

FREDERIC HOMER BALCH— A Troubled Christian Writer's Brief Life

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“—a torn leaf from some old romance.” F.H. Balch

Frederic Homer Balch is a very melancholy and tragic figure in Oregon literature. Born December 14, 1861 in Lebanon, Oregon, the family moved to Goldendale, Washington when he was 10 because of his mother's asthma. Everyone who encounters his story is moved by his great potential as a writer, and his startling conversion to Christianity at age 21. It directly led to his giving up the love of his life, Geneva Whitcomb, and destroying his pagan novel *Wallulah* in the family fireplace. Becoming a Congregational minister, with a church in Hood River, Balch still rode the harsh mid-Columbian landscape in the 1880s to pray with parishioners. Yet despite his career as a preacher, he put both energy and ambition into being a novelist. His grand literary scheme is not to be taken lightly.

After the two separated, because of a quarrel, Geneva moved to The Dalles to attend St. Mary's Academy. She caught pneumonia in January 1886 and died. Her body was rowed home across a Columbia choked with ice floes. The only minister around, Balch was forced to officiate at her funeral. As he looked upon her open coffin, he realized: "I knew I was looking for the last time upon the face of the only girl I would ever love."

He could never forget her. He met a pretty Scotch girl, listening to Chopin and Beethoven at the Oakland seminary, but decided that it wasn't "honorable" to court her, a confidence Frederic or "Fred" shared with his younger sister, Gertrude Balch Ingalls. *Genevra* was the original title for the posthumously published *Genevieve*. Obviously the Whitcomb girl's persona occupied his thoughts, even as his own life was coming to a close.

After the publication of his classic—*The Bridge of the Gods*—in September of 1890, health problems sent him home from the Pacific Theological Seminary in Oakland. He was revising *Genevieve: A Tale of Old Oregon*, and eagerly anticipated writing more novels. Not quite thirty years old, Balch contracted tuberculosis. His mother accompanied him to old Good Samaritan hospital in Portland, where he died on June 3, 1891. What a loss for Oregon literature! His body was taken back to Lyle, Washington, and buried a few paces from Geneva. They sleep side by side in the Lyle-Balch Cemetery, not far from the Pine Hill Church where he preached. It became Balch School and is now a private home.

Down through the years, by myself and with others, I have visited the cemetery to honor Balch. Leaving flowers, saying a silent prayer. The site is one of the Pacific Northwest's great literary shrines. The editor of *Genevieve* and Balch's first biographer, Oregon's great bookman Alfred Powers, chose to be buried there. Obviously, he had respect and even love for the blue-eyed, dark-haired young man who was lost before his work was nearly done. The first significant essay we have on Balch is Powers' 19-page introduction to *Genevieve*. The epitaph on Powers' gravestone sets a proper cosmic tone: "I, a stranger, choose to lie among you amidst God's three symbols of eternity, Mount Hood, Memaloose Island, and the great river Columbia which flows between."

Alfred was 96 when he died in 1983. I wrote the eulogy published in *The Oregonian's Northwest Magazine*.

Only in the last 5 years have I discovered other biographers. They too became obsessed with this tragic figure! Leonard Wiley self-published in a limited edition—220 copies, 1970—*The Granite Boulder*, named for the natural rock Fred chose himself for a tombstone. Eccentric as *Granite Boulder* is, I have grudging respect for the work. Wiley compiled critical info and interviewed Snider and Whitcomb family



Yours,
F. H. Balch.



members living in and around Lyle, and many others who had memories of Fred and Genevra. Studying it reveals the inadequacy of Powers' essay. He had very limited material from which to draw.

In 1988, a treasure trove of unfinished manuscripts was discovered in the Hood River County Museum. Several years ago, I stumbled across an issue of Washington State's historical publication *Columbia* (Spring 1993). The naturalistic story "How a Camas Prairie Girl Saw the World," printed there for the first time from one of those manuscripts, is challenging and moving. The tale of two sisters trapped by an abusive father shows how women of the era were stuck on the farm. For them, the new West was neither heroic nor liberating.

Professor Stephen L. Harris provided excellent introductory notes for the "Camas Prairie" story. Without a doubt, Harris has become the definitive Balch biographer. When will his full-length biography be done? He credits Wiley's widow with passing on years of key research. Harris published a wonderfully illustrated major essay on Balch and *The Bridge of the Gods* in the Winter, 1996-'97 *Oregon Historical Quarterly*. Again, we see a man of letters preoccupied by this sorrowful writer's short-spanned life and career.

Bridge of the Gods is the Northwest novel of its era. It has continuously been in print since first published by McClurg & Co. The Chicago firm would go on to publish Eva Emery Dye's best-seller, *The Conquest—The True Story of Lewis and Clark*, a decade later, featuring Sacajawea as a feminist heroine. Balch's great novel of Indian legends and the "Confederacy of the Wauna" holds up very well. Every Oregonian ought to be familiar with *The Bridge of the Gods*! While he was laboring for the Oregon Railway & Navigation Co., Balch collected lore on the Northwest's vanishing Indian peoples. They spoke of "the bridge of the gods" which the Great Spirit brought to destruction. Lewis and Clark saw drowned trees in the Columbia, perhaps as Balch himself did at the Cascades in the late 1800s.

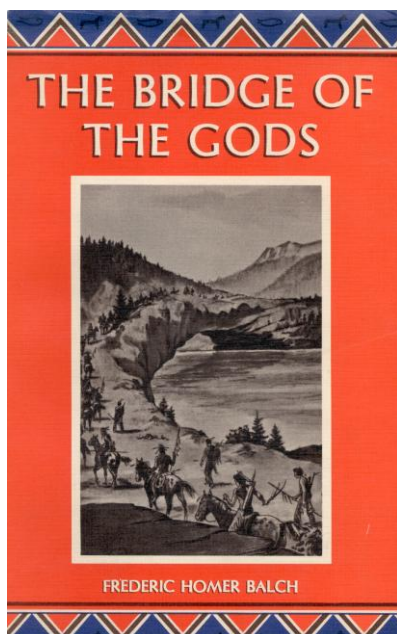
The young agnostic really intended to write non-Christian work. Then he had a classic born-again experience, changing everything in his life. Despite its shortcomings, *The Bridge of the Gods* reveals a genuine interest and respect for native culture. He was not an anthropologist, although he knew some Chinook Jargon and understood cultural taboos and Indian cosmology. For only having a 6-month education at Mt.

Tabor School, and 2 years in the seminary, Fred demonstrates remarkable literary skills. Words like "tomanowas" and "mimaluse" pepper the novel. He speculates from the legends and lore of old pioneers and Indians of an earlier generation. What remains is like one page torn from an entire book.

For him native people are a dying race, children of darkness, not of Christian hope and light. As offensive as this might seem today, and as stereotypical as some of his vengeful Indians are—Chief Multnomah and Princess Winemah are stirring literary characters. Powers published the account of Balch's visit to the eerie Memaloose Island, where the mid-Columbian Indians buried their dead in grave huts, surrounded by skulls, bones and tumbled boards. This cross-cultural encounter with death and the image of death is both symbolical and cinematic. What does "death" mean? Is there life beyond the grave? Such intense inquiry is a central theme in all his books.

Haunting unanswered questions trouble all but the most faithful Christians. Northwest pioneer life had a central faith that there will be a Summer Land. After death, no matter how hard life has been on the frontier—

they would be redeemed and reunited with their loved ones. It's hard to argue with that reassuring emotionality and psychology. Harris states that in a single 8-month period during 1885-'86 the writer lost 3 vibrant young women in his life: his half-sister Allie from T.B., his favorite cousin Frances during difficult childbirth, and Genevra. I have seen hundreds of pioneer gravestones with hopeful engravings, premature deaths. My favorite—Balch would've liked it too—"I do not fear the tomb / because Jesus hath lain there, / and left a sweeter perfume."

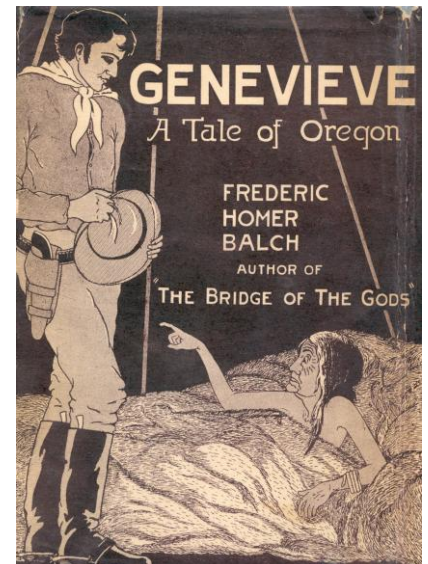


The Bridge of the Gods is a well-made novel and a good read. The young author was not afraid of criticism, or shy about asking for editorial help. Mrs. Barrett in Hood River urged him to change the early title *Cecil Gray, the Missionary*. Thank God! Harris writes in the *Oregon Historical Quarterly* article, a valuable critical evaluation, that Balch intensely identifies with the Oregon landscape. Proud Chief Multnomah attempts to form a great Indian uprising to drive the whites away. And minister Cecil Gray feels erotic passion for Princess Wallulah. When the volcanoes Hood and Adams blow up, the apocalypse concludes both Indian and white prophetic visions.

Alfred Powers edited *Genevieve*, a Western melodrama replete with the occult. I used to prefer *Genevieve* to *Bridge* because it has dramatic and surprising scenes. A half-breed comes home to wreak revenge on his hometown for insulting his race. Guido, like Balch himself, appeals to God to rescue him from demonic possession. There is a mysterious stranger, and a near lynching, necromancy, madame French Lou nursing one of her girls dying from tuberculosis, Guido Colonna's racial shame and love for Genevieve. The posthumously published novel (that should be back in print) is histrionic, nearly preposterous, yet fun to read! Again, how lucky Balch was to have Powers as an editor.

Research by Harris and Wiley dug up lost letters and interviews on the young atheist author. Kathryn Helm, Balch's half-sister-in-law, claims Fred wrestled with demonic visitants. They tried "to drag his soul from his body." Apparently that's the reason he made his fateful decision to embrace Christianity and burn the pagan novel *Wallulah*.

Fred had been experimenting with "spiritualism" before age 21. Kathryn said she went to Indian camps with him when he was querying Native Americans on their beliefs about the dark nether world beyond the grave. Satan was his favorite character in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. How megalomaniacal the aspiring author was! His older half-brother William Helm described *Wallulah* as being "woven throughout with atheism, spiritualism, and the vagaries of a highly sensitive and assertive imagination." Fred told Kathryn that he not only "aspired to be the greatest novelist of the age," but also would continue with his achievements beyond the grave. Wow!



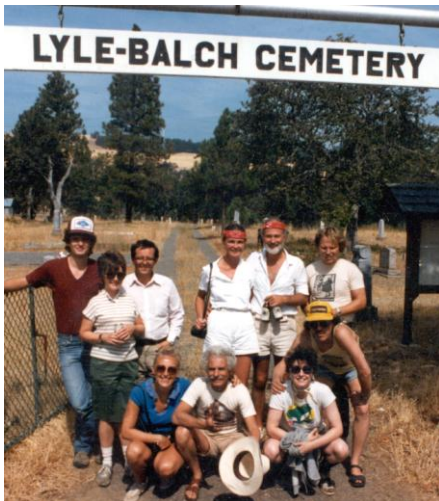
Balch had scrawled in his copy of Joaquin Miller's poems the titles of the books he intended to write. His grand scheme was to create a literature of the Oregon country like Sir Walter Scott's Highland landscape that would make our state world-renowned. No wonder Powers loved him! Fred's remarks from Oakland to sister Gertrude, before he came home to die, are particularly endearing: "I have a deep love for Oregon and Oregon alone. Yesterday I saw a tree loaded with oranges and would willingly have exchanged it for a sight of the Juniper trees in the canyons of the upper Columbia."

If you are interested in Balch in an academic sense, go read Stephen L. Harris or Leonard Wiley. From this point, this essay becomes personal and poetic. Before the age of 21, I was a young "Jesus freak." I was tortured and confused by sexual identity and guilt, living in an Oregon mill town. It's all contained in my first confessional novel *Jack Rain*—my yet-to-be-edited *Wallulah*. I feel lucky that I'm still alive, with perhaps enough time remaining to finish my masterpiece! An agnostic, a "primitive" Christian and Buddhist—I thrill when reading Balch's incomplete and inchoate efforts to confront and understand death. Sure, there is Christian revisionism in the novels, but I sense strong identity with the noble Indian fighting back and the adolescent agnostic wanting to know where God is. As with John Keats, it's too bad Fred didn't have a longer writing career. There always is an "unfinished" aspect to the creative life, whether a person is 26 or 60. Balch wanted to write more books. Maybe they would've been boring ones, but the ones we have are certainly intriguing enough.

In *Genevieve*, the scene with French Lou is astonishing because the girl coughs and spits up blood as she dies, a premonition of Balch's own death. Why is my life entangled with his—even my writing life? I was writing *Jack Rain* to save my life and my sanity at age 21. I was afraid of drowning, unable to swim. Would the world swallow me? Where is God? Yet as the decades have transpired, I now feel myself to be a competent man of letters. I've

read most of the Oregon writers—Hazel Hall, C.E.S. Wood, H.L. Davis, et al. Like Balch, I own a copy of Joaquin Miller's poetry. My point is—how did I get to here from my feeble and febrile youth?—unless there is some kind of predestination or will guiding our lives in the world. Guiding us along, writers or not, if we follow our true path.

When I read Leonard Wiley's *The Granite Boulder*, I had a schizophrenic flashback. Wiley said the name Frederic used was Fred. Well, the Washington town of Lyle has always jogged my emotions because my best friend's name was LYLE. Just like the white-painted letters on the hillside. He died young of aplastic anemia, just



as Balch lost Genevra and the others. I have loved him ever since that terrible inexplicable event. (I pseudonymously called my friend "Fred" in *Jack Rain*. A name picked out of the air?) So "Lyle" and "Fred" and the theme of Jesus in Northwest writing were there in 1961, even in my adolescent necromantic first novel. Every visit to the Lyle-Balch Cemetery gives me this haunted feeling about time and mortality. Mysteries abide in our lives. What is there beyond the sagebrush and the sand and the emptiness?

After the death of his beloved cousin "Frankie," Fred wrote a poem entitled "In The Dark." His faith was shaken, as it was shaken when he presided at Genevra's funeral. But he maintained spiritual possibility. With the dark spirits, the Spee-ough devil energy gone—Balch postulated:

"Hope on, there comes a golden morrow / beyond this sad dark earth."

He concludes: "Surely the light at last will fall, / our dead be found somehow, somewhere."

I hope to see Lyle again. I whisper his name almost every other day.

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