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The Legend of Marcus Whitman and the Transformation of the American Historical Profession

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This article explores the secularization of the American historical profession through the lens of an early twentieth-century historical controversy: the debunking of the legend that nineteenth-century missionary Marcus Whitman saved the Pacific Northwest from becoming a British possession. The Whitman controversy was a key skirmish in an ongoing, and still unresolved, debate about what constitutes right practices and ideations of history in the American academy, what counts as undue historical bias, and what place (if any) appeals to religion should have in academic historical discourse. Through the Whitman debate and other early twentieth-century historical battles, Protestant providential narratives of history were purged from academic textbooks and providential historians marginalized from the academy. Taking a cue from the evolutionary schemas of religious studies scholars, professional historians cast tales like the Whitman legend—and the providential narratives that undergirded them—as primitive myths unfit for a modernizing society. The Whitman controversy thus serves as a case study into the American historical profession's transformation at the turn of the twentieth century, a transformation that remains contested and incomplete.

IN 1900, Edward Gaylord Bourne, an accomplished Yale historian, stood before the members of the American Historical Association (AHA) at their annual meeting and prepared to speak. The audience had come to hear what promised to be the "sensational" paper of the conference: a talk that Bourne had provocatively titled "The Legend of Marcus Whitman."[1] In it, Bourne intended nothing less than to prove that the established history of a national hero, the "Paul Revere of Oregon, the missionary who saved three

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[1] F. H. Hodder, "The Marcus Whitman Legend," *Dial* 32 (1 January 1902): 40.

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States to the American Union," was in fact not history at all, but myth.[2] Rarely do academic conferences offer such representative moments of transformation in the history of thought, yet this might well be marked as one. In his AHA speech, Bourne upended an oft-told story about a singular man. This unto itself was not unusual; historians had been exploring the truth and falsity of biography since Petrarch. What made Bourne's talk so memorable to those who were present, and so meaningful for this retrospective review, were the specific terms by which Bourne corrected the story. He corrected facts, yes. But even more, he corrected the providence he saw inlaid in the story.

The so-called Whitman controversy was not a simple matter of amending an inaccurate historical record or even of removing one of American history's beloved patriotic fictions from historical memory. It was a key skirmish in an ongoing, and still unresolved, debate about what constitutes right practices and ideations of history in the American academy, what counts as undue historical bias, and what place (if any) appeals to religion should have in academic historical discourse. By 1918, the *New Catholic Review* observed that the Whitman legend had been all but stricken from school textbooks. "The fascinating story of Marcus Whitman's saving Oregon to the United States has passed into the region of fable where it belongs," it stated.[3] The controversies surrounding the disappearing legend of Marcus Whitman demonstrate the powerful interplay between the developing disciplines of history and religious studies in shaping the moral and theoretical connotations of myth. Occurring right at the dawn of the professionalization of U.S. history, the Whitman debate presages both future critiques of scientific history, particularly of the new history's reliance on racial pseudoscience and suspicion of oral history, and future battles over the role of providential history in the twenty-first century, as amateur providential historians seek to restore the rightful place of providence in school textbooks and public historical discourse. Which is all to say that, although few outside of the Pacific Northwest remember Marcus Whitman today, we still are debating many of the same concerns about the nature of our remembrance.

The Whitman controversy was emblematic of a profound shift in the American historical profession. Until the turn of the twentieth century, American history research and writing was governed by providential history, a mode of historical research and writing that recognized the Christian God as a key actor and cause in world events, was grounded upon the testimonies

[2]"Address of Rev. Charles L. Thompson, D.D.," *The Church at Home and Abroad* 19, no. 112 (April 1896): 304. First delivered at a home missions rally at Carnegie Hall, New York on March 3, 1896.

[3]Martina Johnston, "The Growth of a Modern Myth," *New Catholic World: A Monthly Magazine of General Literature and Science* 107 (August 1918): 637.

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of respected eyewitnesses, and often served as a tool to aid in sectarian debates. The professionalization of academic history, however, engendered a new mode of historical thought: scientific history. Scientific historians adapted the methods of the natural sciences in order to produce historical work that was, in theory, objective and empirically verifiable. These new methods precluded theological musings and appeals to divine will, eschewed oral history in favor of documentary evidence, and emphasized performative neutrality over sectarian conflicts. While the legend of Marcus Whitman had been enshrined by providential history, scientific history would provide the means for the Whitman legend's dethroning.

The Whitman controversy may thus appear to be yet another tale of a twentieth-century secularization project[4], but the relationship between providentialism and secularism was far more complicated than it may at first seem. Scientific history was predicated on the rejection of providential history, but it also depended on providential history's racial and moral teleologies to provide it with its persuasive weight. Early scientific historians relied heavily on paradigms of racial and religious evolution, drawn from the emergent disciplines of anthropology and comparative religion, to argue that providential history was unfit for a modern, scientific age. While scientific historians believed these evolutionary paradigms were recent innovations in academic scholarship, they actually followed the contours of earlier providential narratives of progress almost exactly. Moreover, many secularizers did not seek to destroy the primacy of Protestantism in the United States; rather, as committed Protestants themselves, they believed that embracing scientific history was necessary in order to preserve Protestantism's influence.[5] American Protestantism could only survive, they believed, if it adapted to the conditions of modernity, which required an empirically accurate history purged of any mythical and pious accretions from earlier ages.

Neither the debunking of the Whitman story nor the secularization of academic history went uncontested. Even as scholars like Bourne built their careers on disproving the Whitman story and similar pious tales, other scholars resisted the new historical methods and fought to defend the story of Whitman's ride in its legendary idiom and the historical methods its mythic affect exemplified.

[4]By using the language of secularization projects, I follow scholars, including Christian Smith and Talal Asad, who argue that rather than being a natural process of societal evolution, the secularization of modern societies has been brought about by power struggles between particular groups seeking particular ends, and thus has continued to be contested, multivalent, and incomplete. See Christian Smith, preface to *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 37; and Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), 25.

[5]Thompson Coit Elliott to Edwin Eells, 24 December 1907, box 5, folder 1, Thompson Coit Elliott Papers, 1903–1907, Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland, Oreg.

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Providential historians critiqued the methods and underlying assumptions of the new scientific history, particularly its depiction of oral histories and providential interpretations as products of an earlier stage of cultural evolution. Yet, while they eschewed the methodological and ideological frameworks of scientific history, they also utilized scientific historical techniques to prove that the Whitman legend was based on legitimate historical evidence, and to argue that scientific historians were inappropriately biased against providential interpretations. Ironically, then, providentialists adopted some of the methods of scientific history while rejecting its underlying principles. Providential historians did not, and do not, eschew archive and empirical argument. They argue only that there is meaning in the story imbued by greater powers than the reasoned hands of history. That providential historians are marginalized from the professional landscape of academic history is not a sign to them that they are not rightly historical. Rather, this marginalization is simply continuing evidence that the truth of legends has yet to be fully understood. Understanding the interplay between providential pasts and present historical science will illuminate the ongoing tug of war about the nature of facts and the place of myth in discussions of the American past.

I. The Whitman Story and Providential History

Marcus Whitman's legend is little known today, due in no small part to the success of Bourne's work. In 1842, Whitman, a Protestant missionary to the Cayuse people of Oregon Territory, allegedly discovered a plot by British Hudson's Bay Company traders and French-Canadian Jesuit priests to gain full possession of Oregon Territory. The colluders planned to trick U.S. President John Tyler and Secretary of State Daniel Webster into signing a treaty that would trade Oregon Territory (which then encompassed most of the Pacific Northwest) for a cod fishery in Newfoundland. At the same time, the British planned to secretly bring an emigration of French-Canadian Catholics to Oregon, ensuring British primacy in the region. Legend has it that Whitman raced from Oregon to Washington, D.C. on horseback in the dead of winter, arriving just in time to convince Tyler not to sign the treaty. Then, to prove Oregon's viability for American settlement, Whitman organized and piloted the first large wagon train of Anglo-Americans to Oregon Territory, ensuring American possession of what would become the states of Oregon, Washington, and Idaho.[6] The British never forgave

[6]The first organized Anglo-American emigration to Oregon occurred a year prior, in 1842, but encompassed only 112 migrants. The Emigration of 1843, by contrast, was comprised of 120 wagons and an estimated 875 emigrants: Stephen E. Woodworth, *Manifest Destinies: America's Westward Expansion and the Road to the Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2011), 64, 73.

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Whitman for the loss of Oregon, and in 1847, they incited several Cayuse men to kill Whitman, his wife Narcissa, and eleven other Americans in the so-called "Whitman Massacre." Whitman, in short, ensured U.S. possession of more than three states' worth of territory, and in the process of doing so, died a martyr to Christian American civilization.

At least, that's the story that most Americans knew in 1900. Thanks to the efforts of Whitman's surviving missionary companions, enterprising Pacific Northwest boosters, and well-connected Gilded Age philanthropists, the Whitman legend had spread across the nation, beyond its original audiences of Pacific Northwesterners and Reformed Protestants. The U.S. Senate printed a history documenting Whitman's heroism in 1871.[7] A college in Washington State was founded in Whitman's name.[8] In the 1880s, Pacific Northwest regional historians, including Elwood Evans and Frances Fuller Victor, had attempted to debunk the story, but their thorough research made little impact in the story's spread.[9] By the 1890s, commemorations of the fiftieth anniversary of Whitman's death stretched from Washington State, where a marble monument was erected over Whitman's grave, to Washington, D.C., where Supreme Court Justice David Josiah Brewer lauded Whitman as the "missionary who saved to the United States the great northwest."[10] *Ladies' Home Journal* published a handsomely illustrated feature on how "Dr. Whitman Added Three Stars to Our Flag."[11] "Every American is aware of the great ride of Marcus Whitman," declared a reporter for the *Atlanta Constitution* in 1895.[12]

The Whitman saved Oregon story had been handed down from Whitman's own missionary colleagues and other early Pacific Northwest settlers, who had certified the tale with their sworn testimonies. Bolstered by these trustworthy eyewitnesses, the Whitman tale had not only received popular acclaim, it had also been adopted and retold by lay and professional church historians who were enamored with the way the story so aptly symbolized God's providential guidance of American history. Rev. J. W. Bashford,

[7]U.S. Congress, S. Comm. on Indian Affairs, *Letter from the Secretary of the Interior, Communicating, in Compliance with the Resolution of the Senate of the 2*nd *Instant, Information in Relation to the Early Labors of the Missionaries of the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions in Oregon, Commencing in 1836*, 41st Cong., 3rd sess. (February 9, 1871).

[8]Whitman College in Walla Walla, Wash.

[9]Frances Fuller Victor, "Did Dr. Whitman Save Oregon?" *Astorian*, 6 March 1881, 1; Elwood Evans to Charles H. Phelps, editor of the *Californian*, draft, 19 November 1880, box 3, folder 1, Elwood Evans Papers, William Winlock Miller Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven, Conn.

[10]"Laud Whitman's Deed: Services in Memory of the Pioneer Missionary," *Washington Post*, 29 November 1897, 2.

[11]George Ludington Weed, "When Dr. Whitman Added Three Stars to Our Flag: How Oregon Was Saved for the Union," *Ladies' Home Journal*, 14, no. 12 (November 1897): 9.

[12]"The Walla Walla Massacre," *Atlanta Constitution*, 10 November 1895, 2.

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president of Ohio Wesleyan University, proclaimed: "A territory larger than all New England . . . saved to our government by the missionary enterprise is God's way of saying to the Christians of the nineteenth century, 'A hundred fold in this world and in the world to come eternal life.'"[13] Philosophy professor D. S. Gregory and publisher I. K. Funk wrote for the *Homiletic Review*: "The providence that saved us Oregon is as striking as that which kept California from falling into the hands of the Spanish Jesuits."[14] Church historian Williston Walker was more retrospect, but still described Whitman as having "prevented the possible abandonment of this valuable region to Great Britain" and then "died a martyr."[15] For Richard Salter Storrs, a Congregationalist minister, church historian, and 1896 President of the American Historical Association, Whitman's winning of the Pacific Northwest was one thread in a historical tapestry collectively demonstrating that "every power that stands against the Gospel has to go down."[16] Whitman was not just a hero of American church history, he was one of its most instructive object lessons in how God used human actors to further the work of salvation through the extension of American territory and power. In other words, Whitman was a star of nineteenth-century American history not in spite of his Christian commitment but because of it.

Whitman's story spread for many reasons: it was an exciting adventure tale; it played on white Protestant suspicions of foreigners, Native Americans, and Catholics; and it could be easily adapted by Western boosters for promotional purposes. But these factors only explain the tale's popular interest not its embrace by historians. In order to understand the significance of the Whitman story for the American historical profession, it is necessary to understand the dominant methodology of nineteenth-century historians: that of providential history.

Nineteenth-century providential historians did many kinds of work that would be recognizable to historians today: they amassed archives of historical material, they interpreted historical events, and they created formal and informal networks through which they evaluated one another's work. They differed from later historians, however, in their overt commitment to particular theological principles: that God acted in human history and that human history could (and should) serve as a means of understanding God's will. As providential historian Hollis Reade argued: "History, when rightly

[13] J. W. Bashford, "A Romance of Modern Missions," *Missionary Review of the World* 1, no. 8 (August 1888): 569.

[14] "The Saving of Oregon Territory," Editorial Notes, *Homiletic Review* 35, no. 1 (January 1898): 96.

[15] Williston Walker, *A History of the Congregational Churches in the United States*, American Church History Series (New York: Christian Literature, 1894), 377–378.

[16] "Address of President R. S. Storrs, D.D., LLD.," *The Independent*, 24 October 1895, 16.

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written, is but a record of providence; and he who would read history rightly, must read it with his eye constantly fixed on the hand of God. Every change, every revolution in human affairs is, in the mind of God, a movement to the consummation of the great work of redemption."[17] Thus, for providential historians, appealing to divine will was not only an acceptable methodological move, it was also a theological imperative. Understanding the direction in which God was moving in history would not only help the providential historian understand history, it would also give the historian insight into God's larger plan of redemption. For providential historians, this plan was clear: Protestant America served a vital role in world redemption history, so the prosperity of the United States was coextensive with the progress of the work of God.[18] Protestant figures like Marcus Whitman served as divinely ordained heroes of church and state, their religious labor considered patriotic labor and vice versa. Those outside the Protestant fold, meanwhile, either served as enemies of the progress of Christian civilization or as backward peoples awaiting the tutelage of Protestant leaders.

The Whitman story was only one of the tales that academic historians sought to debunk as they began to stake their claim to professional authority, alongside doctors, lawyers, and academics in other fields. Popular myths like that of George Washington and the cherry tree, Paul Revere's midnight ride, and Columbus's "discovery" of America also served as sites of conflict between old and new history, between the romantic and moralistic narratives of the nineteenth century and the emerging "scientific" history of the twentieth.[19] The Whitman legend stands out among these, however, because it was so closely intertwined with sectarian, moralist, and overtly theological elements that the new generation of historians eschewed. Unlike Paul Revere or George Washington, Whitman's heroism was intrinsically linked to his status as a missionary. The Whitman story's appeal depended on listeners'

[17]Hollis Read, *The Hand of God in History: Or, Divine Providence Historically Illustrated in the Extension and Establishment of Christianity* (Hartford: H. E. Robbins, 1855), iv.

[18]While historians of many backgrounds wrote with providential commitments in mind, the providential history of the nineteenth century was overwhelmingly Protestant. This is not because people of other religions did not write providential history; Catholics, for instance, had their own forms of providentialism. However, Protestants had greater access to civic and institutional authority as well as means of publication, and American Catholic providentialists often formed their arguments in reaction to Protestant formulations. See Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 345; Jay Dolan, *In Search of an American Catholicism: A History of Religion and Culture in Tension* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 67–69; and Henry Warner Bowden, *Church History in the Age of Science: Historiographical Patterns in the United States, 1876–1918* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971).

[19]"The Midnight Ride Paul Revere Didn't Take," *Detroit Free Press*, 2 December 1908, 4; and Joseph Rodman, "The Hatchet and the Cherry-Tree: The First Printed Version," *Critic* 44, no. 2 (February 1904), 116.

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assumptions that the projects of Christianization and American expansion were coextensive, that missionary labor was also patriotic labor.[20] It also depended on the conviction that missionaries were trustworthy historians and that their testimony should be given equal or greater weight than documentary evidence. The Whitman story thus represented a particular mode of historical work and understanding that the new historians sought to eliminate from respectable historical discourse.

II. Scientific History and the Making of Myths

The Whitman legend's dual features—its basis in oral testimony and its reliance on a providential explanatory framework—are what made it a prime target for the growing ranks of academic historians in the United States. Even as the Whitman story reached its greatest fame in the 1890s, the American historical profession was transforming in ways that would lead to the story's downfall.

Beginning in the 1880s, a new class of university-based professional historians had adopted "scientific" methods of doing history, methods that promised to bring American history into a new era of modernity and accuracy while culling the romantic and pious fictions of an earlier age. Primary source evidence, rather than oral history or eyewitness testimony, became the gold standard for historical proof; objectivity, rather than moralism, romanticism, or sectarianism, became the standard effect of historical narrative; and evolutionary theories of race and religion usurped providential design as historians' primary working teleology and undergirding morality.[21]

The professionalization of historical practice occurred alongside, and was intimately related to, American history's secularization. Secularization is a contested and multivalent term: scholars have posited it as a project closely related to the politics of the nation-state, as a process by which the expansion of science marginalizes religion, and as a further entrenching of (albeit hidden) Protestantism.[22] The secularization of the American historical profession, however, entailed more specific shifts in methodology, ideology, and tone than

[20]William Warren, *These for Those: Our Indebtedness to Foreign Missions; Or, What We Get for What We Owe* (Portland, Maine: Hoyt, Fogg, and Breed, 1870), 154–157; and Bashford, "Romance of Modern Missions," 571.

[21]Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 32–34; and Robert Townsend, *History's Babel: Scholarship, Professionalization, and the Historical Enterprise in the United States, 1880–1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 13–18.

[22]For instance, Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular*; Christian Smith, *The Secular Revolution*; and Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007).

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these definitions encapsulate, and thus, requires a definition specific to the conditions of that discipline. Three overlapping projects marked the secularization of American history: (1) the removal of overtly sectarian language from academic historical narratives, (2) the abandonment of overt appeals to divine intervention in historical affairs, and (3) professional historians' self-conscious embrace of an attitude of objectivity and scientific realism over what they deemed to be myth, superstition, and bias. These three projects were not always neatly sequential or given equal emphasis, but each component invariably occurred as historians sought to forge a coherent academic discipline from a widespread, diffuse populist practice.

Both history's professionalization and its secularization, then, were dependent, in part, on the notion of objectivity: a conviction that the past was an objective reality that could be revealed through following particular methods of inquiry that, as in the natural sciences, would reveal conclusions that were verifiable and unbiased. The scientific historian was to act as "a neutral, or disinterested, judge," as historian Peter Novick writes in his history of the American historical profession, and "must never degenerate into that of advocate or, even worse, propagandist."[23] According to this vision of the historian's craft, obvious appeals to providence and celebrations of the triumph of Christianity were biased, polemical, or simply intellectually lazy. As a critic for the *American Historical Review* wrote of providential historian and Whitman defender William Augustus Mowry's work: "Dr. Mowry regards our territorial acquisitions as a series of special providences and upon this theory contents himself with the externals of negotiation without making any attempt to present the underlying causes."[24] For the reviewer, Mowry's failure to properly examine historical causes was directly related to his reliance on providentialism as an explanatory method. Appeals to providence masked the "real," scientifically discoverable causes of historical events in favor of appeal to an unprovable divine will.

The Whitman story's authority rested on precisely the historical assumptions that scientific and secularizing historians sought to eliminate. It rested almost solely on oral testimony, not documentary evidence. Worse, the eyewitnesses who first circulated the story were embedded in vehement sectarian conflict and their accounts were openly partisan. Furthermore, the story's improbable gaps depended on historians' trust that Providence had guided and enabled Whitman's near-miraculous and highly unlikely deeds. Privately, many professional historians had doubted the Whitman legend for years, but they

[23]Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 2.

[24]F. H. H., review of *The Territorial Growth of the United States*, by William A. Mowry, *American Historical Review* 8, no. 3 (April 1903): 561.

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were hesitant to raise their concerns because of the story's beloved status.[25] Bourne's AHA address would make this doubt—and the methodological, teleological, and moral assumptions that underlay it—public. In so doing, he would imbue this debunking project with a moral energy that would enable other historians to publicly denounce the story as well.

Bourne began his paper by establishing how legends typically functioned in modern America: as ways of filling gaps in documentary evidence or of embellishing true histories "with the foliage of picturesque incident or winged words." The story of Marcus Whitman, however, was different. In Bourne's words, it was a "complete legendary reconstruction of history," the likes of which, he claimed, had not been seen since the Middle Ages.[26] Bourne's talk was not just critical; it was condemnatory. In it, he explained that the tale of Marcus Whitman, celebrated by statues and sermons, printed in textbooks and encyclopedias, and extolled only four years earlier by a previous president of American Historical Association, was false. It was, Bourne claimed, "not only without trustworthy contemporary evidence, but . . . irreconcilable with well established facts."[27] Bourne demonstrated through the use of primary documents that Whitman's ride of 1842–1843 had nothing to do with saving Oregon and that the story of Whitman's ride was nothing more than an "invention" by one of Whitman's missionary colleagues, Henry Harmon Spalding.[28] "The results of this investigation will come to many as a shock," Bourne acknowledged.[29] But his intent was clear: the profession of history had to have no loyalties to myth, nostalgia, or heroism. It had to be loyal only to the scientific production of narrative truth.

Bourne's conclusions were not different from what a small number of lesser-known historians had been arguing since the 1880s. His work, in fact, was nearly entirely drawn from previous research by regional historians Elwood Evans and Frances Fuller Victor, Chicago school principal and insistent debunker William Isaac Marshall, and Bourne's own student Arthur Hutchinson, all of whom he dutifully cited. What Bourne did that others had not was to raise the academic and moral stakes by depicting the Whitman story as a modern-day myth, with all of the connotations of primitiveness that such a designation entailed.

[25]William I. Marshall, "Marcus Whitman: A Discussion of Professor Bourne's Paper," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1900* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1901), 1:230–231.

[26]Edward Gaylord Bourne, "The Legend of Marcus Whitman," *American Historical Review* 6, no. 2 (January 1901): 276.

[27]Ibid., 277.

[28]Ibid., 288.

[29]Ibid., 296.

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In naming the Whitman legend as a myth, Bourne deliberately invoked the language of comparative religion, a field that he had followed with great interest during his career. Bourne's work as a co-editor of the *Yale Review* brought him in contact with a wider network of professionalizing disciplines, including not only comparative religion but also economics, sociology, literature, and anthropology. Like many of his colleagues, Bourne was fascinated by theories of the evolution of civilizations, and he was convinced that Anglo-Americans were among the most evolved of the races. He was particularly interested in comparative religionists' theories of the development of myth among primitive peoples, which he called a "fascinating study."[30] In one article for the *Yale Review*, Bourne compared the theories of Andrew Lang and Max Müller on the evolution of primitive myths and summarized Lang's theory, which he believed was convincing and "likely to gain more and more assent" from scholars.[31] According to Bourne's reading of his work, Lang argued that, if several far-flung cultures shared a similar myth, "such a tale was invented either separately or in one place in a period of barbarism not unlike that of the Bushmen."[32] More advanced cultures would remove "some of its crudities," whereas less advanced cultures would retain the myth in more or less its original form.[33] Myths, in other words, were holdovers from a more primitive state of civilization, one that could still be found in contemporary "savage" societies. Bourne's understanding of myths as constructs of primitive societies would come to play an important role in his debunking of the Whitman tale.

Bourne was also deeply committed to the new scientific history, particularly its emphasis on investigation of original sources.[34] This conviction, too, was shaped by advances in the study of religion, namely, the method of studying the Bible known as "higher criticism." Bourne discussed the importance of higher criticism in an essay on the nineteenth-century German historian Leopold von Ranke, commonly considered to be the founder of the modern historical profession. Bourne depicted Ranke's first foray into the study of original sources in strikingly religious terms, stating that Ranke's first encounter with ancient Roman biography was much like when "[Martin] Luther saw and read his first Bible at Erfurt."[35] Bourne made his name as a historian by applying higher criticism to earlier historical studies in order to

[30]Edward Gaylord Bourne, "Some Recent Books on Folk Lore," *New Englander and Yale Review* 11 (September 1887): 167.

[31]Ibid., 171.

[32]Ibid.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Edward Gaylord Bourne, "Method of Historical Study," *New Englander and Yale Review* 9 (November 1886): 925.

[35]Edward Gaylord Bourne, "Leopold Von Ranke," in *Essays in Historical Criticism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), 245–276, 248.

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locate errors or identify hidden contexts.[36] Bourne's work was highly praised by others in the historical community who hoped that his work would help to prove the worth of the historical methods to skeptics, especially the religious conservatives who resented the application of higher criticism to the Bible. Andrew C. McLaughlin of the University of Michigan, for instance, wrote that Bourne's source criticism of George Bancroft's *Martin Van Buren to the End of His Public Career* was "very interesting and clever. I hope it will teach ecclesiastical obstructionists a lesson."[37]

Bourne's interest in higher criticism was bolstered by his distrust in oral testimony. The Whitman story's narrative was based almost entirely on oral testimonies taken decades after Whitman's ride. Previous historians had accepted the testimonies largely on the basis of the witnesses' reputation: they were mostly missionaries and early Oregon luminaries, all of whom could be assumed to be honest people. As Whitman debunker William Marshall admitted: "I first heard the 'Whitman Saved Oregon' fable, in 1877, and, though it by no means agreed with my previous notions of Oregon history, I accepted it as at least substantially true, solely because it was told and endorsed by missionaries."[38] Scientific historians were far less trusting of oral testimony. They suggested that some eyewitnesses might lie or at least exaggerate. But even testimony honestly given, they believed, was compromised by the "fallibility of the human memory," the "subtle influence on the mind of suggestion," and the "misinterpretation of the evidence owing either to ignorance or [religious] bias."[39] As Bourne wrote in a review essay on historical methods: "Historical critics tell us that tradition ceases to be trustworthy after it has passed through more than two hands."[40]

The Whitman story was thus almost wholly founded on a form of evidence that scientific historians found faulty, and as such, it shared more characteristics with primitive myths than with modern history. These two conclusions would fuel Bourne's debunking of the Whitman legend, and grant the debunking its ideological power.

As Bourne argued, the Whitman story was an aberration, a holdover from an earlier era; it "call[ed] to mind the Donation of Constantine or the story of William Tell."[41] The mention of the Donation of Constantine is significant. While Bourne often spoke highly of Spanish Catholic colonialism as a

[36]Edward Gaylord Bourne, "Bancroft's Life of Van Buren," *Christian Register*, 17 December 1891.

[37]Andrew C. McLaughlin to Bourne, Ann Arbor, Mich., 11 January 1892, box 1, folder 7, Bourne Papers, Yale University Library Manuscripts and Archives, New Haven, Conn.

[38]Marshall to G. H. [George Henry] Himes, 24 August 1888, box 1, folder 2, George H. Himes Papers, Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland, Oreg.

[39]Bourne, "The Legend of Marcus Whitman," in *Essays in Historical Criticism*, 8.

[40]Bourne, "Method of Historical Study," 927.

[41]Bourne, "Legend of Marcus Whitman," *American Historical Review*, 276.

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civilizing force, he nevertheless looked to pre-Reformation Europe for analogues to the Whitman story.[42] Even as scientific historians attempted to craft histories that were not shaped by sectarian commitments, Catholicism served as a hidden term for distinguishing naive or willfully ignorant superstition from modern scientific history. It is telling that historians on both sides of the debate depicted the Whitman myth busting as "iconoclasm," for the scientific historians saw their work as a kind of Protestant Reformation of the historical profession, a stripping away of layers of tradition in order to get back to the original, and supreme, text.[43] While their critics wondered, with Whitman supporter Samuel Clarke, if the scientific historians "are all infidels and hate the church and its missionaries," scientific historians saw their labor as strengthening Christianity by purifying its history according to the demands of the new scholarship.[44]

For Bourne, the Whitman story was troubling because it upended typical narratives of historical progress. It had not emerged in a primitive era but in "the latter half of the nineteenth century in the United States."[45] It had not emerged over centuries but in a period of just a few decades. Most concerning for Bourne, however, was that the Whitman legend had spread so thoroughly in a modern era "abounding with documents."[46] Bourne thus cast his critique of the Whitman story in moral terms:

> To trace the steps by which the imaginative reconstruction of this transaction, strangely distorting the relative significance of men and events, has slowly but steadily pushed aside the truth, until it has invaded not only the text-books but the works of historians whose reputation gives their utterances a certain authority, would give every one a new idea of the pervasive and subtle power of the legendary faculty of the human mind and of the need for unceasing critical vigilance.[47]

Bourne argued that the Whitman story served as a lesson to historians and their readers: Americans must not take their advanced state of civilization for granted; they must constantly be on guard against primitive and medieval

[42]Edward Gaylord Bourne, *The American Nation Series*, vol. 3, *Spain in America: 1450–1580*, American Nation Series, ed. Albert Bushnell Hart (New York: Harper, 1904), 306.

[43]For instance: "History's Iconoclasts," *Seattle Mail and Herald*, 14 December 1901, box I, Marcus and Narcissa Whitman Collection, Whitman College and Northwest Archives, Walla Walla, Wash. (hereafter cited as Whitman Collection); H. J. Haskell, "Myths of American History," *Independent*, 5 July 1906, 31; "Marcus Whitman," *Independent*, 29 November 1909, 1206; "The Whitman Controversy," *Independent*, 3 February 1910, 275; and C. H. Howard, "Not a Legend," *Interior*, 14 February 1901, 201.

[44]S. A. Clark to William A. Mowry, 8 November 1902, box E, Whitman Collection; and T. C. Elliot to Edwin Eells, 24 December 1907, box 5, folder 1, Thompson Coit Elliot Papers.

[45]Bourne, "Legend of Marcus Whitman," *American Historical Review*, 276.

[46]Bourne, "Legend of Marcus Whitman," in *Essays in Historical Criticism*, 5.

[47]Bourne, "Legend of Marcus Whitman,“ *American Historical Review*, 276.

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impulses toward mythologizing. "Studying the sources is not easy," Bourne conceded. Deciphering these "lonely springs in a barren desert" requires careful analysis grounded in familiarity with high-quality secondary scholarship.[48] But this lonely labor is the only protection against "the abiding prevalence of the uncritical spirit in a supposedly skeptical age."[49] The era of modern scholarship depended on the expulsion of myths.

Bourne thus placed the Whitman story within a new teleology of progress, one that owed much to earlier providential narratives even as it repudiated them for their reliance on unsound history. This teleology, for all its celebration of the triumph of science over superstition, was still broadly Protestant in its convictions. Rather than rejecting Protestant frameworks entirely, Bourne combined a Protestant concern for moral progress with the racial and religious science of his day.

III. Scientific Providentialism

"American Historical Society Makes an Exposure," ran the cover of the *Los Angeles Times* the day after Bourne presented his work. "It looks as though many pages printed in American histories concerning the exploits of Marcus Whitman . . . will have to be torn out," it stated.[50] "Everyone thinks he knows how Dr. Whitman undertook a perilous journey across the Rocky Mountains in 1842," noted *The Dial.* "A striking paper by Edward G. Bourne of Yale University . . . proved that this story is not only inaccurate in its details but unfounded in its main outlines."[51] Journalists not only accepted Bourne's conclusions, they also adopted Bourne's teleology. The implicit racial and religious categorizations of Bourne's paper became more explicit in media reports. "The hero worshiper of today must yield to the spirit of modern history, which with the other sciences has laid aside the careless bungling medieval methods, and builds its monuments of fame on the foundations of truth, not on legends," wrote journalist Alice Carman.[52] Carman's article demonstrated the extent to which the sensibilities that drove

[48]Bourne, "Method of Historical Study," 929.

[49]Bourne, "Legend of Marcus Whitman," in *Essays in Historical Criticism*, 6.

[50]"American Historical Society Makes an Exposure," *Los Angeles Times*, 29 December 1900, 14. See also "Now Deny That Marcus Whitman Saved Oregon," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 29 December 1900, 2; "Ride of Dr. Whitman; Story of How He Saved Oregon Called a Mere Legend . . . Proofs that There Is No Truth in It," *The Washington Post*, 17 March 1901, 27.

[51]"The Marcus Whitman Legend," *Dial* 32, no. 374 (16 January 1902), 40.

[52]Alice Carman, "The Whitman Myth," clipping from an unknown newspaper, box E, Whitman Collection; see also Ripley Hitchcock, "The Whitman Legend: Another Revival of a Curious Myth Concerning the Early Days of Oregon," *New York Times*, 28 September 1901, BR1; "Another Page to Be Rewritten," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 1 January 1901, 4; and "Whitman's Real Foes," *Oregonian* (Portland, Ore.), 6 October 1901, 4.

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Bourne's and Marshall's critiques of the Whitman story had permeated the popular press, which translated the new notions of progress for a mainstream audience.

Though many were persuaded by Bourne's arguments, not all Whitman devotees were ready to erase Whitman's ride from their histories. But those who supported the Whitman story realized that a public rebuttal was urgently needed. Whitman's supporters understood that the new methods of disproving the Whitman legend were influenced by scholarly work on myth. As one author wrote for the *Chicago Advance*: "Some of our younger historians are nothing if not critical. They hate legends. . . . Their principal canon of criticism seems to be that any striking story which appeals to the romantic in human nature . . . must be of 'such stuff as dreams are made on,' and they have no rest in their critical souls until they have traced such stories back to that fire mist of imagination from which legends are evolved."[53] For the supporters of the Whitman story, the skepticism of the new history posed a serious threat not just to the old historical regime but to Christianity itself. The story's supporters knew that much of the Bible had been drawn from oral tradition. They thus worried that the new history's skeptical posture toward oral history posed a danger to biblical authority, which was already under siege from other fronts. The editors of the *Homiletic* expressed the stakes starkly: "Professor Bourne's demand for original documents of contemporary data would demolish much of well-grounded history, including Biblical," they warned.[54] For Whitman's supporters, there was no Christianity without providentialism.

Providentialists recognized the need to provide a scholarly counter-narrative to Bourne's debunking. Shortly after the AHA meeting, providential historian William Mowry reached out to Myron Eells, son of Whitman's colleague Cushing Eells, missionary to the Twana people of Skokomish, Washington and respected amateur anthropologist and historian. "The friends of Dr. Whitman must surely rally and present the evidence that the truth gives for the great work which he did," Mowry entreated. "Unless this evidence is presented the public inevitably will be obliged to lean the other way."[55] As an established academic, committed providential historian, and lifelong Pacific Northwesterner whose father had known Whitman personally, Eells was uniquely well positioned for this work. He had earned his Master of Divinity from Hartford Theological Seminary, where he attended lectures by providentialist scholars including Philip Schaff, founder of the American

[53]"Religious World: The Legend of Marcus Whitman," *Chicago Advance*, 17 Jauary 1901, 75.

[54]I. K. Funk and D. S. Gregory, editors' introduction, "How Oregon Was Saved to the United States," *Homiletic* 14 (July– December 1901), 21.

[55]William A. Mowry to Myron Eells, 11 February 1901, box E, Whitman Collection.

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Society of Church History.[56] Like Schaff, Eells believed that providentialism was essential to scholarly objectivity. While Eells became more reserved in his use of providential language over time, he liberally sprinkled his writing with providentialist quotes from others, such as Rev. J. W. Bashford's proclamation that "the Divine Providence is the key to our national history."[57] Yet Eells did not see his providentialism as being at odds with scholarly science. His linguistic and anthropological writings on Pacific Northwest Indians were published in peer-reviewed journals like *Science* and the *American Anthropologist*, the Smithsonian commissioned him to write anthropological pamphlets, and he also wrote on Pacific Northwest history, drawing from his vast library of rare primary sources.[58] Eells thus had a foot in each of the scholarly worlds that were coming into conflict in the early twentieth century, and his gradual marginalization from the academic world attests to the divides that the new history created.

Eells first responded to Bourne and his allies with articles in the *Whitman College Quarterly* and the Portland *Oregonian* and then with a stand-alone pamphlet. Eells also drafted a biography of Whitman entitled *Marcus Whitman: Pathfinder and Patriot*, which would not be published until after his death.[59] In these works, Eells attempted to synthesize the requirements of the new scientific history with older providential methods. He argued that while it was true that oral testimony was sometimes inaccurate, historians had methods of assessing whether testimonies were reliable or not. Testimony that agreed with documentary evidence or was affirmed by multiple witnesses could be considered more accurate and could be used in

[56]*Minutes of the General Association of Connecticut, at the One Hundred and Sixty-First Annual Meeting, Held in Meriden, June 21–22, 1870, with Reports* (Hartford, Conn.: Case, Lockwood & Brainard, 1870), 110. For Schaff's historical providentialism, see Stephen R. Graham, "'Cosmos in the Chaos': Philip Schaff's Vision of America," *American Presbyterians* 67, no. 4 (Winter 1989): 260–261.

[57]Myron Eells, *Marcus Whitman: Pathfinder and Patriot* (Seattle: Alice Harriman, 1909), 307.

[58]Myron Eells, "The Thunder Bird," *American Anthropologist* 2, no. 4 (October 1889): 329–336; Eells, "The Chinook Jargon," *American Anthropologist* 7, no. 3 (July 1894): 300–312; Eells, "Twins among the Indians on Puget Sound," *Science* 20, no. 504 (30 September 1892): 192–193; Eells, "Aboriginal Geographic Names in the State of Washington," *American Anthropologist* 5, no. 1 (January 1892): 27–36; C. L. Higham, "Saviors and Scientists: North American Protestant Missionaries and the Development of Anthropology," *Pacific Historical Review* 72, no. 4 (November 2003): 549–551; and Michael Paulus, "Cultural Record Keepers: The Myron Eells Northwest History Collection, Whitman College," *Libraries and the Cultural Record* 43, no. 2 (2008): 214–217.

[59]Myron Eells, *A Reply to Professor Bourne's "The Whitman Legend"* (Walla Walla, Wash.: Statesman, 1902, reprinted from *Whitman College Quarterly* 4, vol. 3); Eells, "As To The Value Of Historical Testimony," *Oregonian*, 22 March 1903, 32; Eells, "Public Opinion on Whitman Question: Rev. Eells Reviews Professor Bourne's Article from the Whitman Side," *Oregonian*, 31 May 1903, 15; Eells, "Professor William I. Marshall's Seven Mistakes," *Oregonian*, 17 December 1905, 45; and Eells, *Marcus Whitman: Pathfinder and Patriot* (Seattle: Alice Harriman, 1909).

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historical writing.[60] Omitting valid testimony, Eells argued, did a disservice to the historical profession. Scientific historians' emphasis on original documents would be particularly unfair to the earliest Anglo-American settlers of the West, Eells felt, because these settlers tended to be mobile, poorly educated, and subject to adverse conditions for the preservation of documents. This concern was especially personal for Eells. The Eells family had lost two homes, with most their family documents, to fires. "Although [Cushing Eells] refreshed his memory all he could from the writings of others, yet he had to rely on his memory for much," wrote Myron Eells. "It was either this or to lose much of the truth."[61] Eells concluded that scientific historians were too stringent in their requirements that documentary evidence alone be used to ground historical arguments. "Generally scientific history and the truth agree, but sometimes in order to obtain the truth it is necessary to go outside of scientific history, and sometimes scientific history is not the truth," Eells argued.[62]

Eells also argued against Bourne on the grounds of objectivity, stating that Bourne and other scientific historians only adhered to scientific historical methods when it served their arguments. Eells noted that, at times, Bourne did use oral testimonies as evidence. For instance, in 1899, Bourne had interviewed the wife of A. L. Lovejoy, the Oregon lawyer who accompanied Whitman on his 1842–1843 ride, asking her what she remembered her husband saying about Whitman's motivations. Bourne then used Mrs. Lovejoy's testimony as evidence that Whitman's journey had no political motive. "Can any other conclusion be reached than that Professor Bourne has decided that memory, even if it be a memory of a memory, fifty-seven years old, is of weight if on his side, but if it is on the other side and a single memory, not half as old, it is of no weight?" Eells inquired. "Does this not break down his whole argument?"[63] Eells also pointed out that Bourne had neglected important documentary evidence: in particular, an 1843 letter that Whitman had written to James Porter, President John Tyler's Secretary of War. In that letter, Whitman referenced a meeting between himself and Porter and reiterated his ideas for offering protection for American settlers in Oregon. The letter proved that Whitman had met with high government officials in Washington, D.C. for the purpose of encouraging Oregon settlement.[64] Bourne must have known of this letter because it had been previously published on multiple occasions, yet he ignored it entirely in his analysis.[65] Thus, Eells emphasized, not only was

[60]Eells, *Reply to Professor Bourne's "The Whitman Legend,"* 29, 36.
[61]Ibid., 38.
[62]Ibid., 37.
[63]Ibid., 44.
[64]Ibid., 89.
[65]For instance, see Myron Eells, "Dr. Whitman's Bill and His Letter to the Secretary of War," *Transactions of the Oregon Pioneer Association Fifteenth Annual Reunion* (Portland: G. H.

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scientific history a methodology with significant limitations, but also Bourne's examinations were not as consistently "scientific" as he claimed. Here Eells demonstrated how the language of objectivity could be used against scientific historians. Other providentialists followed this tactic, claiming that scientific historians like Bourne were unable to provide an "objective" assessment of the Whitman story, or other providential stories, because of their inappropriate bias against providential interpretations of history.[66]

Eells was seen as a savior by many who believed in the Whitman legend. Because of his status as a descendant of one of the missionaries and as a respected scholar, supporters of the Whitman story hoped that his work might quell the criticisms of the Whitman tale. Samuel Clarke believed that Eells had established the truth of the Whitman story "beyond all question."[67] A journalist for the *Independent* stated that Eells' *Reply to Profesor Bourne's "The Whitman Legend"* "riddles the assumption of an infallible 'scientific method' on the part of the anti-Whitmanites" and "casts a deserved reproach on the super-strenuosity, not to say ferocity, of their arguments."[68]

Yet the very fact that Eells needed to critique Bourne and Marshall on the basis of scientific history revealed how firmly scientific history had supplanted older ways of historical thinking in the academy. This change in scholarly authority, more than any of the particular discoveries in the Whitman controversy, was what signaled the downfall of the Whitman saved Oregon story. Through Bourne's work, the Whitman story became a kind of public and scholarly symbol of the dangers of the old ways of doing history.

From 1901 onward, the Whitman legend began to appear in lists of tales that scientific history had disproven. Bourne's close friend, Harvard church historian Albert Bushnell Hart, mentioned the Whitman story alongside the naive veneration of the Pilgrims, the myth of the Southern Cavalier, and Mason Weems' tale of George Washington and the cherry tree. He stated that the Whitman story was "the most interesting of the American myths,"

Himes, 1887), 69–78; Joseph Henry Brown, *Brown's Political History of Oregon*, vol. 1, *Provisional Government* (Portland: Lewis & Dryden, 1892), 147–154; and Oliver Woodson Nixon, *How Marcus Whitman Saved Oregon: A True Romance of Patriotic Heroism, Christian Devotion, and Final Martyrdom*, introduction by Frank W. Gunsaulus, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Star, 1895) 315–324.

[66]For instance, "Among the Books," *New York Observer and Chronicle (1833–1912)*, 11 July 1901, 79, 28; and William A. Mowry to M. Eells, Hyde Park, Mass., 8 October 1902, box E, Whitman Collection.

[67]For instance, S. A. Clark to William A. Mowry, 8 November 1902, box E, Whitman Collection. See also William A. Mowry to Myron Eells, 1 February 1899, box E, Whitman Collection; Mowry to Eells, 11. February 1901, box E, Whitman Collection; and "What Marcus Whitman Did Do," *Congregationalist and Christian World*, 16 August 1902, 239.

[68]"The Whitman Controversy," *Independent*, 13 November 1902, 2712.

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that had been "resolved into its elementary gases" by Bourne.[69] University of Wisconsin political scientist Frederic Austin Ogg also likened the Whitman story to that of Washington and the cherry tree, placing it in a genealogy that began with the myth that Rome was founded by Romulus and Remus.[70] "The Whitman legend is fatally damaged, so far as any use of it by trained historians is concerned," asserted J. Franklin Jameson for the *American Historical Review*.[71] He conceded, however, that "the passionate revilings to which we have seen the accomplished critic subjected in many newspapers make it plain that the legend will die hard."[72]

Bourne and Eells died within a few years of each other.[73] Their deaths deprived the Whitman controversy of its most prominent partisans, and with their loss, the academic portion of the Whitman debate largely subsided. The posthumous publication of Eells's *Marcus Whitman: Pathfinder and Patriot* (1909) and William Isaac Marshall's *Acquisition of Oregon, and the Long-Suppressed Evidence about Marcus Whitman* (1911) brought one more round of popular and scholarly debate about Whitman, but by 1910, it was clear that scholarly sentiment had shifted toward Bourne, Marshall, and other advancers of scientific historical criticism. The popular press, by contrast, was effusive toward Eells's *Marcus Whitman*, hoping that it would stem the tide against the growing skepticism toward the Whitman story. "A careful reading of the overwhelming mass of evidence in this book ought to put the matter of Whitman's purpose forever outside the realms of controversy," wrote a reviewer for the *Independent*.[74] A review in the *Magazine of History* stated, in a statement that would prove prophetic: "If this volume fails to convince the doubters that Marcus Whitman, the missionary-explorer, was the person to whom posterity is indebted for Oregon . . . no evidence will be produced which may reasonably be expected to convince."[75] But while Marshall's work received a favorable notice in the *American Historical Review*, Eells's *Marcus Whitman* received virtually no attention in the scholarly presses, indicating the

[69]Albert Bushnell Hart, "Imagination in History," *American Historical Review* 15, no. 2 (January 1910): 227–251, 242.

[70]Frederic Austin Ogg, "Paolo Toscanelli and the Discovery of America," *New England Magazine* 30, no. 6 (August 1904): 664–673, 666.

[71]J. Franklin Jameson, review of *Essays in Historical Criticism*, by Edward Gaylord Bourne, *American Historical Review* 7, no. 4 (July 1902): 746–747.

[72]Ibid., 747.

[73]"Death of Professor Marshall," *Oregonian*, 16 November 1906, 5; "Pays Tribute to Memory of Late Myron Eells," *Olympian*, 21 February 1907, 2; and "Obituary: Prof. Edward Gaylord Bourne," *New York Tribune*, 25 February 1908, 5.

[74]"Marcus Whitman," *Independent*, 23 November 1909, 1206; also "On the Book Table" *Chicago Advance*, 9 September 1909, 340; "With Authors and Books," *Idaho Statesman*, 27 October 1909, 4; and "Marcus Whitman as Missionary," *Springfield (Mass.) Republican*, 31 October 1909, 27.

[75]Review of *Marcus Whitman, Pathfinder and Patriot*, by Myron Eells, *Magazine of History with Notes and Queries* 11, no. 3 (March 1910), 179.

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extent to which the Whitman story and its providentialist proponents were now no longer considered part of the academic historical world.[76]

IV. Dividing Providence

The divide between the recognition of Eells's and Marshall's work paralleled the growing divide between popular and scholarly conceptions of history. From 1901 onward, more professional and regional historical associations abandoned the Whitman legend every year. In 1907, the director of the Oregon Historical Society honored not Marcus Whitman but Oregon's first provisional governor John McLoughlin as the "father of Oregon."[77] Within a few years, most major encyclopedias and histories had removed the Whitman story or added a disclaimer.[78] However, the story continued to hold sway outside of the historical community, especially among the populations where it had first circulated: the Pacific Northwest and Protestant communities. In Washington State in 1905, a congressman sponsored an essay contest offering a $100 watch to the student who wrote the best essay on Marcus Whitman and provided as a template an essay that defended the legend.[79] In 1907, citizens of Washington celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of Whitman's death and listened to Cushing Eells' grandson recount the story of Whitman's ride.[80] In 1909, the

[76]Reviews of Marshall's work included Leslie M. Scott, review, *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (December 1911): 375–384; and Charles W. Smith, review, *American Historical Review* 17, no. 2 (January 1912): 385–386. The only two scholarly reviews of Eells's work were a short positive review in the *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society* and a review essay in the *Washington Historical Quarterly.* Charles Smith, the reviewer for the *Washington Historical Quarterly*, stated that Marshall's *Acquisition of Oregon* "closes the case for the negative." See review, *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society* 42, no. 4 (1910): 299; and Charles W. Smith, review, *Washington Historical Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (April 1912): 154.

[77]Frederick V. Holman, *Dr. John McLoughlin: The Father of Oregon* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1907).

[78]See, for example, "Whitman, Marcus," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, ed. Hugh Chisholm, 11th ed. (New York: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1911), 610; "Whitman, Marcus," *New International Encyclopedia*, vol. 28 (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1916), 611; David Saville Muzzey, *An American History* (New York: Ginn, 1920), 267; J. N. Larned, *A History of the United States for Secondary Schools* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903), 436–437; and "Whitman, Marcus," *Americana: A Universal Reference Library* ed. Frederick Converse Beach, vol. 22 (New York: Scientific American Compiling Department, 1911). One exception was William A. Mowry who continued to print the Whitman story in his school textbooks until at least 1914: William A. Mowry and Arthur May Mowry, *First Steps in the History of Our Country* (New York: Silver, Burdett, 1914), 233–235, 315.

[79]The congressman was Francis W. Cushman: "Cushman Offers Prize," *Olympian*, 30 October 1905, 3; "Cushman Prize for Essay," *Olympia Daily Recorder*, 10 November 1905, 2; and "Marcus Whitman by E. A. Winship," *Walla Walla Statesman*, 16 November 1905, 3.

[80]"Address by Governor Recites Story of Terrible Tragedy of First Pioneer's Death," *Olympian*, 30 November 1907; and "Northwest Territory Honors Memory of Marcus Whitman," *Idaho Statesman*, 3 December 1907, 8.

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Walla Walla Commercial Club ordered two statues of Marcus Whitman to be cast, one to be placed in front of the state capitol and one to be placed at Whitman College.[81] Ministers continued to lecture on "Marcus Whitman, the Nation Builder" and children continued to read about Whitman's brave deeds in books like *Why Our Flag Floats over Oregon* and *Heroes of the Cross in America.*[82] Stricken from the avenues of formal history, the Whitman saved Oregon story permeated the regional and religious folkways of American culture.

In the end, the labeling of the Whitman story as a myth was telling, for after its debunking, the Whitman story took on a kind of mythic character. On the one hand, scientific historians situated the disproving of the Whitman legend within a broader moral vision of the triumph of human reason over sectarian superstition. On the other hand, for supporters of the Whitman story, the tale became a symbol of the rejection of scientific history and the values for which it stood. "There is more truth and beauty and possibly more practical benefit . . . in the thrilling story of William Tell than in the remnants of history that some would-be historians have spared to us from which to reconstruct our idol if we can," C. H. Howard asserted in an article defending Whitman.[83] The use of the term "idol" was not incidental: as academics increasingly considered the Whitman story a myth, those who continued to defend Whitman described him in more, not less, sacralized terms. The further removed Marcus Whitman was from secular textbooks, the more valorized he became as an emblem of a lost era in which public virtue and Christian identity could be assumed one and the same.

No piece of writing demonstrates this more clearly than an editorial written for the *Journal of Education* in 1905 on the Whitman controversy. It opened by stating that the "spirit that discounts the part that Columbus had in the discovery of America, that tones down the halo on Washington's historic brow . . . and dulled the sound of the hoofs of Paul Revere's charger" had now attacked Marcus Whitman, but "as none of these modern hostile critics have dethroned Columbus, Washington, . . . or Paul Revere, so they have not and will not make less sacred the name of Marcus Whitman."[84] After considering arguments on both sides of the Whitman question, the writer closed, not with an academic thesis, but with an appeal to spiritual experience. The author described a visit to the Whitman monument: "Without the least

[81] "Governor Hays Speaks at Unveiling of Statue," *Olympian*, 24 September 1909, 4.

[82] "Summer Church Work Planned," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 25 June 1910, 9; "A Nation Builder Worthy of Honor," *Montana Anaconda Standard*, 4 July 1910, 7; "Red-Blooded American Heroes: Marcus Whitman the Saviour of Oregon," *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader*, 10 March 1911, 10; Don O. Shelton, *Heroes of the Cross in America* (New York: Literature Department, Presbyterian Home Missions, 1904); and Leavitt Homan Hallock, *Why Our Flag Floats Over Oregon: Or, the Conquest of Our Great Northwest* (Portland, Maine: Smith & Sale, 1911).

[83] C. H. Howard, "Not a Legend," *Interior*, 14 February 1901, 201.

[84] "Marcus Whitman," *Journal of Education* 61, no. 18 (4 May 1905): 490.

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concern for the relative effect of the pleas of the historical attorneys I stood uncovered at the foot of the monument; with dimmed eyes I read in marble the names of the martyrs, and with unfeigned emotion stood on the sites of the mission houses in which precious blood was shed by sacrilegious hands."[85] Marcus Whitman was no longer just a martyr of flag and cross. He was now a martyr to the new critical spirit among academic historians, a spirit that the Whitman supporters believed would rob history of its heroes and Christianity of its scriptures.

Appeals to providence, of course, did not disappear from academic history overnight, nor did the early twentieth-century vision of scientific history guide American historical practice forever. Subsequent generations of historians would move away from scientific history's confident claims of objectivity, reliance on racialized notions of progress, and dismissal of oral history as a reliable form of evidence.[86] While church historians gradually embraced scientific history's methods and aims, they also preserved vestiges of providentialism in their approaches, placing Protestant communities at the center of U.S. history and depicting them as emissaries of civilization and engines of progress.[87]

But the Whitman controversy had been a central episode in the process by which Christian historiography became a sidebar to the historical profession. To be sure, among academic historians, some still privately held to Protestant understandings of divine Providence. Yet even those who did would concede to an overarching, if contested, vision of objectivity that precluded open appeals to the divine and the theological. And as the public work of academic history became more ostensibly secular, so too did the ranks of popular and amateur historians become more invested in representing an "alternative" view of history, outside of the purview, and peer review, of the academy.

In the midst of the culture wars of the 1990s, conservative Christian lay historians would invoke Whitman as one of the lost figures of America's providential heritage, a heritage that these new providentialists believed had been mocked and obscured by Christian history's cultured despisers. After describing Whitman's heroic rescue of Oregon as "a great episode in the identity of America's developing era as a nation under God," Catherine Millard lamented in 1991: "Whitman's efforts are denigrated by modern historians who

[85]Ibid., 492.

[86]Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 152.

[87]For instance, see Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1918), esp. 589–590; Arthur Cushman McGiffert, *Martin Luther: The Man and His Work* (New York: Century, 1910), esp. 381–388; and Amanda Porterfield, "Leaving Providence Behind," in the forum "One Hundred Years of Church History," *Church History* 80, no. 2 (June 2011): 361–368.

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discredit the purposes for the trip, and even make out his cross-country ride to be legendary."[88] These modern-day amateur providentialists have explicitly rejected the methods and underlying assumptions of academic history as antithetical to providential narratives. Instead, they have built their own institutional structures to advance providentialist views and methodologies that serve the broader political and theological goals of the Christian Right.[89]

The public fervor over the Whitman controversy was short-lived, but the issues it brought to the fore have endured. Scientific history may have been replaced by new modes of historical thought, but academic historians continue to struggle with the questions that the battles over the Whitman story raised: whether it is possible to reconcile the mandates of historical practice with Christian understandings of providence, whether "objectivity" necessarily entails secularity, and how to reconcile the mandates of a professional methodology and the ethics of historical accuracy with the desire to narrate history in ways that capture the popular imagination. Returning to the process by which Whitman was removed from heroic stature within secular historical circles may help to explain why some continue to want to wrest him back in order to argue not only for different American pasts but also different American futures.

[88]Catherine Millard, *The Rewriting of America's History* (Traverse City, Mich.: Horizon, 1991), 209. See also "Blaze Magazine Interview with David Barton: 'Saving History,'" *The Blaze*, 6 July 2012, http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2012/07/06/blaze-magazine-interview-with-david-barton-saving-history; and Robert James, "Who Really Settled the West (Part 2)," The American Truth: A Heritage Lost, http://www.heritagelost-amtruth.com/settled-west2.htm.

[89]These goals are diverse and sometimes conflicting, but they include restricting access to abortion, limiting LGBTQ+ rights, and promoting conservative Christian teachings (such as young-earth creationism and abstinence-only sexual education) in public schools. See Seth Dowland, *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian* Right (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); and Michael Lienesch, *Redeeming America: Piety and Politics in the New Christian Right* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993). New providential lay historians support these policy agendas by rooting these policies in the notion that the United States was founded as an intentionally Christian nation, and that progressive social policies are thus a corruption of America's purpose and identity. See Randall Stephens and Karl Giberson, *The Anointed: Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 61–91.

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