

Holy Things, Holy People

Exploring Catholic history in the Northwest through treasures from the past

PART 3: FATHER BROUILLET'S ACCOUNT OF THE WHITMAN MASSACRE

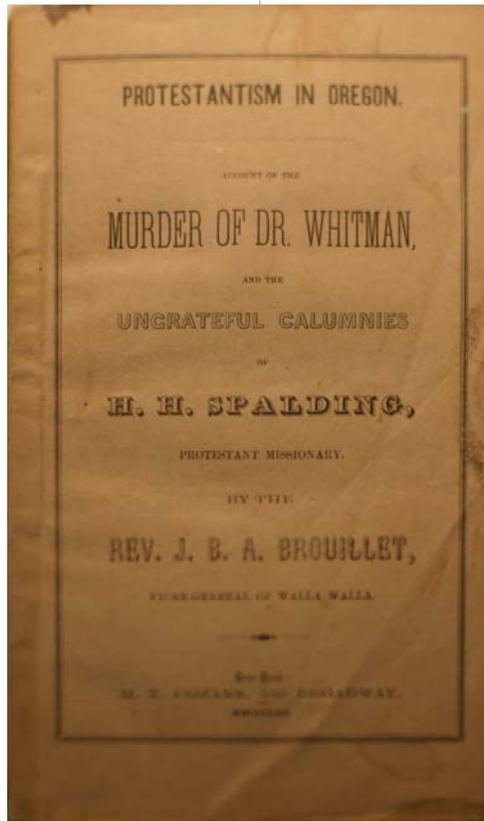
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Father Jean-Baptiste Abraham Brouillet was named Vicar-General of the Diocese of Walla Walla not long after A. M. A. Blanchet was appointed its first bishop. He accompanied Bishop Blanchet on the long journey west, and it was Father Brouillet—at that time just 34 years old—who sorted out many of the details of their journey, hiring guides, purchasing oxen, planning the route—and, perhaps most importantly, speaking English fluently! He little imagined that within two months of his arrival, he would be a central figure in a tragic sequence of events which would mark a turning-point in the history of the Pacific Northwest, and lead to the dissolution of the Diocese of Walla Walla.

Bishop Blanchet and Father Brouillet were by no means the first missionaries to arrive in Walla Walla. Dr. Marcus Whitman and his wife Narcissa, Presbyterian missionaries, had already been working in the region for more than ten years. The Whitmans' intent was to bring not only Christianity, but a new way of life to the native peoples, based not on hunting but on farming. Their endeavors met with mixed success. The Whitmans proved very effective at encouraging more whites to settle in the region, but less successful at transforming the lives of the Cayuse and Umatilla tribes. The more white settlers came, the more the native peoples around Walla Walla were decimated by diseases, especially measles and dysentery. The suffering was particularly intense in 1847. Some of the Cayuse leaders had begun to focus their blame on Whitman, who was also a medical doctor.

These tensions were very much in evidence at Whitman's first encounters with the Catholics. Father Brouillet wrote: "He soon showed by his words that he was deeply wounded by the arrival of the Bishop. . . . He said he did not like Catholics. . . . He spoke against the *Catholic Ladder* and said that he would cover it with blood to show the persecution of Protestants by Catholics."

Bishop Blanchet received a warmer welcome from other Protestant missionaries, especially Rev. Spalding, and in time relations with Whitman also improved. After a series of frustrating delays, Father Brouillet was able to establish a mission about 25 miles from the Whitman settlement at Wailatpu. He arrived there on November 27, and was visited by Dr. Whitman the next day. The Doctor seemed anxious,



"Protestantism in Oregon: Account of the Murder of Dr. Whitman, and the Ungrateful Calumnies of H. H. Spalding, Protestant Missionary, by the Rev. J. B. A. Brouillet, Vicar-General of Walla Walla." *Father Brouillet's account of the Whitman massacre was republished several times. Courtesy of the Archives of the Catholic Archdiocese of Seattle.*

and declined an invitation to lunch, saying he needed to get home before dark as there had been threats against his life. Before leaving, he asked Father Brouillet to come to see him soon.

Two days later, Father Brouillet visited a Cayuse camp to minister to the dying and baptize some children. Upon his arrival he heard with horror what had happened the day before: the Whitman mission had been attacked, and the Whitmans were dead, along with eight others. The rest of the whites living at the settlement—women and about 30 children—were being held hostage. Father Brouillet passed a sleepless night in the camp, and the next morning hastened to the Whitman mission. The situation of the hostages moved him to tears, but they begged him to show no signs of emotion—"it would only have endangered their lives and mine." Father Brouillet helped to wash the bodies of the dead and prepare them for burial in the mass grave which had been hastily prepared, and thus the great Protestant missionary of early Washington was buried by a Catholic priest.

Father Brouillet was allowed to return to his mission, closely watched by the perpetrators of the massacre. At the risk of his own life, he warned Spalding, who escaped to The Dalles. In the weeks that followed, Father Brouillet endeavored to assist the widows and orphans of the

Whitman mission, and eventually they were ransomed and freed. However, his efforts to prevent further violence were unavailing. By early 1848, he and Bishop Blanchet were forced to leave Walla Walla. The diocese was dissolved, and Bishop Blanchet was transferred to the new Diocese of Nesqually.

We owe the existence of Father Brouillet's account to a curious and sad twist in the story. Reverend Spalding, whose life Brouillet had saved, later turned against the priests, and in speech and in print agitated against them, accusing Bishop Blanchet of having incited and even planned the massacre. The official investigation conducted by officials at Fort Walla Walla found in favor of the priests, but anti-Catholic prejudice was strong and Spalding's baseless accusations were repeated again and again. Each time, Father Brouillet quietly defended himself and Bishop Blanchet. "Those who are acquainted with me," he wrote, "know that I have nothing more at heart than to live in peace with all men. . . . I am disposed to look with an equal eye upon the members of all religious denominations, to do all the good I can for the good of all without regard for the name by which they may be called."—*Corinna Laughlin, Director of Liturgy*