Protestant Missionaries and Native Americans:  
A Study of History and Memory  

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Abstract. This study examines the portrayal of Marcus and Narcissa Whitman, Protestant missionaries who worked among the Cayuse tribe in Washington. By utilizing sources such as academic text, personal reminiscence, and film, I argue that popular American memory of missionaries like the Whitmans has been twisted in two opposite directions: as civilizing saviors of savages, and as annihilators of culture. Such transformations are dependent both on the sources consulted, and the reality that society interprets those materials through their current cultural lens. Where memory is concerned, it is not the facts, but rather the perspective of the memory holder that matters most.

1. Introduction

One remembers things in a certain way because it fits his philosophy, worldview, or belief system. If it suits the purpose (whatever that purpose may be) to remember someone as a hero, he will become a hero. Likewise, if it better complements the current atmosphere to see that same person as a villain, he will become a villain. If it becomes too difficult to fit someone into the current mind-frame, that memory will be suppressed, removed from history. According to the classic historian Carl Becker, “[I]t is not essential, that this picture [history] should be complete or completely true: it is essential that it should be useful to Mr. Everyman [i.e., society.]”[1] History then, is not merely a record of facts, but a way of looking at the past through a present perspective. This paper will evaluate how cultural perspective has influenced the evolution of the memory of Protestant missionaries to Native Americans, focusing on Marcus and Narcissa Whitman.

2. Discussion and Significance

Marcus and Narcissa Whitman, Presbyterian missionaries, worked in the Rocky Mountains in the 1830s and 1840s. The Whitmans journeyed to present-day Washington State and established a mission base on land traditionally held by an American Indian tribe known as the Cayuse. At that time the Cayuse had heard of a black book with power - the Christian Bible- and they desired to learn more about it. However, by the mid-1840s, their outlook had changed. Political and economic factors caused a dramatic increase in the number of Euro-Americans who traveled across traditional Cayuse lands. These settlers brought new diseases to which tribal peoples, including the Cayuse, were highly susceptible. In 1847 the settlers caused a Measles epidemic in and around the Whitman Mission. Marcus Whitman, who in addition to being a missionary also practiced medicine, treated both infected Anglo and Cayuse peoples. But most of the Euro-Americans got well, and many of the Cayuse died. The Cayuse suspected the Whitmans of betraying them and causing their people’s deaths. Acting on this belief, a group of Cayuse warriors attacked the mission, killed fourteen people, and took approximately thirty hostages. Because of the attack, settlers eventually hanged five Cayuse. [2]

Over time, multiple collective memories developed surrounding these events. At first, to Euro-American inhabitants, the missionaries were “victims to the fury [sic] of these remorseless savages”. [3] This quote, written by James Douglass of a nearby settlement, represents the memories and history formed by settlers who survived the episode. The missionaries died as martyrs. This memory would dominate history for the next half century. However, a second, suppressed memory existed. The Cayuse leader, Tiloukaikt, is reported as saying before his death by hanging, “Did not your missionaries teach us that Christ died to save his people? So we die, to save our people.” [4] The Cayuse memory was not one of massacre, but rather one of native survival in the face of American interference.

In 1897, as the former captives aged and died, and a new generation rose to prominence, a monument was built near the old mission site. The new mausoleum and shaft commemorated the deaths of the missionaries and settlers, while mentioning nothing about the Cayuse reason for the attack. As the nation grew and moved forward, it did not suit
the current socio-political climate to remember the Cayuse perspective. The dominant memory holders chose to remember progressive settlement, rather than complications with Native American tribes.

The idea of coming together as a nation, being “American” dominated in an era shaped by two world wars, radio, films, and eventually television all emphasizing unity and solidarity. In 1953, the State of Washington presented a statue of Marcus Whitman to the Statuary Hall in Washington, D.C. The sculpture portrayed him as a rugged pioneer, dressed in buckskin with a Bible in one hand and saddlebags in the other. [5] Far from forgotten, the Whitmans were now seen not only as missionaries, but also as heroic pioneers. A children’s biography of the era entitled Narcissa Whitman Pioneer of Oregon tells young readers, “Those who crossed the Rocky Mountains and the blistering plains … found Narcissa Whitman … unforgettable … Magically in the wilderness they were welcomed at the gracious home she had created; there they shared once more civilized ways of living.” [6] Marcus and Narcissa became heroes: brave pioneers who risked their lives carrying superior American values into the wilderness.

As American culture continued to change, so did history. In the 1960s and 1970s current military and political events, such as the Vietnam situation, helped create major shifts in society, shifts that reverberated in history. Americans began to question whether their leaders and heroes really were as morally irreprehensible as they had previously thought. With the old view no longer fitting the new prevalent philosophy, new material was discovered, and old material interpreted in new ways. Interest in suppressed histories, such as those of Native Americans, grew immensely. Revisionists decided that what had been suppressed must now surface to become part of the dominate memory.

This shift in thought can also be recognized in popular media and current events. Films such as Cheyenne Autumn (1964) explored the concept that the military was not always right, while still portraying missionary-teacher Deborah White as a heroine. In 1970, the film Little Big Man shows how in just a few years mainstream media crossed from questioning white intervention to openly and completely transferring the characters of American hero and Indian villain to Native American hero and Euro-American villain. Outside the movie theaters current events propelled the problems of modern-day Native Americans to the forefront. In 1973 an event known as Second Wounded Knee brought Native American grievances into American homes through television and Time magazine. The highly controversial affair curried national attention, and helped shift the popular memory.

The new societal viewpoint judged missionaries primarily based on their impact on tribal cultures. One revisionist of the time, Ronald M. Satz, stated, “The government used missionaries … to wage a massive assault against the integrity of Indian culture.” [7] No longer iconic, the memory of missionaries underwent an iconoclastic shift. Gone were the images of glorious pioneers civilizing the savages and taming the wilderness. Missionaries were considered cultural annihilators. They were blamed for expediting the end of legitimate ways of life.

Through looking at this case study we can see that memory (otherwise known as history) changes over time. Today the Whitman Mission site, as well as many other historic places, seeks to bring out portions of memories from both sides. By seeking to include multiple memories, today’s history attempts to mirror our present multi-cultural society.

3. Conclusions

From 19th century missionary martyrs to early 20th century pioneer heroes, finally leading to the role reversal observed in the later 20th century, one can see how memory and history capably evolve into whatever the dominate society feels it needs. The prevailing culture influences popular memory, and therefore the creation and evolution of history. As the Whitman story shows, missionaries could go from civilizing saviors and pioneer heroes to cultural annihilators. Human perspective continues to influence memory, and therefore, history.

4. References