

## **Lew Wallace**

### **Soldier, Author, Diplomat, An Indiana Man for All Seasons**

(1827-1905)

By Stephen K. Smith

#### **1. Indiana Childhood**

Lew Wallace was born in 1827 in Brookville, IN, the second of four sons of David Wallace, a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy in 1821, a lawyer and Indiana's 6<sup>th</sup> Governor elected in 1837.

As a youth he nearly died of scarlet fever. An indifferent student, he discovered he had a real talent for drawing, sketching during class rather than studying. He frequently skipped school, exploring the woods and fields he loved. His parents discovered that the only way to control him was to give him books to read. By the time David became Governor, Indianapolis had 4000 people and the young man spent much of his time in the Indiana State Library.

Like Lincoln before him whose only formal education was the nine months he spent in the pioneer schools of Indiana, Wallace was mostly self-taught. Also, like Lincoln, he mastered English grammar and found that he had a unique gift for writing. His father dissuaded him from becoming an artist, but for his whole life he continued to make sketches and to admire those who created art. To make a living, he read and practiced law but hated it as "the most detestable of human occupations" (*Sword* at 3),

## **2. Soldier**

Wallace left the Democratic Party when its leaders in Indiana expressed sympathy for the Southern cause. At the beginning of the Civil War, Lincoln called for the raising of six regiments from Indiana. As Indiana Adjutant General, Wallace recruited twice that number. At age 34, he took command of the 11<sup>th</sup> Indiana Volunteer Regiment. He was promoted to Major General in 1862, then the youngest person to hold this highest rank in the Union Army. He fought with Grant at Fort Donelson and at Shiloh, where his controversial arrival on the battlefield on the second day of battle enabled Grant to prevail in what had appeared to be a Union defeat.

At Shiloh, Wallace was fully ready to join the battle but received conflicting and/or unclear oral and written orders from Grant as to the proper route to take. He made what appears to be a reasonable judgment in the chaotic circumstances presented. He took the somewhat shorter, improved route of the two presented. He moved his troops with impressive efficiency, marching them a longer distance and with greater speed than any other commander at the battle. He did arrive in time to save Grant's beleaguered forces and make a major contribution to the ultimate Union victory. However, some historians say both Grant and Sherman were surprised by the Rebel attack. In particular, Sherman continually refused to credit reports that a major Rebel army was near even after his look-out troops were briefly attacked. Grant had been ordered to remain several miles away in Syracuse without a telegraph or Signal Corps support. However, he visited by steamboat the assembled Union army frequently and asked Sherman to be his secret eyes and ears on the ground. Also, there were no intrenchments protecting the Union army, a fact which caused Confederate General Sydney Johnson to leave Corinth for

a surprise attack. In addition, Sherman allowed large gaps to exist between his troops and those of other commanders on each side, which the Confederate troops initially used to outflank and kill Union troops.

Moreover, Wallace was not initially criticized. Only after newspaper reporters carried stories blaming Grant for the enormous Union casualties at Shiloh, did the issue of Wallace's late arrival on the battle field get mentioned. Eventually, the Press made Wallace the main scape goat for these bloody losses. Grant and Sherman never admitted that there was a problem with the orders. They stated that Wallace should have known from the sounds of the battle, where and how best to get to the battle field.

Grant and Sherman, once they recovered from the surprise, fought bravely, eventually closed the gaps, and by the end of the first day held their ground in an unbroken line. With Wallace's crucial help the second day, they won the battle. Their casualties, however, were horrendous. Wallace's were not even though he was heavily involved in the fighting. He had the benefit of not having to react to a surprise attack.

A factor in Wallace's being made a scape goat, was his tendency, when in his opinion, he was made to wait too long for orders from his higher commanders, to second guess them and declare that he had a better plan and would have acted sooner and more decisively. This got back to his superiors and was resented. General Henry Halleck, the supreme Union commander at the time, was especially offended by this behavior. The result was that Wallace, although never formally reprimanded, was sent to be the military commander of Memphis, where he imposed martial law. Tiring of this minor role, he took indefinite leave and went home

to Indiana, but he did not resign his commission. While there Governor Morton requested, he lead Indiana volunteers in a defense against Morgan's Raiders. After a battle in Corydon, involving 2,300 combatants, Morgan was driven out of Indiana into Ohio.

Although Wallace assembled written testimonials from other officers at Shiloh and presented them to Grant, he never succeeded in getting the official record of the battle changed to remove the criticism that he was late to the battle.

After successfully defending Cincinnati from Confederate attack, Wallace took command of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army Corps on March 12, 1864 and led a small force of Union soldiers at Monocacy Junction in a desperate attempt to delay a large Rebel Army under General Jubal Early from capturing Washington, D.C. Although defeated, Wallace bought Grant an extra day to reinforce the city and repel Early's advance.

After the Civil War, he served on the military court that tried those involved in the assassination of President Lincoln. He was also appointed President of the Military Court, which tried and convicted Captain Henry Wirz for war crimes committed during his command of the infamous Andersonville Prison for Union Soldiers. Built to house 10,000 men, it was crowded with three times that many in filthy and diseased conditions: in all 13,000 soldiers died. As at Nuremberg in World War II Germany, Captain Wirz claimed he was merely following orders.

Within the camp the guards created a "dead line" beyond which any union prisoner would be shot. During testimony, Wallace was struck by the case of a prisoner "half dead with thirst"

(*Id at 87*). who crawled under the dead line to reach a stream for a clean drink of water. The guard on duty shot him, and the cup dropped from his hand into the stream. During the trial Wallace drew a sketch for others on the Court of this soldier entitled, “Over the Dead Line.” (*Id at 87*). It hangs on the wall of Lew Wallace’s study in Crawfordsville, IN, then and to this day a powerful artistic depiction of the crimes for which Captain Wirz was convicted and executed.

Thereafter Wallace aided Mexican freedom fighters in their struggle to rid their country of the French puppet ruler Maximilian. In 1878 he was appointed Governor of the New Mexico Territory sent to clean up the “corruption, fraud, mismanagement, plots and murder” (*Id. at 101*) of the prior governor and to bring peace to the region. He formed his own militia and offered \$1000 reward for the arrest of Billy the Kid, a gunslinger for one of the warring factions in the territory. Ultimately, he personally met with and offered Billy immunity from prosecution if he would testify concerning crimes he had witnessed before a Grand Jury. Wallace kept his word and got his desired indictments. Thereafter Pat Garrett gunned down Billy after he had returned to a life of crime.

Wallace’s wife Susan hated New Mexico, where unlike Indiana it almost never rained, was incredibly hot and dusty, and very primitive. Before returning to Indiana and leaving Wallace to stay on alone, she wondered aloud if a new war could be waged against Mexico to make them take the territory back, it having been captured in the War with Mexico in 1846.

### 3. Author

In the evenings in New Mexico, Wallace finished an historical novel on which he had labored in research and writing for many years. In the beginning he neither believed nor disbelieved in God or Jesus Christ. After finishing the 200,000-word draft of *Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ* during lonely nights in New Mexico, he embraced Christianity. The novel was released on November 12, 1880, initially selling few copies and getting poor reviews. However, ordinary people and even preachers warmed to its message and compassion. General Grant did not usually read novels. However, he began reading a copy Wallace had given him in the morning and did not put it down until he finished it the next morning. By 1889 400,000 copies had been sold and translated into numerous languages. Sears and Roebuck printed one million copies and sold them for 39 cents a copy. It was one of the best-selling novels of all time.

The book was made into a play and two movie versions, each the most expensive and successful of their time. The 1959 movie version starring Charlton Heston as Ben Hur, the Jewish noble, and Steven Boyd as Messala, a Roman friend who betrayed him, won 11 academy awards, the most until matched more recently by the film *Titanic*. Before his death, Charlton Heston visited Wallace's study in Crawfordsville, requesting and being granted an opportunity to view the place alone for an hour.

The novel reveals Wallace's values and literary gifts. Although composed in the formal writing style of the time, it is remarkably gripping on the reader. It was mostly researched in available public libraries, including the Library of Congress, this is not a book one would normally expect from an initial unbeliever

and an active military commander: it is a glimpse of his rich inner life.

The main character Judah Ben Hur is a high-born Jew possessing, with some misfortunes, extraordinary and ever-growing power and wealth. Mostly Ben Hur associates with other wealthy, formidable, sophisticated and influential persons. He is a highly trained, experienced and able soldier and military commander. As a dedicated Jewish patriot, he sees the “King of the Jews” as a worldly leader like King Herod dedicated to freeing the Jewish people from the rule of Rome. However, his friend Balthasar, one of the original three wise men at Christ’s birth, sees the actual reality as follows:” you will keep on until you meet a man clothed in purple with scepter. On the other hand, I look for one poor, humble, undistinguished—a man in appearance as other men, and the sign by which I will know him will never be so simple. He will offer to show me and all mankind the way to the eternal life; the Life of the Soul.” (*Ben Hur*, at 218). Ben Hur has financed, recruited, and trained two legions of Galileans to save Jesus from death and to enable him to exercise temporal power. However, Christ refuses Ben Hur’s assistance by inquiring, “The cup my father hath given me, shall I not drink it?” (*Id.* at 264). Ben Hur grudgingly realizes that “it is possible his scheming, and labor, and expenditure of treasure might have been but a blasphemous contention with God”. (*Id.* at 266). He comes to understand that Jesus’ death is necessary to faith in the resurrection: ... I am the resurrection and the life” (*Id.* at 272). The rabbis and teachers had asserted that Christ’s great crime “is preaching that an uncircumcised Gentile is as worthy of favor as a Jew of the strictest habit. He preaches a new dispensation.” (*Id.* at 248), In the end, “Ben Hur became “sensible of a peace he had never known, the peace which is the end of doubt and mystery, the

beginning of faith and love and clear understanding.” (*Id.* at 272).

-8-

#### **4. Diplomat**

In 1881 President James Garfield read *Ben Hur* with great fascination until 2:00 a.m. in the morning and decided to send Wallace to head the American mission to Turkey’s capital Constantinople in hopes it would inspire Wallace for future literary work. That same year Wallace met Sultan Abdul Hamid II, the leader of the Ottoman Empire, at a reception at the Sultan’s Palace.

Contrary to the custom practiced in Turkey, Wallace asked permission to shake the Sultan’s hand, causing uproar at Court. It was considered a “sacrilegious presumption” (*Sword*, at 117) for a Muslim and Christian to touch. At first the Sultan seemed puzzled by the request, but then he smiled and stepped forward and shook Wallace’s hand, the first time in history the Sultan had done so with anyone. The atmosphere changed immediately. To the Sultan’s court, “This strange man from the West” (*Id.* at 117) had overridden tradition and as an equal had pressed their sovereign’s hand.

The Sultan requested a copy of *Ben Hur* and had it translated into his own language. He told others, “I believe this American is an honest man.” (*Id.* at 117) Thereafter, Wallace had a closer relationship with the Sultan and enjoyed personal influence such as no envoy of any foreign nation had exerted before, the Sultan asking his advice at all hours of the day and night.

Wallace was promoted to envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary—the highest rank then available in the American diplomatic service. He toured the holy land and found that his research was so accurate that nothing written in *Ben Hur* required correction

He served in Turkey for four years until 1884 when the Democrat Grover Cleveland defeated the Republican James Blaine for President. The Sultan wanted Wallace to stay on, if not as America's representative then as a representative of the Sultan, who trusted him always to tell the truth. The Sultan gave Wallace beautiful gifts at their parting, many of which are on display in the study in Crawfordsville. For his part Wallace gave the Sultan a huge English mastiff puppy purchased in London. Wallace named the puppy Victorio after the famous Apache Indian chief that he had respected and opposed in the New Mexico Territory. The palace thought the dog was a lion, and the Sultan kept the dog in his bedroom with great cordial intimacy. With all of America's current problems in the Muslim world, think of how much good a diplomat like Lew Wallace could accomplish today.

## **5. An Extraordinary Life**

Lew Wallace grew up unschooled in the wild earth of pioneer Indiana and by personal effort, courage, and discipline developed enormous gifts of raw talent and desire into an extraordinary life.

### **Source Materials:**

1. *Lew Wallace: Militant Romantic*, by Robert F. Mosberger and Katherine Mosberger, McGraw Hill Book Company (“*Romantic*”).
2. *The Sword & the Pen, a Life of Lew Wallace*, by Ray E. Bloomhower, Indiana Historical Society Press, c2005 (“*Sword*”).

3. *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, Volumes 1 and 2, Harper & Brothers, published 1906 (“*Autobiography*”).
4. *Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, by Lew Wallace, Bantam Books, New York, published 1956 (“*Ben Hur*”).