
Pro Rege

Volume 49 | Number 3

Article 5

March 2021

Unsettled Ground: The Whitman Massacre and its Shifting Legacy in the American West (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

Schaap, James C. (2021) "Unsettled Ground: The Whitman Massacre and its Shifting Legacy in the American West (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 49: No. 3, 52 - 53.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol49/iss3/5

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Unsettled Ground: The Whitman Massacre and its Shifting Legacy in the American West. Tate, Cassandra. Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 2020. 280 pp. ISBN 978-1-63217-250-1. Reviewed by Dr. James C. Schaap, Emeritus Professor of English, Dordt University.

In the introduction to Mary E. Cochran's *Dakota Cross-Bearer*, Fr. Raymond A. Bucko describes the December 4, 1989, funeral rites of an important Lakota spiritual leader, Frank Fools Crow, a man of such prominence that his funeral drew reporters and photographers from miles around.

Bucko says two clusters of religious people gathered at either end of Fool Crow's grave that day. On one side stood a contingent of enrobed Lakota priests, most of them Anglican but also one Roman Catholic, while on the other side stood traditional Lakota spiritual leaders, in jeans, some wearing an eagle feather or two.

Both groups of religious men prayed, but the newspaper people, Bucko says, focused their cameras on the "traditionals." Fifty years ago, he asserts, those cameras would have been aimed in the opposite direction, toward the robed clergy because what was of grave importance to Euro-Americans back then was Native acceptance of the white man's ways, including his religion.

Not so today. More sympathies, today, lie with traditional Native cultural expression and religion.

In that introduction, Fr. Bucko creates a portrait of the cultural battle (some call it cultural genocide) which Euro-Americans perpetuated, often with the highest of ideals, on our First Nations. Once upon a time, Native America was the object of governmentally designed programs to imprint Native people with 19th-century versions of Christianity because Christianity was thought to be useful for more defined cultural assimilation. Today, the "black robes," and many Christian mission enterprises (even the CRC's), are not looked upon as sympathetically as they once were.

Such negative views affect the way we tell our stories. There is no more vivid example of the changes Fr. Bucko saw at that funeral than the pivot we have taken to our views of the Whitman Massacre of 1847, and the importance of Marcus and Narcissa Whitman as cultural stars in the far southeast corner of what is today the state of Washington.

The Whitmans were of unquestionably heroic

stock. Both came to their deep piety by way of the Second Great Awakening, and both shared a commitment to social action (e.g., they were abolitionists). The Whitmans were married, literally, by a love for missions, more so than a love for each other, although what was there between them grew.

Narcissa Whitman would be a feminist icon if it weren't for the tragic way her story ends. She was, boldly, the very first white woman to cross the Great Plains. Her inspiring journey opened the Oregon Trail to women, who up until her crossing were simply assumed not to be strong enough for the rigors required. She and Marcus tagged along with a fur company all the way out to Washington, to a place where they had committed to establish a mission among the Cayuse people. She did it. She made it, not by staying aboard a covered wagon but by riding (side-saddle, of course) and often enough going off to explore this new world all by herself.

The story goes—there is ample proof—that Narcissa soured on the indigenous peoples she'd come to serve and found it more agreeable to deal with white folks streaming through along the Oregon Trail. Her letters document her increasing intolerance. Some historians say she became disagreeable, even disliked the Native people she'd come to evangelize.

Marcus, her husband, like many other missionaries of his time, was the medical authority among the Cayuse. He knew white-man's medicine and practiced it well, but factors out of his control came to determine his fate. When white folks arrived at Waiilatpu, Whitmans' mission station, they left the measles behind, and the disease burned through Native communities. To the Cayuse, Dr. Whitman appeared far more successful at treating white kids, who carried immunities, than Native children, who died in horrifying numbers.

If you don't already know the story, death came mercilessly to the Whitmans. The Cayuse, incensed at the deaths of their children, grew furious and eventually killed them in a massacre that took several others at Waiilatpu as well.

For years, history books held up the Whitmans

as martyrs, which, by definition, they were. But their having been martyred gave the Cayuse the reputation of “savages.” “The Whitman Massacre” was quickly established as a foundational story in the progressive history of the Pacific Northwest. Children learned the story in elementary school.

No more.

Cassandra Tate’s books on the Whitmans, *Unsettled Ground*, is a thoughtful and thorough retelling of a very sad story that’s worth telling time and time again. Tate fleshes out detail that’s extraordinary in richness. That a Christianized culture in search of heroes would, once upon a time, find Marcus and Narcissa Whitman, despite their weaknesses, to be verifiable Western heroes is completely understandable. But today, when colonialism itself is now seen as savage, the Whitmans’ story is being revisited.

What Professor Tate attempts in *Unsettled Ground* is a reexamination of the story in light of how we think about and evaluate relationships between the dominant culture and our own First Nations. She points out, for instance, that the bloody brutality of the massacre may well be exaggerated because, often enough, the ugly realities tend to grow in each successive retelling—all of which is another way of suggesting that maybe the massacre wasn’t as bloody awful as we’ve come to believe.

Furthermore, she makes very clear that Narcissa’s desire to preach Jesus may not have been as blessed a calling as she herself might have thought. Likewise, Marcus’s frustration at what he perceived as his Native subjects’ indolence turned quickly into intolerance. Neither of the Whitmans was a saint. Tate claims Cayuse morality held that evil behavior resulted from evil spirits taking up residence in the head. Both Whitmans were slain by hatchet blows to the skull. There was understandable cultural methodology in Cayuse madness.

It takes more than Cassandra Tate can muster—or anyone else, for that matter—to garner sympathy for those who massacred people, to believe them

guilty of no crime, no matter what the provocation or rationale. But Professor Tate’s in-depth study of the Whitman story does what today’s moral positioning might well expect it to accomplish: it tries, thoughtfully and extensively, to heal deep racial wounds.

A year or so ago, a life-size painting of Narcissa Whitman was defaced with red paint at Whitman College, also named after the Whitmans, a place with a distinguished list of alumni and a fine academic reputation. These days, attempts at addressing issues of justice often lead to toppled monuments or defaced portraits that feature men and women at one time considered beyond reproach but today morally questionable.

Extremes on both sides fail to examine the particulars, fail to negotiate the nuance, find it impossible to feel their way through paradox. How do we view Thomas Jefferson, the third President of these United States? Is he the thoughtful scholar who created much of the Declaration of Independence, or is he a master who during his adult life owned as many as 600 slaves?

I grew up in an era when the most wonderful church day of the year was the annual Mission Fest, an all-day affair that included games and singing, hamburgers, brats, and cold pop from a stock tank, as well as a furloughed missionary with slides and stories of God’s love for strange-looking people terribly far away. To those of us who grew up singing “every knee shall bow,” coming to know that bringing souls to Jesus doesn’t happen all that easily or swiftly. Coming to grips with that can be disconcerting. But then, we need the truth—difficult questions require careful examination.

In *Unsettled Ground: The Whitman Massacre and its Shifting Legacy in the American West*, Professor Cassandra Tate attempts—successfully—to help us discover a good deal more about the Whitmans and the Cayuses, a story that once held a sacred place at the heart of a much broader American story.