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ARTS & CULTURE

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POETRY

Nobility, Valor, *and a* Great King:

England's King Alfred

G.K. Chesterton's 'The Ballad of the White Horse'

JEFF MINICK

He was a big man, standing 6 feet, 4 inches tall and weighing nearly 300 pounds. To that mountainous physique, add his characteristic appearance in public—a pince-nez, capes and great coats, papers jutting from his pockets, a walking stick, and cigar—and you had a subject that caricaturists could, and did, love.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874–1936) wrote poetry, fiction, history, treatises of lay theology, biographies, and, most prolifically of all, essays ranging in subject matter from Christian doctrine to contemporary affairs. He entertained readers with his Father Brown mysteries (which recently gained a new audience through a television series), gave Christians and non-Christians alike points to ponder in books like “Orthodoxy,” and, nearly a century after his death, found fans in such commentaries on society such as “What’s Wrong With the World” and “The Outline of Sanity.” As quotable a writer who ever lived, Chesterton had enough beloved and witty aphorisms to become collections in books themselves.

Among this tremendous blizzard of words is his epic poem “The Ballad of the White Horse,” his salute to England’s King Alfred. It’s a blend of history and myth, and its major theme—the forces of light fighting those of darkness—has resonated with several generations of readers.

Continued on Page 4

The ballad’s major theme: the forces of light fighting those of darkness.

◀ The statue of King Alfred the Great, the topic of “The Ballad of the White Horse,” in Winchester, UK.





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An artist's conception of the splendid city of Babylon with its hanging gardens.

TRADITIONAL CULTURE

Is Progress Really Progress? A Sage Says No

KATE VIDIMOS

Today we continually build more buildings, update new electronics, create better platforms, invent different cars. We seem to be dominated by a craze for continual forward progress, keeping ourselves forever busy. How often do we pause this frenetic forward motion to consider where we are heading?

Two years before World War II and as the atom bomb was being developed, Stephen Vincent Benét pondered this question in his science fiction short story “By the Waters of Babylon.”

A Society Doomed
Set in a future, post-apocalyptic time when an atomic bomb left a major city destroyed (called the “Great Burning”), Benét’s story follows a young man who is training to become a priest in a primitive tribe.

In pursuit of knowledge and experience, the young hero sets out on a journey to a forbidden place known as the Great Dead Place of the Gods, which he later learns is called “newyork.”

When he arrives in the city, the young hero has a vision of the gods and their city before the Great Burning. There was a constant roar, and the gods were always moving: “Restless, restless, were the gods and always in motion!”

The gods walked, rode in chariots, or flew in the sky. They could go anywhere and get anything. Then the Great Burning came from the sky, and the gods and city died.

Upon returning home, the young hero announces to his father (the head priest of the tribe) that the gods were not gods, but men: “They went a dark road, but they were men.”

The hero wishes to tell the tribe the truth about the city and the gods, but his father says: “Truth is a hard deer to hunt. If you eat too much truth at once,

you may die of truth.”

The hero decides that truth is best learned bit by bit. “Perhaps,” he says, “in the old days, they ate knowledge too fast.” He realizes that his people must build again but with moderation.

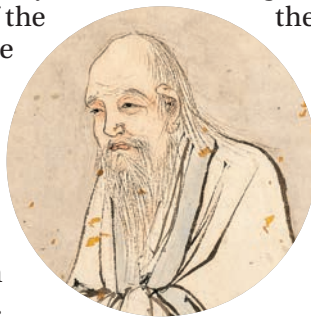
A Meaningful Life
Benét questions our need for continual speed, growth, and progress. This issue is similarly addressed in the Minghui website article “Inspiration From the Story of Zhang Guolao Riding a Donkey Backwards.” Zhang Guolao, one of the Eight Immortals in the Taoist pantheon of China, rode his donkey facing backwards for miles and miles. Although emperors sought his advice, Zhang declined their invitation to come to the court; he did not seek the splendors of the world. Rather, he pursued wisdom, truth, and a “meaningful existence,” and he chose to see the world from a different perspective.

The article shows through Zhang Guolao’s example that “if ordinary people only focused on what happens before them, without seeking the deeper meanings of life, they will miss the great opportunities of knowing the truth.”

Truth is crucial, but if we are so consumed with finding the next truth, then we will never learn or grow.

Both the story and the article tell us: Rather than trying to continually progress forward, update, build, expand, or work, we should focus on learning the truth, living a moral life, and perfecting and effectively applying the knowledge we possess.

Kate Vidimos is a 2020 graduate from the liberal arts college at the University of Dallas, where she received her bachelor’s degree in English. She plans on pursuing all forms of storytelling (specifically film) and is currently working on finishing and illustrating a children’s book.



Zhang Guolao is one of the Eight Immortals in the Taoist pantheon of China.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

FINE ARTS

Rediscovering Antonio Canova’s Lost Dancer

Viewing Canova’s moving masterpiece ‘Dancing Girl With Cymbals’ in Berlin

LORRAINE FERRIER

BERLIN—In the solemn silence of the Bode Museum, I can almost hear the music as Antonio Canova’s nearly life-size sculpture titled “Dancing Girl With Cymbals” effortlessly twirls and pivots on one leg before me. She dances with a lightness seen only in flight, raising her hands above her head for drama and balance, while playing her cymbals. She wears a delicate classical-style dress that skims her body, emphasizing every lithe move she makes.

This dancer’s peaceful presence belies the sculpture’s tumultuous past, having almost been destroyed in a fire and then lost for nearly 130 years before being rediscovered by chance in 1979.

Neville Rowley, curator for early Italian art at the Sculpture Collection and Museum of Byzantine Art (Bode Museum), told me the sculpture’s remarkable story, and how Canova’s “Dancing Girl With Cymbals” came to be one of the highlights of their collection.

A Russian diplomat living in Vienna, Prince Andrey Razumovsky, first owned the sculpture. Razumovsky was a key negotiator in agreeing to the terms of the allies’ victory over Napoleon in 1815. He was also an ardent patron of the arts, supporting greats like Canova and Beethoven. (Beethoven first played his Symphony No. 5 at Razumovsky’s palace.)

But Canova’s “Dancing Girl With Cymbals” disappointed Razumovsky. Contemporary experts believed that ancient artists made pure white statuary, and a large black stain that ran across the dancer’s thighs went against the neoclassical style that aimed to revive that ancient tradition.

On December 30, 1814, just a few months

after Razumovsky received the sculpture, disaster struck. Fire destroyed his palace, yet somehow men managed to pull Canova’s dancer to safety minutes before the palace roof collapsed. Remarkably, the sculpture suffered only a few broken fingers, and the fire meant its black thigh-stain became blackened further from soot.

After 1836, Canova’s sculpture disappeared from records. Then, by chance in the late 1970s, an art historian went to a party held at one of the Rothschild family’s palaces where, on a staircase, he met Canova’s lost dancer. Rowley notes that the exceptional quality of the sculpture along with its broken fingers were key in confirming its identity. Canova expert Hugh Honour had found the details of the fire-damaged sculpture were in letters to Canova from art critic Giuseppe Tamberoni.

Canova’s Enduring Legacy

October 2022 marks the 200th anniversary of Canova’s death. In the late 18th century, Canova first worked in Venice but he made his name in Rome, becoming the greatest neoclassical sculptor of his time. He had invitations from many European heads of state to come work for them, but he stayed firmly on Roman soil, where he felt most inspired.

Canova’s neoclassical-style sculptures are rooted in ancient art. According to “A World History of Art,” by Hugh Honour and John Fleming, Canova “was hailed as the continuer of the ancient Greek tradition, the modern Phidias [ancient Greek sculptor].” He was particularly inspired by paintings on ancient Greek vases, and by frescoes found in Hercu-



“Dancing Girl With Cymbals,” 1809 or 1812, by Antonio Canova. Marble: 6 feet, 9 inches tall. Sculpture Collection and Museum of Byzantine Art at the Bode Museum, State Museums of Berlin, in Germany.

laneum, the ancient southern Italian city that was discovered in 1709 (some 40 years before the discovery of nearby Pompeii).

In addition to being inspired by ancient art, Canova loved dance, and several of his works reflect this love. His friend, the sculptor Antonio d’Este wrote of how, as youths, they’d wander into the mountains on feast days to watch the girls dance. He wrote how Canova enjoyed “the innocence of the dancers, ... [and] by observing the natural movements of these girls, he again and again drew a lesson that benefited his art.”

Great artists like Canova made the impossible possible. Canova excelled at making static marble sculptures full of movement from every viewing angle. He did that in his “Dancing Girl With Cymbals,” and he somehow made the dancer’s solid marble body appear as light as a feather, making it easy for me and other Bode Museum visitors to “hear” the music she dances to.

To find out more about Antonio Canova’s “Dancing Girl With Cymbals” at the Bode Museum in Berlin, visit SMB.museum

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In the ballad, the White Horse symbolizes the keeping of religious faith pure and fervent. “The Vision of the White Horse,” 1798, by Philip James de Loutherbourg. Oil on canvas. Tate, London.



A portrait of Alfred the Great (Latin: Aelfredus Magnus Rex Angl) is flanked by books and documents symbolizing his literary and legislative works. To the side and below are scenes representing Alfred's formation of the Royal Navy, his sojourn to the enemy camp in disguise, and his defeat of the Danes. Also depicted are his crown, weapons, and a captured Danish raven banner. An engraving of King Alfred the Great in “Rapin's History of England,” 1732, by George Vertue. National Portrait Gallery, London.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

POETRY

Nobility, Valor, and a Great King:

England's King Alfred

G.K. Chesterton's ‘The Ballad of the White Horse’

Continued from Page 1

Some Background England's Uffington White Horse, from which Chesterton's poem takes its name, is carved into a chalk grassland hill in Oxfordshire, England. Though the original purpose of the horse is lost in time, for 3,000 years local villagers and farmers have dutifully tended this figure composed of ditches filled with white chalk, regularly weeding it and replenishing the chalk. As Emily Cleaver reports in Smithsonian Magazine, this pictogram is “the size of a football field and visible from 20 miles away.” To this day, the locals, supervised by officials from the National Trust, gather periodically to maintain by hand one of England's

prehistoric monuments.

The White Horse runs through Chesterton's ballad as both a motif and a theme, symbolizing the need to keep religious faith pure and fervent and the country English. The scouring and upkeep of the White Horse hint that Christianity and culture need this same kind of diligent care to remain healthy.

And the historical figure who inspires and directs this undertaking is the ballad's hero, Alfred (849–899), or “Alfred the Great” as he was later deemed. For his many accomplishments, this energetic and wise monarch deserves that honorific. As king of Wessex, one of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of the time, Alfred fought for his people against the Danes, seafaring invaders from present-

day Denmark.

On the verge of losing this war in 878, Alfred assembled his forces in secret, met the Danes in battle near today's Edington, and defeated them. With Alfred as his sponsor, a king of the Danes, Guthrum, received the sacrament of Christian baptism. Less than a decade later, Alfred and his men captured London, and from that point on, fortune favored the Anglo-Saxons over the Danes.

But Alfred was more than a king of war and conquest. He revamped his government's administrative practices and became known and admired for his revisions to the law, in which he sought particularly to protect the weak and the poor. He is even better remembered for his love of learning and his attempts to spread literacy among his people. He himself learned Latin as an adult and translated several works, including Boethius's “The Consolation of Philosophy.”

This lawgiver, educator, and warrior-king is the epic hero of “The Ballad of the White Horse.”

The Tale as Told by Chesterton

After an affectionate dedication in verse to his wife—“where you are shall honour and laughter be”—Chesterton immediately introduces us to the White Horse:

*Before the gods that made the gods
Had seen their sunrise pass,
The White Horse of the White Horse Vale
Was cut out of the grass.”*

And almost immediately, we meet Alfred, who experiences a vision of Our Lady, the Virgin Mary. She encourages him with words like “The men signed of the cross of Christ/ Go gaily in the dark,” but also adds that “The wise men know what wicked things/ Are written on the sky.” Here, too, is her warning, which appears elsewhere in the poem:

*“I tell you naught for your comfort,
Yea, naught for your desire,
Save that the sky grows darker yet
And the sea rises higher.”*

Following this encounter, Alfred begins gathering other chieftains, men like Eldred whose “great and foolish heart/ Stood open like his door” and Mark, “the man from Italy,” whose “eyes in his head were strong like steel/ And his soul remembered Rome.” As the narrative advances, Chesterton recounts the tale of Alfred disguising himself as a minstrel to enter the camp of the Danes and the more familiar story of the old peasant woman and the burned cakes. In Chesterton's version of this legend, when the inattentive king breaks his promise to his hostess to keep some small loaves of bread by the fire from burning in the woman's cottage, she slaps him in the face for his carelessness, a lesson to him on the importance of paying attention to details and keeping his word.

King Alfred sought particularly to protect the weak and the poor.

The Battle of Ethandune between the Danes and the men of Wessex, which historians today call either Ethandun or Edington, takes up three of the poem's eight chapters. In several action-packed scenes, we witness brave deeds on both sides, the deaths of several chieftains, and the rallying and final victory of Wessex. As in many other epics, the leaders, Alfred included, deliver somewhat lengthy speeches in the midst of battle—words to inspire the weary arms and flagging spirits of their troops. Some individual combats receive special attention, as when Ogier of the Danes, trapped beneath his shield by Mark, bursts “the shield of brass and hide” and delivers “a death-stroke to the Roman's side.”

In the final chapter, “The Scouring of the Horse,” Chesterton ends his epic with accounts of Alfred as lawmaker and of visitors from distant lands, and with the king taking London.

Never Say Die

Both Chesterton's hero and, from what we know, the historical King Alfred displayed the virtues of the chivalric code found in later knights: mercy, valor, loyalty, largesse, and more. But the virtue we may notice most of all is Alfred's perseverance.

As we ride with the king while he makes his way to various households, pleading with their masters to summon their men and raise sword and shield in the defense of Wessex, we find a man who refuses to be defeated. That same man appears at



PUBLIC DOMAIN

The code of laws that Alfred compiled in 890 was informed by the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule. “He who keeps them shall not need any other lawbook,” stated Alfred. An illustrated plate from “The Story of the Greatest Nations and the World's Famous Events,” 1913, by Edward Sylvester Ellis and Charles Francis Horne.

the campfires of the Danes disguised as a minstrel and on the field of Ethandune, where he shouts encouragement to his warriors. At one point during the battle, he cries out that he sees Our Lady advancing with them against the enemy:

*“The Mother of God goes over them,
Walking on wind and flame,
And the storm-cloud drifts from city
and dale,
And the White Horse stamps in the*

*White Horse Vale,
And we all shall yet drink Christian ale
In the village of our name.”*

He knows of the odds and challenges he faces—“that the sky grows darker yet/ And the sea rises higher”—but he is a king of hope and faith, and so pushes forward.

A Warning for the Future

In the final chapter, “The Scouring of



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A portrait of Alfred the Great, 1790, by Samuel Woodforde.



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King Alfred's England following the Treaty of Wedmore in 878. Before his death, Alfred the Great reigned over Wessex and Northumbria. An illustrated plate from “The Dawn of American History in Europe,” 1912, by William Lewis Nida.

the Horse,” recollecting his victory, the aging Alfred says:

*“And though they scatter now and go,
In some far century, sad and slow,
I have a vision, and I know
The heathen shall return.
“They shall not come with warships,
They shall not waste with brands,
But books be all their eating,
And ink be on their hands.”*

Here Chesterton is clearly the speaker, not Alfred. The poet goes on to warn that there will occur “ordering all things with dead words.” A few lines later, he writes of “Man made like a half-wit,/ That knows not of his sire.” After this “sign of the dying fire,” Alfred, again via Chesterton, adds:

*“What though they come with scroll
and pen,
And grave as a shaven clerk,
By this sign you shall know them,
That they ruin and make dark;”*

Update the archaic language to our digital age, and here, it seems, is a description of the dark ruin brought on by regulations and officials with “ink on their hands.” And of that man who “knows not of his sire,” Chesterton seems to warn of a diminished appreciation of the past and our ancestors.

Fun and a Final Lesson

One great reason for opening up “The Ballad of the White Horse” is for the sheer good pleasure it provides. Here are galloping lines worthy of that horse, rollicking verse that when read aloud in a strong voice conjures up an actor from the shyest and most reticent of souls. Here are diction, rhyme, and meter that when spoken aloud or in the silence of the heart call for high drama and charged emotions. Even the beat found in verses of sadness and dire caveats can set the blood pounding.

Here, for example, is Mary speaking during her first appearance to Alfred:

*“The wise men know all evil things
Under the twisted trees,
Where the perverse in pleasure pine
And men are weary of green wine
And sick of crimson seas.”*

Read that aloud with some thunder in your voice, and you'll discover the magic.

One final note: Near the poem's conclusion, King Alfred says, “If we would have the horse of old,/ Scour ye the horse anew.” Here, Alfred reminds his listeners by way of this metaphor to care for the treasures of the past: their English rights and laws, and their Christian faith.

If we apply this same admonition to the things from our own history—the Constitution, for example, or the monuments at Gettysburg, Old Glory flying above Fort McHenry, or the poignant photographs of Alabama farmers during the Great Depression—then we realize that we too have the power, and the obligation, to scour away the rust and tarnish that blight these objects. With loving memory as our cleanser and honor bestowed as our scouring pad, we can restore the burnished gold of our national treasures.

Jeff Minick lives and writes in Front Royal, Virginia. He is the author of two novels, “Amanda Bell” and “Dust on Their Wings,” and two works of non-fiction, “Learning as I Go” and “Movies Make the Man.”

A.G. BAXTER/SHUTTERSTOCK



The Uffington White Horse, a chalk figure etched into an Oxfordshire hillside, has been carefully preserved for 3,000 years.

BOOK REVIEW

A Year in the Life of a Scottish Bookseller

ANITA L. SHERMAN

I have a propensity for acquiring books. My small, upstairs office has shelves full of them. I have a friend who runs a small bookstore in Warrenton, Virginia. Originally from Portland, Oregon, I find my memories are keen of Powell's, a legendary independent bookstore touted as the world's largest. I like everything about books, and I like people who share my love of books.

For me, there is something magical about turning those first pages of a new book and starting to read—what new information awaits? What characters will I meet? What mystery will be solved? What drama will unfold?—a whole new world in words, perhaps sprinkled with photos or illustrations.

The title alone lured me to pick up Shaun Bythell's "Confessions of a Bookseller." And it has a charming cover depicting a once-large Georgian townhouse, now a bookshop, with every window filled with scenes of books, staff, and book browsers. The owner stands outside the entrance, his faithful cat, Captain, by his side. It is all so inviting.

I also keep a journal, and this book is structured like a diary chronicling a full year in Bythell's life running the largest secondhand bookshop in Scotland.

Participate in Community

I found myself laughing out loud on several occasions. This is an uproariously funny read.

Bythell has a sharp eye for quickly discerning the makeup of his often-eccentric customers. Add to that mix the personalities of his curious staff, legions of friends and acquaintances, and his family, and you have the recipe for a read that combines biting sarcasm with a guy who is passionate about books and often will lend a sympathetic ear to his staff or customers—if the mood suits him.

Each month charted in the book begins with an excerpt from a 1942 London publication, "The Intimate Thoughts of John Baxter, Bookseller," by Augustus Muir.

These snippets set the stage, or offer a theme, to begin that month's adventures in Bythell's book-buying and selling.

Bythell is an avid reader and passionate about the world of books, from their content to their covers. He is a bookseller in a small, rural Scottish village near the sea.

As a shop owner, he has all the challenges of being a businessman in an industry that has dramatically changed in structure, particularly with the advent of online or-

dering. He remains optimistic that, while the tactics have changed and he does have an online presence, the strategic spirit of reading and purchasing books will survive in traditional corners around the world, like his shop in Wigtown.

Bookstores typically have always offered more than books. They speak to the character of the communities they serve by hosting book signings, lectures, and workshops, and with bulletin boards populated with community events.

The Bookshop in Wigtown is no different. Extra rooms are available for visiting guests. There's always room for hosting a dinner or lending space for a yoga class or pop-up wine bar. The store anchors an annual Writer's Retreat and Wigtown Book Festival. It is all about a caring community, and despite Bythell's often cantankerous and grumpy exterior, he has a deeply soulful side in matters of the heart.

Embrace the Unexpected

There is a graceful rhythm and routine to each day as Bythell notes how many customers come into the shop, how many orders he takes and fills, and how much revenue he makes.

But there's always that odd character who traverses the corridors of the shop or combs through the treasures brought in a box of books. The result is usually some pithy dialogue or silent observation left unsaid that will leave the reader in stitches.

His oddball staff could be the catalysts of their own novels. Emanuela, a young girl from Italy, arrives with his offer of free room and board in exchange for her help in the shop for a summer. Despite a keen language barrier, she manages to enchant many of the locals and is fastidious in her care of the books. She is also a horrible cook but a voracious eater of other people's cuisine.

Take Notes

Another treat offered by this book is the titillating descriptions of other reads that Bythell interjects regularly throughout his daily observations. Readers will no doubt find themselves jotting down authors and titles that are new, or rediscovering books that they have read in the past and warrant a repeat read. This is a bonus for book aficionados.

Not only does the author share other titles throughout his book, but he also offers bits of history, like the creation of bookplates or the best method for book binding.

When in Wigtown, Scotland, I would suggest a visit to The Bookshop. In the meantime,



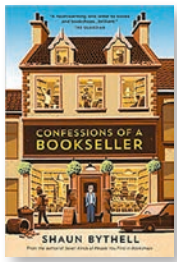
LSTOCKSTUDIO/SHUTTERSTOCK

This book is structured like a diary chronicling a full year in Bythell's life running the largest secondhand bookshop in Scotland.

pick up a copy of "Confessions of a Bookseller." You won't be disappointed.

Anita L. Sherman is an award-winning journalist who has more than 20 years of experience as a writer and editor for local papers and regional publications in Virginia. She now works as a freelance writer and is working on her first novel. She is the mother of three grown children and grandmother to four, and she resides in Warrenton, Va. Anita can be reached at anitajustwrite@gmail.com

For those who love books, bookstores, and people who love books, this is the book for you.



'The Confessions of a Bookseller'

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Shaun Bythell

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BOOK REVIEW

Pique a Young Reader's Interest in America's Founding

DUSTIN BASS

The battles of the American Revolution are the centerpiece for the eighth installment of the "Great Battles for Boys" series written by Joe Giorello. In about 200 pages, the author takes young readers through the important battles—wins, losses, and draws—during the War for Independence.

This book accomplishes precisely what its author has set out to do, which is to get young boys interested in reading by way of the most exhilarating subject: war. The series includes the Civil War, World War I, World War II, and even battles of the ancient world and Middle Ages.

Brief and Concise

At the start, Giorello addresses the reasons that the American colonists decided to fight for independence. He discusses several of the laws that King George III issued, such as the Stamp Act, the Tea Act, and the Intolerable Acts. There is also a brief backstory about the French and Indian War, which was why the British parliament and the king thought it necessary to tax the colonists.

From the Boston Tea Party to the Boston Massacre to the Battle of Bunker Hill, the author gives relatively thorough, yet brief, details about each moment early on, into the conflict. Along with the moments themselves, he also introduces some of the important players involved, both American and British. It is good that the author knows it is not enough to get into the grisly details of battle, but to demonstrate for young minds (and older minds) the causes of the war.



JOSEPH SOHM/SHUTTERSTOCK

Who Fought?

Giorello goes beyond the generalities of the British, French, Spanish, and the American colonists to dive into deeper detail about individuals. At the end of many of the chapters on specific battles, there is a "Who Fought?" section that describes particular subjects in a battle.

This includes soldiers of the Continental Army and British commanding officers. Young readers will learn about people like Crispus Attucks, Henry Knox, Marquis de Lafayette, Sir Banastre Tarleton, and Daniel Morgan.

There is even a section on the Hessians (the German mercenaries who fought for the British), the Marbleheaders (those who ensured that the crossing of the Delaware in December 1776 was possible), as well as a chapter titled "Women of the American Revolution."

Easy, Fun, and Historically Accurate

Throughout the book, there are images of soldiers, battles, and maps. This helps not only to break up the book for faster reading (or at least perceived-faster reading), but it also gives constant visuals for ages that need them.

At the end of each chapter, there are book, movie, website, and even YouTube recom-

mendations that expound upon the specific battle or person. These recommendations are less scholarly works, but they fit in line with the specific target audience in order to help them learn more about the subjects.

For parents looking to get their sons (or daughters) interested in reading and learning about the founding of America (or other historical wars that shaped the world), "Great Battles for Boys: The American Revolution" is an ideal start. It is chock full of factual action that took place during the battles, and it will also introduce readers to more than just George Washington—although there is a chapter appropriately dedicated to him.

This book will help create an appreciation for those who fought for American independence (the known and the unknown soldier) at the end of the 18th century, not only for the reasons of freedom but also because of the incredible odds stacked against them.

Dustin Bass is the host of EpochTV's "About the Book," a show about new books with the authors who wrote them. He is an author and co-host of The Sons of History podcast.



'Great Battles for Boys: The American Revolution'

Author
Joe Giorello

Publisher
Wheelhouse Publishing

Date
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Paperback
220 pages

Throughout the book, there are images of soldiers, battles, and maps.

POPCORN AND INSPIRATION

Spectacle, Drama, and a Greater Truth in One Film

ALL PHOTOS BY MOVIESTILLSDB

RUDOLPH LAMBERT FERNANDEZ

Imagine you're a 23-year-old Jewish assistant director and production manager to 51-year-old director Fred Niblo. The year is 1925. You're in Rome, shooting an MGM epic about a Jewish prince based on a screenplay by one of the most influential women in Hollywood at the time, June Mathis.

That's how it starts for a young William Wyler. Over 30 years later, based on Karl Tunberg's screenplay and work by skilled writers Gore Vidal, S.N. Behrman and Christopher Fry, Wyler remakes the original and his film wins 11 Oscars. Wyler's film is, of course, "Ben-Hur," the epic of epics, inspired by Lew Wallace's book "Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ."

Under the dark clouds of the Roman Empire, a carpenter's son, Jesus the Nazarene, shapes the fates of two men. Wealthy Jew Judah Ben-Hur (Charlton Heston) reunites after several years with Messala (Stephen Boyd), his childhood friend, who's a Roman. But as Rome crushes Judean resistance, their friendship fractures, then breaks.

When Judah's sister, Tirzah (Cathy O'Donnell), accidentally cracks a roof tile, you hear its fateful fall on the Roman parade below and suspect that it's not just their roof that's falling apart. And it's true: The falling tile injures a high-ranking Roman official and spiteful Messala tears into their family and their world. Judah ends up a galley slave, and Tirzah and their mother, Miriam (Martha Scott), are thrown into secret dungeons. Judah comes back for revenge and bides his time.

Feast for the Senses

Decades before CGI appeared in movies, production, set, costume, and art design teams sweated it out. Here, they mobilized over 100,000 costumes, 10,000 extras, thousands of suits of armor, and hundreds of camels, horses, donkeys, and sheep, and that Judeo-Roman world comes alive: the march of a legion, the roar of a crowd, the sweltering heat of a Roman-occupied village, the bestiality of the arena.

You hear every sound: the rattle of a soldier's sword against his belt, the rustle of a governor's tunic, or the rusty turn of a key in a dungeon gate. And you almost smell the stench from a concealed prison cell.

As the galley master growls at slaves, his drumbeat dictates the pace at which they must row: raise oars, down oars, strike oars, battle speed, attack speed, ramming speed!

You lose yourself in the splendor of a Roman palace. You flinch at seeing the Valley of the Lepers alone as much as at the forbidding scarves that lepers use to shield their blighted features.

The Race

The famed chariot race is a filmmaking masterclass but mirrors excellence throughout the film.

Wyler takes his time, showing us as many as nine charioteers in a solemn parade. Horses bearing charioteer standards ride yards ahead; their ceremonial hoof marks are the first you see on the smooth sand before racing-wheel and racing-hoof marks ravage every inch. You almost feel the hot breath of horses on your face, and their edginess at the starting block. As excited crowds spill over arena stands, trumpeters herald the arrival of Pontius Pilate (Frank Thring), who presides.

Wyler and cinematographer Robert L. Surtees cannily swivel cameras between spots of fierce pace (two chariots astride or several together) and utter stillness (a mountainous statue staring up into the Roman sky). They mix this up with fleeting focus on the flow of pace; from time to time, the camera stares at upright dolphin figurines, inverted in sequence to mark the end of each lap.

Unit directors, led principally by legendary stuntman Yakima Canutt, use car-mounted cameras to stay ahead of the horses. Yet repeatedly, over that third-of-a-mile stretch, the horses outrun the cars. Canutt then brings race cars in and gives them a head start. The horses outrun them too.

Perhaps it's for the best. Wyler secures breathtaking footage: four fiery manes charging past a beleaguered chariot or eight manes turning the giant corner, in unison. The horses themselves, all European, are a sight to behold either standing or speeding, Milk-white Andalusians at Judah's chariot and Lipizzans at others, including gorgeous glossy blacks at Messala's. Franklin Milton's sound engineering and



recording team switch every few seconds between relative silence in one spot—say, ground handlers clearing an injured charioteer or a broken chariot—and deafening galloping-wheeling in another. John Dunning's editing "storyboards" the action so seamlessly that you forget the entire sequence took at least a year to plan and as long as three months to shoot. And Miklos Rozsa's score is as majestic as it is moving.

Enduring Power and Life

Wyler's film overflows with symbols. A respectful crown on Judah and a shameful one on Jesus signifies Rome's frivolity. Water here doesn't just quench thirst; it heals as well.

The film argues that temporal power is no less real because it's fleeting: a master's power over his slave, a ruler's over his subjects, an army's over its rivals. It has real and lasting consequences. It hurts, it enslaves, and it kills. But there's a power that transcends it: the power to love and to forgive without regret or rancor. It, too, has consequences. It heals, it sets free, it gives new life.

The narrator's opening lines talk of Judea longing for a redeemer who'll deliver "perfect" freedom, hinting at "imperfect" freedoms all around. As soldiers march by a Jewish village, some Jews line up in awe, others in fear. A customer asks the carpenter Joseph (Jesus's father), still at work, why he isn't watching, too. Joseph answers, "We've seen Romans before." The man nods wearily, "Yes, and we will see them again."

The film doesn't promise the disappearance of persecution but the appearance of a new strength and a renewed faith. It also shows how often we mistake life for death, or how frequently we misread forgiveness as loss when it's actually victory.

Wyler's women characters are scarce but strong. Judah loves Esther (Haya Harareet), who doesn't hesitate to lose his affection if he won't give up vengeance and join her on a Christ-inspired path of forgiveness. Miriam and Tirzah would rather linger in agony and have Judah believe they're dead than have him find them wretched outcasts.

Leprosy here is a metaphor for the grip

Here, they mobilized over 100,000 costumes, 10,000 extras, and thousands of suits of armor.



(L-R) Charlton Heston, Stephen Boyd, and director William Wyler on the set of "Ben-Hur."

'Ben-Hur'

Director:
William Wyler

Starring:
Charlton Heston, Stephen Boyd, Haya Harareet, Martha Scott, Cathy O'Donnell

MPAA Rating:
G

Running Time:
3 hours, 32 minutes

Release Date:
Nov. 18, 1959

★★★★★

of sin; those who contract it are as good as "dead" to others. Those who break free of it gain "new life." Judah's spirit of vengeance is a leprosy of sorts, hence Esther's insistence that he break free of it to find "new life."

As usual, Heston brings acting "presence" rather than "prowess" to the screen, and on this score, he delivers as few actors do. That said, he carries a princely bearing with more ease than he does an air of revenge. Boyd, however, carries Messala's malice effortlessly. Even when he's oozing charm, you suspect that he isn't in it all the way. There's a part of him that's held back, even from Tirzah whom he fancies, almost like he's waiting for something ominous to happen—or to cause it, if it doesn't.

In one of the most rivetingly timed and enacted scenes, the two men recall their days as boyhood friends in Judah's sprawling estate. Suddenly, Rome's ambition rears its head and Messala confronts Judah, hoping to win an influential ally who'll expose Jewish rebels plotting against Rome.

It's a four-minute scene, every second of it gripping. Watch their eyes hunting for weakness, their shoulders set in resolve, their hands raised in warning, their jaws clenched in contempt, the veins on their necks bursting with rage, their powerful voices booming in the peaceful courtyard. Wyler didn't need to bring lions in for his Roman epic. He already had them.

Another Wyler masterstroke is the way he reveals Jesus—by hiding him. He shows us the man, never his face. Wyler knows his audience. Whether Christian or Muslim or Jewish, he knows that the "faith-conscious" won't see his religious narrative as a "waste of time." So he goes ahead with his Old and New Testament references and makes a nearly four-hour movie.

Wyler's single-mindedness helps him tell the story he wants to tell, with the nuance he intends, free of the self-consciousness that plagues other filmmakers who've handled biblical films. His unsparring intensity creates an overtly religious world sympathetically that still astonishes audiences, "believers" or not.

Rudolph Lambert Fernandez is an independent writer who writes on pop culture.



(L-R) Cathy O'Donnell as Tirzah, Haya Harareet as Esther, Martha Scott as Miriam, Sam Jaffe as Simonides (Esther's father), and Charlton Heston as Judah Ben-Hur on a lobby card for "Ben-Hur."



Pictured on this lobby card, Messala (Stephen Boyd, L) meets his boyhood friend Judah Ben-Hur (Charlton Heston) in a tense conversation while confirming their friendship.

REACHING WITHIN: WHAT TRADITIONAL ART OFFERS THE HEART

Cleansing Ourselves of Improper Desires: ‘Midas Washing at the Source of the Pactolus’

ERIC BESS

Have you ever wanted something so bad you could taste it? I’m sure many of us have experienced an intense desire for something: more wealth, more love, more fame, and so on. Quite often, however, the things we desire aren’t what they seem, and they can leave a bad taste in our mouths.

In the cautionary tale of King Midas, his desires left him with no taste at all—literally. Despite his suffering, however, he eventually recovered.

How might we recover from the bad consequences of our extreme desires?

The Midas Touch

King Midas was a character in Greco-Roman mythology who was filled with greed. As the story goes, Midas showed great hospitality to the wise satyr Silenus, mentor to the god Dionysus. When Dionysus discovered that Midas was kind, he granted him a wish. Midas, without thinking clearly or rationally, let his desire for massive wealth take him over, and he wished that everything he touched would turn to gold.

Dionysus granted Midas’s wish, and Midas couldn’t wait to try it out. He walked through the palace grounds touching objects to test his new skill. He touched apples, ears of corn, twigs, foliage, even dirt, and turned them all to gold. He was wonderfully satisfied with his new gift.

He quickly discovered a problem, however. As he tried to put food in his mouth, it too turned to gold. He discovered that having such powers prevented him from eating or drinking.

Overwhelmed by the destructive consequences of his new wish, Midas begged Dionysus to free him from his curse and return everything to order. Dionysus agreed and instructed Midas to wash at the source of the Pactolus River.

Midas hurried to the river, washed, and was freed from his desire for wealth and the curse that his desire brought on him.

‘Midas Washing at the Source of the Pactolus’

In the painting “Midas Washing at the Source of the Pactolus,” the French Baroque painter Nicolas Poussin depicted the moment that Midas washes away his sin.

The main figures are diagonally arranged from lower left to upper right, and these diagonals increase the sense of movement. The river god—the largest figure in the center of the composition—represents the Pactolus River. He reclines with his back turned to us. In front of him, barely visible to us, he holds a pitcher from which he pours water to cleanse the remorseful Midas.

Midas is disrobed and entering the river. We can see his red robe hanging from the

“Midas Washing at the Source of the Pactolus,” circa 1627, by Nicolas Poussin. Oil on canvas; 38 3/8 inches by 28 5/8 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Midas was already a king, the richest in his land, yet he still wished for more.

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tree in the background. He bows his head toward the god in a mixture of gratitude and reverence, and he uses one of his hands to catch the pouring water.

Two cherubs are at the bottom right of the composition. Their vine-like headdresses, similar to the one worn by the river god, let us know that they accompany and assist him as he fulfills Dionysus’s command.

Cleansing Ourselves of Improper Desires

Midas’s story immediately implies that we should be careful what we wish for; a satisfied desire does not necessarily translate into satisfaction. Midas’s desire for excessive wealth only caused him pain and suffering.

In a way, his wish was irrational. He was already a king, the richest in his land, yet he still wished for more. Midas didn’t take the time to reflect on his wish thoughtfully and consider its consequences. Without the rational reflection necessary to temper his irrational desires, he hurt himself. At the extreme limit of his irrational desire to have it all, he was left with nothing.

Dionysus told Midas to wash at the source of the Pactolus River to alleviate the spell that afflicted him. Midas and the river god are the main points of interest in Poussin’s painting, and we can consider the river god a representative of Dionysus.

Poussin painted Midas disrobed, which, to me, spawns several questions. Is the act of disrobing representative of his setting aside his desire for material wealth? Must he put aside his possessions when he approaches the god? Is this the prerequisite for purifying himself of his sins?

Maybe disrobing symbolizes something even deeper. Must Midas come to the god

in his naked truth, hiding nothing, for the god to accept him and wash away his sins?

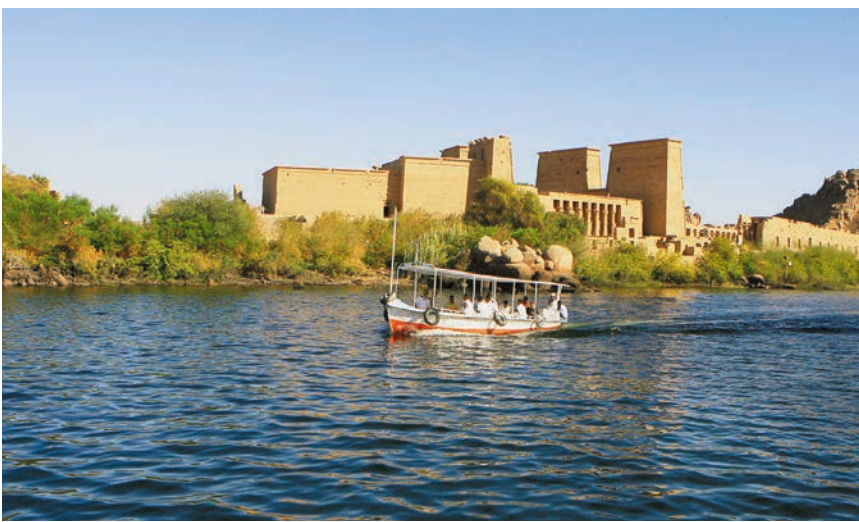
Midas bows his head in gratitude and reverence. His mind is no longer concerned with gaining more material wealth. Instead, he appears to show the god the proper respect. Is it the case that Midas must approach the god with the proper state of mind—a state of mind that bares its truth and approaches with respect and gratitude—if he is to be absolved of his destructive wish?

Interestingly, the god turns away from us to turn toward Midas. Poussin could’ve painted them both facing us, yet he chose to compose the painting with the god’s back toward us. Why would he do this?

We are left asking, “Why can’t I see the god?” Is this Poussin’s way of making us look within to check our own state of mind for the gratitude and reverence appropriate for divine things? Is this the state of mind we must have if we want the divine to turn toward us and reveal itself again in the world? And is this state of mind the path to recovering from the bad consequences of our harmful desires?

Have you ever seen a work of art that you thought was beautiful but had no idea what it meant? In our series ‘Reaching Within: What Traditional Art Offers the Heart,’ we interpret the classical visual arts in ways that may be morally insightful for us today. We try to approach each work of art to see how our historical creations might inspire within us our own innate goodness.

Eric Bess is a practicing representational artist, and a doctoral candidate at the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts (IDSV).



A small boat travels down the Nile River, near the southern town of Aswan. In the 19th century, English explorers set out to claim lands along the Nile for their country.

bibliography, author Candice Millard has given readers a rare gift with her riveting narrative of two British men sent to claim the prize for England.

In “River of the Gods,” the personalities of Richard Burton and John Hanning Speke are brought vividly to life as their chaotic characters unfold in the compelling chapters of the book.

Avenging Adventurers

Burton, the older of the two, had already gained fame as the first non-Muslim to

FILM

Becoming Fred Astaire

Before Fred and Ginger, there was Fred and Adele

STEPHEN OLES

Fred was in trouble. Ever since childhood, he and his sister, Adele, had danced together as a team, finding success in vaudeville and then stardom on Broadway. Adele was the focus of the act, radiating charm and star quality, while her brother escorted and supported her. But she was gone now. She’d suddenly married and left the act. Could Fred find another partner with Adele’s magical appeal? Unlikely. Would audiences pay to see him perform without her? Even less likely.

In Hollywood, with the advent of talkies, the studios were cranking out a bunch of quickie musicals. Surely, Fred’s Broadway résumé would get him work there. It got him a screen test. The camera whirled and he showed his stuff, certain that in no time he’d be starring alongside Jeanette MacDonald and Maurice Chevalier.

Then came the studio’s report: “Can’t act. Can’t sing. Balding. Can dance a little.” His audition had been a disaster. For a Broadway man beloved by theater audiences on both sides of the Atlantic, it was the worst setback since he’d started dancing at age 3.

So Young and So Much Talent

Frederick Austerlitz was born on May 10, 1899, in Omaha, Nebraska, nearly three years after his sister, to Fritz, an Austrian immigrant, and his wife, Johanna. The baby looked sickly. According to Kathleen Riley’s biography, “The Astaires: Fred & Adele,” Frederick’s grandfather declared, “That child will never live!” But a childhood of his mother’s loving care did wonders.

When Johanna (better known as Ann) enrolled Adele at a local dance school, she enrolled her son as well, hoping the exercise would strengthen his frail body. Adele was a born entertainer. Her natural grace and vitality soon made her a favorite at private parties and recitals. Little Fred lacked his sister’s allure, but he worked hard and even learned to dance en pointe before she did.

The children’s dance teacher spotted their potential and urged Fritz and Ann to take them to New York, where they could get more training and might catch the eye of a booking agent. Vaudeville was at its height and kiddie acts were in demand.

It seemed like a long shot, but the tots were certainly talented. So in 1905, the family made the big move and enrolled Adele, 8, and Fred, 5, in a theater school on the corner of 8th Avenue and 23rd Street. When Fritz returned to Omaha and his job as a beer salesman, Ann and the children took up residence in a one-room flat near the school.

“Stage mother” has a bad connotation, but Ann was one of the good ones. In the morning, she home-schooled the children before their afternoon lessons in dancing and acting. She kept them away from the seamy side of show business and saw to their cultural education, exposing them to plays, opera, and ballet as well as singers, comedians, and the Ziegfeld Follies.

By the time the pair made their public debut at a New Jersey amusement park, Ann had decided that Austerlitz was no name for a star. In school programs, she billed her offspring variously as the Austers, the Astiers, and the Astares before finally set-

ting on the posh, mellifluous Astaire.

Paying Their Dues

Fritz, meanwhile, sent money from Omaha and managed to sign the kids with the renowned Orpheum Circuit at \$150 a week plus train fare. Ann rejoiced—they’d finally hit the Big Time! But touring in vaudeville was less than glamorous. “We played every rat trap and chicken coop in the Middle West,” Astaire recalled in his autobiography.

In her excellent book, Riley notes: “It was years before the Astaires attained headliner status, and their climb ... was slow and arduous. Yet the very things that could make vaudeville a demoralizing business were also what made it an invaluable training ground.”

During the long years that Ann and her children toured the nation and fought for better time slots at better theaters, Adele and Fred grew, not only in height and age but also from cute kids into versatile professionals who could dance, act, do comedy, and sing.

In 1915, they shared a bill with the Cansinos, a dancing family from Madrid. Fred studied and copied some of their moves, while Adele developed a big crush on the brother Eduardo. Thirty years later, Fred would dance in two films with the youngest Cansino, by then renamed Rita Hayworth.

Fred befriended and learned from another legend, Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, the first black solo performer in vaudeville. Fred never forgot Robinson’s first words to him: “Boy, you can dance!” He would pay tribute to his friend in the delightful movie “Swing Time” (1936).

On the Way Up

The contrast between the siblings’ temperaments made their act click, but it also caused problems. Adele’s enchanting spontaneity and easy rapport with audiences made her loath to rehearse, while Fred worried that his lack of stage presence was holding her back. Riley explains: “Adele believed she was ... a detriment to her brother because she lacked his discipline and creativity.” She later confessed, “I wouldn’t do anything that made me work all the time. I was a lazy slob.” With her dazzling personality, she got away with it.

Not so for Fred. Unable to coast on his charisma, he worked tirelessly to improve his singing and acting and to invent surprising, never-seen-before choreography. Thus was born the Fred Astaire we know today: the perfectionist, the magic man, lighter than air, lifting American show dancing to new heights, and making it all look easy. Astaire’s mastery came at great cost: hours, days, and years of grueling rehearsals, never stopping, never settling for anything less than poetry in motion.

New York and London

By 1916, Fred was getting more attention in the press. Variety enthused: “That boy alone is like a streak of lightning on his feet.” Producers were taking notice, too. The following year, the Astaires were cast in their first Broadway show and left vaudeville for good. They appeared in several musicals and, even when their roles were small, were singled out for praise in reviews.



Fred Astaire was known for his creativity and strong work ethic. Studio publicity still for the 1955 film “Daddy Long Legs.”

Astaire’s mastery came at great cost: hours, days, and years of grueling rehearsals.



Fred and Adele Astaire in the Broadway musical “Lady Be Good,” 1924. The show was a smash hit in London.



It was Adele who had the charisma. Fred and Adele Astaire, circa 1920 to circa 1925. Library of Congress.

However, nothing prepared them for the sensation they created when they opened their 1923 show, “Stop Flirting,” in London. Critics and audiences went berserk over the young Americans. Celebrities from Noël Coward to George Bernard Shaw acclaimed them. Even the Prince of Wales was a fan. The show featured songs by a young composer Fred had met in New York when they were both teenagers: George Gershwin.

‘Lady Be Good’

The Broadway opening of “Lady Be Good” (1924) was a milestone in theatrical history. The Astaires’ first starring vehicle boasted songs by Gershwin, who had just premiered his immortal “Rhapsody in Blue,” and his lyricist brother Ira. The score, including “Fascinating Rhythm,” was so strong that “The Man I Love” didn’t even make the cut.

A smash in New York, the show hit even bigger in London. One critic raved, “Adele Astaire. That’s all!” He added that Fred was “a genius at his job.” In 1927, the now internationally famous siblings returned to Broadway in the Gershwins’ “Funny Face,” followed by three more hit shows and one flop, during the run of which Adele, who’d developed a taste for high society, starting dating a young British nobleman named Lord Charles Cavendish.

Hail and Farewell

Now in her 30s, at the height of her fame, Adele had grown tired of the grind of eight performances a week and Fred’s endless demands for more rehearsal. Her engagement shocked fans on two continents. On March 5, 1932, she played her last performance, retired from show business, and sailed for England and her new life as Lady Cavendish.

Even Fred’s mother, Ann, doubted his prospects without Adele. But movie producer David O. Selznick thought differently. He called Fred back to Hollywood in 1933, where his first audition had gone so badly. Paired first with Joan Crawford, then later with a starlet named Ginger Rogers, Fred was taken to heart by moviegoers. The rest, as they say, is history.

Stephen Oles has worked as an inner city school teacher, a writer, actor, singer, and a playwright. His plays have been performed in London, Seattle, Los Angeles, and Long Beach, California. He lives in Seattle and is currently working on his second novel.

BOOK REVIEW

2 Explorers Compete to Find the Nile’s Source

2 British explorers compete to find the headwaters of the Nile

ANITA L. SHERMAN

Years ago, I visited Egypt. The pyramids are, of course, awesome in their ancient majesty and mystery. The Nile River, winding its way through the arid desert lands, is the longest in the world. Like the pyramids, its history spans millennia. The river’s gift for centuries has been the fertile floodplain it created. The great civilization of Egypt was able to thrive and flourish from its rich shores.

When I was there, the waters were brown and cloudy and crowded with boats and people. But the majesty of it cannot be overstated, as it is so life-giving to so many.

The early Greeks and Romans attempted to find the headwaters of the Nile but were

left thwarted by a giant labyrinthine swamp. Their efforts went down in history as frustrated and futile endeavors.

Expic Explorations

The discovery and translation of the Rosetta Stone in the 19th century created a flurry of interest in ancient Egypt. European powers were keen on exploring and mapping out corners of the world as their own. The time was ripe for a flood of gutsy explorers (and the governments backing them) to pave the way into uncharted territories.

England was no exception. The Royal Geographical Society, known for its emphasis on acquiring scientific knowledge, was ready to spread its wings and back more explorations, the stuff of perhaps more savory stories—stories of a nature that would boost membership and stature.

After researching some five years and compiling extensive notes, an index, and

travel to Mecca; he went disguised as an Arab chieftain. He was also a decorated soldier in the British Army and was no slouch when it came to sword-fighting. He had command of nearly three dozen languages. Hailing from an aristocratic British family, Speke was also an army officer. But his passion—rather than a curiosity about other cultures—was hunting.

Both men were challenged with soaring egos and they clashed, whether intentionally or not, from the outset. Speke resented playing second fiddle, and Burton disapproved of Speke’s hunting diversions and seeming ignorance of the peoples whose lands they were traveling through.

What they did share was tremendous hardships, horrifying illnesses, and constant setbacks, whether it was from the harsh environment, porters disappearing, devilish donkeys refusing to cooperate, or lack of food. The list was long and fraught with angst that clawed at weakened bodies and dispirited souls. Both men suffered from nightmares.

Burton and Speke were the first Europeans to reach the shores of Lake Tanganyika in 1858. Arabs had been there for nearly two decades. While Burton was confident that the source of the Nile would be discovered

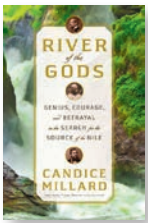
from this lake, Speke wanted to push on to another lake: the Nyanza.

At this point, Burton was nearly paralyzed from malaria and could not go on. Speke pushed forward. While he saw only a small portion of the Nyanza, he was convinced from its stunning beauty and the local stories of its endless nature that this was indeed the source of the Nile and that he alone had discovered it. He quickly named the largest lake in Africa for his queen: Victoria.

The Guiding Light

What ensues next in this story of triumph and tragedy is the now-venomous rivalry between Burton and Speke. Speke rushes back to England, takes credit for the discovery, and continues to disparage Burton, eventually launching a second expedition to prove his claim. Burton, the more charismatic of the two, disputes the claim and, for the most part, garners public support, much to Speke’s chagrin.

Many unsung heroes have been lost to history, but author Millard pays kudos to a third man, one who accompanied not only Burton and Speke but other European explorers as well. This explorer, small in stature but large in heart and



‘RIVER OF THE GODS: GENIUS, COURAGE, AND BETRAYAL IN THE SEARCH FOR THE SOURCE OF THE NILE’
By Candice Millard
Doubleday
May 17, 2022
Hardcover
368 pages

A thrilling, peerless, page-turner account of the exploits of Burton, Speke, and Bombay.

knowledge, was Sidi Mubarak Bombay. The slave trade was alive and well in Africa, and Bombay had been captured as a boy and sent to India, where he was enslaved for some 20 years.

When his owner died, he gained his freedom and returned to East Africa. There, his resourcefulness, knowledge of several languages, courage, and cheerful attitude sustained his living as a highly proficient guide. Without his undying loyalty, it is doubtful that either Englishman would have come to the headwaters of the Nile or, perhaps, survived the attempt.

Millard gives readers a thrilling, peerless, page-turner account of the exploits of Burton, Speke, and Bombay, and an adventure of dauntless courage surrounding a historic discovery.

Anita L. Sherman is an award-winning journalist who has more than 20 years of experience as a writer and editor for local papers and regional publications in Virginia. She now works as a freelance writer and is working on her first novel. She is the mother of three grown children and grandmother to four, and she resides in Warrenton, Va. Anita can be reached at anitajustwrite@gmail.com

FILM REVIEW

Wisdom Inspires Youths in Troubled Northern Ireland

Headmaster teaches Plato and rational thinking

JOE BENDEL

The pupils of Holy Cross Boys School (ages 4–11) have grown up knowing only peace in Northern Ireland. Yet their Ardoyne neighborhood of North Belfast remains marked by the destruction and militant graffiti of “The Troubles.” In this case, it is quite apt to say that it looks like a demilitarized zone.

Headmaster Kevin McArevey and his staff are old enough to remember war and understand the fragility of the current peace. Rather logically, they emphasize nonviolent conflict resolution in their teachings. However, McArevey’s reliance on ancient Greek philosophers is somewhat surprising, but pleasantly so.

Filmmakers Neasa Ni Chianain and Declan McGrath observe McArevey and his colleagues as they instruct, counsel, discipline, and generally keep the peace at Holy Cross in their documentary “Young Plato.”

In 2001, there was an ugly incident involving former-Loyalist protesters outside Holy Cross’s sister school for girls. McArevey’s students are shocked by the video they watch in class, because they have never experienced anything like it, but it is still fresh in his faculty members’ memories. Convincing his students to avoid violence is not simply a way to encourage good classroom behavior. Potentially, it holds life-and-death implications for the community.

Not an Ordinary Headmaster

McArevey is earnest, and he has character. As an Elvis Presley-loving black belt, he is not a typical parochial school administrator. McArevey is definitely not a delegator either. He regularly teaches a philosophy class in which he relies on the Socratic Method (and Presley lyrics). In addition to the ethics of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, he also cites Stoic philosophers to encourage empathy in his students and train them to control their emotions.

During the months before and after the

CCP-virus shutdown (which closed schools throughout Northern Ireland) that interrupted the filmmakers’ visit to Holy Cross, we never see any explicitly religious, sectarian, or class-based conflict among the pupils—though, admittedly, the student body is presumably uniformly Catholic.

In fact, McArevey is most often called to make peace between a pair of estranged cousins. However, drugs and crime have become a constant source of danger in their depressed neighborhood.

McArevey and Holy Cross do seem to make a positive difference in their students’ lives. At least, the way Ni Chianain and McGrath present and edit their footage leads viewers to such a conclusion.

Ironically, the decision to close the school during the early days of China leader Xi’s pandemic arguably seems to have put the students at greater risk than had they maintained in-person instruction, at least judging from the shocking volume of incidents with online predators the students relate to McArevey on their first day back.

Back to the Classics

It is also rather satisfying to see McArevey’s success incorporating classical philosophy into the Holy Cross curriculum. In some ways, “Young Plato” vindicates advocates of an education based on the “Great Books” of Western Civilization.

If the concepts of Plato and Aristotle are accessible and relevant to Holy Cross’s young working-class students, any reasonably mature college freshman should be able to learn from such a

McArevey’s Elvis fandom gives the film a bit of a marketing hook, but there is more substance to him than mere Graceland references. He is an unusually committed and compassionate authority figure for a lot of kids who are in dire need of one.

In fact, McArevey will resonate with fans of great biographical dramas like “Stand and Deliver,” based on the life of beloved East Los Angeles math teacher Jaime Es-



SOILSIU FILMS

Holy Cross does seem to make a positive difference in its students’ lives.

‘Young Plato’

Directors:
Neasa Ni Chianain,
Declan McGrath

Documentary
Running Time:
1 hour, 42 minutes

MPA Rating:
A12 (N. Ireland)

Release Date:
Sept. 23, 2022

★★★★★

calante, and “Lean on Me,” which was inspired by controversial Patterson, New Jersey, principal Joe Clark. Much like them, McArevey reminds us that nobody was ever inspired by teachers who allowed their students to settle for average.

Better Wrap-Up Needed

What McArevey and his staff have accomplished at Holy Cross is definitely worthy of documentary attention. However, Ni Chianain and McGrath do not end with a great narrative climax or a big emotional crescendo. It is possible that the pandemic interrupted their rhythm, forcing them to make do with their shorter post-shutdown footage as best they could.

The resulting documentary still has a great deal of merit, but it lacks a summation that ties everything together.

Still, it is nice to see McArevey and company making a difference with great ideas from the Western canon. Evidently, Irish school documentaries are Ni Chianain’s specialty, since she previously co-helmed “School Life,” which documented a year at a high-achieving Irish boarding school. That was probably a warmer, more accessible film, but “Young Plato” has more applicable lessons for policymakers and pedagogues.

Respectfully recommended for the lessons it documents.

Joe Bendel writes about independent film and lives in New York. To read his most recent articles, visit [JBSpins.blogspot.com](#)

The headmaster of Holy Cross Boys School, Kevin McArevey leads his students in a race in the documentary “Young Plato.”



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