

A Novel American Life: Lew Wallace and the Writing of *Ben-Hur*

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He was inspired by a conversation with a famous atheist to author *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, a bestseller that was turned into a film twice. He was a Civil War general, an arms trader with a foreign government, a Territorial Governor and an ambassador. He personally met Abraham Lincoln, Billy the Kid, and the Sultan of Turkey. His life touched so many 19th century events and people that Lew Wallace could be characterized as the “Forrest Gump” of the 19th century.

Lewis Wallace was born April 10, 1827, in Brookville, Indiana, to David and Esther Wallace. His mother died when he was seven. When he was ten, his father became the sixth Governor of Indiana. His stepmother was a National Vice President of the Women’s Suffrage Association and a leader in the Temperance movement. He grew up among the creeks and forests of central Indiana, developing a life-long yearning for adventure and an ambition to distinguish himself as a soldier. He first soldiered during the Mexican war in 1846, interrupting his law studies to lead a brigade of Indiana soldiers. Between 1849 and 1861 he passed the bar exam, opened a law office, married Susan Elston, became the father of his only child (a son, Henry), and moved to Susan’s hometown of Crawfordsville.¹

Soldier

Wallace’s pursuit of military glory found new opportunity with the outbreak of the Civil War. Returning to the army after Fort Sumter, Wallace became Colonel of the 11th Indiana, and subsequently Brigadier General of Volunteers. On March 21, 1862, he became the youngest Major General in the Union Army, later commanding divisions in the Tennessee battles of Forts Henry and Donelson and at Shiloh, and organizing the successful 1862 defense of Cincinnati.

Wallace’s actions at the Battle of Shiloh stirred controversy between him and Ulysses S. Grant. When Grant’s army was attacked, Wallace was stationed several miles away. Grant ordered Wallace to march to Shiloh and attack the Confederates from the left flank. Due to confusion over the orders, Wallace arrived too late to aid Grant on the first day of the battle, and Union forces sustained massive casualties. Grant was not forgiving, even suggesting that Wallace might have deliberately taken a circuitous route. They never fully resolved this dispute.

After Shiloh, Wallace was removed from field command and spent two years behind the lines. In March of 1864, President Lincoln assigned him to a command in Baltimore, Maryland. In July, Wallace learned that a confederate army was marching into the Shenandoah Valley, and moved his forces to Monocacy Junction, delaying the Confederate advance until Washington DC could be reinforced.

"My greatest personal satisfaction was due to discovery of the fact that in the confusion and feverish excitement of real battle, I could think," he wrote in his *Autobiography* (Volume I, 437). He told his wife Susan in a letter of February 27, 1862, that "I never heard music as fascinating and grand as that of battle." Yet he also admitted, "This soldiering business sadly deadens that very good thing so carefully cultivated by Christians--humanity" (*Autobiography*, I, 455). The theme that battle is not only great and glorious, but also dehumanizing, animates Wallace's portrayals of the naval battle and the chariot race in *Ben-Hur*.

Though not initially an abolitionist, resolving rather to fight on the side of whoever intended to preserve the Union of the United States, Wallace ultimately rejected the institution of slavery. He wrote in his autobiography,

In the nature of things Freedom and Slavery cannot be coexistent. I could not bring myself to defend the institution of slavery; my sympathies would side with the fugitive against his master. In all nature there was nothing more natural than the yearning for freedom. (I, 238-39)

Lew Wallace parlayed his Civil War leadership into a part-time, life-long career as "General Lew Wallace," traveling widely to attend Civil War veterans' reunions and events.

Statesman and Ambassador

Following the war, Wallace served at two famous legal proceedings: the trial of the Lincoln Conspirators and the court martial of Henry Wirz, Commandant of the infamous Andersonville Prison, where nearly 13,000 Union soldiers died from mistreatment. In early 1865, he was detached on a secret service assignment to Mexico both to investigate reports of Confederates' continuing their fight south of the border and to make contact with Benito Juarez, who was fighting for Mexican Independence from the French. Wallace also sold arms to Juarez to help continue the Mexicans' fight. Wallace was even involved with a Florida recount—the disputed 1876 Presidential election between Tilden and Hayes (Morsberger and Morsberger 248-51).ⁱⁱ

In 1878, Wallace was appointed Governor of the New Mexico Territories by President Hayes and charged with ending the Lincoln County Wars. Here is where Wallace's life intersected with that of the infamous "Billy the Kid," William H. Bonney. Wallace made a deal for immunity with Bonney in a private meeting. Subsequent escapes and murders by Bonney negated the deal, and Wallace ultimately signed his death warrant. Aside from writing *Ben Hur*, his part in Bonney's arrest and execution may be Wallace's most notable role. He has been portrayed in more than a dozen movies and television shows about Billy the Kid, by actors including Jason Robards and Wilford Brimley (Adams).

Wallace did not enjoy New Mexico. In a letter to his wife Susan on April 29, 1881, he wrote that "Every calculation based on experience elsewhere fails in New Mexico." Mrs. Wallace did not remain there long—the violence, harsh weather, and difficult terrain did not

appeal to her—but she did save important archival material, still preserved today in the Governor’s Palace.

Wallace’s next adventure was as U.S. Minister to Turkey under President Garfield, a post he held from 1881 to 1885. At his introduction to Sultan Abdul Hamid II, Wallace horrified the translators by insisting on shaking the Sultan’s hand. No one was supposed to touch the Sultan! But, indeed, the Sultan did extend his hand, and the two improbably became friends. Ever the romantic, Wallace described in glowing terms the Sultan who was sometimes known as “Abdul the Assassin”: “His bearing is kingly, his face thin and colorless, eyes black and keen as a falcon’s. He rides a milk-white Arabian, which he manages with skillful and delicate hand” (*Autobiography*, I, 984-85).

While posted to Turkey, Wallace traveled throughout Europe and the Middle East, visiting places he had researched and described in *Ben Hur* with the sense that he had already been there. He began research for his third novel while living in Constantinople. When Grover Cleveland, a Democrat, became President in 1885, Wallace resigned and returned to the states, refusing the position in the Turkish government offered by the Sultan.

Author

Wallace’s career as an author began on August 22, 1863, when his poem “The Stolen Stars” was published on the front page of *Harper’s Weekly Magazine*. Fifteen stanzas long, the poem accuses the south of stealing stars from the flag and includes the line, “A million northern boys I’ll get to bring me home my stars.” He also authored the campaign biography of Benjamin Harrison, a friend, when Harrison was nominated for the Presidency in 1888, and the novels *The Fair Gods* (1873), concerning the conquest of the Aztecs by the Spanish, and *The Prince of India: or Why Constantinople Fell* (1893), about the legendary figure of the Wandering Jew. He is undoubtedly best remembered, though, for his second novel, begun in Crawfordsville and completed in New Mexico: *Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, published by Harper and Brothers on November 12, 1880.

Wallace had already written a story about the Wise Men, with whom he had long been fascinated, and put it away in a drawer unpublished, when in 1876 he had a chance encounter on the train from Crawfordsville to Indianapolis with Col. Robert Ingersoll, the famous atheist. During the train ride, Ingersoll challenged Wallace to describe traditional Christian beliefs. Dazzled by Ingersoll’s critical rhetoric, Wallace resolved to determine for himself what he believed:

To explain this, it is necessary now to confess that my attitude with respect to religion had been one of absolute indifference. I had heard it argued times innumerable, always without interest. [...] Yet here was I now moved as never before. Was the Colonel right? What had I on which to answer yes or no? [...] I resolved to study the subject. And while casting round how to set about the study to the best advantage, I thought of the manuscript in my desk. Its closing scene was the

child Christ in the cave by Bethlehem: why not go on with the story down to the crucifixion? That would make a book, and compel me to study everything of pertinency; after which, possibly, I would be possessed of opinions of real value. It only remains to say that I did as resolved, with results---first, the book "Ben Hur," and second, a conviction amounting to absolute belief in God and the Divinity of Christ. (Wallace, "Preface," iii-vii).

Wallace decided to show the religious and political condition of the world at the time of Christ's birth, which might demonstrate a necessity for a savior. (Contemporary scholars such as Marcus Borg now routinely interpret the life, death and resurrection of Jesus by considering its religious and political context.) Through the character of Massala, Wallace illustrates the political situation of Rome. Ben-Hur and his family furnish the religious background of Jewish messianic expectation. The healing of Ben-Hur's mother and sister after they have been stricken with leprosy illustrates Jesus' miraculous power. Balthasar, one of the three Magi, survives until the end of the story to provide literary continuity.

Wallace was aware of the risks of including the Jesus of the Gospels as a character in a historical novel, something that had never been done. "The Christian world would not tolerate a novel with Jesus Christ its hero, and I knew it. Nevertheless, writing of Him was imperative, and He must appear, speak, and act. Further, and worse as a tribulation, I was required to keep Him before the reader, the object of superior interest throughout. And there was to be no sermonizing. How could this be done without giving mortal offence? How, and leave the book a shred of popularity?" (*Autobiography*).

Wallace settled on three criteria: Christ would remain offstage until the end of the novel, would speak only words attested to by the gospels, and would not appear in any scene imagined solely by the author. The one exception to this rule is a scene where Ben-Hur, on a forced march while in Roman captivity, is offered a cup of cold water by Jesus at a well near Nazareth. This establishes the memory of Jesus for Ben-Hur, enabling his later recognition of the young Jewish prophet being crucified as the one who had given him water.

Wallace carefully researched the geography and topography of the Middle East and the details of life in the Roman Empire of the first century. "I had to be so painstaking! The subject was the one known thoroughly by more scholars and thinkers than any other in the wide range of literature. [...] Once I went to Washington, thence to Boston, for no purpose but to [...] satisfy myself of the mechanical arrangement of the oars in the interior of a trireme." (*Autobiography*).

The Legacy of *Ben Hur*

Ben-Hur sold slowly at first, but by the end of the 19th century, it had replaced Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as the bestselling novel of all time, a distinction it held until the publication of *Gone With the Wind* in 1936. Excerpts of *Ben-Hur* were widely published in anthologies and school textbooks. Christian clergy, many of whom who had heretofore

preached against novels, insisting that the Bible alone should be read by the faithful, began to recommend *Ben-Hur* to their flocks. Wallace's novel broke the barrier against religious fiction, and helped establish the genre that includes *Quo Vadis* by Henryk Sienkiewicz (1895), *The Robe* by Lloyd C. Douglas (1942), and *Barabbas* by Par Lagerkvist (1950).

Ben-Hur captured the imagination and spread through American culture. With Wallace's blessing and participation, the Supreme Tribe of Ben-Hur fraternal organization was created as a mutual benefit society, the objectives of which were to provide life insurance, improve members socially, provide entertainment, aid in business, secure employment, care for the sick, and bury the dead. Like many late 19th century societies, a full ritual was enacted, based on scenes from the book, with the officers of the society assuming character's roles. The society eventually failed financially and closed, but the Ben-Hur building, home of the society, still stands in Crawfordsville today, vacant and in need of restoration.

Tableau and re-enactments of scenes from the novel were staged in community auditoriums and church basements across the country, raising inevitable copyright issues, which were not resolved until motion pictures came on the scene. Meanwhile, the first Broadway production opened on November 29, 1899, with Wallace's support, after two significant challenges were addressed to his satisfaction. First, there was the difficulty of portraying Jesus Christ with an actor; Wallace agreed that Jesus Christ could be depicted as a beam of white light. Secondly, the climax of the conflict between Massala and Ben-Hur required staging a chariot race on the stage. Eight horses pulling two chariots were trained to run on treadmills installed in the floor of the stage with the background scenery installed on a cyclorama to give the appearance that the horses were really moving. A Broadway hit, the show also went on the road, often holding two-week engagements in U. S. cities. An estimated six thousand performances were seen by over twenty million people during the two decade run, which ended in April of 1921 ("General Lew Wallace Study and Museum").

In 1907, shortly after Wallace's death, a 15 minute long motion picture was made without authorization from either Harpers or Wallace's estate, represented by his son Henry, who pursued the issue of copyright. In a landmark Supreme Court decision written by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, the copyright was upheld ("Kalem Co. v. Harper Brothers"). Henry Wallace is thus credited with securing the intellectual property of authors from copyright infringement by film and theatrical productions. After initially resisting attempts to film the story, Henry in 1921 finally sold the rights for \$600,000. Eventually MGM acquired the rights, resulting in the 1925 motion picture, which, though far less famous than the 1959 one, is thought by some to feature a superior depiction of the chariot race.

The 1959 picture ensured the enduring fame of *Ben-Hur*. A vast marketing campaign, with a host of branded products, established new marketing strategies for both motion pictures and Christian iconography. Historian Howard Miller calls the release of the 1959 movie a

watershed event in the relationship between American culture and religion, particularly Christianity, describing it as “a film that combined unprecedented spectacle and action with deep spirituality, the whole of which was then skillfully sold in the marketplace to a wide general audience.” The film, according to Miller, was “a negotiation among sacred and secular” that helped American culture become modern without rejecting religion as Americans became accustomed to “Christian iconography in the secular market” (Miller).

Ben-Hur expresses social and religious themes that continued to play out in the 20th century, including a gentler characterization of Jews during an era in American history when anti-Semitism was common. Though converted to Christianity in the final chapter, for the balance of the story Judah Ben-Hur champions the cause of the Jews against Roman oppression. Wallace’s depiction of the crucifixion does not implicate the Jews, as he places characters representative of the whole of humanity at the crucifixion scene and along the way to Golgotha. Wallace is generally appreciated for his portrayal of a heroic Jewish warrior-prince.

Wallace’s biographers call him one of the “illustrious obscure,” a figure no longer widely known, though considered by his peers as one of the great men of their age. Wallace may no longer be as famous as he once was, but *Ben-Hur* nonetheless changed the role of the American novel, transformed the way movies were marketed, and bridged the gap between sacred texts and secular culture—and it was only one of Lew Wallace’s achievements. Wallace remains the only American novelist enshrined in Statuary Hall at the U.S. Capitol. At the unveiling on January 11, 1910, James Whitcomb Riley, famous Indiana poet, read his elegy to Wallace (“honored for his Nation’s sake, / And loved and honored for his own”), and Wallace was remembered as we still have reason to remember him today: as a dreamer, a painter, a poet, a nature student, a violinist, a soldier, a governor, a statesman, and a patriot (Morsberger and Morsberger 497).

Notes

ⁱ When he was not away on one of his adventures, Wallace lived most of his life in Crawfordsville, Indiana, the hometown of his wife, Susan Elston, an accomplished author in her own right. Her sister was married to Henry S. Lane, a Governor of Indiana and a Senator who helped secure the nomination of the Republican Party for Abraham Lincoln. In my own Crawfordsville childhood, in the mid-20th Century, Lew Wallace’s presence and that of the Elston and Lane families was still evident. The author’s local fame meant that the arrival of the 1959 movie *Ben-Hur* was an exciting event at the local Strand Theatre. The General Lew Wallace Study, where Wallace’s body lay in state after his death on February 5, 1905, remains a notable landmark in Crawfordsville.

ⁱⁱ Twenty electoral votes were in dispute, all in southern states. Wallace represented the Republicans as an arbitrator in the Florida recount. Ultimately, a compromise was reached. Hayes became President and the Republicans agreed to withdraw troops from the South.

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*Biographical Note



Deborah spent her childhood in Crawfordsville, Indiana, the hometown of Lew Wallace. She holds a Bachelor of Science Degree in Pharmacy from Ohio Northern University, but left her pharmacy career for full time ministry in 1995. She holds Master of Arts, Master of Divinity and Doctor of Ministry Degrees from United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio.

Deb is an Elder in the United Methodist Church and a member of the West Ohio Annual Conference. She has served as Senior Pastor of North Broadway Church in Columbus since July 2006. She serves as a board member for several United Methodist related non-profit organizations. This was Deb's first paper after joining the Columbus Torch Club, in preparation for which she re-read *Ben Hur* from cover to cover and made a trip to Crawfordsville, only to find the Lew Wallace museum closed because of a snowstorm.

Deb and her spouse, Gary, are the parents of two grown sons, and the grandparents of three granddaughters.

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