

## THE OREGON QUESTION.

JULY, 1845.

[ See Gazette, Page 2207. ]

Northwestern America is probably the largest portion of the world yet unsubdued by cultivation. From about latitude  $32^{\circ}$  to  $70^{\circ}$ , and from longitude  $125^{\circ}$  to  $95^{\circ}$ , boundaries enclosing a space of more than 4,000,000 square miles, the real occupants of the country are the aboriginal hunters and fishers. Two or three Russian, English, and Mexican trading stations on the coast; and in the interior a few English hunting posts, and some missionary establishments supplied by Mexico and the United States—are the only points inhabited by civilized men. About 500,000 Indians, and about 10,000 whites, constitute the population of a district more than one third larger than Europe, and situated for the most part within the temperate zone. The whole is intersected from north to south by a chain called, to the north of latitude  $42^{\circ}$ , the Rocky Mountains, and to the south of that parallel, the Sierra Anahuac; which is in fact a continuation of the Andes. Between these mountains and the Pacific, from which they are at an average distance of 500 miles, run intermediate ranges, some parallel and some from west to east, so as to leave level a very small portion of the country. The rivers which flow from the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains are the great rivers of North America—the Mackenzie, the Missouri, and the Rio Grande. On the western side they are few, interrupted by falls and rapids, closed at their mouths by bars, and, in the earlier part of their courses, generally confined by precipitous banks of 1000 or 1500 feet in height.

We have said that the occupants of the territory are the Indian tribes; but the greater part of it is under the nominal sovereignty of Russia, England, the United States, and Mexico. The Russian boundary begins at the southernmost point of Prince of Wales's Island; (lat.  $54^{\circ} 40'$ ), then runs in a north-western and northern direction to the Arctic Ocean; so as to include first a narrow strip of coast, and then a peninsula washed by three seas, and forming the north-western extremity of the Continent. The British portion includes all that is east of the Rocky Mountains, and north of latitude  $49^{\circ}$ . The boundary of the United States comprises all that is east of the Rocky Mountains, from latitude  $49^{\circ}$  to  $42^{\circ}$ ; and then runs in a south-easterly direction, until it reaches the rivers which form the boundary of Texas. All that remains south of the forty second parallel belongs to Mexico.

Between these limits lies the unappropriated Oregon country, bounded on the north by the parallel  $54^{\circ} 40'$ , on the east by the Rocky Mountains, on the south by the forty second parallel, and on the west by the Pacific. It is about 650 miles in length, and of an average breadth of about 550—narrower towards the north, and broader towards the south—the Rocky Mountains running, not parallel with the coast, but in a south-westerly direction. It contains, therefore, about 360,000 square miles; more than three times the surface of the British Islands. The northern part of the coast, above the forty eighth parallel, is protected by numerous islands, the largest of which, Vancouver's Island, is about two-thirds of the size of Ireland. Along the straits which separate these islands from the continent, are many excellent harbours; but down the whole coast of the Pacific, from latitude  $48^{\circ}$  to Port San Francisco, far within the Mexican frontier, there is no refuge except Bulfinch harbour and the Columbia—the former of which can be entered only by small vessels, and the latter is inaccessible for eight months of the year, and dangerous at all times.

We have already said that the whole country is intersected by ranges of mountains. Most of them are loftier than our loftiest Alpine ranges, and some are supposed to equal, or even to exceed the highest Andes. One consequence of this is, that the climate is severe except in the southwestern valleys, where it is tempered by the neighbourhood of the sea. Another is, that only a very small portion of the land is capable of cultivation. The best portion is the valley between the Kalmet Mountains and the Pacific, a strip about eighty miles broad and three hundred long, watered by the Columbia, and by its tributaries, the Cowlitz on the north, and the Willamet on the south. But even of this Oregon Felix, Mr. Greenhow states that only from one-eighth to one-tenth is cultivable. Further to the west the land rises into elevated plains, sometimes of rock and sometimes of sand, without wood and almost without vegetation, intersected indeed by rivers, but rivers which bring no fertility. 'The banks,' says Captain Wilkes, 'of the Upper Columbia are altogether devoid of any fertile alluvial flats, destitute of even scattered trees; there is no freshness in the little vegetation on its borders; the sterile sands reach to its very brink; it is scarcely to be believed until its banks are reached, that a mighty river is rolling its waters past these arid wastes.' Towards the north, a higher latitude and a still greater elevation render the country still less fit for the abode of man. But even here some fertile valleys are to be found. And Mr. Dunn describes the lower part of Vancouver's Island as, on the whole, the most habitable portion of this inhospitable territory.†

But though generally incapable of tillage, the southwestern part contain some districts not unfit for pasturage, and others which are rich in timber. The rivers are full of fish, and the northern part abounds, or till lately did abound, with furred animals.

Until the last three or four years, the only use made of it by civilized men, has been as a mart for the purchase of furs and

skins. The earliest adventurers in the North American fur-trade appear to have been the French Canadians. At first, in the beginning of the seventeenth century, when the wild animals were plentiful and the Indians numerous and powerful, the white traders remained in their towns on the banks of the Saint Lawrence, and were satisfied with the skins brought to them by the hunters. As this supply diminished, and as the Indian tribes were thinned and cowed by the destructive proximity of civilization, the traders found it necessary to penetrate the wilderness, and barter with the hunter on his own territory. The bold men who engaged in this traffic had to encounter every form of hardship and danger. They had to deal with savages, selfish, cruel, and treacherous; intellectually, and, bad as the whites were, perhaps morally, their inferiors—beings with whom they had no sympathy, towards whom their only relation was a mutual struggle to kill, to overreach, or to plunder. Under such circumstances, and in a country without law or public opinion, the *courcours des bois*, as the French fur-traders were called, degenerated—as civilized men exposed to such influences always will degenerate—into intelligent beasts of prey; uniting the foresight, the perseverance, and the powers of combination of the White, to the rapacious and unscrupulous ferocity of the Indian. The remedy adopted by the French government was, to prohibit all persons from entering the Indian territory without a licence; and to make the continuance of the licence depend on their conduct.

In 1669, an association was formed by Prince Rupert to prosecute an English fur-trade; and in 1770 its members were incorporated by charter, under the title of the Hudson's Bay Company. To this Company Charles the Second granted, as absolute lords and proprietors, all the lands on the coasts and confines of the seas, lakes, and rivers within the Hudson's Straits, not actually possessed by the subject of any other prince or state, and the exclusive right of trading with the inhabitants. And the charter proceeds to threaten all who may intrude on their privilege with the forfeiture of ship and merchandise, half to the Crown and half to the Company.

In 1749, nearly eighty years after the creation of the Company, an attempt was made to deprive them of their charter, on the ground of non-user; and it certainly appeared that they had done but little. They had at that time only four small forts, occupied by 120 men. Their exports for the ten preceding years had amounted to £36,000, their expenses of management and establishment to £157,000, and their imports to about £280,000; so that their net profit was about £8000 a year.\* At this time the value of the furs annually imported from Canada into Rochelle, amounted, according to the rate fixed by the Company, to £120,000, or more than four times as much.†

In 1763, Canada was ceded to England. Having been under the sovereignty of France in 1670, it was not included in the Company's charter. The vast western regions were now open without the necessity of a licence; and the fur trade was prosecuted at first by individuals, and afterwards by associations, which all, ultimately were consolidated in the Northwest Company. Of this great Company—of its wealth, its power, its feudal discipline, and its feudal magnificence—Mr. Washington Irving has given a vivid picture in the introduction to his 'Astoria.' The Hudson's Bay Company, with the characteristic inactivity of an ancient body protected by charter, remained quietly at their posts, like the earlier French traders, and purchased the furs which the Indians brought to them. The Northwest Company explored the forest, the mountain, and the lake, frightened the Indians by their power, destroyed them by supplies of spirits and of arms; and for a time were almost masters of the continent between the Rocky Mountains and the Canadian lakes. But the fur trade, even when best managed, has always been a decaying trade, the reproduction of wild animals never equalling their consumption. Conducted as it was by traders and Indians, anxious only for immediate gain, who killed indiscriminately the male and the female, the full-grown and the cub, it became more destructive, and yet less productive, every year. As their original hunting grounds were exhausted, the Northwest Company pushed their parties and their posts towards the west. About the year 1806, they are supposed to have first crossed the Rocky Mountains, and to have established posts on the northern head waters of the Columbia. About the same time they advanced north into the territories of the Hudson's Bay Company, which at length had also found it necessary to establish posts in the interior. In 1812, that Company for the first time made an attempt to exercise their rights of colonization. They sold a tract on the shores of Lake Winnipeg and of the Red River to Lord Selkirk, who planted there the germ of a considerable colony. The Northwest Company, with the unscrupulous ferocity which a life among savages seems to produce among the members of even the most civilized nations, for some years waged a partizan war against the Hudson's Bay posts. Sometimes they merely drove away their inhabitants by force, or by cutting off their means of support; sometimes they waylaid and destroyed them on their route; and at length, in the year 1814, they organized an expedition against the Red River settlement, which, after a civil war of two years, ended in the defeat and massacre of the governor, Mr. Semple, with his immediate companions, and the expulsion of the survivors.

It was now obvious that the contest between the companies would produce the ruin of one or of both; and a successful attempt was made to consolidate them. But this alone would not have

\* Vol. iv. p. 429.

† Dunn's Oregon, p. 242.

\* Reports from Committees of the House of Commons, reprinted in 1863. Vol. ii. p. 215.

† Anderson. Vol. iii. p. 237.