

ABSTRACT

THE FALL AND RISE OF LEW WALLACE: GAINING LEGITIMACY THROUGH POPULAR CULTURE

by Shaun Chandler Lighty

As a lawyer, soldier, and politician, Lew Wallace epitomized the nineteenth-century ideals of manhood. Yet a series of professional failures prompted Wallace to turn to writing as a way to reconstitute his identity. The century's best-selling novel, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, was the result. The questions Wallace explored in *Ben-Hur* about the historic reality of Christianity also resonated with the popular religiosity of Americans eager to experience faith vicariously. Aided by the late nineteenth-century mass-market machinery that propelled his novel to commercial success, Wallace became a popular authority on secular and religious matters by deriving definition and legitimacy from his audiences. Scholars generally omit Wallace and *Ben-Hur* from current historiography, yet both reveal important insights into late nineteenth-century American culture regarding manhood, popular religiosity, and celebrity.

THE FALL AND RISE OF LEW WALLACE:
GAINING LEGITIMACY THROUGH POPULAR CULTURE

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Introduction

“All scholarship,” T. J. Jackson Lears wrote, “is – or ought to be – a kind of intellectual autobiography.”¹ I have taken Lears’s statement to heart in preparing this thesis. I recall one of the first chapter books I read during my days at Sugar Creek Elementary School, several miles north of Crawfordsville, Indiana, was an orange-colored volume from the *Childhood of Famous Americans Series*. The book was titled *Lew Wallace: Boy Writer*. I was drawn to this book because Lew Wallace (1827-1905) was my fellow townsman. Although he died seventy years before I arrived, his presence could still be felt in the city. Most noticeable was his study, an impressive freestanding building, insulated from the encroachment of modern time by a massive brick wall. Even before I could read, I remember my parents driving past the building, and being told that Lew Wallace, the author of *Ben-Hur*, had worked there. Still at that early age I felt as though Wallace’s accomplishments contributed to my identity as a Crawfordsville resident.

When I was a high school freshman, my English teacher had her students write book reports from an approved list of titles. I perused the list, and seeing nothing to my liking, I asked if I could read *Ben-Hur* instead. She consented, and I spent the next month wrestling with Wallace’s antiquated prose. I do not remember the first time I saw the 1959 film version of *Ben-Hur*, but it must have been before I read the book because most of my report dealt with how the film and the book differed. I came away from *Ben-Hur* as unimpressed with Wallace’s authorship as my teacher was with my book report. However, my indifference to Wallace would soon change.

Four years later, I had finished my first year of college, and as all college students are, I was desperate for a job. I was loath to resume my staple summer employment preparing food at Arni’s. So I sent vocational inquiries to the three Crawfordsville museums. The General Lew Wallace Study and Museum, then called the Ben-Hur Museum, was the only institution to reciprocate interest. I would continue to work there through the next six years, during my spring and summer breaks, and during my years between college and graduate school. I learned all about Wallace from museum coordinator Joann Spragg. Among the small handful of Wallace scholars and students, Joann’s knowledge is unmatched. Her enthusiasm for Wallace is also infectious. The first task Joann gave me was organizing three filing cabinet drawers where she

¹ T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), xviii.

had collected every newspaper article and book paragraph she could that had the faintest mention of Lew Wallace, *Ben-Hur*, or related topics. Organizing those files also helped to organize my own thoughts about Wallace.

The dearth of academic-quality secondary material on Wallace did not concern me as I sorted those file drawers, although the absence of such material is puzzling in retrospect. Wallace's name frequently appears in popular secondary media: travel guides, Civil War magazines, and Billy the Kid articles. When his name does appear in scholarly secondary material, it is most often in connection with his most famous novel, *Ben-Hur*. Wallace is arguably one of the most influential nineteenth-century Americans whom nobody studies today. The more I thought about why scholars have ignored him, the more perplexed I became. Wallace was a man involved in nearly every major event of his lifetime: the Mexican-American War, the Civil War, the Florida Electoral Count, the Lincoln County Wars, and the Ottoman Empire's twilight. He was acquainted with every U.S. president from Abraham Lincoln to Theodore Roosevelt. And not least, he authored a novel that wildly outsold most nineteenth-century works. Therefore, Wallace's omission from historiography needs an explanation.

One can easily dismiss his military service as unremarkable, since he actively participated in only three battles. Wallace's time in Turkey took place during an era of American isolationism and had little direct impact on the United States. While many of the things he accomplished can be similarly explained away, *Ben-Hur* cannot be as easily dismissed. Some might counter that *Ben-Hur* was historical-adventure fiction whereas the prevailing late nineteenth-century literary trend was realism, a fact which explains *Ben-Hur*'s exclusion from nineteenth-century historiography as an anachronism. However, by excluding it, one also dismisses the millions of people who read *Ben-Hur*, and specifically those who derived some benefit from their reading of the book. If Lears's statement, quoted above, is correct, then any inquiry into *Ben-Hur* should necessitate first understanding Wallace.

Just as Wallace had his reasons for writing *Ben-Hur*, I too have my reasons for writing about Wallace. I wish to write a Wallace biography that begins to give his life some nineteenth-century cultural relevancy. It may be questioned if there is any merit in writing another Wallace biography; after all there are already three standard works. Wallace's own autobiography was posthumously published in 1906. Its weakness, however, is that Wallace only completed his tale up to his thirty-seventh year. His widow, with the assistance of journalist and friend Mary

Hannah Krout, cobbled together the rest of his life story using letters and articles he had written. While *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography* was completed for publication, it left much to be desired content-wise by giving fragmented accounts of the last, and most successful, years of his life. Forty years later, Irving McKee endeavored to rectify the incompleteness of Wallace's autobiography with "*Ben-Hur*" *Wallace: The Life of General Lew Wallace*. McKee's book remained the only complete Wallace biography for the next thirty years. Then in 1980, the centennial of *Ben-Hur*'s publication, *Lew Wallace: Militant Romantic* appeared from Robert and Katharine Morsberger. It is the most thorough and recent Wallace biography. I do not presume to replace *Lew Wallace: Militant Romantic*. However, the Morsbergers' portrayal of Wallace tends to divorce his actions from any external causes. That is not a criticism of the book as such. Rather, the book's apparent weakness is a reflection of where historical scholarship has gone in the past twenty-five years, with its emphasis on culture.²

One thing I hoped to discover by pursuing graduate studies was to make sense out of where Lew Wallace fit into his culture. The first book I read that helped me begin to do that was T. J. Jackson Lears's *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (1981). Wallace expressed the same tendencies as those individuals Lears described as antimodernists, even though Wallace was a generation older. Lears's historical characters were plagued with self-doubt, un-actualized expectations, and conflicted worldviews. They struggled to make sense of themselves, their environment, and their cultural context. As I argue in this thesis, *Ben-Hur* was a way for Wallace to deal with these struggles.

What exactly was the nature of Wallace's modern struggles? I often thought while giving tours at the study or reading his biographies that if Wallace was left to choose his own vocation, he would have been strictly an author or artist. Why did he become a soldier, a lawyer, and a politician before settling on authorship? I argue he became those things because his father was. Two books in particular have informed my thinking about my first chapter on Wallace and gender. E. Anthony Rotundo's *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (1993) and Michael Kimmel's *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (1996) are two of the best histories in this often-neglected field. Kimmel's book was

² Cultural history aims at examining how historical characters are formed, maintained, transformed, repressed, and resisted. For a helpful article on cultural history see Mark Poster, "Cultural Studies," in *Encyclopedia of American Cultural and Intellectual History*, ed. Mary Kupiec Cayton and Peter W. Williams (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2001), 2:705.

especially helpful in his use of Freud's Oedipal Complex to argue that men always measure their value in relation to other men, whether fathers, brothers, teachers, or friends. The homosocial pressures Wallace endured forced him to conform to the nineteenth-century conceptions of successful manliness which his father so well embodied. Understanding this is imperative to understanding how Lew Wallace came to write *Ben-Hur*. When Wallace's identity as a self-made man unraveled, he retreated from civilization and to authorship as a way to regain personal meaning and resolve the discomfort of conforming to a socially determined identity.

Ben-Hur, however, did not possess personal meaning for Wallace alone. Indeed, it had personal meaning for many readers. There are several works that are helpful in accounting for *Ben-Hur*'s popularity. Fundamental to this inquiry were Peter W. Williams' *Popular Religion in America: Symbolic Change and the Modernization Process in Historical Perspective* (1980) and Charles Lippy's *Being Religious, American Style: A History of Popular Religiosity in the United States* (1994). These works argue that religious belief frequently emerges outside of institutional boundaries when individuals are confronted with change and the prevailing belief system needs modification. The result is often a syncretistic individual faith that becomes popular when enough people find value in it. *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* can be categorized as popular religion because it was authored by a man who never belonged to a church, was distributed through secular channels, and was consumed by millions of readers.

Yet the fact that *Ben-Hur* was popular does not explain why it was. Paul Gutjahr's *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States* (1999) and David Morgan's *Protestants & Pictures: Religion, Visual Culture, and the Age of American Mass Production* (1999) suggest some answers to this question. Late nineteenth-century American Christians were besieged by doubts about the validity of their faith. Darwinian Naturalism and biblical higher criticism had stripped away many supernatural explanations for the world's existence. Gutjahr and Morgan argue that the popularity of illustrated Bibles and other religious visual aids were counters to modern doubt. The users of these devotional aids had their faith bolstered via an image of Jesus or maps of the Holy Land. The latter especially fostered religiosity through the physicality of places where Jesus walked. While the earliest editions of *Ben-Hur* had no illustrations, Wallace was meticulous in his description of the geography, customs, and costumes of his first-century characters. *Ben-Hur*'s historical accuracy functioned in a similar fashion to its contemporary visual religious aids by substantiating faith in a time of doubt.

People visit and contact the Lew Wallace Study for various reasons. Many Civil War aficionados pass through the doors. Many more visitors arrive because they saw the movie, fewer because they read the book. Martin Sheen visited once and professed to be an expert on the Lincoln County Wars; after all, his sons starred in *Young Guns*. A few Turks have visited, and at least one was at the point of tears when recalling what Wallace had done for his country. Several years ago a Jewish man from Seattle contacted the study especially interested in the assistance Wallace lent to the Zionists while in Constantinople. The point is that people who are familiar with Wallace view him in very different ways. This observation comprises the final chapter concerning Wallace and celebrity. This chapter benefited from Mary Kupiec Cayton's article "The Making of an American Prophet: Emerson, His Audiences, and the Rise of the Culture Industry in Nineteenth-Century America," where she employed reception theory to argue that "Emerson's cultural impact may have depended less on what he intended than on what key communities of interpreters made of him."³ The same argument can be made with Wallace as the subject.

Manhood, popular religion, and celebrity may initially appear to be three disparate themes upon which to construct a coherent narrative. However, the overarching storyline I wish to narrate concerns legitimacy in nineteenth-century America. The boy Wallace idolized his father, and at an early age he learned that attaining manly respect would necessitate conforming to his father's standard. Conformity also required him to abandon his artistic and literary pursuits, which were not then viewed as legitimate or manly full-time occupations. While in his thirties, Wallace met with professional, financial, and personal failures that prompted him to reevaluate the manly identity to which he had aspired. He resumed his artistic and literary passions as therapy for the pain of failure. His writing interests compounded with spiritual confusion led him to evaluate the historical reality of Jesus, and *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* was the result. However, he was not writing just for himself, but for an audience. The message and historical details of *Ben-Hur* tapped into a popular religious yearning for certainty in faith matters. *Ben-Hur*'s success restored Wallace to legitimacy, this time as an author, though *Ben-Hur*'s languishing first and second year sales did not aid his authorial status. Wallace's literary career was facilitated by his publisher, the media, advertisers, and ultimately by his readers.

³ Mary Kupiec Cayton, "The Making of an American Prophet: Emerson, His Audiences, and the Rise of the Culture Industry in Nineteenth-Century America," *American Historical Review* 92 (June 1987): 599.

Wallace was statesman but not churchman, yet he became a popular authority on secular and religious matters by deriving definition and legitimacy from his audiences.

In support of this narrative I have drawn upon manuscripts, Wallace's published works, contemporary newspaper and magazine articles, and artifacts. The Indiana Historical Society is the major depository of Wallace letters. What they do not own they have collected from other libraries and private collections, and microfilmed to produce a definitive and comprehensive collection of Wallace primary sources. Among Wallace's published works, his autobiography is indispensable for understanding him. His novels can also offer important insights into his personality. Periodicals, especially Wallace's hometown newspapers, have been an overlooked source by previous Wallace biographers. An exhaustive search of Crawfordsville's two major newspapers revealed small but important details necessary to my arguments. Finally, Wallace's lifetime collection of souvenirs that are housed and displayed at the General Lew Wallace Study and Museum afford the scholar some insights into his life that textual sources alone cannot provide.

Chapter One

Writing Your Name in History and Shuddering to Read It There: Lew Wallace and Manly Identity in Mid-Nineteenth Century America

Americans often refer to individuals according to their prominent social status or vocational accomplishment, whether they are academics, soldiers, businessmen, clergymen, or politicians. The small, western Indiana, nineteenth-century town of Crawfordsville was no different. Instances of socially defined status were easily observed among the citizens' titles. Wabash College in Crawfordsville was home to teachers and administrators like Professor Joseph F. Tuttle and Professor Caleb Mills. Senator Henry S. Lane, a notable Civil War politician, resided down the street from the college. Isaac Compton Elston, Crawfordsville's foremost citizen, lived next door to Lane and distinguished himself with his military title of major. Elston's title also differentiated him from his son of the same name, who had attained the rank of colonel during the Civil War. Even those prominent citizens without academic, political, or military laurels still received prefixes. The eminent novelist, naturalist, and lawyer J. Maurice Thompson sometimes had the abbreviated "Hon." attached to his name in Crawfordsville newspaper articles.

These titles were naturally limited to men, since these professions were, with rare exceptions, an exclusively male domain. Male titles acted as designations of distinction over other males. It was better to be referred to as colonel rather than mister. The former prefix proclaimed that the one who bore that title was a leader, dominant over other men. Naturally a general trumped all other titled men. A general had no superiors; he had seemingly reached the pinnacle of self-autonomy. Crawfordsville had three post-Civil War residents who could boast such a title: Mahlon D. Manson, a one-term Congressman and druggist by profession; Henry B. Carrington, a military science professor at Wabash College; and Lew Wallace, a soldier turned novelist. Yet Wallace as a Major-General managed to outrank even his peers who were only Brigadiers. He was the toast of the town, the celebrity in their midst, and the person who put Crawfordsville (if only for a brief time) on the map.

After the Civil War, the press and populace would rarely, if ever, refer to Wallace as simply "Lew Wallace." It was always "General Lew Wallace" or more often "General Wallace." Wallace was apparently a man among men, and his lifetime of accomplishments speaks for itself: Mexican-American and Civil War veteran, Governor of the New Mexico Territory, U.S.

Minister to Turkey, best-selling novelist, patented inventor, and artist. He was an individual who had little reason to express humility, a fact which makes it all the more curious that the name on his novels' title pages omitted the "General" prefix. Even his posthumously published autobiography was simply titled *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*. Wallace's choice of what appeared on his title pages reveals much about Wallace's identity as a nineteenth-century man. Manly identity in modern American culture is often a contradiction between "fulfilling. . .a particular sense of what a person thinks he should be and what others. . .think he should be."¹ Many episodes from Wallace's life reflect this tension to the extent that he was described as "a fugitive. . .rather than a citizen of the Gilded Age."² There would be little question of Wallace's Gilded Age citizenship if he conformed to that society's conception of manhood, but he did not. He violated the manly ideal by engaging in activities perceived as irresponsible such as fiction writing and the arts, then predominately feminine activities. He also shunned responsibility by undertaking physical flights away from American society. Why did Wallace conduct himself in these unmanly ways?

Understanding Wallace's historical context helps to explain that his behaviors and attitudes were reflective of the tensions experienced by many middle-class white men living in the new commercial, industrial, and modern climate of late nineteenth-century America. This climate revoked previously held notions of autonomy and self-determination and caused many men to become "preoccupied with authentic experience as a means of revitalizing a fragmented personal identity. . .[and a] therapeutic quest for self-realization."³ Men like Wallace succumbed, challenged, conformed, and reformed society's "version of what men. . .are – and ought to be."⁴ Wallace's flights from civilization and to authorship were ways for him to regain personal meaning and resolve the discomfort of conforming to a socially determined manly identity.

Sigmund Freud taught that what humans become as adults is largely determined by their childhoods. Lew Wallace was born in 1827 at Brookville, a small eastern Indiana frontier

¹ Joe L. Dubbert, *A Man's Place: Masculinity in Transition* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Spectrum Book/Prentice-Hall, 1979), 5.

² Robert Morsberger and Katharine Morsberger, *Lew Wallace: Militant Romantic* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1980), xii.

³ T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* (1981; repr., New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), xix.

⁴ E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* ([New York]: HarperCollins Publishers, BasicBooks, 1993), 1.

village. Infant Wallace did not know that he had entered a time when many believed “a man could determine his place in society through his own efforts. . .[and] master. . .his own social fate through personal energy and determination.”⁵ Andrew Jackson became president the year after Wallace’s birth and best exemplified the sentiment of self-made manhood after remaking himself from a poor, orphan boy into a military and political giant. Jackson, however, remained nothing more than an abstraction as young Wallace slowly became cognizant of his surroundings. His father, David Wallace, was a more proximate exemplar of Jacksonian era manhood.

David Wallace’s father, Andrew, “was of the kind so often likened to a rolling stone,” constantly on the move and never finding the fortune he sought.⁶ He did, however, have the good fortune to serve as William Henry Harrison’s quartermaster, whose acquaintance would prove beneficial to his son. Harrison appointed David Wallace to the West Point Military Academy, whence he graduated in 1821. David served as a West Point mathematics professor following his graduation, then resigned his position, became a lawyer, and married Esther French Test, the daughter of a prominent frontier judge. After establishing himself in this way, David embarked on a political career that would take him from Indiana state legislator to lieutenant governor then governor and eventually a one-term trip to Congress. David Wallace embodied the sentiments of self-made manhood and effectively modeled what constituted manliness for his four young sons.⁷

David Wallace’s impression was not lost on young Lew. The earliest patriarchal reminiscences from Lew Wallace’s autobiography occurred after the family had moved to Covington, Indiana, a small town on the Wabash River near the Illinois border. During that time, many frontier settlers feared that Black Hawk’s confederacy might venture from Illinois into Indiana. David Wallace, no doubt the one Covington resident with the most military background, organized and drilled a company of men as a precaution. Lew Wallace recalled seeing his father in the gray West Point Cadet uniform and remarked, “None of the good man’s after honors exalted him in my eyes like that scant garment.”⁸ After an exciting day of watching citizen-soldiers perform drills, he remembered, “When night came, and my mother tucked me in the little trundle-bed with my elder brother, I had gained such store of wisdom pertaining to war

⁵ Ibid., 168.

⁶ Lew Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1906), 1:3

⁷ Wallace’s sons with Esther, in order from oldest to youngest, are William, Lewis, John, and Edward. John died of scarlet fever in 1832. All the others survived into adulthood.

⁸ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 1:5.

that it passed into my dreams and from them into my life; so I promised myself, saying many times, ‘Wait until I am a man.’”⁹ Already at this young age, Wallace recognized that his father’s value was measured in relation to other men.

The homosocial demands on David Wallace were enough to take him to Indianapolis and a political career. The drawback of his professional success was his removal from his family, which remained in Covington. In his absence, Esther became the most influential figure in her young sons’ lives. Maternal influences became increasingly important for nineteenth-century children because of fathers’ frequent work-related absences. The affection mothers bestowed on their children was viewed as “crucial [to] the task of character development.”¹⁰ Lew in particular seemed to make this task doubly difficult for his mother. He was prone to run off and spend his days with the ferryman. Wallace recalled that those days were “days of suspense with her. She came to know where I was to be found, and. . . followed after me.” She patiently taught him his alphabet and “made [the] discovery that to keep [her son] in bounds there was nothing like a book.” When that failed, Esther was not averse to dressing her son in “a woman’s frock or petticoat,” which Wallace recalled, “shut me in quite effectively.” Yet the most potent method of character development Esther Wallace employed “were her entreaties and tears. The contrition they brought,” Wallace wrote, “lasted until the vitality which was the unconquerable part of my nature drove me to going again.” Esther’s behavior illustrates the powerful role that maternal sensibility played in the construction of children’s character.¹¹

When Wallace was seven, his mother’s “love, with all its countless illustrations of touch, look, care, sympathy, and word. . . [became] but a memory.” Twenty-seven-year-old Esther Wallace contracted tuberculosis; her husband “was in New York on business. . . dreamless of what was to occur.” Lew Wallace recalled being summoned into the room when she was dying and called out to her. “She did not answer,” he wrote, “and then I understood the silence. The comprehension fell upon me as darkness leaps in on the blowing-out of the last light.” Wallace and his two brothers were now all alone. Esther’s death underscored an important psychological development for Wallace. It was here that he broke with the domestic sphere characterized by “mutual dependence” and entered a “public world of competition and conflict.”¹²

⁹ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 1:19.

¹⁰ Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 28.

¹¹ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 1:11, 21, 27, 27.

¹² Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 1:34, 33; Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 52.

Wallace's boyhood was defined in opposition to control. He explained, "I possessed an animal enjoyment of existence so pure and deep that it was an absolute governor."¹³ The loss of his mother, compounded by his father's absence, left no one to instill in him "habits of regularity and self-control" which were reckoned central for future manly success.¹⁴ As a boy Wallace did what he pleased, never mindful that his "father's permission [was necessary] to make [a] change of residence."¹⁵ Wallace's entry into Wabash College best exemplifies his carefree attitude. His older brother, William, had been sent to Crawfordsville to enroll at the recently founded Presbyterian preparatory school.¹⁶ After a few days, Lew grew to miss his brother and set out to Crawfordsville by himself, although he eventually persuaded his teenaged uncle to carry him thither on horseback. Naturally, Wallace arrived at the college unprepared and described himself as follows:

My straw hat, besides being a production of the country, and ragged and rain-stained, hung to the back of my head as if there had been a peg there for its special accommodation, allowing my shocky hair the broadest liberty. My feet were bare and unwashed, and to make them more conspicuous, one of my great toes was garnished by a rag. . .My trousers, rolled nearly to my knees, hung to my gaunt torso dependent upon a single suspender of cloth listing. My shirt, guiltless of a button, offered a display of neck and breast red as a Mohave Indian's.¹⁷

Wallace's self-description, whether actual or invented, resonated with the popular images of boyhood personified by Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, "independent, fun-loving, and noble-hearted."¹⁸

Wallace enrolled at Wabash, and by his own admission attended only a few weeks.¹⁹ His residency is not as important as his reason for attending Wabash in the first place: his desire to be close to William. Historian of childhood Steven Mintz observed, "The sibling bond. . .signified

¹³ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 1:35.

¹⁴ Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 82.

¹⁵ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 1:37.

¹⁶ Crawfordsville, Indiana, is approximately thirty miles east of Covington. Wabash College was founded in 1832 and is the third oldest Indiana college.

¹⁷ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 1:39.

¹⁸ Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 83.

¹⁹ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 1:41. Wallace's recollection of his brief tenure at Wabash does not agree with college records, which show that his tuition was paid for two years. This may be either an example of Wallace's delinquency or his self-fiction.

loyalty, connection, intimacy, selflessness, and continuity.”²⁰ William was in many ways the only stability Lew knew. Furthermore, Lew defined himself in relation to William. “It is singular,” he remembered, “the frequency with which [William] was held up to me as an example. . .served. . .to increase my pride in him. Had he been more like me, perhaps it had been different.”²¹ Wallace’s boyhood worship of his brother affirmed the notion that a male’s worth is homosocially determined.²²

Despite the influence William exerted, Lew Wallace persisted in challenging “the dictates of respectable” manhood.²³ After leaving Wabash, he reportedly drifted around the county and briefly attended a Crawfordsville seminary but spent most of his time fishing and hunting. He continued to demonstrate “frivolous behavior, the lack of worthy aims, and the want of self-control,” all of which demarcated boyhood from manhood.²⁴ To what extent Wallace’s acting out was a reaction against his mother’s death and father’s absence is an open question, but the situation did not improve when David Wallace returned and collected his sons in 1836.

David Wallace, however, did not return alone; he brought with him his nineteen-year-old bride, Zerelda Gray Sanders. William told Lew that their father had brought them “a new mother,” at which point “all the rebellious sparks in [Lew Wallace’s] nature blew together and broke into flame.” “She may be your mother, but she’s not mine,” he retorted to his brother’s statement. He felt betrayed by his father’s actions. “I had not been consulted,” he fumed. He remembered his mother lying in a forsaken grave and was determined that Zerelda, who was only ten years older than himself, would never replace her. However, it became necessary for him to modify his hard-line stance when he returned from the woods deathly ill; it was Zerelda who nursed him back to health. Her saving act was enough for young Wallace to forgive her intrusion into his life, and henceforth he called and considered her to be his mother.²⁵

David Wallace’s return, either because of his initial absence or his son’s spite, did not succeed in tempering Lew’s juvenile irresponsibility. An antebellum father was supposed to

²⁰ Mintz, *Huck’s Raft*, 87.

²¹ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 1:37.

²² Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 26.

²³ Mintz, *Huck’s Raft*, 83.

²⁴ Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 20.

²⁵ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 1:45. Esther Wallace’s grave was forsaken not only metaphorically, but in reality since there is no extant headstone at her burial place in the Liberty Street Cemetery in Covington. Also, Wallace’s eventual admiration of his step-mother was enough for him to use her to model Judah’s mother in *Ben-Hur*.

teach “sons the importance of perseverance and thrift, of diligence and punctuality, of industry and ambition.”²⁶ Fortunately for David he had other avenues open to him that might more effectively impress these values upon his wayward son. He sought out Professor Samuel K. Hoshour in Centerville, Indiana, and saw that William and an aunt were nearby to assist. The professor was unlike any educator Lew Wallace had yet encountered; he was fair in his discipline, made arithmetic palatable, and worked to develop his pupils’ strengths. Wallace remembered, “Professor Hoshour was the first to observe a glimmer of writing capacity in me. An indifferent teacher would have allowed the discovery to pass without account.”²⁷ The teacher patiently taught the pupil and played to Wallace’s interests rather than chastising him for his weaknesses. Hoshour introduced his student to John Quincy Adams’ rhetoric, Shakespeare, Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield*, Byron, and the Bible as literature. This culmination of Wallace’s education was teaching him to become not only a better writer, but also a storyteller.

Fiction writing was not favored by many antebellum elites, including David Wallace. David’s reading encompassed Macaulay, Byron, Milton, Shakespeare, and Thucydides. Wallace noted that his father was “a subscriber to all the great British quarterly magazines, and bought the best editions of the best books.” David would read the classics and great English works aloud to his sons and have them do likewise. Fictional works and American works were rare in David Wallace’s library. Many male Americans were reluctant to write fiction because it was seen as frivolous and unproductive, and consequently, unmanly behavior. Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, for instance, apprehensively began their literary careers around this time. David Wallace believed that his son wasted too much time reading fiction. Lew Wallace frequently spent days in the company of Natty Bumppo, Red Rover, Ivanhoe, and Ichabod Crane. Consequently he was not spending time in the classroom or on assignments. Wallace reflected, “Looking back to the thrashings I took stoically and without a whimper, I console myself thinking of the successful lives there have been with not a jot of algebra in them.”²⁸

It was this cavalier attitude that David hoped Hoshour could remedy in his son. Instead the professor reinforced it by making the perceived liability an asset. Wallace admitted that Hoshour “dropped a light into my understanding and caught me” through his patient and

²⁶ Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 27.

²⁷ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 1:56.

²⁸ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 1:81, 54.

respectful guidance. In some ways Hoshour acted as a surrogate father for Wallace by giving him the attention that his real father did not or could not. Wallace believed the year spent in Centerville with Hoshour was the turning point of his life. Across the grave, Wallace retrospectively saluted his teacher, “I know wherein I am most obliged to you – unconsciously, perhaps, but certainly you taught me how to educate myself up to every practical need.” David succeeded in modeling antebellum manhood for his son, but Hoshour developed the tools for Wallace’s transition from boyhood to manhood.²⁹

David was prevented from being his son’s mentor because of his paternal responsibility as disciplinarian. Even though an antebellum father was “encouraged to love and cherish” his children, his disciplinarian role “served to underline his authority and distance,” and consequently, “love was not always offered with great warmth or informal ease.”³⁰ David went through great pains to transform “the impulsive passions of the boy into the purposeful energies of the man.”³¹ A clear example of David’s effort concerned his son’s venture into the artistic realm. After his election, David commissioned Jacob Cox to paint his gubernatorial portrait. Lew quickly latched onto Cox and was invited to grind the artist’s paint cakes. The boy was determined to try his hand at painting and smuggled some supplies to the attic where he organized his studio. Zerelda, curious at her stepson’s absence as well as missing household supplies, tracked Lew down and brought him and his work before David. His father, in a moment of levity, laughed at the contents of Lew’s studio: a dog-hair brush, a wood box panel as a canvas, and castor oil. He conceded that his son had produced a recognizable portrait of Chief Black Hawk, but reproved him on the perils of being an artist where no ability or patrons existed. Lew countered with the example of Cox, in response to which his father pointed out that the man had a practical trade in addition to being an artist.³² Wallace recalled, “A predilection for art might have become a passion” had it not been for his father’s admonition.³³ Nevertheless, he covertly persisted.

This episode contributed to Wallace’s growing psychic crisis as the boy was told what he should be and discouraged from being what he wanted or could be. David Wallace was ultimately looking out for the welfare and best interests for his son. However, the options David

²⁹ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 1:58, 59.

³⁰ Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 26-27.

³¹ Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 21.

³² Cox was a tinsmith by trade.

³³ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 1:50.

endorsed also had to do with the manly nineteenth-century goals of wealth and respectability. David Wallace admonished his son to begin the transition from boyhood to manhood. Lew Wallace's journey to manhood needed to be substantiated homosocially. As sociologist Michael Kimmel has explained, "From fathers and boyhood friends to teachers, coworkers, and bosses, the evaluative eyes of other men are always. . . watching [and] judging" in order to determine who is worthy of being called a man.³⁴

Like other nineteenth-century fathers, David Wallace was "expected to prepare his son in a practical sense for entry into the world."³⁵ He had done his best to accomplish this goal through financing his son's education. Unfortunately, his son suffered chronic lapses of academic application.³⁶ At sixteen years of age, Wallace was summoned into his father's library where a stack of paid school bills was handed to him. David lamented his son's wasted educational opportunities and then remarked, "Without shutting the door upon you, I am resolved that from to-day you must go out and earn your own livelihood. I shall watch your course hopefully."³⁷ Wallace the adolescent was both relieved and regretful to be freed from his father's control. He knew he had disappointed his father by failing to transition seamlessly from boy to youth to man. Yet he also rejoiced in the fact that he could now direct his own course. He recalled as he left, "I. . . look[ed] back at the house; and I see it yet made more lasting in recollection by my father standing in the open door. . . It will not be hard to understand what brought and held him there while I remained in sight."³⁸ David Wallace had done what he could for his wayward son and anxiously hoped that by turning him out on his own he would find his own way to become a man.

Lew Wallace quickly located a job copying court records. An unfulfilling vocation, it allowed him to support himself. In order to break the monotony of his profession, he began an evening habit of diligently studying and writing. The book that consumed his attention was Prescott's *Conquest of Mexico*, from which he reasoned that a great novel could be written about the event. *The Fair God*, Wallace's first historical adventure novel, had its genesis during this

³⁴ Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 7. Lew Wallace wrote that his father's eyes were "unusually observant of me" (*Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 1:78).

³⁵ Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 26.

³⁶ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 1:14.

³⁷ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 1:78.

³⁸ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 1:79.

somber period of his life.³⁹ Obviously he was still enjoying the frivolous pursuits that his father and other men would frown upon by escaping to a militaristic and exotic land of the past through authorship.

Imagining a time when blood was spilt and manhood was violently proven compelled Wallace to seek the physical experience. Fortunately for him, Indianapolis had several militia companies, where in addition to being an avenue of escape from oppressive domestic life and work, both young and old could prove their manliness. Wallace joined the Marion Rifles and was elected second sergeant. The company was composed mostly of those “incapable of mustaches” and was viewed as amateurish in comparison with the elite City Greys of Indianapolis. This was one more homosocial arena where Wallace’s manhood could be tested. However, the case was settled when the Rifles bested the Greys in a mock battle. Wallace recalled that this event was his “initiation into the Ancient and Honorable Order of Soldiers.” Wallace’s soldiering was a bold first step in his transformation to manhood.⁴⁰

After nearly two years of copying records, Wallace remembered, “I felt the impulses of manhood in near approach. The ego in me began to wrestle with the question. . . what am I to do with myself?” Wallace was beginning to equate manhood with occupation. Having exhausted his patience with copying, Wallace approached his father with the proposition that he begin studying law. Wallace recognized that the law was a stepping-stone to politics and greater manly accolades. After a year of study and practicing law under his father’s supervision, Wallace was prepared to take the bar exam. David Wallace must have been delighted that his wayward son had finally come around and was on the threshold of becoming all he had envisioned Lew to be, which was ultimately a reflection of himself.⁴¹

There was, however, one last detour on the journey, simultaneously one last fling with boyish adventure and a crucible for testing manhood. The increasing tensions between the United States and Mexico drew Wallace’s attention away from his legal studies. If there was to be a war, he intended to fight. On the eve of the Mexican-American War, Wallace took the bar exam but was indifferent to the results. In a note appended to his exam, he stated his military intentions regardless of his admission or rejection to the bar. A few days later Wallace received

³⁹ While *The Fair God* began here it was not published until 1873, nearly twenty-five years later.

⁴⁰ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 1:93, 94.

⁴¹ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 1:98.

a reply: “The Court interposes no objection to your going to Mexico.”⁴² Needless to say, his law license was not enclosed.

When war was declared on Mexico, Wallace recruited a company from Indianapolis, which would comprise part of the First Indiana Infantry. At only nineteen years of age, he was elected the company’s second lieutenant. Indianapolis citizens gave the troops a splendid sendoff and marched with them to the wagons. “My father marched with me,” Wallace recalled. “The moment came for me to climb into the wagon. Up to that [moment] he had kept silent, which was well enough, seeing I had only to look into his face to know he was proud of me. . . [H]e took my hand and said: ‘Good-bye. Come back a man.’”⁴³ Wallace broke down and cried at his father’s words. Wallace’s service in the Mexican-American War was unremarkable since his regiment was stationed far from the field and lost more men to disease than battle. The only war actions he witnessed were a few skirmishes and reconnaissance actions. Despite his unspectacular war service, he returned to Indiana in 1847 as a member of the manly fraternity of war veterans.

Wallace resumed law study with his father and eventually received his license to practice from the Indiana Supreme Court in 1849. He then set out from Indianapolis to open his first law office in his boyhood haunt of Covington. Covington was not the best place to launch a successful career, but it offered him the chance to excel in a less competitive environment than Indianapolis could offer. His move paid off when he was elected Prosecuting Attorney of the First Congressional District within a year of being admitted to the bar. The election marked the twenty-three year old Wallace as a rising political star in the Democratic Party.⁴⁴ Concerning his

⁴² Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 1:113.

⁴³ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 1:115.

⁴⁴ It is important to note the reason for Wallace’s political party preference. David Wallace was a Whig, and Lew Wallace appeared to follow in his father’s footsteps. However, during the Mexican-American War Zachary Taylor had made some disparaging comments about the courage of an Indiana regiment at the Battle of Buena Vista. It was not Wallace’s regiment, but it was a regiment from his state, and to impugn the valor of one Indiana regiment was to do the same to all Indiana regiments. Wallace voraciously defended the honor of Indiana throughout his life; in fact, when the Indiana regiments were sworn in at the beginning of the Civil War, their motto became “Remember Buena Vista,” in other words, demonstrate in the Civil War that the charges leveled against Indiana during the Mexican-American War were wrong and furthermore unjust. After the Mexican-American War Zachary Taylor rode his military fame to a presidential nominee of the Whigs. Wallace felt betrayed by the Whigs and was determined to do whatever was in his power to see that Taylor lost the election. His actions included operating a Free Soil Party press in Indianapolis, but when that party folded and his backers left him in financial debt, his only other political option was to become a Democrat, which he remained until early in the Civil War when he became a Republican.

new position, Wallace wrote to his brother, “I’ve had first rate success in my Prosecutions, so far; and have not only sustained myself, but also, made friends and won laurels.”⁴⁵

Wallace’s practice as a rural antebellum attorney enabled him to reinforce his manly identity via “riding the circuit.” As historian E. Anthony Rotundo has explained, “A judge and a troop of lawyers left a central town or city and, for months at a time, would travel together from one place to another to hold court.”⁴⁶ The masculine sphere of legal practice fostered a fraternal organization whereby members “maintained their strength and solidarity. . . [by gathering] their hostilities and redirect[ing] them.”⁴⁷ The closed legal sphere was simultaneously hostile and collegial and extolled “camaraderie, competitiveness, physical courage, practicality, personal trust, oratorical prowess, entrepreneurial skill, and an aversion to bookishness,” many of which were also admired virtues in the larger masculine sphere.⁴⁸ For Wallace and other antebellum lawyers, the bar gave them “a distinctive sense of authority and honor” among other men.⁴⁹

Wallace, like many other nineteenth-century men, had “a hunger to be a somebody, amidst everybody.” Apparently soldiering, practicing law, and engaging in politics were not enough to socially demonstrate his manhood. So he joined Covington’s Masonic Lodge on November 6, 1850. The Masonic lodge was popular in nineteenth-century America because it “provided solace and psychological guidance during young men’s troubled passage to manhood.” In particular, the Masonic religious mythology and ritual were manly alternatives to the emasculated liberal theology espoused from church pulpits. Historian Mark Carnes argued, “If middle-class men built new temples, it was because existing ones had proven deficient; if they created strange new gods, it was because the ones with which they were familiar had failed them; and if they chose to evoke spiritual wastelands, it was because such representations in some way resembled the world in which they lived.” Many Northern antebellum men were indifferent to worshipping a doe-eyed androgynous Jesus because he was not manly enough. As an alternative the Masonic order venerated a secret deity that resembled a Calvinist “distant and

⁴⁵ Lew Wallace to William Wallace, 11 September 1851. Lew Wallace Collection, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, Indiana (hereafter cited as LWC).

⁴⁶ Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 197.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁴⁸ Michael Grossberg, “Institutionalizing Masculinity: The Law as a Masculine Profession,” in *Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America*, edited by Mark C. Carnes and Clyde Griffen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 137.

⁴⁹ Samuel Haber, *The Quest for Authority and Honor in the American Professions, 1750-1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), ix.

impersonal” Father God. Father imagery was everywhere in Masonry. Masonic ritual included re-enacting patriarchal narratives, in which participants were encouraged to “transform the figure of a patriarch into the representation of his own father.” Perhaps Wallace recognized that the Masonic deity and patriarchs were not unlike his own father, and in order to better relate to him or gain his approval, it was necessary to conform to these standards. Like his father, Wallace remained a Mason his entire life and ascended through the order becoming a thirty-second degree Mason of the Scottish Rite. Masonry was about being manly, but Wallace discovered that the final degrees “contradicted the assumption that men were innately impure, aggressive, and unemotional,” which was taught in the earlier degrees. Rather, the higher degrees affirmed “that men possessed traits socially defined as female.” In the darkness of the lodge, it possibly dawned on Wallace that his father was more empathetic than he had been disposed to believe.⁵⁰

Joining the Masons, aside from reinforcing Wallace’s conceptions of manhood, served a very practical purpose. According to Carnes, “The expressed intention of the young man joining an order to make contacts and acquire status masked a desire to gain sufficient position to marry.”⁵¹ Wallace migrated to Covington not entirely for professional reasons, but also to live near Crawfordsville, where Susan Elston resided. Along with vocation, love was “the greatest concern of young men facing the future.”⁵²

Wallace met his future bride upon returning from the war. His commanding officer, Henry Lane, was the husband of Susan’s sister and arranged for Lew and Susan to meet. While Lane had no reservations about Wallace, Susan’s father needed to be impressed. Major Isaac Compton Elston was cognizant of Wallace’s pedigree but wary of the young man’s life record. However, the mere prospect of winning Susan’s hand was all the incentive Wallace needed to be diligent in his career and prove his worth to Major Elston. Fortunately, Wallace’s rising star changed his marriage prospects for the better, and he confided to his older brother:

⁵⁰ Haber, *The Quest for Authority*, 96; Mark Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 14, 65, 59, 124, 149. This paragraph on Masonry is mostly conjecture. Mark Carnes book is very insightful, but Wallace’s Masonic experience is difficult to make sense of since it was, after all, a secret society. I do think that Masonry had an impact on Wallace’s gender identity and also in his relations to his father. It is notable that the only personal item of David’s, aside from some books, that Wallace held on to and still exists today is his father’s Masonic apron. This anomaly needs to be made sense of somehow and this paragraph was my attempt to do so.

⁵¹ Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America*, 14.

⁵² Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 58.

She's the prettiest girl living. . .With the family I stand fairly admitted and recognized. The last time I was there they 'showed me to the public' in their family carriage, the old Maj. himself driving. Still, the old gent. don't [sic] like me, and you know I'm not famous for strict adherence to the golden rule – "return good" &c. He treats me politely; to him my manner is a mingling of courtesy and independence.⁵³

One account related that Wallace's final test in proving his marriageable worth was when "he climbed to the roof of a house burning near [the Elston's] and heroically battled the blaze."⁵⁴ A successful legal and political career and disinterested benevolence in fire fighting demonstrated his manliness and solidified the Elston's opinion of his suitability for their daughter.

Lew Wallace married Susan Elston in 1852. The following year brought the birth of their only child, and the young family's relocation to Crawfordsville from Covington. A humorous letter written by Wallace to his brother on the eve of his son's birth hinted that Lew Wallace believed he had actualized, if not surpassed, David's hopes for him. Regarding the naming of his son, Wallace wrote:

The fellow's name shant be David – that's too plebian – nor William, - that's very pretty for a child, but unfit for a man, - nor Edward, - that's too pretty for either man or baby. I have determined that the most aristocratic and democratic, the most romantic and unpedantic, the most noble, manly, appropriate and significant of all that "best becomes a man" is – "Lew."⁵⁵

His son was in fact named after Henry Lane, but it is notable that Wallace jested that his own first name was manlier than those of either his father or brothers. Wallace now had a successful career, a wife, and a son. Perhaps as a final accent to his manhood, Wallace grew his trademark goatee, which would be variously kept and unkempt for the rest of his life.⁵⁶

Wallace was becoming more and more like his father. Like David, Wallace became a soldier, lawyer, husband, and father. His political career looked to be on an intercept course with

⁵³ Lew Wallace to William Wallace, 23 August 1850. LWC.

⁵⁴ Morsberger, *Lew Wallace: Militant Romantic*, 40.

⁵⁵ Lew Wallace to William Wallace, 17 February 1853. LWC.

⁵⁶ The growth of Wallace's goatee cannot be precisely dated. The last depiction of a clean-shaven Wallace is a daguerreotype in the Lew Wallace Study collection. In this daguerreotype, Wallace is holding his son Henry, who appears to be two or three years old, which would date the image to 1855 or 1856. The next image known of Wallace is an engraving in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly* depicting Wallace and his staff in the field near Romney (WV) in early 1861. Wallace is shown with a full beard, which would later be trimmed to a goatee. So, it is fair to state that Wallace's facial hair was grown between 1855 and 1861.

his father's career at the very least. He was elected to the Indiana State Senate in 1856, when he was only twenty-nine years old. That same year Wallace ventured into another fraternal enterprise by organizing the Montgomery Guards, a Crawfordsville militia unit. This group demonstrated their warrior-manliness in drills and parades and was lavished with public praise. Naturally, Wallace as the company's captain gleaned the most honors and statewide recognition. Wallace's star appeared as though it would never halt its ascent. When David Wallace died in 1859, he could rest assured that his son had reached manhood, but the next fifteen years would teach Lew Wallace that manhood's permanence sometimes evaporated into the air.

When Fort Sumter was seized and Abraham Lincoln issued a call for volunteers, Indiana Governor Oliver P. Morton knew to whom he could turn. Because of the Montgomery Guards' excellent reputation, Morton entrusted Wallace with the position of adjutant general, to recruit and organize the volunteer regiments. Morton, a Republican, had no reservations about entrusting this task to the Democrat Wallace. Wallace had made it clear to Morton a few months earlier that he had become concerned and appalled at the traitorous agendas being pursued by the Indiana Democrats. He was soon to break completely with the party.

Wallace recruited and organized 130 companies, almost double the requested quota. His task accomplished, he tendered his resignation as adjutant general in order that he might receive a field command. After his unremarkable service in Mexico, Wallace was eager to serve in the field and "partake of the excitement and . . . bask in the glory of successfully proving himself a man" in an arena other than civilian life.⁵⁷ Morton granted Wallace's request, and he assumed the colonelcy of the Eleventh Indiana Infantry, which was organized as a Zouave unit. His own Montgomery Guards constituted one of the companies.

Wallace found success early in the Civil War as the rest of the Union forces were floundering. He led a successful raid on Romney, Virginia (later West Virginia), and received a great deal of publicity for this action, including a full page engraving in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated*. Success and the advantage of having a brother-in-law, Henry S. Lane, in Congress aided Wallace's promotion to brigadier-general shortly after Romney. Wallace soon found himself with the Army of the Tennessee, led by General Ulysses S. Grant, conducting a Union offensive to cut the state of Tennessee in two by first capturing Forts Heiman, Henry, and

⁵⁷ George Cotkin, *Reluctant Modernism: American Thought and Culture, 1880-1900* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 148.

Donelson on the Cumberland River. Wallace wrote to his wife from Fort Henry, “I find myself just as anxious to go forward as ever. I find my interest in battles rather increased than otherwise – in fact, I like the excitement, and in very truth, I never heard music as fascinating and grand as that of battle.”⁵⁸ At Fort Donelson, Wallace was given command of a division, and his battle actions proved decisive in the Union victory. Grant, of course, received the glory, earning the moniker “Unconditional Surrender.” However, Wallace was also rewarded by gaining another promotion to major general. The thirty-four-year-old Wallace was the youngest major general in the Union army. He could rise no further in rank, but oh, how he could fall.

In early April 1862, the Army of the Tennessee was encamped around Pittsburg Landing on the Tennessee River. Wallace’s division was stationed six miles down river at Crump’s Landing when Confederates attacked the Federal forces at Pittsburg Landing on the morning of April 6. From Pittsburg Landing, Grant dispatched orders for Wallace to move his division to the battlefield. Wallace received the orders shortly before noon, but the division failed to arrive until dusk. The reasons for his tardiness were largely due to poor communication to and from the field as well as swampy terrain through which his division, including artillery, had to traverse.⁵⁹ The arrival of Wallace’s division and Don Carlos Buell’s army turned the battle into a Union victory, but the celebration was short-lived. Union casualties alone totaled 13,000, and it was the largest loss of life the then one-year-old war had produced. The battle was contemporarily named the Battle at Pittsburg Landing, but it is better known as Shiloh, a word of Hebrew origin meaning “place of peace.” For the thousands of soldiers killed in battle, it was their place of peace, but the men who survived carried physical and psychological wounds for the rest of their lives. Wallace was no different.

Wallace wrote to Susan shortly after the battle and informed her that there were several lies circulating about his command at Shiloh, but trusted that “time will set everything right at last.”⁶⁰ Time failed to perform the rectification that Wallace expected, and twenty years later he bemoaned, “Shiloh and its slanders! Will the world ever acquit me of them? If I were guilty I would not feel them so keenly.”⁶¹ The criticisms directed at Wallace stung directly at the heart

⁵⁸ Lew Wallace to Susan Wallace, 27 February 1862. LWC.

⁵⁹ For an excellent account of Wallace’s actions at Shiloh see Stacy D. Allen, “‘If He Had Less Rank’: Lewis Wallace” in *Grant’s Lieutenants: From Cairo to Vicksburg*, ed. Steven E. Woodworth (University Press of Kansas, 2001). 63-90.

⁶⁰ Lew Wallace to Susan Wallace, 17 April 1862. LWC.

⁶¹ Lew Wallace to Susan Wallace, 10 March 1885. LWC.

of the identity he had worked so hard to craft. His failure to deliver his division to the field in a timely manner hinted that he was incompetent, insubordinate, or worst of all, a coward. If there was merit to these criticisms, it seems unjustifiable that Wallace remained in command of his division for the next three months, especially considering that Grant was pulled promptly from command after the battle.⁶² Wallace requested a leave of absence in late June, intending to resolve some business matters in Crawfordsville, visit the dentist, and spend some time with Susan and Henry. However, he was unaware that some of his superiors intended for his leave to be permanent.

Near the end of his leave, Governor Morton summoned Wallace to Indianapolis and requested him to make the recruiting circuit to replenish the dwindling number of volunteer enlistments. Wallace objected because not only was the task unappealing, but he was anxious to return to his division. “They are very busy at headquarters,” he told Morton, “where I fear I have enemies. The division is very dear to me. If I lose it, I will never get it back.”⁶³ At that remark Morton produced a telegram from Secretary of War Edwin Stanton that corroborated Wallace’s fears. For the majority of the remaining war years, Wallace would largely be a major general without a command. He certainly would never receive an authorized field command, governing troops in the field of battle. It was only due to happenstance that he was the commander at Monocacy in Maryland at the “Battle that Saved Washington, D.C.,” which took place over two years after his removal.

Wallace knew that the public would understand his shelving as a product of his tardiness at Shiloh. It was the most convenient explanation, and it has persisted long past his lifetime. The implication that he had erred at Shiloh galled him to no end, and he took great pains to justify himself.⁶⁴ However, no vindication could ever relieve the psychic and social pain he wrestled with then and for the rest of his life. Wallace had lost the one thing every soldier

⁶² Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:575-76.

⁶³ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:589.

⁶⁴ The best proof of this is a series of letters Wallace collected from his officers and sent to Grant. Harry B. Carrington gathered and published this correspondence along with Grant’s reply in “Major General Lew Wallace at Shiloh,” *Bay State Monthly Magazine*, March 1885: 330-340, 367. Wallace took to the lecture circuit to defend his actions and several of his officers defended him in print, in particular see Charles Whittlesey, “Gen. Wallace’s Division – Battle of Shiloh, Was it Tardy?” *Cleveland Herald*, 22 June 1875; George F. McGinnis, “Shiloh,” in *War Papers Read Before the Indiana Commandery Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States* (Indianapolis: Levey Brothers, 1898). Perhaps the greatest exoneration Wallace ever received was from Grant himself who absolved Wallace from all blame except for inexperience in “General Lew Wallace and General McCook at Shiloh,” *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, September 1885: 43. The same exoneration also appeared in Grant’s *Memoirs*.

“value[s] more highly than life – his reputation as *a man among other men*.”⁶⁵ Wallace was perceived as a failure by the public and his army peers in the manliest of occupations. Even in the civilian world of nineteenth-century America, “failure was a want of achievement where achievement measured manhood.”⁶⁶ It was as if his manhood had been revoked. Wallace returned to Crawfordsville, where at least his wife and son were still proud of him. He went into the pork and beef packing business with brother-in-law, Aaron Blair, and like the Prodigal Son was left to deal with hogs.⁶⁷

The Democratic-run *Crawfordsville Weekly Review* delighted in ridiculing its former golden boy’s fall from grace. Wallace continued to receive his military salary even though he was no longer in command, a fact the *Review* sarcastically praised: “Noble patriot! How hard it is for one to leave his family and business and serve in the . . . field. What a bright chapter will Lew have in ‘Indiana’s Roll of Honor.’”⁶⁸ Unable to find peace even in his hometown, Wallace retreated to the primordial swamplands of the Kankakee River in northern Indiana to hunt and fish. Wallace remarked that the Kankakee was the “one friend I was sure of.”⁶⁹

Nature had a therapeutic effect for many nineteenth-century males. The “frontier had been a place where men could achieve their manhood or re-prove it after failure.”⁷⁰ This re-proving of manhood in nature took place in several ways. One way was a reconnection with “certain classic values of boy culture” such as irresponsibility and pleasure.⁷¹ It is likely that Wallace was re-living his boyhood days on the Wabash by retreating to the Kankakee. The retreat to boyhood was essential because that was point zero for the self-made man, and in order to re-establish himself, a man needed to go back to the beginning. Another reason was the potency associated with nature, which was equated with “masculine hardiness and power that suddenly seemed an . . . indispensable remedy for the artificiality and effeteness of . . . life.”⁷² As Rotundo observed, “The gun and the rod were still emblems of male duty to feed one’s

⁶⁵ General S.L.A. Marshall quoted in Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 7.

⁶⁶ Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 177.

⁶⁷ “Major Gen. Lew Wallace has gone into the pork and beef packing business,” *Crawfordsville (Indiana) Weekly Review*, 3 October 1863.

⁶⁸ “Major Gen. Lew Wallace still continues to draw his salary,” *Crawfordsville (Indiana) Weekly Review*, 28 November 1863.

⁶⁹ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:591.

⁷⁰ Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 87.

⁷¹ Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 192.

⁷² John Higham, “The Reorientation of American Culture in the 1890’s,” in *Writing American History: Essays on Modern Scholarship* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 81.

family.”⁷³ Therefore, if even in this small way, Wallace was reasserting his manhood despite the military and society implying that he had lost it.

It would be incorrect to understand Wallace as frittering away the remainder of the war on the Kankakee. He was eager to get back into command and pursued any and every chance to do so. He moved quickly in early September 1862, to fortify Cincinnati when CSA General E. Kirby Smith threatened the city. Without troops or other defenses, Wallace rallied the Cincinnati citizens to organize their own defense by building breastworks. He bolstered these defenses by employing 70,000 irregulars and civilians armed with muzzleloaders more appropriate for squirrel hunting than martial protection. Smith was unaware of the city’s lack of quality or quantity personnel, but he was impressed enough by the fortifications that he chose not to test its strength. Ten months later, Wallace leaped at the prospect of engaging Confederate raider John Hunt Morgan when he invaded southern Indiana, but Morton needed to rein in his rabid general when he wanted to pursue Morgan across the state line.

Besides these brief military actions, Wallace continued working to clear his name and return to the field, appealing to the War Department for a court of inquiry to investigate his actions at Shiloh. Stanton received Wallace’s request and forwarded it to Major General Henry Wager Halleck for consideration. Halleck, then the Army’s General-in-Chief, wrote on the document, “I do not think that Genl. Wallace is worth the trouble and expense of a court of inquiry or a court martial. His only claim to consideration is that of gas,” the last word was written with a flourishing stroke of his pen.⁷⁴ This unprofessional comment from Halleck underscores an important point that presents a better explanation for Wallace’s removal than any investigation into his Shiloh march could show. In fact Wallace and the Shiloh controversy cannot be contextually divorced from Wallace’s personality and his feuds with his military superiors. He once confided to Susan, “I feel myself going up, and as I go, I realize the fact that the rungs of the ladder get more and more slippery. Heavens, if I should fall! As I go up, I am made conscious of being an object of jealousy, and to feel also, that my progress is carefully watched by those who, having the power, stand ready to push me the instant I topple.”⁷⁵

Wallace was not the innocent victim of envious bureaucracy that he wished to believe he was. Rather, his brazenness and unguarded tongue, compounded with his youth and relative

⁷³ Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 35.

⁷⁴ Lew Wallace to Edwin M. Stanton, 13 January 1864. LWC.

⁷⁵ Lew Wallace to Susan Wallace, 10 May 1862. LWC.

military inexperience, failed to endear him to the forty- and fifty-year-old career military men under whom he served. In fact, Wallace chafed at the command of every superior officer he was ever assigned under, whether Zachary Taylor in the Mexican-American War or Civil War commanders John C. Fremont, Charles F. Smith, Halleck, or even Grant. Wallace privately confided that he as a volunteer could achieve better results than these West Pointers.

Unfortunately his supposedly confidential ruminations imprudently reached the ears of Halleck.

One May 1862, evening, as the Union forces were in siege against Corinth, Mississippi, a trio of officers rode into Wallace's camp, and he invited them into the tent for supper. After dinner, one officer asked Wallace his opinions on how the siege on Corinth was progressing. "The question, though natural as could be," Wallace recalled, "was like a spark on loose powder in a magazine." He proceeded to criticize Halleck's plan, which was essentially "to ridicule the man himself." Wallace could not restrain himself, but the officers listened politely until his conclusion. When he finished, it was dark and the visitors resolved to take their leave. They thanked Wallace for his hospitality, and as they mounted to leave, it dawned on him that these men could be from Halleck's staff. After they left, he summoned an orderly to shadow them to their destination and then report back. Wallace's suspicions were confirmed. He hoped that Halleck was magnanimous enough to forgive his folly, but in reality he knew, "I had made an enemy, and he was in high place and going higher." While Wallace was on leave in July 1862, Halleck was promoted to General-in-Chief. Only President Lincoln wielded more power.⁷⁶

The same homosocial forces that at one time legitimated Wallace's success were now at work in his demise. Halleck would consistently block every attempt Wallace made to return to the field. He confided, "It seems but little better than murder to give important commands to such men as. . .Lew. Wallace."⁷⁷ Henry Lane exercised his influence with Lincoln to restore his brother-in-law to command. The President and Stanton seemed amenable to the suggestion, but Wallace knew that "Halleck is the only one in situation to offer. . . opposition."⁷⁸

Wallace's desire to return to command eventually became counterproductive. In July 1863, when military actions in Vicksburg and Gettysburg were in progress, Wallace telegraphed

⁷⁶ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:579-80.

⁷⁷ U.S. War Department. *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. 1st ser., vol. 34., part 3 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1884), 333. The period after Lew is in the source itself. Lew was short for Lewis, and most of his correspondence through the Civil War was signed with the period to indicate the abbreviation. It was not uncommon for contemporaries referring to him in writing to use the abbreviation as well.

⁷⁸ Lew Wallace to Benson J. Lossing, 3 July 1863. LWC.

Halleck from Cincinnati: “Is there any objections to my visiting Vicksburg?” After a week and no reply, he wired again, “Receiving no prohibition, I infer your assent, and will go to Vicksburg to-morrow.” This evoked a blistering, same-day reply from Halleck, “No prohibition does not give assent. You are to await orders at Cincinnati, and will not leave that place without proper permission.” Halleck’s reply did not deter Wallace from continuing his pestering, and hearing of the fighting at Gettysburg, he wired, “I respectfully beg leave to tender my services to the governor of Pennsylvania.” This proposition was also rejected. He wrote one last time, asking if he could return to Crawfordsville. This offer Halleck “graciously accorded.” “Is it possible,” Wallace pondered to a friend, “to imagine treatment more petty and annoying?” If this statement had not originated with Wallace, one would be hard pressed to discern whether Halleck or Wallace was being described.⁷⁹

The Wallace-Halleck telegraph exchanges were relatively minor irritations compared to what Wallace would later do. Halleck had tried to keep Wallace from being a nuisance by giving him assignments that would keep him occupied and away from the battlefield. The conditions of Union and Confederate prisoner exchange prohibited the soldiers from being re-deployed against the respective enemy. Since these soldiers’ enlistments were not expired, the War Department sought to employ them in other useful pursuits. Halleck ordered Wallace to organize some exchanged soldiers to combat the Santee Sioux in Minnesota. Wallace countered by allowing the force with which he had been entrusted to desert and return to their homes. Undeterred by Wallace’s passive aggression, Halleck appointed him as president of a commission to investigate how General Buell had allowed Confederate General Braxton Bragg to invade Kentucky. Wallace considered this opportunity “only a little less acceptable than field duty. . . because it would be educational.”⁸⁰ Besides it authorized him to travel where he pleased to conduct the investigation. Halleck did not expect, although he should have, that the Buell Commission would take an excursion to Washington, D.C. “The reception. . . they got was by no means cold,” the *Cincinnati Daily Commercial* reported. “In fact, it was hot. The first inquiry was – ‘Well, what in h – and d – n are you doing here?’”⁸¹ Wallace had brought his commission along to Washington as he lobbied for his return to the field, but he was also on a fact-finding mission.

⁷⁹ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:655-56; Lew Wallace to Benson J. Lossing, 3 July 1863. LWC.

⁸⁰ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:642.

⁸¹ “Letter from Washington,” *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, 3 March 1862.

The final commission report absolved Buell while managing to attribute Bragg's Kentucky invasion to Halleck's negligence.

The acrimonious relationship between Halleck and Wallace was famous enough for Carl Sandburg to write about it in his Lincoln biography. Sandburg picked up the story with a conversation between a visitor and Lincoln. Lincoln remarked, "Halleck wants to kick Wallace out, and Lane wants me to kick Halleck out." The visitor replied, "Well, I'll tell you how to fix it to the satisfaction of both parties." Lincoln asked, "How is that?" The visitor responded, "Why, kick 'em both out."⁸² It never came to that. Wallace apparently had a change of heart in February of 1864. Since his removal, Wallace had exchanged letters with Robert Milroy, another slighted Hoosier volunteer general. Milroy lamented, "You have been infamously treated by West Point, so have I."⁸³ Months earlier Wallace would have commiserated in Milroy's pity, but instead his reply read, "I have determined to trouble people no more about my affairs," and his letter continued by describing his newfound respect for his military superiors of the West Point clique.⁸⁴

What prompted Wallace's change? The previous July, Wallace received a letter from William Tecumseh Sherman. Sherman's letter was an attempt to diffuse a difficult situation. Wallace's calls for a court of inquiry had grown increasingly louder. If granted, it would have required the presence of Grant and Sherman and consequently taken away from the Union's offensive momentum. Sherman urged him to drop the inquiry into the Shiloh march and suggested, "Subsequent events may sweep that [matter] into the forgotten of the past." However, Sherman's epistle also had personal advice for Wallace. Sherman too knew the trials and tribulations of maneuvering in the homosocial military world, and as a result nearly resigned early in the war. He advised Wallace, "We can only gain a permanent fame by subordinating ourselves and our peculiar notions to that of the common commander." He recommended that if Wallace could regain command, he should "keep quiet as possible, and trust to opportunity for a becoming sequel to the brilliant beginning you had." Sherman played upon Wallace's insecurities and aspirations and concluded, "Some one or more may have been envious of your early and brilliant career, but, as I know you must be ambitious of more lasting and real fame, I feel that with the advice of unselfish friends that end is still in reach." Wallace accepted

⁸² Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1939), 2:40.

⁸³ Robert H. Milroy to Lew Wallace, 16 February 1864. LWC.

⁸⁴ Lew Wallace to Robert H. Milroy, 27 February 1864. LWC.

Sherman's suggestions, and the next month he rescinded his request for a court of inquiry. When Milroy was writing Wallace the following February, Wallace received good news. Grant had replaced Halleck as the Army's General-in-Chief. The obstacle being removed, Wallace would have a command back shortly.⁸⁵

Wallace was, like many other self-made men, "ambitious and anxious, creatively resourceful, chronically restive. . . and among the casualties of his own handiwork."⁸⁶ At the time of his dismissal he was loath to admit this. Believing others were more culpable than himself, he wrote, "I learned all of sorrow, mortification, shame, wounds to pride, torture of spirit, and suffering in general there is in being a scapegoat for the sins of other people."⁸⁷ Wallace's persistent belief that he had been slighted was a clear burden on his psyche and manly identity. Shiloh and its fallout had far reaching effects on Wallace gaining acceptance from the political powers in the United States, since most post-war politicians had been military officers. If he could no longer find acceptance in America and a place to distinguish himself as a great man in history, where could he go to accomplish these objectives? His imagination and far-off lands were two avenues of retreat. He went to these locales to re-form himself in order to return as a man among men.

The conclusion of the war presented Wallace with few options. He retained his military commission for as long as he could. He served on the court-martial for the Lincoln assassination conspirators and at the trial of Henry Wirtz, commandant of the Andersonville prisoner camp. Both were very prestigious trials, but legal matters lacked the same excitement as war. There were no more military battles to fight, and Wallace's likely recourse was to return to Crawfordsville and resume his law practice, to which he had developed a particular aversion. In his later years he would describe law as "that most detestable of human occupations."⁸⁸ However, there was one career alternative, and if successful, he would attain the one mark of sophisticated manhood that had henceforth eluded him: wealth. "The lesson of my life," he recalled many years later, "is talent and honors amount to nothing in this age and in our country without money."⁸⁹ Wealth just might have been the salve to cure the old wound from Shiloh.

⁸⁵ William Tecumseh Sherman to Lew Wallace, 27 August 1863. LWC.

⁸⁶ Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 9.

⁸⁷ Lew Wallace, "March of the 3rd Division, Army of the Tennessee, to Pittsburg Landing, April 6th, 1862" (undated speech manuscript). LWC.

⁸⁸ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:969.

⁸⁹ Lew Wallace to Henry Lane Wallace, 19 March 1881. LWC.

Shortly before the war's conclusion, Wallace was ordered by President Lincoln to conduct a secret mission to Mexico in order to subvert Confederate plans that sought to continue the rebellion from south of the border. Wallace's mission was a success, but in the process he made the acquaintance of General José Carvajal. Carvajal, in concert with the Mexican minister to the U.S., Matías Romero, entreated Wallace for finances or arms to help the Juaristas battle Maximilian and the French. Wallace approached the State Department for suggestions. William H. Seward, Secretary of State, did not wish to get involved but did not prohibit Wallace from taking action *sans* government endorsement.

Wallace tendered his resignation from the army, effective November 20, 1865, and promptly took up the Mexican cause. Carvajal had promised Wallace a command in the Mexican army and a payment of \$100,000 for his services. This was an offer he could not pass up and foresaw that he would be set for life if he succeeded. Wallace, with the financial assistance of Herman Sturm and the backing of Jonathan N. Tiff, devised to sell Mexican bonds. The sales were less than swift, and within nine months less than ten percent of all the bonds available had been sold.

Regardless of the poor bond sales, Sturm was resourceful, and using money out of Wallace's and his own pockets, managed to accumulate enough munitions to outfit an army of 7,000. A few days before he sailed from New York City in July 1866, to deliver the arms, Wallace wrote to Susan, "Altogether, my dear, I am more confident than ever that I will realize what I am going for. I now believe firmly that I can send home the money, or a large portion [of] it. Certainly, it would have been very foolish had I turned my back upon the chances, which are now more promising than ever. Had I done so, I would never have forgiven myself."⁹⁰

Wallace had little difficulty delivering the arms shipment to the Juaristas, but he spent the next seven months trying to get paid. Carvajal had been ousted in the meantime, and Mexican President Benito Juárez argued that while the arms were appreciated, Carvajal had not been authorized to conduct such a transaction. Refusing to return empty-handed, Wallace waited for his payday and in the meantime found delight in exploring Mexico's landscape, history, and culture in order to accurately portray the characters and setting for *The Fair God*. Meanwhile, Susan Wallace was lonely and frustrated in Crawfordsville. She foresaw that things were not going to turn out as planned and longed for her husband's return. Wallace did return to

⁹⁰ Lew Wallace to Susan Wallace, 20 July 1866. LWC.

Crawfordsville in February 1867, but without his promised reward. When the Mexican Claim Commission was established in 1868, Wallace submitted his account for \$125,552.50, which was eventually rejected.⁹¹ Fifteen years later, only after he hired a lawyer to seek reparations, did the Mexican government concede his more modest request for \$15,000, \$4,000 of which went to pay his attorney. It was a nice settlement, but it could not erase the years of humiliation to which he had been subjected.

Had his initial agreement with Carvajal been honored, the orchestration of such an incredible windfall would have assured everyone of Wallace's manliness as a rich and successful genius. However, by pursuing this deal, Wallace had exercised "spontaneous impulse" and furthermore neglected his family and his financial obligations at home.⁹² He had quit his job, first as a military officer, then as a practicing attorney. Again, success would likely have rendered these problems irrelevant. Failure, on the other hand, intensified the focus on his lack of commitment and identified him as less than a man, for men were not supposed to act so irresponsibly. Wallace was seen once again as an impulsive boy delighting in unfettered adventure. He returned to Crawfordsville with his manly identity in pieces, a situation that was further exacerbated by his indebtedness to a relative.

Isaac Compton Elston, Jr., Susan Wallace's brother, had taken over operations of Crawfordsville's premier banking establishment, the Elston Bank. Anything involving finances in the community most likely went through the Elston's hands. When Lew Wallace fell on hard times and needed to borrow money, Isaac was there to lend it but would never let his struggling brother-in-law forget it. Enmity did not always exist between the two men. In fact, Elston had served on Wallace's staff during the Civil War and had in part ridden Wallace's coattails to a colonelcy. However, their relation had turned bitter largely because of Elston's treatment of Wallace regarding his debt. It is curious that of Susan's other siblings, all of whom held the Elston bank in trust, it was only Isaac Elston who treated Wallace so badly.

Wallace detailed his relation and offense with Elston in several letters he wrote after he was able to rise out of debt. When the Mexican government tendered their financial obligation, Wallace wrote to Henry:

⁹¹ Morsberger, *Lew Wallace: Militant Romantic*, 212.

⁹² Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 55.

I'm glad to say, that my bad luck in money making seems to have come to a sudden stop. . . I am specially rejoiced at this ray of light [for] it will silence certain of those who laughed at my venturing to Mexico, and at my claim. One of them lives in a new house close by your Aunt Anna's. That house does not prove that he has done better. He has yet to pay for it. Nor will any one now say I was a filibuster. Some day I may even get some credit for having helped crush out the empire Louis Napoleon tried to plant on our continent.⁹³

Wallace is here referring to Isaac Elston although he does not name him by name. However, elsewhere Wallace was more candid: "Beware of compound interest in the shape of renewing notes – especially if the debt is in Col. Elston's grip. You have to pay, and never cease hearing of the affair."⁹⁴ He continued by detailing his feelings toward his brother-in-law. "Shall I make mention of mortification and shame endured at the hands and tongue of Col. Elston, whom over and over again I would have mashed into the earth for his insolence had I not dreaded the scandal such an affair would have created?"⁹⁵ He eagerly anticipated "the purgatorial pains which will wrench his [Elston's] little pigeon heart when he hears that, my debts all paid."⁹⁶ Yet Wallace's eventual triumph was, in the meantime, tempered by crises in vocations and other humiliations, which further hastened his retreat from the pressures associated with being a successful man in the Gilded Age. His place in the modern world and failed attempts to prompt change through law, politics, and war had made him feel like a "long suffering slave growing old and hopeless."⁹⁷

Wallace attempted to build upon the political career he had started before the war, but his prior success was not easily repeated. He declared his Republican candidacy for Congress in 1868, but was defeated in the primaries by the incumbent, Godlove S. Orth. Acquiescing to his failure, he acted as "a good party man, he campaigned for Orth and extolled the Grant administration." Orth won the election, and Wallace set his sights on running again in 1870. Orth was pressured by the Republican Party not to oppose Wallace for the nomination the second time around. However, Orth's spite divided the Republicans. There were political rumors that

⁹³ Lew Wallace to Henry Lane Wallace, 16 January 1883. LWC. Aunt Anna referred to Joanna Lane, the widow of Henry Lane and sister of Susan Wallace. The Lane Place, as their house was and is called, is located on Water Street in Crawfordsville, Indiana. Directly behind Lane Place and facing Wabash Avenue is the present day D.A.R. house, which was originally the residence of Colonel Isaac Compton Elston, Jr.

⁹⁴ Lew Wallace to Henry Lane Wallace, 27 March 1883. LWC.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Lew Wallace to Henry Lane Wallace, 17 May 1883. LWC.

⁹⁷ Lew Wallace to Henry Lane Wallace, 18 July 1883. LWC.

Wallace was only seeking election in order to cash in on all of the unpaid Mexican bonds still in his possession. Wallace's Democratic opponent was fellow Crawfordsvillian Mahlon Manson. When Manson won with a margin similar to Orth's two years before, Manson credited his victory to "Republicans especially those in [Orth's] Tippecanoe County." Two years later, Orth was again a candidate, Wallace was out of the picture, and Orth soundly defeated Manson.⁹⁸

Despite losing in popular elections, Wallace harbored the thought that he might yet earn a political appointment. After all, Grant was running for national office, and he might feel like rewarding his former lieutenant. In order to facilitate this possibility, Wallace campaigned extensively in Indiana and Missouri for the Republicans and Grant in 1868. "Despite his efforts to secure the Republican victory," historian Lee Scott Theisen explained, "Wallace found himself an outsider during Grant's administration."⁹⁹ Wallace wrote Grant directly to inquire if he could be appointed the United States District Attorney for Indiana. "The office. . . has no political significance," he wrote, "[and] it would. . . be a great help to me, by. . . giving me the start in the profession which I so much covet."¹⁰⁰ Grant took no action on the request. The silence seemed to indicate that Grant was not especially fond of Wallace. He had suspected as much, for when Grant's campaign biography appeared in early 1868, it contained an unfavorable account of Wallace's actions at Shiloh. Whitelaw Reid, the managing editor of the *New York Tribune* and strong supporter of Wallace, confirmed Wallace's suspicion with his own assessment of the President. "Instead of being the impassive man his admirers represent him," Reid confided to Wallace, "[he] is really the most sullen and revengeful of mortals. He has not to this hour, forgotten the old experience at Pittsburgh [sic] Landing. Indeed he was incautious enough the last time I met him to let it out by some reference to a casual encounter I had with him on the Tennessee River."¹⁰¹

Every which way Wallace now turned, he found the doors that had once been thrown open to him were abruptly slammed. He had been raised believing that men could fashion their own destiny. Experience, however, had taught him the opposite.¹⁰² As T. J. Jackson Lears has

⁹⁸ Lee Scott Theisen, "Forgotten Politician: The Public Career of Lew Wallace," *Their Infinite Variety: Essays on Indiana Politicians* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1981), 169-71.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 173.

¹⁰⁰ Lew Wallace to Ulysses S. Grant, 6 March 1869, in *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, ed. John Y. Simon (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), 19:364.

¹⁰¹ Whitelaw Reid to Lew Wallace, 16 March 1873. LWC.

¹⁰² T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 34.

explained, “The image of the Promethean self-made man was mythic in a double sense: it was part of a world view which provided many Americans with meaning and purpose; and it was false.”¹⁰³ Wallace’s worldview and consequently his identity were broken as a result of facing accusations, scorn, ridicule, and social failure. If he was to continue functioning in nineteenth-century America, he needed to pick up the pieces. However, what he re-assembled looked very different than the norm.

Lew Wallace led an unremarkable life between 1867 and 1876, the time between his return from Mexico and his appointment to oversee the Florida electoral count.¹⁰⁴ His most recent biographers have described this time of his life as an interlude between his past success and future greatness. This time period can easily be dismissed for its monotony, but it was crucial for the re-fashioning of Wallace’s identity. After having lost a small fortune in Mexico, gainful employment should have been one of his priorities. Instead he dawdled for the next twenty-two months.¹⁰⁵ His 1868 Congressional run did occur during this time frame, but it lasted only three months. Concurrently, he appeared on the lecture circuit, delivering his lecture “Mexico and the Mexicans,” but his appearances were neither extensively nor consistently scheduled. In the absence of any socially sanctioned vocational productivity, Wallace retreated to the irresponsible passions of his youth.

Suppressed for nearly thirty years, Wallace’s artistic talent exploded. He completed oil portraits of his father-in-law and Henry Lane.¹⁰⁶ He also embarked into the fantastical by painting and exhibiting a purple-winged cupid. However, two of his best-known paintings were harrowing commentaries on his Civil War experience. *The Conspirators* and *The Dead Line* are visual chronicles of the post-war trials at which Wallace presided. Measuring over five-feet square, *The Conspirators* depicts John Wilkes Booth and the eight men tried for Lincoln’s assassination.¹⁰⁷ He sketched the accused while listening to the trial’s testimony and later

¹⁰³ Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 18.

¹⁰⁴ The later date also marks the year Wallace gave for when he began to write *Ben-Hur*.

¹⁰⁵ He returned from Mexico in February 1867, and did not resume his legal practice until December 1868. “Resumed Practice” and “A Card,” *Crawfordsville Journal*, 10 December 1868.

¹⁰⁶ The portrait of Major Isaac Elston is in Michigan City, Indiana. The portrait of Lane is displayed at the Lane Place in Crawfordsville, Indiana.

¹⁰⁷ “The Conspirators” is on permanent display at the General Lew Wallace Study and Museum, Crawfordsville, Indiana. Mary Surratt was also accused and convicted of plotting Lincoln’s assassination. Wallace explained that he did not include her likeness in the painting because he was never at liberty to sketch her as he was with the other defendants. “She came into the court always wearing a heavy veil, which she raised but once for identification” (Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:851).

incorporated his sketches into the oil painting. His other major work, *The Dead Line*, was a gruesome portrayal of the horrors of the Andersonville Prison Camp and was inspired by testimony given at Henry Wirtz's court-martial.¹⁰⁸ The painting portrayed a Union soldier shot dead by a Confederate sentinel for crossing "the dead line" in an attempt to fill his tin cup with clean water. When exhibited, *The Dead Line* received notices such as "horribly realistic and revolting," "with much of the terrible in it," and another critic hoped that Wallace "might try his hand on some pleasanter subject."¹⁰⁹

The Conspirators and *The Dead Line* have always been examined merely as Wallace's commemorations of the related trials. This assessment essentially equates to Wallace sacrificing two years of gainful employment to produce souvenirs that had little commercial value. However, no work of art is created in a vacuum. What Wallace had personally experienced informed his paintings. *The Conspirators* and *The Dead Line* are stark reminders of the destructive tendencies produced by manhood. In the former, Wallace portrayed a fraternity and positioned his subjects on toppled limestone blocks, metaphorically describing their intentions of destroying the Union.¹¹⁰ *The Conspirators* was Wallace's commentary on men's penchant for destruction, by which he too believed he was psychologically victimized. Similarly, *The Dead Line* can also be re-evaluated as a critique of conventional nineteenth-century manhood. Henry Wirtz's defense argued he was obediently acting on "orders received from his superiors."¹¹¹ Wallace's artistic commemoration of an Andersonville horror was a parable about the deadly social pressures of conforming and defining a man's identity in relation to other men.

Wallace's immersion in his artwork was counter to conventional nineteenth-century expectations for men. Rotundo has explained that vocations were distinctly sex-typed spheres where politics, for instance, was "marked 'male,' but a career in the arts was marked

¹⁰⁸ It is sometimes referred to as "Over the Dead Line." I use the past tense when writing about "The Dead Line" because the painting has been lost. Its last verified location was at Terre Haute, Indiana, now many years longer ago than anyone alive can remember. Fortunately two sketches that Wallace used to complete the painting survive. One is in the collection of the General Lew Wallace Study in Crawfordsville, the other is deposited in the Lew and Susan Wallace Papers Collection at the William Henry Smith Memorial Library, Indiana Historical Society in Indianapolis.

¹⁰⁹ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:893.

¹¹⁰ *The Conspirators'* setting is more than metaphor. Matthew Brady photographs of Lincoln's Second Inaugural reveal that most of the conspirators were in the crowd that day. Lincoln's Second Inaugural was delivered at the U.S. Capitol Building, which was then under construction with limestone as the chief building material.

¹¹¹ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:853.

‘female.’”¹¹² Likewise, a literary career connoted a female profession, but Wallace did not allow this prevailing attitude to discourage his fiction writing, although it might have initially. Twenty years before *The Fair God*’s publication, Wallace had read chapters from his *Fair God* manuscript to Charles White, president of Wabash College. “Dr. White listened politely, took off his spectacles, and then gravely advised Mr. Wallace to abandon the field of authorship.”¹¹³ White’s discouragement may have been aesthetically motivated, but it could also have been intended to save Wallace from the embarrassment of pursuing an inappropriate occupation. When *The Fair God* was published in 1873, he found encouragement from some favorable reviews to continue writing, even though insinuations persisted that his fiction was feminine. In 1879, while he was nearing completion of another manuscript, he wrote to Susan:

A poet of the Sierras (not [Joaquin] Miller) called yesterday and asked me, confidentially, if my wife had not helped me in writing *The Fair God* and my new book. I told him yes – that I never put away a chapter as finished without first reading it to you to get your criticism. In many instances I had great help in that way. He came in evidently thinking you were joint author. The poor little verses in [it] will be credited to you; of that I feel certain; yet if you can stand the imputation I can.¹¹⁴

Wallace’s war and post-war years had taught him that he could live through negative opinions about his performances, so he persisted in his authorial pursuits. In the months following *The Fair God*’s publication, he began conceptualizing *Ben-Hur*, which when completed would gain its author a greater prominence than he had ever known.

The omniscient narrator in Wallace’s *The Prince of India* observed, “How many there are who spend their youth yearning and fighting to write their names in history, then spend their old age shuddering to read them there!”¹¹⁵ It took Wallace a lifetime to understand those words. Wallace’s first forty years were lived in conformity to his father’s ideas of what a man ought to be. His natural identity, however, delighted in artistic and literary pursuits that were frowned upon by David Wallace and other respectable men as irresponsible pursuits. Wallace soon discovered that they were right, and he began to desire the power and success that his father so effectively wielded. He concluded that the best way to obtain his father’s social influence was to

¹¹² Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 170.

¹¹³ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:894.

¹¹⁴ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:923.

¹¹⁵ Lew Wallace, *The Prince of India: or Why Constantinople Fell* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1893), 2:165.

model himself after him. Wallace's choice entailed becoming a lawyer, soldier, politician; settling down, marrying, and starting a family. Wallace's transition to manhood, however, was not a final state; rather, it embodied a chronically conflicted identity that necessitated a constant defense of his identity in relation to other men. Ambition was necessary for survival in the homosocial realm, and while ambition aided Wallace's climb, it also contributed to his fall. He strove to write his name in history and made enemies in the process. As a result, he discovered limits to his self-invention. He could futilely struggle against them or discover a way of least resistance. Wallace re-vivified himself by embracing the youthful loves of art and literature he had been compelled to abandon. It was in these arenas that Wallace regained personal meaning and found relief from the confining restraints of a socially determined manly identity. He learned a late lesson about the regrets that result from an overzealous life, but he was still young and humbled enough to be taught that the path to historical immortality was often paved in the most unexpected ways.

Chapter Two

Accepting (a Novel's) Christ:

Ben-Hur and Nineteenth-Century Americans' Popular Religious Sentiments

Today visitors to Crawfordsville's General Lew Wallace Study and Museum frequently ask, "Why did he write *Ben-Hur*?" The docents usually respond by retelling Wallace's account of *how* he came to write *Ben-Hur*. Although *why* and *how* are not mutually exclusive questions, there often are subtle differences in their meaning. *How* can mean by what process did Wallace write *Ben-Hur*, and an answer can be given that never addresses *why* he wrote it. Effectively answering the visitor's question, however, requires that the *purpose* of Wallace's writing is explained. Part of the answer was given in the last chapter: Wallace wrote *Ben-Hur* as a way to relieve internal doubts about his identity. However, Wallace did not write exclusively for himself. He wrote for an American audience that he had reason to believe would read *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*. While Wallace wrestled, researched, and wrote about the historic reality of the Christian faith, many religious Americans were seeking evidence for belief in an age of doubt. *Ben-Hur* succeeded commercially because it met the need of Gilded Age Christians to experience faith in a novel way. The man who authored *Ben-Hur* and the people who read it can give important insights into the popular religious sentiments of late nineteenth-century America.

Ben-Hur's genesis began with Esther Wallace. Her son recalled her reading the Bible to him as a small boy. Images of mothers reading to their children flourished in Victorian America. Reading became a private, domestic act as the century progressed. It was also viewed as a feminine act, an intimate transaction between a mother and child, which aimed at revering "the heart over the mind."¹ Unfortunately, Esther Wallace's attempts to promote this sentiment in her son did not seem to take hold in his childhood. However, Wallace remembered that his mother's recitation of the Magi's journey "took. . .a lasting hold upon my imagination."² Yet instead of infusing religious piety in young Wallace, the gospel narrative inspired boyish curiosity. His mind was flooded with numerous questions about the Magi: Where did they come from? How many were there? How did they follow a star?³ It was not until much later, in the 1870s, when Wallace was "getting over the restlessness" of his Civil War and post-war service that he decided

¹ Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 83.

² Lew Wallace, *The First Christmas: From "Ben-Hur"* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1901), v.

³ Lew Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1906), 2:926.

to answer his childhood inquiries as a short story.⁴ He anticipated that the story “might be acceptable to the Harper Brothers,” perhaps as a magazine serial with rich illustrations.⁵ However, when he was through with the manuscript, instead of submitting it, he closed it up in his desk drawer.

Wallace’s reminiscences mentioned above are revealing on several levels. A first observation is that Wallace, during this time of restlessness, was revivifying childhood memories. T. J. Jackson Lears observed that it was not uncommon for those who wrestled with modernity’s effects on identity to rediscover childlike or feminine characteristics. Lears explained, “They longed to rekindle possibilities for authentic experience, physical or spiritual – possibilities they felt had existed once before, long ago.”⁶ Wallace needed to return to the past in order to rediscover what he wanted to be, before his father discouraged his artistic inclinations and before he became a troubled imitation of his father. However, Wallace’s retreat in time went well past the forty-some elapsed years when he was a Hoosier schoolboy. Wallace left modernity altogether through his mind’s eye. Furthermore, Wallace’s reawakening of his childhood dream to become a fiction author was at odds with nineteenth-century gender roles. It was a common attitude “that politics. . . was a man’s world, while the arts were the province of women.”⁷ In particular, a short story about the Wise Men would naturally be seen as sentimental fiction, which male literary critics viewed as having little artistic value.⁸

When Wallace resumed his law practice in December 1868, he did so out of necessity, not choice. Wallace’s Mexican fortune had yet to materialize, and he had no other vocational prospects either militarily or politically. He saw little potential in becoming a full-time author; therefore, law was his only recourse. However, to return to the law was to revisit the negative homosocial forces that he had so recently been victimized by during the Civil War and its aftermath. “The legal profession,” Rotundo explained, “stood for passion, self-seeking

⁴ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:927.

⁵ Wallace, *The First Christmas*, v.

⁶ T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 57.

⁷ E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* ([New York]: HarperCollins Publishers, Basic Books, 1993), 170.

⁸ George Cotkin, *Reluctant Modernism: American Thought and Culture, 1880-1900* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 89-90.

aggression, and a constant capitulation to worldly lures and pressures. . . . [It] represented the classic male weakness.”⁹ It was in this context that Wallace began writing *Ben-Hur*.

He must have befuddled his half-sister, Agnes, when he wrote an 1874 letter to her that read, “I have just come out of the court room, and business is over for the day. Now, for home, and a Jewish boy whom I have got into terrible trouble, and must get out of it as best I can.”¹⁰ She may have wondered if Lew were going mad. Yet he relieved those thoughts by explaining that these events were occurring in his writing. Wallace found in his imagination and writing that “there is a deal more pleasure than in the court room, where I am so everlastingly antagonized.”¹¹ Writing was a balm for Wallace’s psyche and a remedy for un-actualized expectations. Wallace explained that writing took him “so completely out of this world and the affairs of the present – a perfect retreat from the annoyances of daily life as they are spun for me by enemies and friends who might as well be enemies.”¹²

Wallace was entwined in a web of aggressive homosocial competition. Darwin’s theories were being played out in nineteenth-century American social experiences. In the public’s opinion, the fittest were not those possessing “intellectual brilliance”; rather they were those who exhibited “industrious work habits, extraordinary moral discipline, and. . . indomitable will.”¹³ It was not that Wallace lacked these characteristics, but his lack of restraint in pursuing a quixotic Mexican fortune, his hesitancy to resume law, and his fascination with fiction marked him as unfit to play the Darwinian game. Instead of fighting, Wallace took flight into his imagination, far away from modernity’s pain, confusion, and un-reality. Wallace sought re-vivification in an ancient locale where grace once existed.

When Wallace began writing *Ben-Hur*, he described his personal religious attitude as “absolute indifference.”¹⁴ He recalled, “I had no convictions about God or Christ. I neither believed nor disbelieved in them.”¹⁵ The religious views Wallace expressed were not uncommon. In fact, historian Paul Carter explained that there was a spiritual crisis during the

⁹ Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 171.

¹⁰ Lew Wallace to Agnes Wallace, 27 November 1874. Lew Wallace Collection, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, Indiana (hereafter cited as LWC).

¹¹ Lew Wallace to Agnes Wallace, 27 November 1874. LWC.

¹² Lew Wallace to Susan Wallace, 6 September 1880. LWC.

¹³ Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 18.

¹⁴ Wallace, *First Christmas*, viii.

¹⁵ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:927.

Gilded Age.¹⁶ Many scholars have understood that the emergence of a “scientific perspective” characterized by Darwinian naturalism “weakened religious doctrines.”¹⁷ Modern doubt was the term Victorians used to describe this religio-cultural malaise. However, it is important to note, as Lears did, that “modern doubt was not openly atheistic; on the contrary it might well conform outwardly with the pious progressivism of a [Henry Ward] Beecher.”¹⁸ There was an obvious inherent contradiction between a scientific and a religious perspective. Scientific ideas advocated survival of the fittest, whereas Protestant beliefs emphasized grace and helping one’s neighbor. Yet it was the former perspective that tended to dominate late nineteenth-century America. When asked why she did not attend church, one urban industrial worker replied, “My employer goes [to church]. He is one of the pillars of the church. That’s reason enough why I shouldn’t go.”¹⁹ Perhaps it was the same observed inconsistencies that led Wallace to proclaim, “The preachers had made no impression upon me.”²⁰

Curiously, Wallace remembered, “To lift me out of my indifference, one would think only strong affirmations of things regarded holiest would do,” such as could be found in the written and spoken words of pastors and theologians.²¹ Yet it was not the testimony of the faithful that shook Wallace out of his indifference; rather it was the speech of the “Great Infidel,” Colonel Robert Green Ingersoll. Ingersoll was infamous for traveling the country delivering lectures on the merits of unbelief. Wallace was well aware of Ingersoll’s reputation, but he was also personally acquainted with him. Both men served at Shiloh, and they were also active in the Republican Party. In 1876, a soldiers’ reunion and the Republican National Convention simultaneously converged in Indianapolis and allowed for an encounter that would challenge Wallace’s religious apathy.

Wallace boarded the evening Indianapolis bound train in Crawfordsville. He made his way down the aisle and was passing the stateroom when he heard a knock on the window. Wallace opened the stateroom door to discover Ingersoll inside, eager for conversation. Wallace consented to provide the conversation if he could dictate the subject. Ingersoll acquiesced. Wallace began by asking if there is a God. Ingersoll, as expected, answered that he did not know

¹⁶ Paul A. Carter, *The Spiritual Crisis of the Gilded Age* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1971).

¹⁷ Cotkin, *Reluctant Modernism*, 24.

¹⁸ Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 42.

¹⁹ Aaron Ignatius Abell, *The Urban Impact on American Protestantism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1943), 63.

²⁰ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:927.

²¹ Wallace, *The First Christmas*, viii.

and asked Wallace if he did. Wallace continued, asking if there was a devil, heaven, hell, and hereafter. Ingersoll supplied the same response to each inquiry, “I do not know, do you?” After establishing the topics of conversation, Wallace allowed Ingersoll to begin. Wallace remembered, “I sat spellbound, listening to a medley of argument, eloquence, wit, satire, audacity, irreverence, poetry, brilliant antitheses, and pungent excoriation of believers in God, Christ, and Heaven, the like of which I had never heard.”²²

Two hours later the train rolled into Indianapolis’ Central Station where Wallace and Ingersoll parted company. Wallace declined soliciting a streetcar to bear him to his brother’s residence on the northeast side of town; Ingersoll’s statements had made him feel like walking.²³ “Trudging on in the dark, alone except as one’s thoughts may be company,” Wallace recalled, “I was aroused for the first time in my life to the importance of religion.”²⁴ He considered it ironic that “outright denials of all human knowledge of God, Christ, Heaven, and the Hereafter” would stir him out of indifference.²⁵

Wallace’s “reading had covered nearly every other subject” except religion.²⁶ He admitted reading the great sermons of the day, but “always for the surpassing charm of their rhetoric” and not for their spiritual message.²⁷ Wallace’s ignorance on religious matters was not uncommon for most Gilded Age men. Cultural critics such as Charles Norton contended that religion “enfeebled the spirit of manliness,” so naturally it would be a subject to be avoided.²⁸ Furthermore, formal religious belief had been altered with the advent of modernity, which tended to celebrate human accomplishment. “The real deity behind the veil,” historian James Turner wrote, “was humanity itself.”²⁹ However, Wallace’s life had taught him that he could not believe in men, for it was at their hands that he had psychologically suffered.

Nevertheless, Wallace felt that he needed to investigate religious matters as a possible “solace against the pain of failure.”³⁰ Wallace likened his personal struggles to the darkness, and he believed his religious ignorance only compounded the matter as a “spot of deeper darkness in

²² Wallace, *The First Christmas*, vii.

²³ Wallace, *The First Christmas*, viii.

²⁴ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:929; Wallace, *The First Christmas*,

²⁵ Wallace, *The First Christmas*, viii.

²⁶ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:929.

²⁷ Wallace, *The First Christmas*, viii.

²⁸ James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 235.

²⁹ Turner, *Without God, Without Creed*, 251.

³⁰ E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 184.

the darkness.”³¹ He concluded that the only way to light this darkness was through study, “if only for the gratification there might be in having convictions of one kind or another.”³² As Wallace sought to create a personal world of meaning and identity for himself, he was engaging “in the age-old task of religion by finding a way to make sense” out of his life.³³ This process Wallace engaged in is what scholars sometimes refer to as popular religiosity.³⁴ Popular religiosity tends to be a syncretistic process whereby people incorporate diverse elements into their worldviews, whether these elements are church doctrine, folk belief, mass culture, secular philosophy, or even other faith traditions. With Wallace it can be observed that he was an individual with no theological training and no church affiliation who sought to re-order his life after the prevailing belief system of self-autonomy had failed him. Wallace’s conversion to Christianity was predicated on recognizing Jesus, “the living symbol and embodiment of selfless love,” as the best remedy to “a society given over to greed and self-aggrandizement.”³⁵

Wallace’s process of investigation and ultimately his religious conversion is worth understanding better because of its unconventionality and what it might illuminate about popular religiosity at this time. He considered three ways of beginning his inquiry: through theological study, by reading sermons and commentaries, or through his own effort. He shuddered at the thought of the first option and remarked that theology “had always seemed. . .an indefinitely deep pit filled with the bones of unprofitable speculation.”³⁶ *The Prince of India*, Wallace’s final novel, provides more evidence of the author’s disdain for formal theology. One scene has Sergius, a young Russian Orthodox monk whom some maintain best expressed Wallace’s personal religious beliefs, meeting with his Hegumen, or religious superior.³⁷ “You know the [Nicene] Creed is the test of orthodoxy,” the Hegumen began. Then Wallace’s voice seemed to take over the Hegumen’s speech: “Sad to say, the centuries since the august Council [of Nicea]

³¹ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:929.

³² Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:930.

³³ Charles Lippy, *Being Religious, American Style: A History of Popular Religiosity in the United States* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, Praeger Press, 1994), 10.

³⁴ See Lippy, *Being Religious, American Style* and Peter W. Williams, *Popular Religion in America: Symbolic Change and the Modernization Process in Historical Perspective* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989)

³⁵ Richard Wightman Fox, *Jesus in America: Personal Savior, Cultural Hero, National Obsession* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 252.

³⁶ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:930.

³⁷ William Kane was president of Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana at the time of Wallace’s death in 1905. During a Wallace memorial address a few days after Wallace’s death, Kane recalled a personal conversation with the deceased where he had learned that Sergius best expressed Wallace’s personal creed. “His Religious Views,” *Crawfordsville (Indiana) Weekly Journal*, 24 February 1905.

have been fruitful of disputes more or less related to those blessed canons, and sadder still, some of the disputes continue to this day. Would to God there was no more to be said of them!”³⁸ Wallace’s writings, particularly *Ben-Hur* and *The Prince of India*, demonstrate that he was not ignorant regarding theological doctrine; in fact, he appeared to be fully conversant on the topics. However, he was reluctant to rely upon theologians to help form his convictions, especially when Christian history showed continual dispute over sacred doctrine. Besides, there were other avenues of investigation open to him.

He considered the merits of sermons and commentaries, but jokingly dismissed them with “the very thought of them overwhelmed me with an idea of the shortness of life.”³⁹ The number and thickness of these books was not all that dissuaded Wallace from this area of investigation. He was likely aware of what Richard Wightman Fox has understood about nineteenth-century liberal preachers. Fox argued, “Liberal Protestants. . . drafted Jesus into their religious and intellectual service.”⁴⁰ In other words, if Wallace’s investigation had relied upon sermons and commentaries, his conclusions would not get at the questions he was asking about first century Christianity, since the preachers’ comments and depictions of Jesus would be colored by their contemporary cultural understandings and attempts at congregational appeasement. Religious novelist Elizabeth Stuart Phelps explained, “The popular preacher. . . must keep unwelcome truths to himself. . . . [H]e must be a religious diplomat. . . . [A] hearer could not be bored, or made uncomfortable with truths that he did not like or accept.”⁴¹ Henry Ward Beecher, the most prominent mid-nineteenth century preacher, added that because society changes and people change, the job of the preacher is necessary “to re-adapt truth, from age to age, to men’s ever-renewing wants.”⁴² Wallace concluded that he could not reach his own religious convictions by way of pulpit rhetoric if the messages issued from thence were subject to human fickleness.

The alternative to theologians and preachers was to reach his own conclusions using the gospels exclusively and otherwise relying entirely upon himself. He reckoned his years of legal practice had prepared him for the task by developing in him a “mental muscularity.” His

³⁸ Lew Wallace, *The Prince of India: or Why Constantinople Fell* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893), 1:456.

³⁹ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:930.

⁴⁰ Fox, *Jesus in America*, 264.

⁴¹ Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *The Story of Jesus Christ: An Interpretation* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1898), 131.

⁴² Henry Ward Beecher, *The Life of Jesus the Christ* (New York: E. B. Treat, 1896), 7.

investigation was not to be informed by pastoral input, theological persuasion, or quantifiable spiritual guidance, but through self-reliance. However, mental acuity could only take him so far. What would happen if perchance he lost interest in the subject? He had lost interest in subjects before: As a boy he became apathetic about arithmetic and concluded, “It and I could never be friends.” Like arithmetic, Wallace considered religion a dry subject and wondered how he could make it “light and savory,” thereby enabling him to retain his focus.⁴³

Writing had always held his attention, so it seemed practical to put his research to an enjoyable end. In fact, the story he wrote about the Magi and the nativity, he considered, would serve as a suitable introduction. The obvious conclusion of the research would be Jesus’ crucifixion, but Wallace was uncertain how to fill the thirty-year gap in between these events where the gospel accounts were largely silent. He eventually “decided to use the blank to show the religious and political conditions of the world” during Jesus’ lifetime, believing such an investigation would show the need for a Savior.⁴⁴

As Wallace wrote, he found himself “writing reverentially, and frequently with awe.” His characters became “essentially living persons.” One autobiographical passage reads as if Wallace were having schizophrenic episodes. He remembered, “Sometimes Ben-Hur or Simonides or Balthasar or Sheik Ilderim. . . would call me imperiously; and there being no other means of pacifying them, I would play truant from court and clients.” Rather than attribute this statement to mental illness, it is more appropriate to understand the all-consuming nature of his task. As he conversed with and learned from his characters he “was unconsciously making ready to cast [aside] [his] indifference.” “Long before I was through with my book,” he remembered, “I became a believer in God and Christ.”⁴⁵

Unlike most conversion accounts, Wallace’s decision was not made on a mourner’s bench, at a Moody revival, or on a deathbed. Instead, his conversion was quite un-dramatic and occurred over an extended time period. Perhaps he arrived at a Christian worldview while sitting beneath his beech trees, or riding the train, or hunched over his desk with scattered papers and books and pen in hand. Nevertheless, Wallace became a Christian from *outside* the church. Charles Lippy has argued that people frequently develop “religious worldviews independent of

⁴³ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:930, 1:26, 2:930.

⁴⁴ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:931.

⁴⁵ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:928, 2:928, 2:934, 2:929, 2:936.

religious institutions.”⁴⁶ Furthermore, extra-ecclesiastical conversions defy the “normative standards fixed by institutions and traditions.”⁴⁷ A standard Christian conversion would normally necessitate a church. The nearly universal hallmarks of belonging to the Christian body are baptism and the Eucharist. Both sacraments can only be administered through a church. Wallace, although baptized as an infant, circumnavigated the church. “Not that churches are objectionable to me,” he wrote, “but. . . my freedom is enjoyable.”⁴⁸ His freedom from church authority is one illustration of popular religiosity existence on the individual level. However, if anything really exhibits popular religiosity, it needs to be popular.

What makes something popular? Stephen Prothero has argued that the popular expresses “the inchoate sentiments of the public.”⁴⁹ *Ben-Hur*’s success can only be understood because it touched some common, unarticulated concern among late nineteenth-century Americans. It has been shown that Wallace researched *Ben-Hur* in order to form religious convictions of one kind or another. Yet why was it necessary to turn his research into a book? Certainly he loved writing and saw it as an escape from his cultural and vocational disquiet, yet why write? Wallace’s *The Boyhood of Christ* appeared in book form in 1888 and contained a preface that can shed light on this question. Wallace knew his readers would wonder why he who was “neither minister of the Gospel, nor theologian, nor churchman” would write a book like *The Boyhood of Christ* or *Ben-Hur*.⁵⁰ He answered, “I wrote it to fix an impression distinctly in my mind. . . [that] the Jesus Christ in whom I believe was, in all the stages of his life, a human being. His divinity was the Spirit within him, and the Spirit was God.”⁵¹ Wallace’s sentiment also struck a popular nerve. Biblical higher criticism was eroding people’s faith concerning the trustworthiness of the biblical narratives. As a result, David Morgan has explained, “The idea of recovering the likeness of the historical Jesus seemed especially attractive to American believers,” and many embarked on “a quest for certainty in a time of underlying doubt.”⁵² The Americans who embarked on this quest were often assisted by a burgeoning publishing industry.

⁴⁶ Lippy, *Being Religious, American Style*, 4.

⁴⁷ Lippy, *Being Religious, American Style*, 9.

⁴⁸ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 1:2.

⁴⁹ Steven Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 105.

⁵⁰ Wallace, *The Boyhood of Christ* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1900), n.p.

⁵¹ Wallace, *The Boyhood of Christ*, n.p.

⁵² David Morgan, *Protestants & Pictures: Religion, Visual Culture, and the Age of American Mass Production* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 10.

Evangelical and secular presses alike produced many religious titles. Theodore Ziolkowski has observed, “Literary works represent an aesthetic response to the urgent impulses of the times. . . [and] our interpretation of the work must. . . be grounded in an understanding of the society that produces it.”⁵³ Wallace did not write any of his books in a vacuum but wrote to resolve religious issues that he shared with many others in his culture. Wallace’s contention that Jesus was fully human inhabited by the spirit of God, while not doctrinally orthodox, was a testament to the central issue that concerned many nineteenth-century Christians. The Incarnation was “the most important and controlling” doctrine for liberal and evangelical Christians.⁵⁴ Defense and support of this doctrine was the key impetus for most publications on religious subjects.

Henry Ward Beecher argued that Jesus could not be seen “in Galilee, nor in Judea, just as he was. We look back upon him through a blaze of light. . . . It is not the Jesus who suffered in Palestine that we behold, but the Christ that has since filled the world with his name.”⁵⁵ Beecher’s comments demarcate the historical Jesus from the Christ of faith, but that does not mean that the public readily acknowledged such a distinction. Furthermore, Beecher’s Christ was a “personal power without form, a name of wonder without portraiture.”⁵⁶ This was a disconcerting prospect for Americans living in an age that exalted objectivity and empirical observation. Beecher’s comments reduced religious belief to little more than a feeling, divorced from physical reality. Yet the physical realm was the only thing American Christians could use to substantiate the historical reality of Jesus and the biblical accounts. Jesus could not be seen in Galilee, but Christians could still see Galilee. The Holy Land served as an answer to critical biblical studies. The works of David Friedrich Strauss [*Das Leben Jesu* (1835)] and Ernest Renan [*Vie de Jésus* (1863)] popularized biblical higher criticism and argued for the historicity of Jesus but maintained “the gospel character of Christ and the accounts of his miracles and teaching were creations of the early church.”⁵⁷ Higher criticisms opponents countered by documenting ethnographic, archeological, and botanical evidence that supported “the accuracy of

⁵³ Theodore Ziolkowski, *Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 297.

⁵⁴ William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 4.

⁵⁵ Beecher, *The Life of Jesus the Christ*, 135.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁵⁷ Fox, *Jesus in America*, 233.

biblical manuscripts and traditions of interpretation.”⁵⁸ As a result, the Holy Land became an increasingly important site of contention regarding the Bible’s accuracy.

Wallace was well aware of this debate, and he was deeply concerned with accurately depicting the Bible’s historic, cultural, and geographical settings. He had never visited the Holy Land, and he knew the critics would not tolerate any mistakes. *Ben-Hur*’s critical and ultimately commercial success hinged on his ability “to paint [the Holy Land], water, land, and sky, in actual colors.”⁵⁹ Neither could he afford to misrepresent the costumes and customs of his characters. Fortunately for Wallace and the American public, Bibles were increasingly published with illustrations and maps. Some nineteenth-century biblical illustrations “focused. . . on complex measurement scales and accurate topographical markings,” which demonstrated that scientific accuracy was superseding the biblical narrative’s authority.⁶⁰ In addition to biblical illustrations, publishers also marketed numerous reference works on the Holy Land. One of the most popular works was William M. Thomson’s *The Land and the Book*, which some have maintained was the best selling book between *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Ben-Hur*.⁶¹ If Thomson’s work was indeed that popular, Wallace might have used it for reference, although no copy survives in his library at Crawfordsville. Wallace acknowledged that he used over 300 volumes while researching *Ben-Hur*, and he wrote “with a chart always before [his] eyes. . . showing the towns and villages, all the sacred places, the heights, the depressions, the passes, trails, and distances.”⁶²

Several years later, Wallace’s appointment as United States Minister to the Ottoman Empire allowed him to visit the sites he took such great pains to represent. “I had every opportunity of testing the accuracy of the descriptions given in *Ben-Hur*,” he recalled.⁶³ He sought out all of the places his characters inhabited and concluded, “At every point of the journey over which I traced his [Ben-Hur’s] steps to Jerusalem, I found the descriptive details

⁵⁸ Paul C. Gutjahr, “American Protestant Bible Illustration from Copper Plates to Computers,” in *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, eds. David Morgan and Sally M. Promey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 275.

⁵⁹ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:932.

⁶⁰ Paul C. Gutjahr, *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777-1880* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 69.

⁶¹ Naomi Shepherd, *Zealous Intruders: The Western Rediscovery of Palestine* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 90.

⁶² “Interview with Gen. Lew Wallace,” *Crawfordsville (Indiana) Saturday Evening Journal*, 11 October 1884. Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:932.

⁶³ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:937.

true to the existing objects and scenes, and I find no reason for making a single change in the text of the book.”⁶⁴ Wallace humorously admitted that several “portions of the landscape which he had added to give color, thinking them fictitious [sic]” were actually very real; the coincidences were enough to make him superstitious.⁶⁵ Wallace’s commitment to historical and geographical accuracy is one reason *Ben-Hur* met with commercial success. Researcher Paul Gutjahr argued that *Ben-Hur* allowed readers to “learn things about the time in which Jesus lived and point to the educative qualities of the book as a reason for reading it.”⁶⁶ Furthermore, *Ben-Hur*’s accuracy gave readers “reason to believe in the historicity of the figure of Jesus.”⁶⁷ A contemporary newspaper writer concurred: “Few [works] have awakened the profound reverence for biblical history as has [*Ben-Hur*]. . . It has been the faithful aid of the pastor and the Sunday school and without seeming to do it has stimulated interest in research bearing on the life of the Nazarene and his time.”⁶⁸

In his accurate portrayal of the Holy Land to Americans, Wallace tapped into a popular religious need to experience faith. Religious historian Colleen McDannell contended, “American Christians. . . want to see, hear, and touch God.”⁶⁹ This need often exceeds institutional church boundaries as Christians appropriate extra-ecclesiastical elements to satiate this desire. Illustrated Bibles and *Ben-Hur* provided media through which nineteenth-century American Protestants could experience, albeit vicariously, the place where their God was made manifest and incarnate. Historian Susan Curtis has linked together various popular nineteenth-century religious book titles to explain that “American Protestants could follow ‘in the footsteps of the master’ from ‘manger to throne,’ or they could stand in the ‘shadow of the cross’ and answer the ‘call of the carpenter.’”⁷⁰ Religious novels gave American Christians a virtual reality where they could see, hear, and touch God.

Wallace, although he was an unconventional Protestant, experienced the same longings as other American Protestants. When weighing the merit of writing *Ben-Hur*, he recognized that theologians could write a better apologetic work than he could, yet their work would be confined

⁶⁴ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:937.

⁶⁵ “His Religious Views,” *Crawfordsville Weekly Journal*, 24 February 1905.

⁶⁶ Gutjahr, *An American Bible*, 169.

⁶⁷ Gutjahr, *An American Bible*, 169.

⁶⁸ “Gen. Lew Wallace,” *Crawfordsville (Indiana) Weekly Journal*, 10 February 1905.

⁶⁹ McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 1.

⁷⁰ Susan Curtis, *A Consuming Faith: The Social Gospel and Modern American Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 82.

to a small portion of the population. Wallace acknowledged that “his desire was to reach and help the masses.”⁷¹ “In no other way,” he commented, “can attention be so easily secured or so large a pupilage gained by a teacher” as through novels.⁷² However, the problems regarding accurately depicting geography, culture, and history aside, Wallace faced a nearly insurmountable proposition in writing *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*. He knew and feared that “the Christian world would not tolerate a novel with Jesus Christ its hero.”⁷³

“It was somewhat of an experiment,” he recalled, “to represent Christ in a romance. Sermon, biography and criticism have heretofore occupied the field exclusively.”⁷⁴ Indeed, scholarly and popular lives of Christ were increasingly accepted in the nineteenth century. Beecher estimated that over 150 lives of Christ and gospel harmonies had appeared in the 300 years prior to the publication of his own life of Christ.⁷⁵ That estimate roughly averages one new life of Christ published every two years. However, that average dramatically increased during the final third of the nineteenth century.⁷⁶ The rise in production could possibly be viewed as a reaction to the liberal lives of Christ, which Strauss and Renan most prominently had authored earlier in the century. The liberal lives modernized Jesus “to make him relevant to the present,” de-emphasized Jesus’ eschatology in favor of his social message, and portrayed Jesus as motivated by human and not divine reasons.⁷⁷ The humanity of Jesus was stressed at the expense of any divinity to the point that “Jesus emerged in the mid-nineteenth century as a living breathing human being.”⁷⁸

Nineteenth-century Americans witnessed Jesus’ incarnation on the page and on the stage. Protestant prohibitions against Jesus pictures were eroded as new print technologies burgeoned. Currier and Ives marketed a line of religious lithographs including portraits of Jesus. Illustrated Bibles and lives of Christ frequently reproduced famous Jesus paintings by European masters. Perhaps the most shocking and even scandalous appearance of Jesus was in Salmi Morse’s 1879 play *The Passion*. Morse did not intend to offend the religious public, but he could not do otherwise. The nineteenth-century theater was considered a morally disreputable arena in the

⁷¹ “Wallace and Harper,” *Crawfordsville (Indiana) Weekly Journal*, 17 March 1905.

⁷² “Gen. Wallace on ‘Quo Vadis,’” *Crawfordsville (Indiana) Weekly Journal*, 27 August 1897.

⁷³ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:933.

⁷⁴ “Governor Wallace,” *Crawfordsville (Indiana) Saturday Evening Journal*, 26 February 1881.

⁷⁵ Beecher, *The Life of Jesus the Christ*, 5.

⁷⁶ J. Gilchrist Lawson, ed., *Greatest Thoughts About Jesus Christ* (New York: Richard R. Smith), 80.

⁷⁷ Ziolkowski, *Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus*, 40-41.

⁷⁸ Prothero, *American Jesus*, 55.

first place. The difficulty of staging a sacred play in a secular environment further compounded the problem. Fox has explained, “To put Christ in the theater was to declare him free of biblical protection. It was to make him incarnate in secular culture and to lose sight of his mysterious transcendence of all culture.”⁷⁹ Additionally, many clergy feared that *The Passion* would be a “pernicious influence on the thoughtless and profane.”⁸⁰

Novels, not unlike the theater, were viewed as an equally tenuous area to promote religious ideas because there was little certainty that the Christian readers would use proper discernment in their reading habits. James Strong, compiler of the still valued *Strong’s Concordance*, wrote, “I am not an advocate of novel-reading, especially not of the perusal of the trash with which the modern press so largely teems.”⁸¹ Strong’s comment was representative of the majority of nineteenth-century Protestants. When Wallace presented his *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* manuscript to Joseph Henry Harper for publication, Harper cautioned Wallace that the “subject was a delicate one to treat in a novel,” to which Wallace replied “that if there were anything in the story which could offend a fellow Christian he would rather cut off his right hand than publish it.”⁸²

Wallace knew beforehand that if his novel was to find any degree of acceptance, its success depended “in great measure on the manner of presentment.” He devised three criteria, which he hoped would avoid giving “mortal offence.” First, it is obvious to anyone who has read *Ben-Hur*, or especially seen the 1959 movie, that the *Tale of the Christ* is almost lost amidst Judah’s revenge seeking, sea battling, and chariot racing. The nativity opens the book and movie, but Jesus is a behind-the-scenes figure until the book’s final hundred pages and the movie’s final six scenes. Wallace was able to keep writing specifically about Jesus to a minimum as a way to avoid potential religious objection. Second, Wallace pledged that Jesus “should not be present as an actor in any scene of my creation.” The only exception to this injunction he permitted was a cameo of Jesus offering Judah a drink of water when he was being taken to the galleys. Wallace’s final protocol was to assure when Jesus finally appeared that “every word He uttered should be a literal quotation from one of His sainted biographers.”

⁷⁹ Fox, *Jesus in America*, 297.

⁸⁰ Alan Nielsen, *The Great Victorian Sacrilege: Preachers, Politics and The Passion, 1879-1884* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1991), 75.

⁸¹ James Strong, *Sketches of Jewish Life in the First Century* (Cincinnati: Cranston & Stowe, 1891), 9.

⁸² “Wallace and Harper,” *Crawfordsville (Indiana) Weekly Journal*, 17 March 1905.

Wallace hoped that his self-censorship would meet with the approval of the clergy, religious press, and “orthodox Christian sentiment.”⁸³

There was one other matter with which Wallace needed to concern himself: How could he as a non-church-member dare to write a Jesus novel? *Ben-Hur* had two notable Jesus novel precedents.⁸⁴ Although it is uncertain whether Wallace read either of them, they certainly did not meet with *Ben-Hur*'s success. One of the earliest Jesus novels was William Ware's *Julian: Or, Scenes in Judea* (1841). The novel relates the story of Julian, a Roman Jew, who travels for the first time to Judea. Once there, Julian becomes intensely nationalistic and works to find and support a Messiah who will restore Judea's political glory. He conspires with others to proclaim Herod as the Messiah. Concurrently, Jesus ministers in the novel's distant background, and news of his ministry reaches Julian second-hand. Julian and other characters debate Jesus' merits, but Julian concludes, “I felt [Jesus] was united to God, I saw that the language of his countenance was not that of an angel, nor of a God, but of a man.”⁸⁵ It is helpful to know that Ware was a Unitarian minister, and Julian's words essentially espoused the author's creed. Doctrine aside, there are a few parallels between this earliest Jesus novel and *Ben-Hur*.⁸⁶ Although debates about Jesus' identity are prominent in both novels, Jesus himself is a cameo character. Furthermore, both novels share a commitment to historical and geographical accuracy. The subtitle of *Julian; Or Scenes in Judea* is a good indication of this point, but Ware also wrote the following: “In respect to Scripture antiquities no more has been attempted than not to do them violence. Geographical and Topographical details will be found to agree essentially with the best authorities.”⁸⁷

Joseph Holt Ingraham's *The Prince of the House of David*, which was published in 1855, was the most popular pre-*Ben-Hur* Jesus novel. The author was an Episcopalian priest, who,

⁸³ “Gen. Wallace on ‘Quo Vadis,’” *Crawfordsville (Indiana) Weekly Journal*, 27 August 1897; Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:933; Lew Wallace, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1908), 130; Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:934; “Gen. Wallace on ‘Quo Vadis,’” *Crawfordsville (Indiana) Weekly Journal*, 27 August 1897.

⁸⁴ For an outstanding compilation of eighteenth through mid-nineteenth-century religious fiction titles see David S. Reynolds, *Faith in Fiction: The Emergence of Religious Literature in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 227-237. Because the genre exploded in the late nineteenth-century Reynolds had to limit his list of titles after 1850, but he still provided a solid sample of titles from 1850-1980.

⁸⁵ William Ware, *Julian; Or Scenes in Judea*, 2nd ed. (1841; repr., New York: C. S. Francis & Co., 1856), 2:255.

⁸⁶ One similarity that does not merit inclusion in the text above but nevertheless is a curious parallel. In *Julian* a heroine assassinates a Roman official by casting “a stone from a roof” (1:91). In *Ben-Hur*, Valerius Gratus nearly meets the same fate when Judah dislodges a roofing tile that falls and strikes the procurator (*Ben-Hur*, 122-23).

⁸⁷ Ware, *Julian*, 1:vi.

before ordination, was a prolific author of cheap fiction. He was apparently ashamed of his former profession and attempted to gather and destroy his formerly published works. However, he eventually re-embraced his talent and began writing religious fiction. In *The Prince of the House of David*, Ingraham's principal character is Adina, a young Jewish woman from Rome. Adina narrates the story through a series of long letters to her father in Rome. Adina witnesses and documents Jesus' public ministry and even becomes personally acquainted with several biblical personalities, including Lazarus, Mary, Martha, and the disciples. Ingraham's book closely follows the gospel accounts, but he did interject several fictional conversations between Adina and Jesus. Not unlike *Ben-Hur*, *Julian*, travel writing, or lives of Christ, *The Prince of the House of David* aimed at giving the reader a sense of intimacy with Jesus' time and place. Furthermore, Ingraham, unlike Ware, did not hesitate to use his characters to deliver lengthy apologetics for Christ's divinity.

What makes Wallace and *Ben-Hur* uniquely different from the progenitors of American Jesus fiction is that, unlike Ingraham or Ware, Wallace was affiliated with the church in no official capacity. It is curious that this fact did not negate Wallace as a religious authority. Granted, many *Ben-Hur* readers were likely unaware of Wallace's extra-ecclesiastical religiosity, but even if they had been aware, would it have mattered? Beecher, as quoted in Hutchison, observed that common people "form an atmosphere, a public sentiment, around investigators who give power and practical use to the dry products of the inquiring brain."⁸⁸ In other words, theological doctrines must be adapted to new generations lest they lose their public relevance. In some cases, what the public finds theologically or religiously relevant is not disseminated from the pulpit or seminaries, but from mass culture. Stephen Prothero has observed that the Christianity circulated in nineteenth-century novels "is not about correct doctrines of divinity. It is about heartfelt personal relationships – between the individual and Jesus and among humans themselves."⁸⁹

Lew Wallace's life illustrated elements of late nineteenth-century popular religiosity, but it is important to also consider what *Ben-Hur* specifically demonstrated about popular religiosity. James Strong, after initially deriding fiction reading, concluded, "I cannot ignore the fact that the

⁸⁸ Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism*, 101.

⁸⁹ Prothero, *American Jesus*, 66.

human mind. . . eagerly craves. . . the narrative form of information. . . [for] instruction.”⁹⁰

Historian Charles Lippy would likely agree, since he has contended that religious novels in particular are necessary sources to understand the ways common readers thought about religious matters.⁹¹ Although the popular religious ideas held by religious fiction readers cannot be precisely discerned, it is nevertheless certain that people purchased, read, and (formally and informally) discussed religious novels because they “sent signals about beliefs and values that resonated with their own life experience.”⁹² Of course, a novel about first century Judea probably would not contain much that resonated with nineteenth-century life experience. However, “what is vital about *Ben-Hur* and cognate works,” Lippy argued, “is the way they strip Jesus of the centuries of christological doctrine.”⁹³ Religious novels thereby freed Jesus from institutional authority and allowed readers to define Jesus in ways meaningful for their own faith experiences. *Ben-Hur* was a novel written extra-ecclesiastically, distributed secularly, and read domestically. It informed many readers’ spirituality. It would be difficult to identify an example that exhibited more characteristics of popular religiosity than *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*.⁹⁴

One answer to the question frequently asked by visitors to the General Lew Wallace Study and Museum, why Lew Wallace wrote *Ben-Hur*, is that he wrote to resolve personal issues, through spiritual explanation. That fact alone is not remarkable, however; billions of people continue to find spiritual salve for physical, emotional, and psychological pain. What is remarkable is that Wallace popularized his conclusions through a mass medium, and those who read *Ben-Hur* appropriated Wallace’s conclusions in turn for their own spiritual benefit. Wallace was not a pastor, but he ministered to a congregation of millions. An earlier time would have quibbled with the Christian doctrine espoused in *Ben-Hur*. An earlier time would also have lacked the technology, networks, and markets necessary to the mass distribution of a religious novel. People always construct personal religiosities, but by Wallace’s time mass and material

⁹⁰ Strong, *Sketches of Jewish Life in the First Century*, 9.

⁹¹ Lippy, *Being Religious, American Style*, 147.

⁹² Lippy, *Being Religious, American Style*, 17.

⁹³ Lippy, *Being Religious, American Style*, 151.

⁹⁴ Williams defined popular religiosity as exhibiting the following characteristics, “usually (1) found outside formal church structures, (2) transmitted outside the established channels of religious instruction and communication employed by these structures, and (3) preoccupied with concrete manifestations of the supernatural in the midst of the secular world.” He proceeded to say that two out of the three criteria can make the case for something popular. It is obvious that *Ben-Hur* meets the first two criteria and a case can be made for the third in that *Ben-Hur* readers were concerned with finding a supernatural experience mediated through novels and other elements of mass culture. Williams, *Popular Religion in America*, xi.

culture had facilitated ways for personal religiosity to be shared and hence popular. The shared popularity of Lew Wallace and *Ben-Hur* is a good indication of the emergence of mass-media-spawned popular religiosity in nineteenth-century America.

Chapter Three

Hungering for Heroes: The Celebrity Making of Lew Wallace

“A peculiarity of the most democratic people in the world,” Lew Wallace wrote, “is their hunger for heroes.”¹ Statesmen and soldiers have tended to monopolize membership in America’s pantheon of heroes, but the giants of these professions were noticeably absent in late nineteenth-century America. Into this gulf, new heroes emerged who were celebrated more for their contributions to leisure activities rather than public service. Lew Wallace was such a hero, “[a]lthough. . . famous as a soldier long before he entered the field of letters, it was through his authorship of ‘Ben-Hur’ . . . that he became known to the largest number of people.”² However, there was more to Wallace’s celebrity than simply being famous. What can Lew Wallace’s life illustrate about late nineteenth-century celebrity? Or more specifically, why was he celebrated?

Reader-response theory can provide helpful insights for answering these questions. Although this theory derived from literature studies that tried to explain how people read, it is also helpful in explaining how people, celebrities in particular, are perceived. Just as some readers fail to grasp an author’s intent, Americans’ understanding of celebrities falls short of actually knowing the subjects’ real selves since celebrities are mass-mediated images. A celebrity *per se* does not exist; rather celebrity is a state of signification created by adulating fans.³ Fans are integral to the existence of the celebrity, or, to put it another way, “authors do not make books; books make authors.”⁴ If there is no audience for the book, how can there be an author? It is not exactly that there cannot be an author without an audience, but authors ask “their readers to *give* credence to what they are reading.”⁵ An author has no authority without readers’ reception, nor can a celebrity be celebrated without fans’ reaction. Yet what is it that causes celebrities to be adored?

Part of a fan’s fascination with a celebrity may result from reading their works, watching their performances, or following a mass-mediated narrative of their life. These public presentations are given consideration by their audiences, not merely for entertainment’s sake, but

¹ Lew Wallace, “The Capture of Fort Donelson,” *The Century* 29 (December 1884): 286.

² “General Lew Wallace Dies at Indiana Home,” *New York Times*, 16 February 1905.

³ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 64-65. Eagleton’s sentence read, “Literary texts do not exist on bookshelves: they are processes of signification materialized only in the practice of reading.”

⁴ R. Jackson Wilson, *Figures of Speech: American Writers and the Literary Marketplace, from Benjamin Franklin to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 8.

⁵ Wilson, *Figures of Speech*, 7.

because they likely mean something to their constituency. While Wallace may have initially written *Ben-Hur* for his own benefit, it was read because it benefited its readers. It told the readers stories or answered readers' questions in ways that resonated with their beliefs. In fact, belief is central to many reading acts. Theorist and critic Stanley Fish has commented on the value of belief: "What you believe is what you see is what you know is what you do is what you are."⁶ Fish commentator Gary Olson has clarified, "For Fish, beliefs are constitutive of consciousness. . . . [I]n many ways we are what we believe. People 'understand' or are 'persuaded' by a position or belief because it fits into the structure of beliefs already in play."⁷ This argument gives an explanation for *Ben-Hur*'s popularity, but it also addresses why Wallace was celebrated. Wallace, by virtue of authoring a celebrated fictional work, had his public identity bound to *Ben-Hur*. Consequently, Wallace inhabited his novels and the mass-market machinery that had enabled *Ben-Hur* to flourish.⁸ In late nineteenth-century America, Lew Wallace became culturally commodified along with his intellectual property as a product of new mass media, mass marketing, and an emergent consumer culture.

While waiting out the final days of his tenure as United States Minister to Turkey, Wallace reflected on what he had accomplished during his first fifty-eight years. "I have tried many things in course of the drama," he wrote to Susan, "and if I may pass judgment upon the success achieved in each[,]. . . I shall look back upon *Ben-Hur* as my best performance."⁹ *Ben-Hur* more than anything else had "made" Lew Wallace, not only in terms of finances and life achievement, but also in terms of celebrity. An example of *Ben-Hur*'s impact on Wallace's celebrity can be observed with a search of the *New York Times*. Prior to *Ben-Hur*'s publication in November 1880, Lew Wallace's name had graced the *Times*' pages forty-eight times. Most of these mentions concerned Wallace's military or political activities. After *Ben-Hur*'s publication and until his death in 1905, Wallace was mentioned in the *Times* another 378 times. Many of these articles and advertisements, whatever the subject, often linked "Gen. Lew Wallace, the author of 'Ben-Hur'" in descriptions. The century's best-selling novel gave legitimacy to its author, but it was a legitimacy ultimately derived from a consuming public that was unwilling to purchase the novel at first.

⁶ Fish quoted in Gary A. Olson, *Justifying Belief: Stanley Fish and the Work of Rhetoric* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 81.

⁷ Olson, *Justifying Belief*, 3.

⁸ Richard S. Lowry, "Littery Man", 9.

⁹ Lew Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1906), 2:969.

When *Ben-Hur* appeared in 1880, sales were discouraging, and its future prospects were doubtful. One news article recalled that *Ben-Hur* initially “showed no signs of popularity, nor did its sale improve much in the second year.”¹⁰ Another article retrospectively commented, “The book had been practically relegated to the storehouse.”¹¹ Indeed, it was fortunate that *Ben-Hur* had the opportunity to make it to the storehouse at all. Longtime Harpers’ book-reviewer George Ripley reluctantly recommended *Ben-Hur* for publication because he did not consider it “legitimate literature.”¹²

The novel’s fortune and the public’s impression of it had begun to change by the time Wallace returned from Turkey. A March 1887 notice from Harper and Brothers listed *Ben-Hur* with 162,000 sold.¹³ Five months later, Harpers announced that *Ben-Hur* had sold 33,000 more copies.¹⁴ Thirteen years later *Ben-Hur* had sold 700,000 copies domestically, and it was observed that sales in 1900 were “4,000 copies in excess of those of 1899; the sales of 1899 were about 2,000 copies ahead of those of 1898, and so on back to 1880.”¹⁵ At the time of Wallace’s death, twenty-five years after *Ben-Hur*’s debut, sales had surpassed one million copies.¹⁶ Strong sales continued well into the twentieth century, and in 1945 Alice Payne Hackett estimated that *Ben-Hur* had sold two and a half million copies.¹⁷ Hackett’s estimate was fifteen years before *Ben-Hur* interest would peak again with M-G-M’s 1959 film.

Ben-Hur was fifth on Hackett’s best seller list, behind Charles Sheldon’s *In His Steps* (1897), Elbert Hubbard’s *Message to Garcia* (1898), Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind* (1936), and Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1937). If one concentrates on nineteenth-century best sellers, *Ben-Hur* was, according to Hackett, outsold by only two books. Furthermore, *Ben-Hur* outsold its nearest nineteenth-century best sellers, the *Boston Cooking School Cook Book*, by 343,000, and the nearest work of nineteenth-century fiction, *Tom Sawyer*, by a million copies. However, there is an important observation to be made regarding what outsold *Ben-Hur*. Charles Sheldon failed to copyright *In His Steps*, and as a

¹⁰ “‘Ben-Hur,’” *Crawfordsville (Indiana) Weekly Journal*, 6 January 1905.

¹¹ “The Author’s Full Dinner Pail,” *The Bookman* 28, no. 4 (1908): 339.

¹² Eugene Exman, *The House of Harper: One Hundred and Fifty Years of Publishing* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 150.

¹³ Classified Ad, *New York Times*, 8 March 1887.

¹⁴ Classified Ad, *New York Times*, 9 August 1887.

¹⁵ “Notes and News,” *New York Times*, 22 December 1900.

¹⁶ At least two articles estimated sales of one million around 1905. See “How ‘Ben-Hur’ Came to Be Written,” *Current Literature* 42, no. 2 (1907): 178; “‘Ben-Hur,’” *Crawfordsville (Indiana) Weekly Journal*, 6 January 1905.

¹⁷ Alice Payne Hackett, *Fifty Years of Best Sellers 1895-1945* (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1945), 104.

result the novel proliferated in cheap dime and nickel paperback forms. Additionally, there is reason to question Hackett's figure of eight million copies of *In His Steps* sold since that figure derived from Charles Sheldon alone without any independent corroboration.¹⁸ *Message to Garcia* was similar to *In His Steps* in that sales flourished in cheap form, yet unlike *Ben-Hur* or *In His Steps*, it cannot be considered a fully matured novel. *Message to Garcia* was a Horatio Alger story for adults, which book historian James Hart described as "no more than an anecdote leading into a lengthy exposition of the moral."¹⁹ While *In His Steps* and *Message to Garcia* found great sales by appearing in cheap forms, *Ben-Hur* was never issued in nineteenth-century America in editions cheaper than a sextodecimo cloth edition, which retailed for \$1.50. Some of the most expensive nineteenth-century editions of *Ben-Hur* cost \$14, such as the boxed, two-volume, fully illustrated, Garfield edition bound in three-quarter levant.²⁰ *Ben-Hur*'s issuance in pricey editions illustrates an important facet of Wallace's quest for legitimacy: no matter how critics would deride his fiction as anachronistic or sentimental, Wallace would not allow them the satisfaction of calling his work cheap. If his work continued to appear in cloth-bindings or better, detractors could not argue that his work was somehow lacking in artistic merit. Furthermore, the fact that *Ben-Hur* found popular success in an expensive form is another indication that Wallace's work was legitimated in the marketplace.

It was not only *Ben-Hur* that consumers purchased, but any book bearing Wallace's name. Wallace followed *Ben-Hur* in 1893 with *The Prince of India*, and when the *New York Times* gave advance notice of its publication, they concluded, "The enormous popularity of Gen. Wallace's 'Ben-Hur' will secure for this new work wide and immediate attention."²¹ *The Prince of India* was published in August with a first edition of 50,000; by September 4, it was reported that 35,000 copies had sold.²² By the end of 1893, *The Prince of India* had sold over 100,000 copies.²³ *The Prince of India* was a more expensive book than *Ben-Hur* since it was issued in two volumes and at the cheapest retailed for \$2.50, but the higher cost did not deter purchasers wanting to read the next Wallace novel. However, the staggering initial sales did not persist

¹⁸ For a discussion of reported sales of *In His Steps* see Timothy Miller, *Following In His Steps: A Biography of Charles Sheldon* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987).

¹⁹ James D. Hart, *The Popular Book: A History of America's Literary Taste* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 178.

²⁰ Advertisement, *The Literary World* 24, no. 24 (1893): 394.

²¹ "Gen. Lew Wallace's New Story," *New York Times*, 8 March 1893.

²² "Literary Notes," *New York Times*, 4 September 1893.

²³ "Literary Notes," *New York Times*, 25 December 1893.

because *The Prince of India* failed to touch the popular religious nerve that *Ben-Hur* did. Nevertheless, the tremendous, but brief, sales of *The Prince of India* highlighted the outstanding commercial reception of Wallace's work. It also reveals the power of Wallace's publisher.

It is safe to say that copies of *Ben-Hur* would have likely remained unsold, as in its first few years off the presses, had it not been for Harper and Brothers. Furthermore, Wallace would have likely remained on the fringes of public memory had it not been for his publishers. When Wallace first submitted the *Ben-Hur* manuscript to Joseph Harper, he was just as concerned as Wallace with the feasibility of depicting Jesus in a novel. Yet the Harpers' name dictated good taste in nineteenth-century America. They had the power to make authors, and "with their channels of advertisement and distribution, they could foster the careers of chosen writers and the cause of American literature as a whole."²⁴ Part of the Harpers' respectability derived from their Methodist commitment to print "interesting, instructive, and moral" books as a way of sanctifying the market.²⁵ Religiously knowledgeable consumers would likely be aware of the Harpers' commitment and have little trepidation regarding purchasing Harpers' publications.

Harpers' real success was not in its piety but in its commercial machinery. They published a weekly newspaper and a monthly magazine in addition to books, and their periodicals went a long way towards advertising what was new off their presses. Furthermore, it was not merely coincidence that *Ben-Hur* sales became brisk when *Harper's Weekly* displayed a full page engraving of Wallace on the cover of the March 6, 1886, issue.²⁶ Likewise, when Wallace's *The Boyhood of Christ* debuted in *Harper's Monthly* for Christmas 1886, *The Literary World* acknowledged that the story "has apparently given new life to the author[']s famous book."²⁷

Harpers also pitched *Ben-Hur* in many different ways. A series of 1891 Harpers' advertisements recommended reading *Ben-Hur* while at home, on vacation, and during Lent.²⁸ Additionally, Harpers marketed excerpts from *Ben-Hur*, *The Chariot Race* and *The First Christmas*, as exclusive holiday gift editions along with Wallace's Christmastime appropriate *The Boyhood of Christ*. Perhaps one of the more sly *Ben-Hur* marketing ploys involved Harpers'

²⁴ Michael Newbury, *Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 201.

²⁵ Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 75.

²⁶ *Harper's Weekly*, 6 March 1886.

²⁷ "News and Notes," *The Literary World* 17, no. 25 (1886): 472.

²⁸ "Lenten Reading," *Harper's Weekly*, 7 March 1891; "Home Reading," *Harper's Weekly*, 28 March 1891; "Books for Vacation Reading," *Harper's Weekly*, 22 August 1891.

inclusion of *Ben-Hur* excerpts into their school reading primers. Reading about the chariot race or the sea battle in a primer might have convinced more than a few schoolchildren to procure a *Ben-Hur* copy of their own.²⁹ Harpers also recommended “some Harper juvenile books selected for school libraries and reading circles.”³⁰ Their suggestions included *Ben-Hur* for eighth grade boys, along with *Huckleberry Finn*, *Adventures of Buffalo Bill*, and *How to Get Strong and How to Stay So*. Not to be overlooked at the expense of redundancy, *The Chariot Race* and *The First Christmas* also made the list.

The listing of *Ben-Hur* with other titles promoting the strenuous life also indicates another Harpers’ advertising strategy. Harpers advertised *Ben-Hur* contextually with both similar subjects and dissimilar genres. A revealing example is Harpers’ 1890 edition of James Ludlow’s *The Captain of the Janizaries*, which had four back-page advertisements for other Harpers’ titles. The first ad is for *Ben-Hur*, which makes sense because *The Captain of the Janizaries* and *Ben-Hur* are both historical fiction. The next ad is for Wallace’s *The Boyhood of Christ*, obviously an attempt to sell all their Wallace titles in inventory but also carrying along the Christ theme. The third ad is for William Thomson’s three-volume work *The Land and the Book*, which suggests that Thomson’s Holy Land scholarship can be linked to or equated with Wallace’s fiction. The final listing is for Thomson’s *Jesus Christ in the Old Testament*. These four advertisements suggest one way Harpers marketed their books, but also perhaps how readers came to understand *Ben-Hur* and Wallace. Both the author and his creation came to be seen as authorities equal to Thomson and his scholarly works of non-fiction.

Harpers played no small role in reshaping their star author for particular audiences. However, other parties were molding Wallace’s name as well. While meditating on the success of *Ben-Hur*, one magazine writer stated, “General Wallace’s book reached [Americans] not because of any publishers’ publicity department but because the story was praised and discussed in a thousand pulpits.”³¹ An Indianapolis newspaper reported, “Rev. McCulloch bought sixteen [copies of *Ben-Hur*], and Myron H. Reed has several times recommended it from his pulpit – no

²⁹ *Harper’s Fifth Reader: American Authors* (New York: American Book Company, 1889). This edition contains an excerpt from the Chariot Race. When I worked at the General Lew Wallace Study I was transferring some books from one shelf to another, and came across a different edition of *Harper’s Reader* that contained an excerpt from the Sea Battle.

³⁰ “Some Harper Juvenile Books Selected for School Libraries and Reading Circles,” *Harper’s Weekly Advertiser*, 24 April 1909.

³¹ “Chronicle and Comment,” *The Bookman* 21, no. 2 April 1905: 116.

small praise to be given any book from such men.”³² The Rev. J. C. Fletcher commented, “No one could read [*Ben-Hur*] without inducing his neighbor to do the same.”³³ Pulpit recommendations created an American Protestant reading culture around *Ben-Hur*.

Lew Wallace once wrote, “A wise man wishing to know another always attends him when he is in narrative.”³⁴ As American Protestants read *Ben-Hur*, they drew their own conclusions about the author. A *Chicago Inter-Ocean* review stated, “The author has taken special pains to show the deep reverence with which he enshrines the name of Christ in his own heart.”³⁵ Did the reviewer know this definitively *from* Wallace, or was it merely inferred from reading *Ben-Hur*? Similarly, Reformed Episcopal Church Bishop Cheney acknowledged that he did not know Wallace, but still said the following:

My experience is that when a writer of fiction attempts to invest the facts of the Gospel history in the mantle of romance, he is apt to shock and grate upon the reverence which every Christian feels for that supreme subject. I have read *Ben-Hur* with no such feeling, but, on the contrary, with the conviction that *it is conceived and executed in a spirit of such profound reverence* that no one can become interested in its perusal without its (sic) doing him good.³⁶ Bishop Cheney’s feeling was not contrary to fact, for Wallace later acknowledged that he wrote *Ben-Hur* “reverentially and frequently with awe,” but Cheney being a stranger to Wallace had no way of knowing this.³⁷ Furthermore, if Protestant clergy were cognizant of Wallace’s heterodoxy, it raises the question of whether they would have recommended *Ben-Hur* to their congregations at all. Nevertheless, the fact of the matter is that “the Protestant Christian found in [*Ben-Hur*] that which suited him.”³⁸

However, it was not just Protestants who appropriated *Ben-Hur* and Wallace, but also Catholics and Jews. *Harper’s Weekly* reported, “A singular tribute to the breadth of spirit that characterizes General Lew Wallace’s *Ben Hur* is the fact that both his Jewish and Catholic fellow-citizens are buying the book in large quantities.”³⁹ An issue of *The Catholic World*

³² “The Success of Ben Hur,” *Crawfordsville (Indiana) Saturday Evening Journal*, 29 January 1881.

³³ “Personal,” *Harper’s Weekly*, 12 January 1889, 23.

³⁴ Lew Wallace, *The Prince of India: Or Why Constantinople Fell* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1893), 1:115.

³⁵ Advertisement, *Harper’s Weekly*, 4 August 1888, 578.

³⁶ “Personal,” *Harper’s Weekly*, 4 February 1882, 67. Emphasis mine.

³⁷ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:928.

³⁸ “Personal,” *Harper’s Weekly*, 12 January 1889, 23.

³⁹ “Personal,” *Harper’s Weekly*, 3 April 1886, 211.

belatedly recommended *Ben-Hur* to its readers “as a genuine and rare gem of literature.”⁴⁰ A letter was forwarded to Wallace from an unidentified priest who expressed “profound admiration. . . for his wonderful creation, which I have always found my most inspiring spiritual reading at Christmas-tide. . . . I am sure the author will receive the blessing of the Master of the Harvest for the countless souls his labor has garnered.”⁴¹ However, the greatest Roman Catholic endorsement of *Ben-Hur* came from the Vatican itself. Henry Salvadori, honorary chaplain to Pope Leo XIII, translated *Ben-Hur* into Italian and made “various modifications of ideas into the work in the interests of piety.”⁴² Supposedly, this action made *Ben-Hur* the first novel authorized and blessed by the Holy See.⁴³

Some Jews received *Ben-Hur* positively as well. Rev. J. H. Fletcher remarked, “The Jew discovered that. . . [*Ben-Hur*] was a book which respected the Jew.”⁴⁴ Of course, this comment derived from a Protestant clergyman; nevertheless, *Ben-Hur* had a Jewish hero at a time when “anti-Semitic views became more overt, more fashionable, and more pervasive than ever before” within popular culture and among scholars.⁴⁵ However, reception of *Ben-Hur* varied among Jews. In 1897 Charles Flowers performed his “Ben-Hur Tableaux” in a Cleveland synagogue. The newspaper reported, “Gen. Wallace’s ‘Tale of the Christ’ was well received and. . . Mr. Flowers was encored repeatedly. . . . [It] speaks well of the author, the monologist and the liberality of the Cleveland Hebrew congregation.”⁴⁶ Conversely, Rabbi Joseph Silverman from New York City’s Emanuel Temple “vigorously denounced” the *Ben-Hur* stage-play, which opened in 1899, calling the production a “libel on the Hebrew people and their religion.”⁴⁷ While neither of these examples concerns *Ben-Hur* the novel, it is safe to infer that there was no consensus on *Ben-Hur* in the late nineteenth-century American Jewish community. Wallace was either a hero or a villain to American Jews.

The burgeoning public libraries, like Harpers and religious pulpits, also encouraged *Ben-Hur*’s readership. George Cotkin has described late nineteenth-century public libraries as sites of

⁴⁰ “New Publications,” *Catholic World* 38, no. 226 (1884): 572.

⁴¹ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:955-56.

⁴² Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:941-42.

⁴³ Robert E. Morsberger and Katharine M. Morsberger, *Lew Wallace: Militant Romantic* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), 448.

⁴⁴ “Personal,” *Harper’s Weekly*, 12 January 1889, 23.

⁴⁵ T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 108.

⁴⁶ “Ben-Hur in a Synagogue,” *Crawfordsville (Indiana) Weekly Journal*, 5 March 1897.

⁴⁷ “Ben-Hur Denounced,” *The (Crawfordsville, Indiana) New-Review*, 16 December 1899.

“social-control” where “care and prudence [were] exercised. . . in the selection of reading materials for the masses.”⁴⁸ The governing principle for libraries’ reading selection was ultimately a reader response question, namely, how would certain fiction reading morally affect its audience?⁴⁹ This question was aimed especially at dime fiction, particularly Horatio Alger’s work, because of the possible adverse effects it might have on its mainly male juvenile audience. Obviously the moral effect of *Ben-Hur* on its readers was never called into question after glowing endorsements from clergy and since the book never appeared as a cheap edition. Furthermore, *Ben-Hur* was consistently listed as recommended juvenile reading, notices to which public libraries no doubt gave heed.⁵⁰

While some public libraries sought to exercise social control, the institution was also at the mercy of its patrons. Public libraries catered to their reading public by supplying the fiction in demand. For this reason, some researchers and writers have acknowledged, “The [reading] taste of a representative public is most likely to be reached best by the count kept in the public libraries.”⁵¹ Although the caveat of such an approach is that it cannot be guaranteed that everything that was checked out of a library was read, similarly every book purchased may or may not have been read. Nevertheless, the fact that a book found great library circulation at least reflects the intent of patrons to read a work, presumably because of its prominent place within the public sphere. In 1893, New York publishers J. Selwin Tait and Sons undertook a survey of prominent American libraries asking for a list of the 150 most frequently requested books. J. Selwin Tait and Sons then compiled the results and found that *Ben-Hur* appeared on eighty-three percent of the lists returned.⁵² Only *David Copperfield*, *Ivanhoe*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* appeared on the lists with more frequency.

Library circulation records demonstrate that patrons read, or intended to read *Ben-Hur*. However, library records cannot tell us *how* people read Wallace’s novel and what they took away from it. Historians have frequently turned to contemporary published reviews to understand how a work was read, but these reviews can often fail to gauge the novel’s impact

⁴⁸ George Cotkin, *Reluctant Modernism: American Thought and Culture, 1880-1900* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 108.

⁴⁹ Glenn Hendler, *Public Sentiments: Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth Century American Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 87.

⁵⁰ For recommendation of books for juvenile libraries see Grace Isabel Colbron, “Choosing the Children’s Library,” *The Bookman* 42, no. 2 (1915): 196-200; “Chronicle and Comment,” *The Bookman* 64 (December 1897): 285.

⁵¹ Hamilton W. Mabie, “The Most Popular Novels in America,” *Forum*, December 1893, 508.

⁵² The results of J. Selwin Tait and Sons’ survey is interpreted in *Ibid.*, 508.

because of the reviewers' and publications' elite social status. For instance, *The Atlantic Monthly* pronounced *Ben-Hur* as "a failure, artistically" and commended it to readers only as an example of what not to do with historical fiction.⁵³ *The Century* favorably reviewed *Ben-Hur*, although it opined, "the historical romance is rather of an anachronism nowadays."⁵⁴ However, the evaluations of critical reviewers did not dissuade "the minds of tens of thousands of American readers the stubborn belief that *Ben Hur* is one of the very greatest novels that the world has produced."⁵⁵

Ben-Hur was read and appreciated "by a great number of very different sorts of persons, young and old," prominent and obscure, all of whom were reckoned as "competent judges" of the book's merit.⁵⁶ Readers of *The Critic* submitted lists of the ten best American books. When the periodical compiled the lists it contained the collected poems of John Greenleaf Whittier, James Russell Lowell, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Essays*, Oliver Wendell Holmes' *Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*, Washington Irving's *Sketch Book*, as well as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Seemingly out of place in this list of Eastern intelligentsia, *The Critic*'s readers also recommended Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Lew Wallace's *Ben-Hur*.⁵⁷

Ben-Hur's commendation from a "high brow" periodical's readers, such as those of *The Critic*, was not an aberration. Many prominent nineteenth-century citizens wrote favorable letters to Wallace regarding their encounters with *Ben-Hur*. The Southern poet Paul Hamilton Hayne gushed, "I did not think that the man lived in America who could have written such a book as *Ben-Hur*. . . . Pages in it have thrilled me through and through while I remark that never on any occasion have you sunk below the dignity of your majestic theme."⁵⁸ Hayne judged, "*Ben-Hur* is not likely to become 'popular,' but by scholars and thinkers of every conceivable grade this singularly graphic performance must be cherished."⁵⁹ Retrospectively obvious, Hayne's prediction missed badly. Another prominent Southerner, Varina Davis, remembered reading *Ben-Hur* to her father, Jefferson Davis. She recalled, "I remember reading aloud to him

⁵³ "The Head of Medusa, and other Novels," *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1881, 711.

⁵⁴ H. A. B., No title, *Century Illustrated Magazine*, November 1884, 155.

⁵⁵ "Chronicle and Comment," *The Bookman* 21, no. 2 April 1905: 115.

⁵⁶ "New Publications," *Catholic World* 38, no. 226 (1884): 572.

⁵⁷ John Lothrop Motley's *The Rise of the Dutch Republic* was the tenth title on the list. A copy of the list was reproduced in *The Ladies Home Journal*, March 1895, 34.

⁵⁸ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:947.

⁵⁹ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:949.

‘Ben-Hur’ from 10 o’clock until daybreak, both of us oblivious to the flight of time, and when my sleepy eyes refused to follow the lines I left him still absorbed in the novel – indeed, he did not go to rest until he had finished it.”⁶⁰

Apparently *Ben-Hur* was a book that was hard for nineteenth-century readers to put down. Sculptor William Wetmore Story wrote to Susan Wallace that he and his wife had put off reading *Ben-Hur* until they could find an uninterrupted evening to do so. When they finally commenced, the Storys alternated reading the novel aloud to one another. They read and listened, transfixed to “passages and scenes which stir one’s blood like the sound of the trumpet.” In particular, Story felt that the sea battle and the chariot race were so vivid “that we seem to have been there as spectators or actors.” Similarly, novelist F. Marion Crawford recalled spending many “sleepless nights. . . reading and rereading the marvellous [sic] description of the chariot-race.” Wallace’s British counterpart in Constantinople, Lord Dufferin admitted, “From beginning to end I read it with breathless interest and delight.”⁶¹

Ben-Hur also found an audience among U.S. Presidents. Reportedly, Ulysses Grant took thirty hours and read the novel in one sitting. However, James Garfield recorded a more revealing example of his *Ben-Hur* reading process in his diary. He began reading *Ben Hur* before bedtime on Sunday, April 10, 1881. The following Friday, Garfield recorded, “After lunch, I took some time with *Ben Hur*, which keeps up in dignity and interest.” Saturday evening, “callers and *Ben Hur*” occupied him until bedtime. Sunday afternoon, Garfield “saw a few callers, but spent most of the time with *Ben Hur*.” He then recorded, “The plot of the story is powerfully sketched and its tone is admirably sustained. I am inclined to send its author to Constantinople, where he may draw inspiration from the modern East for future literary work.” Two days later Garfield woke at five thirty to finish *Ben-Hur* in bed. He concluded, “It is a book of great power. Wallace surprises me with his delicacy and penetration, as well as his breadth of culture.” That same day Garfield wrote to Wallace, thanking him “for the pleasure [*Ben-Hur*] has given me. . . With this beautiful and reverent book you have lightened the burden of my daily life.”⁶²

⁶⁰ “Jeff Davis and ‘Ben-Hur,’” *Crawfordsville Weekly Journal*, 16 August 1895. While Jefferson Davis’ wife was named Varina this article clearly refers to Davis’ daughter, also named Varina.

⁶¹ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:952, 954-55, 951.

⁶² Hart, *The Popular Book: A History of America’s Literary Taste*, 164; *The Diary of James A. Garfield*, ed. Harry James Brown and Frederick D. Williams (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1981), 4:573, 576, 577, 578; Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:940.

Garfield's reading of *Ben-Hur* is one of the most detailed accounts extant. Not only do we learn that Garfield, like many other readers, thoroughly enjoyed the chariot race, but reading *Ben-Hur* acted like a companion interspersed between callers, and appropriate for afternoon and evening conversations. Another observation that is not initially obvious from his diary is that Garfield was reading *Ben-Hur* during Easter week, which prompts the question whether *Ben-Hur* was Garfield's Lenten reading.⁶³ While *Ben-Hur* may have sharpened Garfield's spiritual focus on Easter, it obviously had a practical effect by easing Garfield's daily burdens, but whether it merely facilitated a mental retreat or perhaps something deeper is unclear. It is also important to observe how Garfield understood and appropriated Wallace. The two men were only casually acquainted; both men had served at Shiloh and no doubt encountered one another in the Republican political sphere. Nevertheless, Garfield decided after reading *Ben-Hur* that Wallace would make an ideal envoy to the Ottoman Empire. Garfield also hoped to see another edifying literary work as a result. Garfield's political position allowed him to recast the author of *Ben-Hur* in a role that he thought would fit Wallace, before even seeing if it was what Wallace wished.

Although the above paragraphs detail the readership of mostly prominent, upper-class, nineteenth-century citizens, they were more the exception than the norm. Henry Ward Beecher had not read *Ben-Hur*, and Henry James likely ignored the recommendation to read the novel.⁶⁴ While passing through Boston on his lecture tour, Wallace attended two receptions in his honor hosted by publisher Benjamin Ticknor, his wife Caroline, and publisher Henry O. Houghton, respectively. *Harper's Weekly* reported that among the guests "were the most brilliant men and women" of Boston.⁶⁵ There were some notable absences: James Russell Lowell and Oliver Wendell Holmes, whom *Critic* readers had classified with Wallace, were no shows. William Dean Howells and Thomas Bailey Aldrich were also noticeably absent. These authors' absences, Irving McKee remarked, was the equivalent of "Homer, Dante, Milton, and Shakespeare" not attending an "Elysian meeting [of] all the first poets."⁶⁶ Wallace wondered, "Why did they not come? Or rather why were they *all* absent? Would their presence have been

⁶³ Paralleling this observation was the above citation of a Catholic priest reading *Ben-Hur* during advent and Harpers' marketing *Ben-Hur* as Lenten reading.

⁶⁴ Robert E. Morsberger and Katharine M. Morsberger, *Lew Wallace: Militant Romantic* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), 311.

⁶⁵ "Personal," *Harper's Weekly*, 15 January 1887.

⁶⁶ Irving McKee, "Ben-Hur" Wallace: *The Life of General Lew Wallace* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1947), 227.

too much of a sanction or endorsement for the wild westerner?”⁶⁷ Once again Wallace felt that his legitimacy was being questioned, although this time it was as an author rather than a soldier or a man. Easterners reckoned Wallace a “romancer” rather than a “novelist.”⁶⁸ The former term implied an antiquated literary genre with an audience of young boys and women as opposed to realist fiction produced by novelists. Yet it really did not matter what the Eastern intelligentsia thought as they tried to exercise their power over what constituted good taste, because the public had already glowingly endorsed Wallace’s work.

As Wallace wrote *Ben-Hur*, he pondered “the question, familiar. . . to every writer – the question everlastingly thrusting itself in the intervals between paragraph and verses, *who will read my work when it is done?*” If he could only have foreseen that “almost every mail brings friendly messages from hands we may never touch, and it is a deep pleasure to know the venture sent out with much misgiving has such assured success.” People like Samuel Moore, a Lafayette, Indiana, merchant wrote Wallace proclaiming, “I feel that I am a *better man* for having read it.” George Parrish, a recovering alcoholic, wrote to Wallace from the Kewanee, Illinois, YMCA. Parrish described a life in which “everything was black and growing blacker” until he read *Ben-Hur*, which “brought Christ home to me as nothing else could.” He proudly told Wallace that he had remained sober for the two years since reading *Ben-Hur*. Wallace’s novel was also responsible for Nicholas Smith’s religious conversion. Smith related to Wallace that for several weeks after reading *Ben-Hur* he was afflicted with insomnia, lack of appetite, and unproductivity. Smith explained, “The affecting scenes described in the closing part of the book” pertaining to Jesus’ crucifixion abided with him day and night. Smith finally found relief for his disturbed spirit by joining his local Congregational Church. As a result, Smith found “a new home, a new life and perfect peace of mind,” and wrote Wallace to say, “This is what. . . reading. . . *Ben-Hur* has done for me, and I want to thank you for writing the book.”⁶⁹

These lower and middle-class men likely read little of what could be called standard literature, but they constituted a readership “whose literary horizons [did] not extend beyond” *Ben-Hur*.⁷⁰ At the Indiana Woman’s Reformatory, inmates reportedly “devoured” the three library copies of *The Prince of India* in a library that was mainly comprised of story papers and

⁶⁷ McKee, “*Ben-Hur*” Wallace, 227.

⁶⁸ “An American Academy Named,” *New York Times*, 29 July 1895.

⁶⁹ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:949; Susan Wallace to Elizabeth Little quoted in “Writing *Ben-Hur*,” *Crawfordsville Saturday Evening Journal*, 17 April 1886; Morsberger, *Lew Wallace: Militant Romantic*, 310-11.

⁷⁰ “Chronicle and Comment,” *The Bookman* 21, no. 2 April 1905: 115.

juvenile fiction.⁷¹ One cannot help but think that any extant copy of *Ben-Hur* in the reformatory would have found the same eager reception. Some readers of Wallace's work did not read it just once, but again and again. One unidentified admirer considered *Ben-Hur* to be "the greatest book to my way of thinking, that has ever been written," and admitted, "I have read it over several times."⁷² What was it that caused the masses who were otherwise disinclined to read novels, either for financial, social, or religious reasons, to buy, borrow, and read *Ben-Hur*? In line with the testimony in above paragraphs, Lord Dufferin answered, "I can quite understand your [Wallace] having received the thanks of those whom you have aided to realize, more acutely than their own feeble imaginations enabled them to do, the heart-breaking incidents of the Crucifixion."⁷³ The reader comments cited above are just a sample of those readers bold enough to write Wallace, but the repetitive themes expressed in these letters of spiritual renewal is enough to hypothesize that many readers had similar reading experiences.

Aside from the practical spiritual applications *Ben-Hur* had for many lives, there is another clear reason why readers read *Ben-Hur*; specifically, it was an exciting story. James Garfield believed the sea battle and chariot race "will. . . take a permanent and high place in literature."⁷⁴ Paul Hayne admitted to Wallace, "The chariot-race at Antioch. . . is almost enough to make an old man young."⁷⁵ Even a critic admitted, "If the actual reverence of the reader was not offended, and his sense of artistic propriety was not violated, there is no room to wonder that he [the reader] enjoyed the tale and felt it deeply."⁷⁶ Another essayist wrote, "Perhaps there is genuine regret in the fact that one cannot always be fifteen years old and retain that age's impression of the lasting greatness of *Ben Hur*."⁷⁷

Indeed, the young appeared to have a special affinity for *Ben-Hur*. The 1893 commencement of New York City Grammar School No. 79 offered recitations from the works of Longfellow, Cooper, and Lew Wallace.⁷⁸ This is only one example, but *Ben-Hur* frequently

⁷¹ Margaret W. Noble, "Women Keepers for Women Convicts," *The Chautauquan*, January 1894, 467.

⁷² "Likes Ben Hur," (*Crawfordsville, Indiana*) *Weekly News-Review*, 28 August 1903.

⁷³ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:951.

⁷⁴ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:940.

⁷⁵ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:948.

⁷⁶ No title, *The Literary World* 22, no. 16 (1891): 256.

⁷⁷ "Chronicle and Comment," *The Bookman* 21, no. 2 April 1905: 116.

⁷⁸ "Girl and Boy Graduates," *New York Times*, 28 June 1893.

appeared in school curriculum, either through recitations or through school readers.⁷⁹ However, it would be difficult to determine how students read *Ben-Hur* due to the scarcity of nineteenth-century student essays or annotated texts that would have survived to modern day. Theodore Dreiser, for instance, acknowledged that he enjoyed *Ben-Hur* as a boy, but little more can be determined from this reminiscence.⁸⁰

Fortunately, there is one prominent account of a student reading *Ben-Hur*. L. M. Montgomery's classic *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) narrates an instance when Anne is caught reading *Ben-Hur* in school instead of studying Canadian history. Although the account is fictional, it would not be outrageous to believe that it is also autobiographical or at least happened to some pupil someplace, sometime in nineteenth-century North America. Anne narrates to Marilla, her adopted parent:

I was reading it at dinner hour, and I had just got to the chariot race when school went in. I was simply wild to know how it turned out-- although I felt sure Ben Hur must win, because it wouldn't be poetical justice if he didn't--so I spread the history open on my desk lid and then tucked Ben Hur between the desk and my knee. I just looked as if I were studying Canadian history, you know, while all the while I was reveling in Ben Hur. I was so interested in it that I never noticed Miss Stacy coming down the aisle until all at once I just looked up and there she was looking down at me, so reproachful-like. I can't tell you how ashamed I felt. . .Miss Stacy took Ben Hur away, but she never said a word then. She kept me in at recess and talked to me. She said I had done very wrong in two respects. First, I was wasting the time I ought to have put on my studies; and secondly, I was deceiving my teacher in trying to make it appear I was reading a history when it was a storybook instead. I had never realized until that moment, Marilla, that what I was doing was deceitful. I was shocked. I cried bitterly, and asked Miss Stacy to forgive me and I'd never do such a thing again; and I offered to do penance by never so much as looking at Ben Hur for a whole week, not even to see how the chariot race turned out. But Miss Stacy said she wouldn't require that, and she forgave me freely.⁸¹

⁷⁹ While working at the Lew Wallace Study, I frequently had visitors that graduated from Crawfordsville High School before the 1960s. These CHS alumni often told me that *Ben-Hur* was required reading. I imagine this requirement had a long precedent dating back to Wallace's time.

⁸⁰ *Letters of Theodore Dreiser: A Selection*, ed. Robert H. Elias (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1959), 1:121.

⁸¹ L. M. Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1970), 233-34.

Marilla tells Anne that she was never allowed to read novels when she was a schoolgirl, and furthermore, the classroom is no place for novels. Anne counters, "Oh, how can you call *Ben Hur* a novel when it's really such a religious book? . . . Of course it's a little too exciting to be proper reading for Sunday, and I only read it on weekdays."⁸²

If Anne's *Ben-Hur* reading experience is inferred to be representative of other late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century student readers, a few conclusions can be made. First, readers were fascinated with the chariot race. The scene's popularity is made evident by the fact that the chariot race was recommended reading for local Chautauqua circles.⁸³ Student elocutionists euphorically recited the passage to the extent that one writer commented, "We should feel more kindly toward the Chariot Race if it had not been butchered by so many thousand amateur elocutionists."⁸⁴ Second, novel reading had found some degree of educational acceptance in the generation or two between Anne and Marilla. This is also reflected with Harpers' publishing *Ben-Hur* excerpts in their school readers. Finally, Anne's defense of *Ben-Hur* as a religious book extended well beyond the classroom and into the sanctuary. In 1896, Sarah R. Fisher, presumably a student, gave a review of *Ben-Hur* during a Friends' Meeting in Fleming, Pennsylvania, which the clerk recorded as "very interesting."⁸⁵ Obviously some Protestants would disagree with Anne's assessment that prohibited Sunday *Ben-Hur* reading.

Ben-Hur readers and the Harpers' influence allowed Wallace to be embraced by everybody, from octogenarian men to young boys, from incarcerated women to U. S. presidents, from poor down-on-their-luck folks to English lords, and from Protestant clergymen to the pope and select rabbis. Wallace had reached a status that few authors ever attain. Yet his literary celebrity came with a price. Imitative genre fiction exploded, and lax international copyright legislation was exploited in order to cash in on Wallace's fame. Wallace also had to carefully navigate requests for product endorsement, lectures, and dramatizations lest his name be misrepresented and his newly established authority undermined. Wallace's celebrity status highlights the ways individuals understood and appropriated Wallace for their personal or professional gain, often irrespective of Wallace's own wishes or identity.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 234.

⁸³ On at least two occasions *The Chautauquan* listed Wallace's account of the chariot race as "suggestive programs for local circle work." See "Outline and Programs," *The Chautauquan*, October 1885: 45; "C. L. S. C. Outline and Programs," *The Chautauquan*, March 1898: 673.

⁸⁴ "Chronicle and Comment," *The Bookman*, April 1905: 116. For one example of the many accounts of chariot race recitations see "With the Public Readers," *New York Times*, 29 June 1892.

⁸⁵ "Conferences, Associations, Etc.," *Friends' Intelligencer*, 28 November 1896.

Imitation is often a good measure of celebrity. Jesus fiction was rare before *Ben-Hur*, but the genre rose like the dust from Ben-Hur's chariot wheels. One contemporary commentator diagnosed an "epidemic of Biblical romances" that afflicted late-nineteenth-century America.⁸⁶ It could be argued that *Ben-Hur* was not solely responsible, and that biblical fiction flourished to address the same popular religious needs that made *Ben-Hur* popular. However, examining how publishers pitched their biblical fiction and how reviewers compared the new novels can substantiate arguing the other side, that *Ben-Hur* was directly responsible for the rise of biblical fiction. For instance, J. B. Lippincott advertised "Wilson Barrett's Great Novel," *The Sign of the Cross*, with several newspaper reviews, one of which read, "The story is reverentially told, and for interest and power deserves to be classed with Lew Wallace's religious masterpiece."⁸⁷ Similarly, the publisher's preface to Annie Fellows Johnston's *Joel: A Boy of Galilee*, acknowledged that this book was an attempt to do for children what *Ben-Hur* had done for adults, that is provide an accurate depiction of the life and times of Christ.⁸⁸

Some biblical fiction shifted attention from Jesus to a larger context of New Testament figures and locales, but this variant genre continued to be compared to *Ben-Hur*. Elizabeth Miller, a Hoosier, authored *Saul of Tarsus* (1907), which was advertised with the following reviews: "Since Ben-Hur there has been no biblical novel equal," and "Not since. . . Ben-Hur has there arrived so superb a story," and "Saul of Tarsus will make for itself as permanent a place as Ben-Hur."⁸⁹ Similarly, Cyrus Townsend Brady's *Fetters of Freedom* (1913) was another Pauline novel and was billed as only comparable to *Ben-Hur*.⁹⁰ Despite the hype other biblical fiction received, only Henryk Sienkiewicz' *Quo Vadis?* (1896) was able to rival the sales and quality of *Ben-Hur*.⁹¹ An 1898 survey of booksellers in twenty-seven North American cities revealed that *Quo Vadis?* was the number one seller in seventeen cities and appeared among the top five best sellers of six other cities.⁹² One journalist attributed its popularity to "the argument that scenes

⁸⁶ *The Literary World* 22, no. 16 (1891): 256.

⁸⁷ Advertisement, *The Bookman* 5, no. 6 (1897): 547.

⁸⁸ Johnston, *Joel: A Boy of Galilee*, n. p. Publisher's Preface.

⁸⁹ Advertisement, *The Bookman* 24, no. 6 (1907): 910.

⁹⁰ Advertisement, *The Bookman* 37, no. 6 (1913): 746.

⁹¹ One detail to keep in mind when comparing sales of *Ben-Hur* to *Quo Vadis?* is that the latter had no copyright protection and often appeared in cheap forms, which begs the question if *Quo Vadis?* was an alternative for those unable to pay *Ben-Hur*'s \$1.50. Nevertheless, Alice Payne Hackett estimated that *Quo Vadis?* sold 754,000 copies between its 1896 debut and 1945 (*Fifty Years of Best-sellers*).

⁹² No title, *The Bookman* 6, no. 6 (1898): 570-72.

and characters borrowed from the times of Christ. . . take tremendous hold of the imagination when utilized by an author of stirring narrative powers.”⁹³

Scenes and characters from first-century Christian life and times also took a tremendous hold of publishers’ imaginations as well. Roberts Brothers of Boston tried to cash in on the *Ben-Hur* craze by reviving Joseph Ingraham’s books. A reviewer remarked, “It is significant circumstance that one of our foremost publishing houses should think it a profitable venture to issue. . . new edition[s]” of *The Prince of the House of David*, *The Pillar of Fire*, and *The Throne of David*.⁹⁴ In an 1896 advertisement, Roberts Brothers marketed Ingraham’s works along with Johnston’s *Joel: A Boy of Galilee*, and Edwin A. Grosvenor’s *Constantinople*, to which Lew Wallace just happened to write the introduction.

Producing the same fictional genre was not enough for some, since there are examples where *Ben-Hur* was imitated more directly and substantially. Henry Van Dyke’s *The Story of the Other Wise Man* issued from the same press as *Ben-Hur* and was advertised alongside it. In some way Van Dyke’s book can almost be seen as a companion piece to *Ben-Hur* since Wallace wrote extensively about the Magi, and one, Balthasar, is a prominent character. However, while *The Story of the Other Wise Man* may or may not be an unintentional companion piece to *Ben-Hur*, two other authors were bolder and issued unauthorized sequels to *Ben-Hur*. Rabbi Herman M. Bien’s *Ben-Beor; a Story of the Anti-Messiah* (1891) described the first part of his novel as a counterpart to Wallace’s *Ben-Hur*, and Wallace’s personal copy is extant at the Wallace Study and Museum in Crawfordsville.⁹⁵ A second sequel to *Ben-Hur* was James Clark’s *Esther* (1892), which was published by the Methodist Church, and like so much other biblical fiction, purported to be a series of lost epistles.

In the midst of the biblical fiction flood that *Ben-Hur* had unleashed, some critics took notice and took exception. George Woodberry lamentfully reviewed two biblical novels, *Come Forth* and *Genius in Galilee*. He bemoaned biblical fiction as crude, coarse, and revolting. He commented that at least Lew Wallace’s tale was “powerful in adventure, scene-painting, and the feeling for humanity; it had force [,]. . . [even] if its attraction was at times a meretricious glitter.” Woodberry attributed the success of *Ben-Hur* to Wallace’s concern in not offending his

⁹³ “Chronicles and Comment,” *The Bookman* 64 (1897): 278.

⁹⁴ “Ingraham’s Biblical Romances,” *The Literary World* 27, no. 24 (1896), 416.

⁹⁵ Aside from using the name Ben-Hur, a summary of the book appears to have little correlation to Wallace’s book. For a summary of *Ben-Beor* see Louis Harap, *The Image of the Jew in American Literature: From Early Republic to Mass Immigration* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1974), 251-254.

readers' religious or aesthetic sensibilities. However, Woodberry derided, "It is impossible to make any similar allowance for the imitations to which [Wallace's] example gave rise; they are only degradations of the sacred story." Clearly, Woodberry's comments and the advertising methods employed by publishers undoubtedly link *Ben-Hur* to the imitative biblical novels that followed.⁹⁶

The demand for popular works, biblical fiction or otherwise, led publishers to satisfy that demand either through imitation or in some cases through the real thing by taking advantage of lax copyright legislation. It was mentioned above that *In His Steps* and *Quo Vadis?* both found impressive sales largely because they were not copyrighted. It was not as easy to domestically pirate *Ben-Hur*, yet the international market was another story. Unauthorized editions of *Ben-Hur* poured off of British and Canadian presses, and there was no legal recourse for such actions since there was no international copyright. Curiously, one of the chief opponents of an international copyright agreement was Wallace's own publisher, Harper and Brothers. No international copyright was a two-way street; not only did British publishers take advantage of unprotected American works, but American publishers did the same with British works. Historian Michael Newbury explained that Harpers "became America's largest publisher mostly on the strength of inexpensive reprints of British works, and from early on had their business interests very intimately tied to the laxity of international copyright legislation."⁹⁷ *Harper's Magazine* and Harpers' catalogues were replete with British authors. Harpers threw their weight against an international copyright in the 1840s because it was not in their best interest. However, the issues were changing in the late nineteenth century when Harpers had established an all-star lineup of American authors and their profits were being infringed upon by British publishers. Harpers opened a London office and tried to see that more stringent copyright legislation was passed.

While in London on one of his final trips to and from Turkey, Wallace stopped into Harpers' London office where he learned that another London publisher, Frederick Warne & Company, had pirated *Ben-Hur*. Wallace, armed with the pirate publisher's address, paid a visit to their storefront. After inquiring of a salesman about the sales of *Ben-Hur* and receiving a pleasing reply of 75,000 copies, Wallace then introduced himself as the author. The salesman

⁹⁶ Woodberry quoted in *The Literary World* 22, no. 16 (1891): 256.

⁹⁷ Newbury, *Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America*, 179.

asked Wallace if he was interested in seeing the firm and meeting Mr. Warne, to which Wallace agreed. Upon meeting Warne, Wallace confronted him and stated that he expected compensation. As Warne fumbled an accommodating and evasive reply, Wallace noticed that the *Ben-Hur* copy he was perusing had been altered in two ways. *Ben-Hur*'s subtitle had been omitted and a pseudographical preface was inserted. The publisher responded to this last charge, "Well, yes. Your own letter did not seem exactly suitable to our market, and therefore we drew up another statement" and signed Wallace's name to it.⁹⁸ Essayist Brander Matthews, commenting on this encounter, wrote, "The British publisher. . . has never offered to make any payment to [Wallace], whom he had despoiled and whose work he had disfigured."⁹⁹ British pirates, Matthews argued, not only robbed American authors of their profits, but also their reputations.¹⁰⁰

The U. S. Congress eventually passed a revised copyright act in 1891, which was designed to "check or absolutely stop the importation of cheap reprints."¹⁰¹ However, there were still legal loopholes. In 1895 Wallace was returning from a trip to Canada when a boy peddling a cheap library tried to interest him in making a purchase. Wallace purchased a twenty-five cent Canadian edition of *Ben-Hur* among the young merchant's stock and found it had been altered in fashion similar to Warne's edition. He tucked the book into his luggage where the customs officer could not overlook it. However, when the officer inspected his luggage, he made no mention of the contraband. Wallace drew the officer's attention to the book, and the latter explained that duties were not collected on single pirated books. Wallace was incensed and was determined to take the matter to Washington.¹⁰² Wallace found no solace in the resulting legal decision, which concluded "that the copyright act of March 3, 1891, does not prevent foreign publications of American books copyrighted under the old law from being brought into this country and sold."¹⁰³

Wallace's crusade for copyright protection demonstrates how Wallace the celebrity became a fictional character adapted to and appropriated for individual ends, irrespective of his own intention. In an unrelated 1903 Supreme Court decision, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes,

⁹⁸ "The Literary Pirates of London," *Crawfordsville (Indiana) Saturday Evening Journal*, 5 September 1885.

⁹⁹ Brander Matthews, "American Authors and British Pirates," *New Princeton Review*, September 1887, 210.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 211.

¹⁰¹ "Ben Hur and International Copyright," *Crawfordsville Journal*, 13 December 1890.

¹⁰² This episode is recounted in "Roaring Mad," *Crawfordsville Weekly Journal*, 8 February 1895.

¹⁰³ "'Ben Hur' Decision Sustained," *Crawfordsville (Weekly) Review*, 4 May 1895.

Jr., wrote, “Personality always contains something unique. It expresses its irregularity even in handwriting, and a very modest grade of art has in it something irreducible, which is one man’s alone.”¹⁰⁴ Similarly, Henry van Dyke was quoted, “To cut out chapters and replace them with others written by strange hands; to change the scene of a story, and leaving the author’s name on the title page, put sentiments in his mouth which he has not expressed and does not hold.”¹⁰⁵ It was not just that Wallace’s intellectual property and financial rewards were jeopardized through copyright infringement, but also his reputation due to the alterations made to his work. Wallace had become a cultural commodity to the extent that even what he did not write could sell.

The copyright issue was only one arena where Wallace as celebrity fought to preserve the legitimacy and authority he had gained as an author. Dramatization was another. Wallace was approached as early as February 1881 for permission to adapt *Ben-Hur* for the stage. He had serious concerns about dramatization, the chief of which was his fear that the production “would fail to treat [the religious elements] in the proper spirit of reverence.”¹⁰⁶ One aspiring dramatist suggested to Wallace that a Passion Play could be introduced into *Ben-Hur*, thereby making a fortune. Wallace refused saying, “Had I made any money in that way, I should have felt like Judas with his thirty pieces of silver and should have gone out and hung myself.”¹⁰⁷ Wallace knew that any adulteration of *Ben-Hur*’s religious elements would not only jeopardize *Ben-Hur*’s popularity, but also his own reputation. Legitimacy was central to Wallace’s intellectual property and dramatization. Wallace wanted to ensure that his authorial intent was manifest in a drama, irrespective of audience reception. Loss of authorial intent would open his work to dilution and corruption, tarnish his carefully manicured image, and result in losing the legitimacy he had won in the public sphere of late nineteenth-century American popular culture.

Wallace’s initial hope in dramatizing *Ben-Hur* was to do it himself, which would ensure that the novel was faithfully adapted. He declined sixty different offers to dramatize *Ben-Hur*, insisting that he alone could do it. Wallace prepared a stage version and submitted it to New York theater managers; the returning verdict was not favorable. Wallace’s version was rendered impractical “on the ground that he has not known how to make a real play of it.”¹⁰⁸ His

¹⁰⁴ Holmes comments are from *Bleistien v. Donaldson Lithographing Co.* (1903) quoted in Lyman Ray Patterson, *Copyright in Historical Perspective* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1968), 218.

¹⁰⁵ “American and British ‘Pirates’,” *Scientific American*, 25 February 1888, 112.

¹⁰⁶ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:1000.

¹⁰⁷ “Governor Wallace,” *Crawfordsville (Indiana) Saturday Evening Journal*, 26 February 1881.

¹⁰⁸ “Gen. Wallace as Dramatist,” *Crawfordsville (Indiana) Journal*, 23 February 1889.

dramatization attempt having failed and the demand for a stage adaptation being so persistent, he permitted several Crawfordsville citizens to produce a *Ben-Hur Tableaux*, which made limited but well-attended appearances throughout the Midwest.

Despite the mild success and novelty of the “*Ben-Hur Tableaux*,” Wallace as late as 1898 maintained that he would not permit a fully staged dramatization. He reiterated his concern about portraying the crucifixion and added the impossibility of presenting “the chariot race and the battle of the galleys, so that they would be properly appreciated.”¹⁰⁹ Wallace’s reluctance did not slow the dramatization offers. He was particularly amused at an offer he received from the Kiralyf brothers, who proposed to rent thirty acres on Staten Island to stage the chariot race.¹¹⁰ However, Wallace’s amusement at the design was still not enough to convince him of the venture.

Wallace could not resist the attempts to dramatize forever. America at the turn of the century was drawing “almost every contemporary novel of consequence. . . [to] Broadway, and the most conspicuous of all could not escape.”¹¹¹ While others had failed to convince Wallace to dramatize, Abraham Erlanger and Marc Klaw succeeded. Klaw and Erlanger teamed to form one of the most powerful theater syndicates during the first two decades of the twentieth-century, and *Ben-Hur* was a large part of that success. When Wallace was asked why he had submitted to Klaw and Erlanger after all of the requests he had denied, he acknowledged that they presented a capable production design, but also that “the dignity of the story, as I conceived it to be, was carefully preserved, and due regard was shown for the religious opinion of all who might be induced to attend.”¹¹² Klaw and Erlanger’s recognized that a sensitive portrayal of the work would reflect favorably on the author; it would also enable them to succeed where other Christ-themed plays had failed.

Ben-Hur the play was just as successful as the novel. It opened on November 29, 1899, and did not finally close until over twenty years later when the motion picture rights to *Ben-Hur* were sold. The chariot race was run on stage with live horses running on treadmills built into the stage floor, while a thirty-foot cyclorama with the scenery painted on it operated in the background. As per Wallace’s wishes, Jesus did not appear as an actor; instead a powerful

¹⁰⁹ “Won’t Dramatize It,” *Crawfordsville (Indiana) Weekly Journal*, 11 March 1898.

¹¹⁰ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2:1001. Also mentioned in “Won’t Dramatize It,” and “*Ben-Hur* in Drama,” *Crawfordsville (Indiana) Weekly Journal*, 21 April, 1899.

¹¹¹ McKee, “*Ben-Hur*” Wallace, 175.

¹¹² “*Ben-Hur* in Drama,” *Crawfordsville (Indiana) Weekly Journal*, 21 April 1899.

spotlight indicated the divine presence. Wallace biographer Irving McKee estimated that when the production finally closed twenty years later, twenty million people had seen it.¹¹³

Ben-Hur's financial success on stage led Klaw and Erlanger to also seek Wallace's permission to dramatize *The Prince of India*. Initially Wallace resisted on financial grounds. He explained to Klaw and Erlanger associate Joseph Brooks, "We seem so far apart respecting the royalty that the prospect of an arrangement looks discouraging."¹¹⁴ Wallace believed that accepting the offer "would be lowering [his] standard" and as a result depreciate the worth of his intellectual property, at least in his own mind.¹¹⁵ A year and a half later the royalty issue had been settled and Wallace was reviewing *The Prince of India* play manuscript that was being written by Joseph I. C. Clarke. Unfortunately, Wallace was seriously ill and had only a few months to live, but a few letters from Wallace's twilight reveal how he tried to maintain quality control over his intellectual property. In November of 1904, Wallace's son, Henry, wrote to Brooks, "On account of ill health, father has found himself utterly unable to do the Prince of India justice and review it in the manner he had hoped. . . [he] expects to offer suggestions on [Clarke's manuscript] rather than attempt a re-vamping of the whole subject which he thought necessary because he thought Mr. Clark[e] had not fully succeeded in grasping the idea of the characters."¹¹⁶ Two months later, Clarke had resubmitted a manuscript with Wallace's recommended changes. Wallace's health was temporarily improved enough to write Brooks that the "prologue and first act [are] entirely satisfactory and approved," and he offered his congratulations to Clarke.¹¹⁷ Wallace advised Brooks, "If you can only keep Mr. C. in this vein and have the same hard work on the rest of the play, I have no doubt of the result. Don't let him think he can go easy on it."¹¹⁸ Wallace was dead in a month, and *The Prince of India* debuted two years later, although it failed to find *Ben-Hur*'s success.

Wallace's intellectual properties were not the only aspect of himself in demand. He had returned from Turkey for the last time in early 1886. By April, he was called upon to lecture on his foreign experience at Indianapolis' Plymouth Church. He delivered his lecture "Turkey and the Turks, with Glimpses at the Harem" to a thousand member audience. Despite its racy

¹¹³ McKee, "*Ben-Hur*" Wallace, 180.

¹¹⁴ Lew Wallace to Joseph Brooks, 25 April 1903. Lew Wallace Collection: Indiana Historical Society (hereafter cited as LWC).

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Henry Lane Wallace to Joseph Brooks, November 1904. LWC.

¹¹⁷ Lew Wallace to Joseph Brooks, 4 January 1905. LWC.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

promise the speech was quite chaste. Perhaps late nineteenth-century Americans' fascination with the Orient put him in demand, but the opportunity to be in the presence of the author of *Ben-Hur* was the real attraction. Prior to and especially following his appearance in Indianapolis, Wallace found "a large part of his correspondence consisted of applications for addresses and lectures, until at last he turned the whole matter over to a bureau, and soon found himself provided with 'dates' for engagements from Maine to the Rocky Mountains, and from October until next spring."¹¹⁹ His speech repertoire included "Turkey and the Turks," along with the equally unoriginally titled "Mexico and the Mexicans," a defense of his actions at Shiloh, and reading excerpts from *Ben-Hur*. His reception varied widely from city to city. In New York City, he was simultaneously a "literary Occidental Bashi-Bozouk" without the fez and a gentleman.¹²⁰ In Boston, he felt slighted because of the snubs from Aldrich, Howells, Holmes, and Lowell that were mentioned earlier. Elmira, New York, likened Wallace to their famous summer resident Mark Twain.¹²¹ Yet the unceasing travel and constant demands for his attention quickly wore on the sixty-year-old Wallace. McKee observed, "He was especially tired of audiences who listened in deadly silence and applauded always at exactly the same place."¹²² As a result he wrote to Susan, "Nobody will ever take account of my performance, much less write it in a history book. . . . I am looking to you and *Ben-Hur* to keep me unforgotten after the end of life."¹²³ Obviously he was unaware of how central his audiences were to his public memory.

Wallace worked hard to craft a public image in both active and preventative ways. However, his image could not be maintained with public performances alone. The late-nineteenth-century American public continually pried into celebrities' private lives because of their belief that it was in private where character was forged and the celebrity's real self was manifested. Why else were there persistent public inquiries into whether Ulysses S. Grant was drunk on the battlefield? Or why was Henry Ward Beecher's rumored adultery great fare for gossip? Despite Grant and Beecher's moral failures, they were still celebrities in that they were personalities, which was a criterion of admiration that had come to replace character.¹²⁴ Personality as such enabled the public to vicariously relate to celebrities. The public followers of

¹¹⁹ "Personal," *Harper's Weekly*, 13 November 1886, 727.

¹²⁰ Morsberger, *Lew Wallace: Militant Romantic*, 362, 364.

¹²¹ McKee, "*Ben-Hur*" Wallace, 228.

¹²² McKee, "*Ben-Hur*" Wallace, 228.

¹²³ Quoted in Morsberger, *Lew Wallace: Militant Romantic*, 364.

¹²⁴ Charles L. Ponce De Leon, *Self-Exposure: Human Interest Journalism and the Emergence of Celebrity in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 37.

celebrities believed they knew them and many would intrude into celebrities' private lives, through seeking autographs or endorsements, writing letters, and sending gifts. Sometimes they could enjoy the celebrities' presence in absentia as reporters got close for them. Historian Michael Newbury added, "The personal and professional activities of . . . writers were increasingly dictated and disciplined by an anonymous public's demands and intrusions."¹²⁵ Wallace had to manage these disturbances lest he become suffocated in the process.

A St. Louis *Post Dispatch* reporter wrote, "The author of 'Ben Hur' has a larger number of readers interested in his personality than any other American writer."¹²⁶ This was one individual's informed opinion, but it also represented a journalistic trend of satiating reader interest by featuring celebrity interviews in the late nineteenth-century American press. Joseph Pulitzer impressed upon his reporters that "interviews with prominent men. . . [should give] a striking, vivid pen sketch of the subject."¹²⁷ Pulitzer suggested that focusing on the domestic environment, spouse, children, and pets would best serve this purpose. He explained, "Those are the things that will bring him [the prominent man] more closely home to the average reader."¹²⁸ Reporters invaded celebrity domiciles where they could "get behind the veil with which everyone attempts to conceal his innermost thoughts and feelings."¹²⁹ Yet celebrities were not inert subjects but were self-conscious in their personal appearances and how they were presented to an inquiring public.¹³⁰

Photography was a medium relatively new to mass media at turn of the century America. Even when Jacob Riis first published *How the Other Half Lives* in 1890, his photographs were engraved for publication. To late nineteenth-century Americans, photography was a medium that could not lie; therefore, when photographs appeared of prominent citizens it was a faithful representation, warts and all so to speak. *The Ladies' Home Journal* was one periodical that took advantage of the technology that could mass print photographs and sent Eddiess Terry Shepler to Crawfordsville to acquire photographs of "The Creator of 'Ben Hur' at Home." Her assignment resulted in a full page of "glimpses of General Lew Wallace" in the December 1898 issue of the

¹²⁵ Newbury, *Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America*, 81.

¹²⁶ Reprinted in "Lew Wallace," *Crawfordsville (Weekly) Review*, 22 January 1887.

¹²⁷ Pulitzer quoted in Ponce De Leon, *Self-Exposure*, 36.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ponce de Leon, *Self-Exposure*, 57-58.

¹³⁰ Ponce de Leon, *Self-Exposure*, 19.

magazine.¹³¹ Among the pictures were two interior shots of Wallace's study, one photograph of his house, a picture of his son, and two photographs of Wallace and his grandchildren, one of which showed Wallace and his youngest grandson, William Noble Wallace, playing with violins.¹³² There was no photograph of Susan because she consistently declined the opportunity to be photographed.¹³³ The agenda of the *Ladies' Home Journal* was clearly to depict Wallace to their readers in ways to which they could possibly relate, either as a parent, or grandparent, lover of nature, or musician. They also managed to penetrate into Wallace's sanctuary, which they described as "the studio with no windows."¹³⁴ Behind the walls of Wallace's study, the pictorial essay showed nothing sinister, only Wallace at work and his collection of art, books, and lifetime souvenirs, which were able to narrate something about Wallace's personality and character in their own right.

The majority of the Wallace photographs *The Ladies' Home Journal* reproduced were actually taken by Crawfordsville photographer Thomas B. Nicholson, although Henry Wallace, an aspiring amateur photographer snapped at least one. A year after the magazine feature, Nicholson and his business partner published *The Home of Ben-Hur*, which contained twenty-seven pages of Wallace images. Advance notice of the work promised it would "show the General at work and in various other attitudes bearing upon his every day existence, and his home, which will be of interest to the public."¹³⁵ *The Home of Ben-Hur* improved upon the magazine feature by showing Wallace on horseback, fishing, boating, eating, strolling, conversing, and tipping his hat. A picture of David Wallace and Sir William Wallace were included to show that Lew Wallace was from great stock. A preface to the work by J. A. Green

¹³¹ "The Creator of 'Ben Hur' at Home," *Ladies' Home Journal*, December 1898, 5.

¹³² The caption for this image was "Amusing his grandchild." The gender neutral designation was used because of obvious confusion about William's sex since he was dressed like a girl would be dressed. The other photo reveals the *Journal's* confusion by indicating that "the boy is Lew Wallace, Jr." when in fact both of the grandchildren were males.

¹³³ There are only four likenesses of Susan Wallace known to exist. The best known is an oil painting in the collection of the Henry S. Lane Place and Montgomery County Historical Society in Crawfordsville, Indiana. A copy of this painting was made in the 1990s for display in the Lew Wallace Study and Museum. Two images of Susan Wallace are daguerreotypes in the collection of the Lew Wallace Study. Both of the daguerreotypes were likely made in the 1850s. One is obviously earlier than the other and the later one can be dated to 1855 or 1856 since it is paired with a daguerreotype of Henry Lane Wallace (b. 1853) who appears to be approximately three years old. The final and possibly last picture ever taken of Susan is a small photograph which Wallace carried in a watch case during the Civil War. The watch case, which also contains a photo of Henry, is in the Lew Wallace Study collection.

¹³⁴ "The Creator of 'Ben Hur' at Home," *Ladies' Home Journal*, December 1898, 5.

¹³⁵ "Little Locals," *The (Crawfordsville) New Review*, 5 August 1899.

concluded, “Great in his public life, General Wallace is exceedingly great in his home life, where. . . he finds an ideal state well nigh materialized.”¹³⁶

Providing glimpses into Wallace’s domestic life did more than just satisfy curiosity; it created an intimacy between the author and his audience. For some this intimacy became obsession. The April 1910 issue of *The Bookman* announced, “During the past few weeks we have received quite a number of curious letters. . . . [W]e have selected the following for publication as being the gem of the collection. . . . We have suppressed the name of the writer, for reasons that will be only too obvious to our readers.”¹³⁷ The letter from Indianapolis portrayed an individual obsessed with literary celebrities, even admitting to physically stalking Hoosier literati James Whitcomb Riley, Meredith Nicholson, and Booth Tarkington. The anonymous author continued, “I have written odes to them, thus assuring myself of indelibly, ineffaceably linking my name with theirs, and assuming no little share of their popularity. I have written things over the grave of General Lew Wallace, and only deplore his early death, which deprived me of a chance unparalleled. . . to share with him his popularity and *Ben Hur*.”¹³⁸ It is easily imaginable that this epistler lived out their days in a state hospital. However, this letter characterizes, albeit in the extreme, the obsessive concern readers expressed for their favorite authors well-being. A tamer example occurred when Crawfordsville correspondent J. D. Tracy visited Missouri and wrote back, “General Wallace is one of the most popular men among Missourians from a literary standpoint, in the country. Scarcely a person to whom I was introduced, but made inquiries about him as soon as they learned of my place of residence.”¹³⁹ The questions Tracy fielded concerned everything from Wallace’s personal character to his hairstyle.

Perhaps the most amusing and illuminating anecdote concerning the public’s intrusion on Wallace’s private life resulted from the publication of *Ben-Hur*. Wallace, at Susan’s suggestion, dedicated the work “To the Wife of My Youth.” Readers were confused as to what to make of this dedication. The more informed readers likely referenced the dedication with Tupper’s

¹³⁶ J. A. Green, “General Lew Wallace – A Sketch,” in *The Home of Ben-Hur* (Indianapolis: Hollenbeck Press, 1899).

¹³⁷ “Chronicle and Comment,” *The Bookman*, April 1910: 122.

¹³⁸ “Chronicle and Comment,” *The Bookman*, April 1910: 123.

¹³⁹ J. D. Tracy, “J. D. T. at ‘Paree’,” *Crawfordsville Journal*, 25 February 1888.

effusion on marriage.¹⁴⁰ However, many “thousands of readers. . . were touched by the pathos of what they took for a forlorn widower’s expression of undying affection. Letters of sympathy poured in upon Gen. Wallace, and inquiries concerning his supposed affliction.”¹⁴¹ Rumoredly, there were even marriage proposals in the lot. Of course, the problem was that Susan was not dead, which led Wallace to append “who still abides with me” to the dedication of subsequent editions.¹⁴² This anecdote not only reveals the public’s intrusion into an author’s private space by first writing letters and then inquiring about a potentially sensitive subject, but it also illustrates the sensibility extant in late nineteenth-century reading cultures. Evidently, many readers of *Ben-Hur* empathetically responded to the book and its dedication, which fostered a mass-mediated identification between Wallace and his audiences.¹⁴³ The existence of a media sphere where Wallace as a celebrity could become familiar to his audiences sweetened Wallace’s palatability to late nineteenth-century consumers.

In late nineteenth-century America, Lew Wallace’s name, image, and intellectual properties were all cultural commodities. During his lifetime, everything associated with him was consumed, celebrated, appropriated, or exchanged by his audiences, advertisers, and the mass media. It was this Wallace cultural commerce that gave him legitimacy, for all popular heroes ultimately derive legitimacy from their audiences. Wallace was certainly not America’s first popular hero, nor was he the last. However, he emerged at a time when the traditional heroes of soldiers and statesmen were absent. Wallace filled the heroic void by being made into a literary celebrity by audiences that increasingly entertained leisure class interests.

¹⁴⁰ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 1:197. Martin Tupper (1810-1889) English author of *Proverbial Philosophy*. Wallace obviously considered Tupper to be well-enough-known to his audience that he provided nothing other than the surname.

¹⁴¹ *New York Times*, 25 February 1905.

¹⁴² The briefer dedication is one of the identifying hallmarks of a first edition *Ben-Hur*.

¹⁴³ Hendler, *Public Sentiments*, 3.

Conclusion

Judah Ben-Hur rested his troubled head on his mother's lap. He was distraught over an exchange he had earlier in the day with his one-time friend, Messala. Messala's verbal assaults stung at the heart of Judah's identity and left internal doubts that were not easily resolved. Confused, Judah sought solace with his mother. He asked her, "What am I to be?" She replied, "You are to be my hero." Frustrated with the answer, he persisted, "Let us be brave and serious. I will be your hero, but you must put me in the way. You know the law - every son of Israel must have some occupation. I am not exempt, and ask now [,]. . . what shall I be?"¹ As Lew Wallace wrote this dialogue, he wrestled with the same question.

Wallace's identity, like Judah's, was predicated on vocation, purpose, calling. In the late 1860s and early 1870s, he was doubtful that what he had become originated within himself. Indeed, his identity to that point was homosocially conditioned. He became a soldier, a lawyer, and a politician because those were the paths men trekked to authority and respectability. Perhaps he would have remained content with this self, but personal and professional failures conspired against him and jeopardized his manly identity. "It is not an easy thing," Wallace admitted, "to shake off in a moment the expectations nurtured through years until they have become essentially a part of us."² Yet it was necessary in order to answer the question that plagued him, "What shall I be?"

Like many who wrestle with questions of identity and purpose, Wallace examined Christianity as a solution to his pain and frustration, and it was in this context that *Ben-Hur* was born. The most often repeated theme in *Ben-Hur* concerns the contests between human and divine wills. Judah Ben-Hur's life certainly did not proceed as he would have planned. Besides being enslaved for a crime he did not commit, Judah's military and political plans are overruled by Jesus' divine mission. The message of *Ben-Hur* is that there are plans unfathomable to human imagination. Such a message allowed Wallace to cope with his failures and anticipate a better future. Yet Wallace was writing not just for himself, but also for an audience. While *Ben-Hur*'s message likely resonated with readers, the evidence suggests that they were more taken with Wallace's depictions of the Holy Land. Wallace's painstakingly accurate portrayals of the land where Jesus walked and taught were important for many religious Americans seeking

¹ Lew Wallace, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1908), 100-101

² Wallace, *Ben-Hur*, 505-06.

evidence for belief in an age of doubt. Neither Christianity nor novel writing were perceived as particularly masculine in nineteenth-century America, but they both enabled Lew Wallace to recognize his calling as “a man in the world of writing – one with a pen which shall stop men to listen to it, whether they wish to or not.”³

Of course, Wallace’s pen would have been heard by far fewer if not for the growth of mass media and a consumer culture. *Ben-Hur* languished on retailers’ shelves its first few years off the presses. However, Harper and Brothers, Wallace’s publishers, possessed the power to manufacture bestsellers through their marketing machinery, and consequently create celebrity authors. Furthermore, *Ben-Hur*’s religious subject and its moral tone also made it a favorite among religious pulpits and public libraries. The tremendous popularity of *Ben-Hur* made its author into a celebrity. Yet Wallace became more than just a celebrity, he became a cultural commodity. His intellectual properties became commercial properties and were dramatized, imitated, and even plagiarized. Even his spoken words, likeness, and name became elements of cultural exchange as his readers sought to know the author of *Ben-Hur*.

In 1885, Wallace reflected upon his life. “I have tried many things in the course of the drama,” he wrote, “the law, soldiering, politics, authorship, and, lastly, diplomacy – and if I may pass judgment upon the success achieved in each [,] . . . I shall look back upon *Ben-Hur* as my best performance.”⁴ As a young man, Lew Wallace had yearned to read his name in history, only to cringe at what was written there. As a middle-aged man, he wrote a Jesus novel, which he suspected the public would never tolerate. As an old man, he reaped the benefits of that gamble. *Ben-Hur*, forged out of disillusionment and failure, enabled Lew Wallace to find legitimacy through popular culture.

³ Lew Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1906), 2:969.

⁴ Lew Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1906), 2:969.

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