary Herald* kept supporters informed as information reached them. However, the Board did not in any way direct special attention to the Whitmans. In the first 50 years of the Board's existence, the Board and its allies published at least 30 missionary biographies, along with 17 biographies of native converts and 11 biographies of mission executives. They chose to NOT produce a biography of the Whitmans.

The first biography of the Whitmans appeared 45 years after the massacre: *Marcus Whitman, M.D., the Pathfinder of the Pacific Northwest and Martyred Missionary of Oregon*, by Jonathan Edwards. As the title suggests, his missionary service was secondary to his role in opening up Oregon.

American historians were beginning to explore the frontier as a major theme in American History. In 1893 Frederick Jackson Turner published *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. Other historians soon followed his lead. That same year, journals and letters from the Whitmans' first journey to Oregon were published as *A Journey Across the Plains in 1836*. In 1895 two biographies were published which would go through many printings and continue to be available today: *The Story of Marcus Whitman*, by J. G. Craighead, and *How Marcus Whitman Saved Oregon*, by Thomas W. Nixon. That was the same year the statues at the Presbyterian Historical Society were commissioned. From 1902 to 1937 sixteen more biographies of the Whitmans were published, and in the 1960s six more.

The Whitmans were not model missionaries, as they came to identify more with the settlers and less with the Indians. This was probably a contributory cause of the massacre. The Whitmans do have an important place in the history of the settlement of the Northwest.