

“Forty-Seven-Forty or Fight!”

Columbia: Britain's Youngest North-American Colony

By W. Ward

TO Alexander I of Russia, the Monroe Doctrine, suggested in the the first instance by George Canning, the “Lone Star State” of Texas, and John Calhoun—plus an election cry—Britain owes that great Western Territory of North America, now known as British Columbia.

Prior to 1840, the whole of the Pacific Coast from Alaska to the present southern border of the State of Oregon, was claimed by the British on account of exploration and being under Charter to the Hudson's Bay Company, and known as Oregon.

After the revolt of the Spanish dominions in America, which had alone been recognised by the United States and Great Britain as an establishment of their independence, the “Holy Alliance” was formed in Europe for the purpose of restoring the Bourbon monarchy in Spain, and the reclaiming of the Spanish colonies. Alexander I, Czar of Russia, joined the league, and got ready to send an army to extend the Russian Empire from Alaska (which then belonged to Russia) southwards to California.

Canning sent for the American Ambassador, and suggested joint moves against the further adventures of European powers on the American Continent. Though, officially, the United States declined to enter into a “forbidden European treaty,” left her in the last instructions of her great founder, Washington, she took the hint, and both countries let it be diplomatically known that further European colonization on the American continent would be strongly resisted by the proved two greatest maritime powers who had been so lately at war with each other without result. Thus was formed the Monroe Doctrine. The matter of the actual claim to the Pacific coast from Alaska to California then became a political one between the two English speaking countries.

Soon after the Mexican independence, the northern territory of that country, which was largely in proportion to the numbers of her few inhabitants populated by settlers from the United States, seceded and declared the independent State of

Texas. The Texans desired to enter the American Union but were resisted from Washington, who did not desire the addition of another State in the South to add against the balance of the Northern states. Through the murder of a journalist named Morgan, however, the whole policy of the then governing party was overthrown, and Harrison was elected President, which office he barely held. Tyler, his Vice-President, being appointed on his death, made John Caldwell Calhoun his Secretary of State, one of the greatest figures of mid 19th Century American politics.

Calhoun had the support of both the Southern and the Northern “expansionists” and by arbitration was enabled to settle the Texas matter, as well as bring to a head the unsettled matter of the Oregon Territory. For long the political cry in the North against Great Britain had been “Forty-seven-forty or fight!”—this referring to the American demand that all territories south of the latitude 47°40' must be Union. Calhoun foresaw that it would be impossible to fight Britain, who in a few weeks could land armies from India and the East on the Pacific coasts, whereas any American army would be obliged to sail round Cape Horn and thus be at the mercy of the British fleets, as, of course, the intervening land between the then United States and the Pacific was unmapped and unknown.

In the meantime, Peel, with his Foreign Secretary, Lord Aberdeen, had taken up the anti-slavery question and against Texas joining the American Union, which curiously they were supported in by the Northern States. Calhoun was strong, however, and he secured Texas, arranged the 47-40 line, whereby the new States of Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana, came into existence, and averted war with Britain, giving up the claim to the great island of Vancouver.

Thus forever was settled the status of Northern Oregon, now British Columbia, that had rankled in the minds of the two English speaking countries for nearly thirty years, and forever established the greatest unguarded international frontier in the world.