

In this contribution from Westerner Web Jones we are getting advance notice of a forthcoming book, probably to be titled *Oregon Hundred* and sure to do for Oregon bookmen (and booksellers) what the *Zamorano Eighty* did for Californians. The portion printed here, complete in itself, is a shortened version of the introduction to the book, now nearing completion, which will be a bibliography of Oregon's best and most readable books in the non-fiction field.

THE BOOKS OF OREGON HISTORY

By WEBSTER A. JONES

OREGON HISTORY DEVELOPED ON A HIGH PLANE OF DRAMA AND GRANDEUR—unique in all the movement of this nation westward to the Pacific Ocean.

The scene was magnificent. Fifteen hundred miles from west to east, from the lush rain-drenched forests above the surf of the Pacific, to the white, steel-like peaks of the Rocky Mountains. Fifteen hundred miles from north to south, from the shining lanP of lakes and dark wilderness to the adobe missions of the Franciscan padres.

Here was a land bigger than Europe. Here was a land of untold richness. Here was a land of stored-up resources which could feed and clothe and propel the world for centuries.

Drama and suspense came into the picture when the greatest nation on earth, at the beginning of its decades of world dominance as the British Empire, and the revolutionary new nation of the United States of America fenced and maneuvered for the Oregon country for 37 years. It is a singular turn of events that this nation in so short a time should become the successor to the British Empire in world leadership.

Within this drama of nations, played by diplomats and kings and presidents, there swirled in widening circles the episodes and plays of heroic men and women. No less dramatic, no less intense, no less productive were their works, their loves, their hatreds, their sacrifices.

Because of its greatness and because of the drama it created, the Oregon Country caught the interest of the best writers of America, Great Britain, France, and Germany, the great explorers of these nations, the top scientists of the world. And because of these factors, too, it drew the attention of the best minds of America. No area of Western America received so much attention from our national leaders for so long a period as the Oregon Country.

The Oregon Country was a land of conflict. Out of this conflict came great creativeness: a flood of wonderful books which are as absorbing now as the days they picture and the years in which they appeared. This is the gold of the Oregon Country, more vital,

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more endlessly fascinating, more wonderful than anything produced in that land or of that country, rich and beautiful as it is.

To your pleasure in studying and collecting in Oregon history, I dedicate this essay. My only real usefulness will be in helping to suggest avenues for your greater enjoyment. To me, the adventure of Oregon history has been one of a lifetime—and each year it holds me more and rewards me more. I hope that I can aid you to build platforms from which you can launch your own exploration of Oregon history. Remember, Oregon history is like olives or artichokes; it is a cultivated taste. Avoid Oregon history at all costs if you feel any bookman's weakness. Once you taste its richness and thrill to its dramas, you are a gone collector; and on the way to your most satisfying years of collecting.

Five factors stand out in a study of the books of Oregon history, or of any study of Oregon history itself.

First, are the conflicts we have generalized and which we will describe more fully later. No phase of Oregon history, no period, no activity failed to develop conflicts which brought out the best as well as the worst in the participants. But they produced great books. More about conflicts as we progress.

Second, is the influence of women on the course of Oregon history. In no other Western advancement did women control the destinies of the land as definitely as they did the Oregon Country. The Oregon migration was essentially a woman's movement. The growth of Oregon was mainly due to women because they set standards far above those of the earliest inhabitants, the mountain men. Women made Oregon into a frontier of homes and churches, of temperance leagues, of orderly progress. From the time Sacajawea helped Lewis and Clark through the mountains after they had abandoned their boats on the headwaters of the Missouri river, women never ceased to contribute immeasurably to Oregon's development. This was a woman's world transplanted into a wilderness. Women led in missionary work. Women made something out of this lonely land.

Third, the overwhelming sacrifices of the men who were the greatest champions of Oregon. Dr. Marcus Whitman, a great man by any standards, was tomahawked to death for the 11 years he devoted to improving the lot of Indians and immigrants in the Oregon Country. No man ever went through as searing a hell on earth as he in trying to keep his mission going despite the capricious opposition of the American Board in Boston which was influenced by Dr. Whitman's slandering enemies. John Floyd, Congressman from Virginia, was ridiculed as "Old Oregon," sneered at, laughed at for all his years in Congress, for his efforts to keep alive interest in Oregon through bills and reports in the House of Representatives which furnished field days of ridicule for the Eastern Representatives in Congress. Hall Jackson Kelley who did more than any other man to stimulate the emigrations to Oregon, the development of Oregon, and the interest in Oregon, was the object of the most knavish kind of ridicule, but he continued his work

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Fort Vancouver, as painted by Henry James Warre in 1845-46 and appearing in his *Sketches in North America and The Oregon Country* (London, 1848). (Courtesy The Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.)

for almost 50 years until engulfed by poverty and sickness and bitterness. President James K. Polk withstood the damning of powerful blocks of politicians in steering a sane course on Oregon. No president ever took more abuse over a present part of this nation than Polk. Nathaniel J. Wyeth, who sunk his own and his friends fortunes in the Oregon Country, and lost them all, was broken and reviled when he left Oregon. Dr. John McLoughlin, Chief Factor at Fort Vancouver for 22 years, ruling all the vast Oregon Country—the most able administrator in all its history—was attacked with savagery and brutality by the pioneers he had helped, so that his later years as a United States citizen were swamped in abuse and bitterness. Dr. Lewis Linn, Senator from Missouri, took ridicule for his championing the occupation of Oregon. Stephen A. Douglass bore the frontal attack of the Southern senators and their allies in making sure that Oregon would never be a slave country. The sacrifices of these men make dramatic the scenes in which they were the principal actors—and add to the depth of our interest in Oregon.

Fourth, the remarkable timing of the writing and production of books on the Oregon Country. In a period of 60 years from 1830 to 1890, from the first publication of Washington Irving's account of the Astor expedition in *Astoria*, to the Bancroft histories, the

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great period of books about Oregon burst into full bloom. The quality and quantity of that golden era has never been equalled. The significant works of the past 60 years have been few and widely separated, with the exception of a few scholarly works, such as James Christy Bell's *Opening a Highway to the Pacific*, the best study of the emigration to Oregon, in 1921, Hiram Chittenden's *The American Fur Trade*, in 1902, Harrison Clifford Dale's *The Ashley-Smith Explorations* in 1918, Clifford Merrill Drury's *Marcus Whitman, M.D. Pioneer and Martyr* in 1936, and Henry Harmon Spalding: *Pioneer of Old Oregon* in 1937, George W. Fuller's *A History of the Pacific Northwest* in 1931, William I. Marshall's *Acquisition of Oregon* in 1911, Lewis A. McArthur's *Oregon Geographic Names* in 1944, the magnificent biography of Dr. John McLoughlin by Dr. W. Kaye Lamb in the three volumes of *The Letters of John McLoughlin from Fort Vancouver* in 1941, 1943 and 1944, Dale I. Morgan's *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West* in 1953, Fred Wilbur Powell's *Hall Jackson Kelley, Prophet of Oregon* in 1917, and Dr. Oscar O. Winther's *The Old Oregon Country* in 1950. After the first sixty years of amazing vitality in writing worthwhile books,



The American Village, as painted by Henry James Warre as painted in 1845-46 and appearing in his *Sketches in North America and The Oregon Country* (London, 1848). (Courtesy The Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.)

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a lull set in which has been relieved only by few original works. It appears that the great age of Oregon books was finished in 1890. We would wish it to be otherwise; but we, as students and collectors, are grateful for the prolific golden era which gave us the grand story of Oregon as it emerged from wilderness.

And *fifth*, is the stature of women in the production of significant books on Oregon history. For example, in the *Oregon Hundred* (now in preparation), six are by women:

- ✓ 1. Mrs. Frances Fuller Victor's *History of Oregon* in the Bancroft series
- ✓ 2. Mrs. Victor's *River of the West*
- ✓ 3. Mrs. Victor's *Early Indian Wars of Oregon*
- ✓ 4. Narcissa Whitman's *Journal and Letters*
- ✓ 5. Mrs. Abigail J. Duniway's *Captain Gray's Company*
- ✓ 6. Miss A. J. Allen's *Ten Years in Oregon: Travels and Adventures of Dr. E. White and Lady West of the Rocky Mountains*.

Mrs. Francis Fuller Victor, who worked with Bancroft for 11 years and who is credited with six of his histories, undoubtedly is the greatest woman historian in America. She merits that standing both for the volume of her work (eight major histories), the care of her research, and the brightness of her prose. Time has proved the worth of her work and her amazing skill.

No record written by any woman in American history excells the humanity, the pathos, the drama in the journal and letters of Narcissa Whitman, first white woman to cross the plains, as she records the dreams and hopes for the Whitman mission. We see this remarkable woman mature before our eyes. Knowing her death is to come in the brutal murder of 1847—knowing that this is the story of a doomed woman—we are held by this tragic life as it unfolds in the most fascinating letters ever written by a woman in the West.

The five most important books on Oregon history—the most readable and the most significant, are the following, in the order named:

- ✓ 1. *Astoria* by Washington Irving. In my opinion the greatest book ever written on California was Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*. *Astoria* is the *Two Years Before the Mast* of Oregon history. After all these years (it was first published in 1836), and after all the historians have proved its inaccuracies, it still is bright and entertaining—and we get the same thrill out of reading it as we did 35 years ago. It is magnificent, beautiful, endlessly intriguing. We are entranced by Irving's prose.

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Astoria has been read by more persons than any other book on Oregon. The editions must be countless.

2. *A Day with a Cow Column* in 1843, by Jesse Applegate. This is a short essay on crossing the plains, the record of the day's activity in the wagon train, written in simple prose so directly and so warmly that it has become the most beautiful account ever penned of the migration to Oregon. It is a great human document of a great movement.
3. *History of Oregon* by Hubert Howe Bancroft. (Written by Mrs. Frances Fuller Victor.) Mrs. Fuller was a talented writer, as well as a careful researcher, so that this work moved easily and swiftly through all the turns of history, a wonderful job of organization and writing.
4. *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, edited by Reuben Gold Thwaites. The greatest exploration in the history of America was the Lewis and Clark expedi-



The Rocky Mountains from the Columbia River Looking Northwest, as painted by Henry James Warre in 1845-46 and appearing in his *Sketches in North America and The Oregon Country* (London, 1848). (Courtesy The Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.)

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Mount Hood from les Dalles, as painted by Henry James Warre in 1845-46 and appearing in his *Sketches in North America and The Oregon Country* (London, 1848). (Courtesy The Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.)

tion. No other work can equal in vitality the every-day reports of these two remarkable men. We learn to know them, their faults, their bad grammar, the haphazard spelling; we live with them and their adventures. We capture in their halting prose the zest and zeal of their advance, suffering with them, exulting with them. No other record of exploration gives quite the thrill that these original journals provide. To many of us, reading the original journals for the first time has been the most wonderful adventure we have had in all our reading and collecting in Western Americana.

- ✓ 5. *Recollections and Opinions of an Old Pioneer*, by Peter H. Burnett. This is an engaging and frank account of the emigration of 1843 and events in Oregon and California, of which Burnett was the first governor. It is told in the manner of the age, with good sportsmanship and a healthy joy in the special kind of humor loved by the pioneers. Burnett could laugh at himself when the joke was on him and when he had no shoes in his first years in Oregon. It has humility which makes it a great book as well as perhaps the brightest ever written on early Oregon.

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If this cream of Oregon books were to be 10 works, I would add to the five above the following:

6. *The Rocky Mountains*, by Washington Irving. Captain Bonneville's adventures in the West have almost as much pull and charm as Irving's *Astoria*. He writes of the fur trade with gusto and zest. Although Captain Bonneville's journeys and activities in the West actually were of much less importance than many others, Irving has made them far more interesting.
7. *Journal of a Trapper*, by Osborne Russell. This is by far the best narrative of fur trading and trapping in the Oregon Country. We are indebted to our good friend Lawton Kennedy for the finest printing of the book—a new edition published in 1955 by the Oregon Historical Society and the Champoeg Press.
8. *James Clyman, American Frontiersman*, edited by Charles L. Camp. This is the most forthright, ruggedly honest report on Oregon ever written. Clyman had the gift of creating an impressive narrative in the most simple language. It has a glowing vitality and veracity that makes it stand alone as an Oregon story of the years 1844 and 1845. He roamed all over the West, but almost half of his diaries cover his trip across the plains in 1844 and his observations in Oregon. The priceless original diaries and journal are at the Huntington Library as are many other Oregon high spots.
9. *Journal and Letters of Narcissa Whitman*. We have already talked about these above. They cover the years from 1836 when she began her journey to Oregon, the first white woman to cross the continent, to only a few days before she was killed by the Cayuse renegades at Waiilatpu near Walla Walla, Washington. Here is a poignant record of a beautiful and dedicated woman struggling with all the overpowering difficulties of the Oregon wilderness. It is perhaps the most moving story in all of Oregon history.
10. *Journal of Travels over the Rocky Mountains to the Mouth of the Columbia River*, by Joel Palmer. This is the most interesting and informative of all the Oregon Trail narratives. It is direct, simple, sparing of words, completely representative of the age and the people. It provides a little breath of Oregon Trail fever which we draw into our lungs like the pleasant aroma of a fine wine. It is a beautiful and stirring story—powerful because of the terseness and simplicity of Palmer's prose.