CHAPTER XXVIII

THE OREGON QUESTION

THE extremely interesting details of the controversy between the United States and Great Britain over the ownership of what was once called the Oregon country—now the States of Oregon, Washington, and Idaho and the province of British Columbia—find no place in the present narrative. But the possibility that a war between the two countries might grow out of the controversy had a material influence in determining the course of successive Mexican governments toward the United States, and, to a less extent, the policy of President Polk's administration in reference to Mexico, so that the main outlines of the dispute must necessarily be sketched.

The first discoverers of the Pacific coast of America, north of the present limits of California, appear to have been the Spaniards—although Sir Francis Drake, in 1579, visited the coast and spent some time in a harbor which appears to have been that which is now known as Drake's Bay, a little north of San Francisco. But it was not until almost the end of the eighteenth century that the Spanish government made any serious efforts to explore the northwest coast. At about the same time the Russians, starting from the Asiatic coasts, were exploring toward the south and east, and seem to have examined the shores of the American continent to a point south of Sitka, overlapping the Spanish discoveries; and Captain Cook, who sailed on his third and last voyage of discovery from England in July, 1776, also visited the coast between California and Alaska. Later, the French exploring expedition under La Pérouse visited

various parts of those coasts between Mount Fairweather, in Alaska, and Monterey, in California.

But by the time of this voyage private enterprises had already begun to bring the northwest coast of America into general notice. The publication of the journals of Captain Cook's third voyage made known to English-speaking men the great possibilities of profit in the fur-trade, from America to China. In 1785 and 1786 British vessels sailed from London and Macao and Calcutta, bound for the northwest coast, and in 1787 the *Washington* and *Columbia* sailed from Boston to the same destination. By a sort of general understanding the fur-traders of both nationalities established their chief resort at Nootka Sound, on the western side of Vancouver's Island, where ships occasionally wintered.

In the spring of 1789 a Spanish exploring expedition, sent by the viceroy of Mexico to anticipate Russia in taking possession of the coast, found British and American vessels at anchor off Nootka, and after some hesitation seized two of the British ships and sent them as prizes to San Blas, in Mexico. The act caused intense excitement in England and the fitting out of a fleet destined to attack Spain. "The declared object," wrote Gouverneur Morris, then in London, "is to compel Spain to atone for an insult offered to Great Britain by capturing two vessels in Nootka Sound. . . . If Spain submits she may as well give up her American dominions; for the position advanced here is that nations have a right to take possession of any territory unoccupied." [1]

In the face of the determined attitude of Great Britain—"the uncommon celerity and unparalleled dispatch which attended the equipment of one of the noblest fleets that Great Britain ever saw"—and the unwillingness of France to back up Spain in its quarrel, there was nothing to do but to submit. By July 24, 1790, the King of Spain had agreed to make full restitution of the British vessels captured at Nootka Sound and to indemnify the owners and crews; and on October 28, 1790, a convention was signed at the Escurial by which the King further agreed to restore the

[1] Morris to Washington, May 29, 1790; *Amer. St. Papers, For. Rel.*, I, 123.

land and buildings of which the British fur-traders had been dispossessed, as also to admit the right of British subjects to navigate or carry on fisheries in the Pacific Ocean, and to land on the coast in places not already occupied, for the purpose of carrying on commerce with the natives of the country or of making settlements.

The Nootka Sound convention was principally important as marking a step in the downward course of the Spanish colonial policy. It had been forced upon the Spaniards solely by a sense of their inability to resist England single-handed, for the beginning of the French Revolution had left Spain without an ally; and indeed, some two years later, the arrest and execution of Louis XVI forced Spain into a temporary alliance with England. The alliance with England led to an agreement for the mutual abandonment of Nootka. By another convention, signed January 11, 1794, it was agreed that after a formal delivery to a British official of the "buildings and districts of land on the Northwest coast of North America, or the islands adjacent to that continent of which the subjects of His Britannic Majesty were dispossessed," the officials of the two crowns should "withdraw respectively their people from the said port of Nootka." Neither of the parties, it was agreed, should "form any permanent establishment in the said port or claim any right of sovereignty or territorial dominion there to the exclusion of the other." In accordance with this convention English and Spanish commissioners met at Nootka and carried out the ceremony of delivery of the "buildings and district of land" and the abandonment of the port; and thenceforward it remained deserted.[1]

The strain of the Napoleonic wars, followed at their close by disorders at home and accompanied by the revolt of the Spanish colonies, effectually prevented Spain from undertaking any new enterprises. From 1795 that government made no further efforts either to explore the northwest coast, or to push its colonies beyond the neighborhood

[1] An excellent monograph on the Nootka Sound controversy, by W. R. Manning, will be found in *Amer. Hist. Assn. Rep.* 1904, 279–478.

of the bay of San Francisco, while at the same time Americans and Englishmen were making discoveries and giving the world extensive information concerning the whole Pacific coast of North America.

In January, 1791, Captain George Vancouver, who had been sent to Nootka to receive the buildings and tracts of land of which the subjects of his Britannic Majesty had been dispossessed, explored in considerable detail the whole of Puget Sound and the coasts of Vancouver's Island. He also examined and explored the coast from Cook's Inlet, in Alaska, as far south as San Diego, in California. Not long after arriving on the northwest coast Vancouver was informed by Captain Gray of the American ship *Columbia*—trading for furs—that he had taken his ship into the mouth of a large river, which he had ascended for some miles and had named the Columbia River, after his ship. On receiving Gray's account and his chart of the entrance, Vancouver sent his second in command, Captain Broughton, to the river, and Broughton found the entrance and explored the river more than a hundred miles from its mouth in October, 1792.

All this time the interior of the country on the Pacific slope, from the bay of San Francisco north, was practically unknown. Some of the Hudson's Bay people had penetrated it, and in the summer of 1793 Alexander MacKenzie had discovered the Fraser River and descended it to its mouth. But the American government was the first to attempt anything like an accurate and scientific exploration of the country. Immediately after the cession of Louisiana, the active mind of Jefferson had conceived the idea of taking steps to secure the Louisiana Purchase to its westernmost bounds. How far Louisiana extended in that direction was entirely a matter of conjecture, but Jefferson, anticipating Talleyrand's advice, was determined to make the most of his bargain.[1] The result was the expedition of Lewis and Clark, who descended the Columbia to the sea in 1805.

[1] "You have made a noble bargain for yourselves and I suppose you will make the most of it."—(Livingston to Madison, May 20, 1803; *Amer. St. Papers, For. Rel.*, II, 561.)

The following winter was passed by the explorers in camp at the mouth of the river, and in 1806 they made their way back, arriving at St. Louis near the end of September, 1806.

St. Louis at this time was the centre of the American fur-trade, and the news of Lewis and Clark's success in crossing the continent, and their reports as to the character of the country they had traversed, spread rapidly throughout the United States. Among other persons who took a lively interest in these reports was John Jacob Astor, a merchant of New York, who was endeavoring to establish an American company that should rival, in the United States, the Hudson's Bay and the Northwest Fur Companies of Canada. As a part of his plan he now resolved to plant a fort near the mouth of the Columbia River, a point which he believed could be reached either by sea or land for the purposes of the trade. Such an establishment, under the name of Astoria, was begun in 1811 upon a liberal scale, but the War of 1812 with Great Britain put an end to its existence.[1] The treaty of Ghent, which closed the war, provided, however, that "all territory, places and possessions whatsoever, taken by either party from the other during the war, . . . shall be restored without delay," and under this provision Astoria was formally handed back to Captain Biddle, of the United States ship *Ontario*, on October 6, 1818.

At the beginning of the year 1819 the condition of things was therefore as follows: The Spaniards had made extensive voyages of discovery north of the present boundaries of California, but had failed to follow them up by continuous or permanent occupation. The Russians had explored the coast eastward and southward from Bering Strait, but had made no permanent settlements anywhere between what are now the northern limits of California and the southern limits of Alaska. A French expedition had surveyed the coast, but they too had made no attempt at settlement; and whatever rights France had possessed, either by reason of their maritime discoveries or by reason of their ownership

[1] Washington Irving's *Astoria* is, of course, the most entertaining, if not the most impartial, account of this settlement.

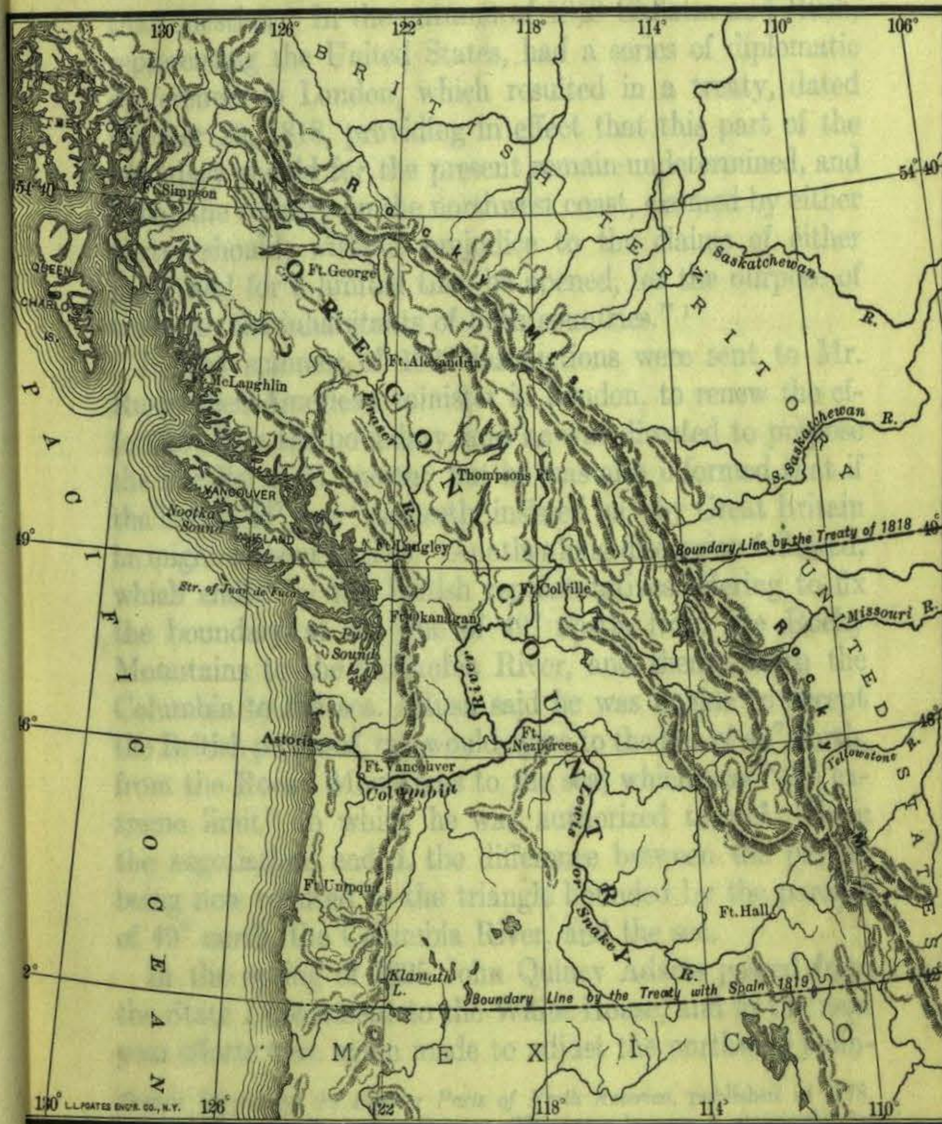
of what was called Louisiana, had been transferred to the United States by the treaty of 1803.

The only civilized nations who had made any attempts to occupy the country had been the United States and Great Britain. American and British ships had at various times visited and examined the coast and their crews had carried on trade with the natives. Both American citizens and British subjects had explored the interior and had discovered the courses of the principal rivers; but with the exception of fur-trading establishments of a more or less permanent character, neither party could assert anything like a settlement of the country.

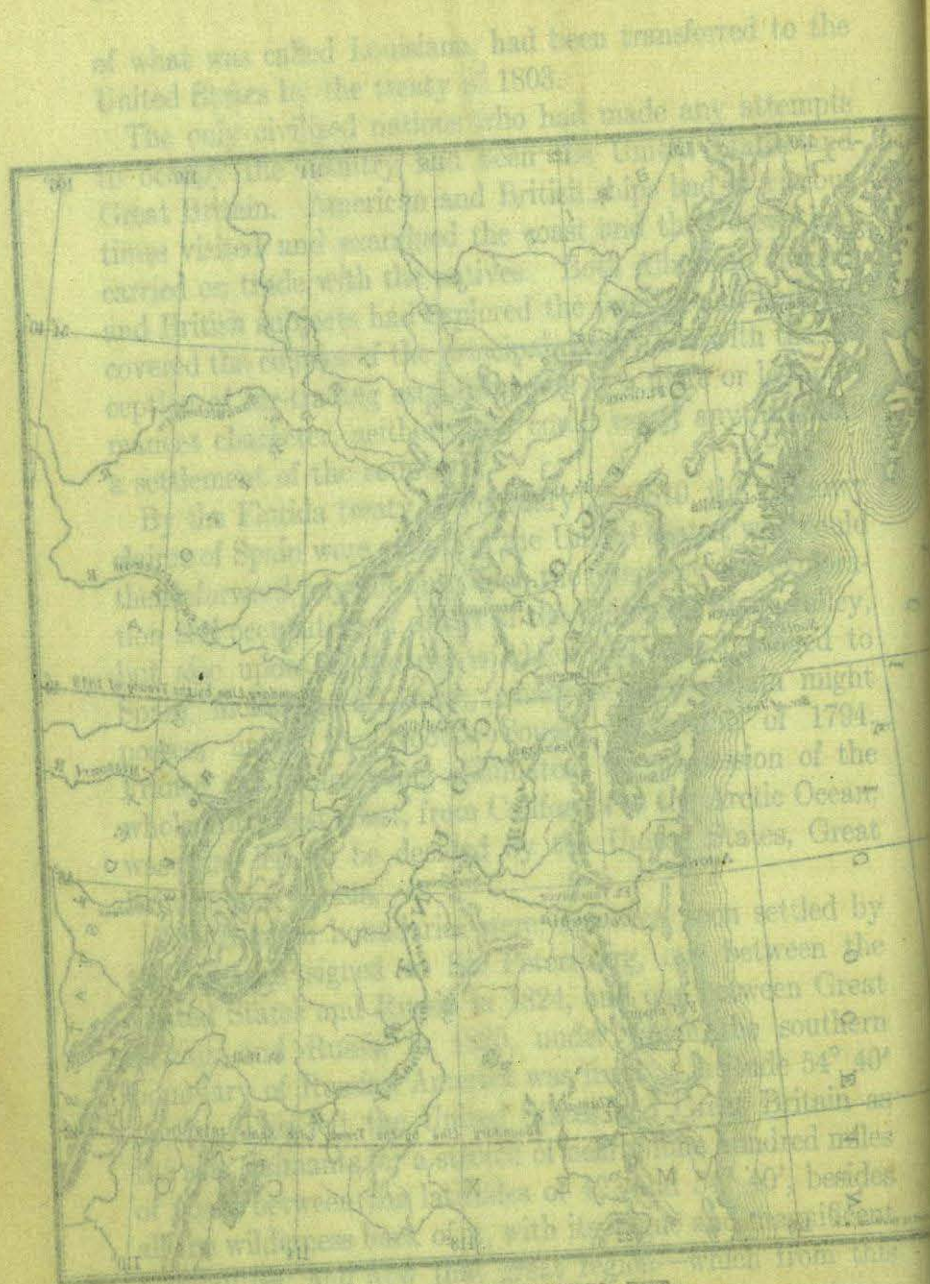
By the Florida treaty of February 22, 1819, the shadowy claims of Spain were vested in the United States, who could thenceforward rely not only upon the discovery and exploration and occupation of a part of the Columbia River valley, but also upon all the rights which had ever belonged to Spain, including, of course, whatever rights Spain might possess under the Nootka Sound convention of 1794. France and Spain being eliminated, the possession of the whole northwest coast, from California to the Arctic Ocean, was thus left to be decided by the United States, Great Britain, and Russia.

The Russian boundaries were, however, soon settled by two treaties signed at St. Petersburg, one between the United States and Russia in 1824, and one between Great Britain and Russia in 1825, under which the southern boundary of Russian America was fixed at latitude 54° 40′ north. This left the United States and Great Britain as the sole claimants for a stretch of nearly nine hundred miles of coast between the latitudes of 42° and 54° 40′, besides all the wilderness back of it, with its vague and magnificent possibilities; and how that great region—which from this time forward was generally known as the Oregon country[1]—was to be divided between the two claimants was the question at issue.[1]

[1] The name Oregon, as applied to this territory, was derived from the suppositious "Great River of the West," which Jonathan Carver, in his mythical



THE OREGON COUNTRY



The treaty of Ghent in 1814 had left for future settlement the whole boundary westward of the Lake of the Woods, but an effort was made very soon afterward to dispose of that question. In the autumn of 1818 Gallatin and Rush, representing the United States, had a series of diplomatic conferences in London, which resulted in a treaty, dated October 20, 1818, providing in effect that this part of the boundary should for the present remain undetermined, and "that the country on the northwest coast, claimed by either party, should, without prejudice to the claims of either party and for a limited time be opened, for the purpose of trade, to the inhabitants of both countries." [1]

In the summer of 1823 instructions were sent to Mr. Rush, then American minister in London, to renew the effort to settle the boundary, and he was directed to propose the parallel of 51° north; but he was also informed that if the line of 49° was "earnestly insisted on" by Great Britain he might consent to that. Another long discussion followed, which ended by the British representatives offering to fix the boundary at the line of 49° north, from the Rocky Mountains to the Columbia River, and thence down the Columbia to the sea. Rush said he was unable to accept the British proposal, but would agree to the line of 49° north, from the Rocky Mountains to the sea, which was "the extreme limit" to which he was authorized to go.[2] There the negotiations ended, the difference between the parties being now reduced to the triangle bounded by the parallel of 49° north, the Columbia River, and the sea.

In the spring of 1825 John Quincy Adams passed from the State Department to the White House, and in the next year efforts were again made to adjust the northwest boun-

Travels Throughout the Interior Parts of North America, published in 1778, mentioned as the Oregon or Origan. The name became a synonyme for remoteness and solitude—witness Bryant:

> "Lose thyself in the continuous woods
> Where rolls the Oregon, and hears no sound
> Save his own dashings."

[1] Gallatin and Rush to Secretary of State; *Amer. State Papers, For. Rel.*, IV, 381.
[2] *Ibid.*, V, 557.

dary. Both parties renewed their previous offers of compromise, and both offered some slight additional advantages. But the concessions offered were not acceptable, and a new treaty was signed on August 6, 1827, by which all the boundary provisions of the treaty of 1818 were "indefinitely extended and continued in force," either party being at liberty, at any time after October 20, 1828, to annul and abrogate the agreement on giving twelve months' notice.[1]

Up to this time, the subject of the northwest coast had attracted little public attention either in America or in England, although to the officers and stockholders of the Hudson's Bay Company—which had consolidated with the Northwest Fur Company in 1820—the matter was of absorbing interest. That great monopoly had done its utmost to establish its posts throughout the country and to acquire and extend its influence over the natives; but "beyond the limits of the government offices, and of the Hudson's Bay house, no one in England seems to have taken the slightest interest in anything relating to North-West America."[2] Meanwhile, American fur-traders had practically abandoned the country. Astor, unable to get what he considered adequate support from the government, made no further attempt, after the close of the War of 1812, to extend his enterprises beyond the Rocky Mountains, and other American traders had suffered such hardships in their expeditions that for years they contented themselves with following up the head-waters of the Missouri, the Yellowstone, and the other streams on the Atlantic side of the mountains.

However, by about 1830 the American fur-traders managed to push farther and farther toward the Pacific. According to Washington Irving, the whole country between the Russian possessions in the north and the Spanish possessions in the south was in time "traversed and ransacked in every direction by bands of hunters and Indian traders; so that there is scarcely a mountain pass, or defile, that is not known and threaded in their restless migrations, nor a

[1] *Ibid.*, VI, 650–671, 691, 696.
[2] Greenhow, *Hist. of Oregon and California*, 378.

nameless stream that is not haunted by the lonely trapper."[1] But though the American traders and trappers penetrated the Oregon country, unlike their British rivals they had no permanent posts beyond the Rocky Mountains. The agents of the principal companies visited the region from time to time with supplies for the Indians and trappers, which they exchanged for furs to be sent back to St. Louis, but they did not remain.

While these obscure and lonely pioneers were exploring an empire, spasmodic efforts were making in Washington to ascertain and define the rights of the United States; but nothing effectual was done, and thus matters rested, and would doubtless have so continued for an indefinite period but for an important series of events over which neither the American nor the British governments had the slightest control—the beginning, namely, of extensive emigration overland from the United States into the Oregon territory. A few settlers had gone by sea in 1834, under the leadership of Methodist missionaries, and established themselves within the limits of the present state of Oregon, where some old employees of the Hudson's Bay Company had already begun farming. The land was fertile, and the new settlements prospered. In 1836 the American Board of Foreign Missions sent out several missionaries and their wives, who managed to make in safety the long journey overland; and from that time forward the number of emigrants steadily increased, the Oregon trail became better known, wagons were regularly taken over it, and in the spring of 1843 not less than a thousand people—men, women, and children—crossed the continent to find homes on the Pacific.

As soon as the American settlements in Oregon began to grow to a respectable size, the subject of the title to their lands and the protection of the people on their journey and in their new homes claimed the serious attention of the government. Unlike the British occupants of the soil, who were necessarily agents of the Hudson's Bay Company—for all other British subjects were excluded by the company's

[1] Washington Irving, *Bonneville's Adventures*, 23.