Frederic Homer Balch: The Pioneer Novelist
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By Stephen L. Harris

It was an experience the nine-year-old boy never forgot. Leaving behind the familiar gentle landscape of Oregon's Willamette Valley in 1871, he entered a new world that seemed to have been designed for giants. Sailing eastward up the Columbia River Gorge, he passed between towering walls of dark basalt, over which plumes of white water cascaded hundreds of feet to merge with the great river. Shadowed by snowy peaks that loomed high above the gorge rim, human beings seemed reduced to insignificance in that wild terrain.

Traveling with his family to a new home in Goldendale, Washington Territory, Frederic Homer Balch felt an instant affinity with the Columbia region, an identification with its colossal monuments that he would later celebrate in the finest historical novel yet produced by a Pacific Northwest writer, The Bridge of the Gods: A Romance of Indian Oregon. Published in 1890 and never out of print, Balch's novel is a vivid recreation of the heroic and violent world of the Willamette tribes prior to the period of Caucasian exploration or settlement.

On that memorable journey upriver, young Fred took his first train ride, past the Cascade Rapids, a six-mile portage necessary to bypass roaring cataracts that churned the water to a silver fury. He also caught unobstructed glimpses southward of Mount Hood's glaciated spire, and of broad-shouldered Mount Adams, which dominates the river's northern skyline. Back aboard a steamer, Fred then cruised past Memaloose Island, for centuries the Indians' sacred burial ground, where white bone glinted visibly through decaying cedar huts. In one of the most eerily memorable scenes of Western fiction, Fred would later picture the Willamette Chief Multnomah making a forbidden night visit to Memaloose Island. Defying the malevolent spirits of his dead ancestors that invisibly press upon him, Multnomah dares to uncover the face of his long-dead Asiatic wife. As the chief, by an act of indomitable will, tries to wrest a vision of the future from the netherworld, he hears the ominous roar of avalanching rock the fall of the Bridge of the Gods, portending his doom and that of his entire people.

As Fred grew up, living first on one side of the Columbia Gorge and then another, he made friends with numerous local Indians, listening around campfires to ancient tales of the Willamettes' former power over many lesser tribes. He heard of the great land bridge that had once spanned the Columbia River, that it was tahmahnavis, a creation of superhuman forces, and that its collapse had formed the Cascade Rapids. He was also entertained with slyly humorous tales about a love triangle involving the Columbia's three guardian peaks. Wyeast(Mount Hood) and Pahto (Mount Adams) were brothers but also rivals who competed for the favors of the fair Tah-one-lat-clah (Mount St. Helens). Catapulting hot rocks at each other, the rivals angered Tyee Sahale (the Great Spirit), who then shook down the tahmahnavis bridge that had linked their two territories.
Fred believed that these Indian legends reflected actual geologic events, a view with which most Northwest earth scientists would concur. The historical landform that inspired the stories, however, was not the high stone arch depicted in many illustrations, but a massive natural dam that formerly blocked the Columbia River near the present site of Cascade Locks. About A.D. 1260, a series of landslides, originating at or near the summits of Table Mountain and Greenleef Peak on the Washington side of the river, deposited nearly half a cubic mile of rock in the Columbia channel. Covering about 14 square miles, the slides forced the river southward more than a mile to its present course and temporarily formed a dam over 200 feet high.

While the dam lasted, it served as a land bridge that permitted the Klickitats, Willamettes and other tribes to cross the mile-wide river dry shod. It may have taken many years for the Columbia's impounded waters to overtop the obstruction and create the Cascade Rapids from its shattered fragments.

The legend also correctly assesses the volcanic nature of the Columbia's three guardian peaks, all of which have erupted repeatedly during recent geologic time. Mount St. Helens' pyrotechnics are well known, but only in the last few years have geologists realized how frequently Mount Hood has been active. The volcano erupted about A.D. 1350 and again, intermittently, between 1760 and 1810, producing a series of hot avalanches and mud flows that devastated the floors of the Sandy and White River valleys. Mount Hood revived briefly as late as 1859 and 1865-66. Oral reports of these mid-nineteenth century eruptions may have provided Fred with his remarkably accurate descriptions of Hood's eruptive behavior.

As a teenager, Fred learned the Chinook jargon in order to gather old legends that were even then becoming lost forever with the deaths of tribal elders. According to his sister, Gertrude Balch Ingalls, he already saw his role as a preserver and interpreter of a rapidly disappearing culture:

He overlooked no opportunity of interviewing aged Indians and finding those who were the last remnant of tribes that had almost passed out of existence. Whenever a rumor reached him that an old Indian might be found in some far distant tepee, no matter how isolated the village might be from civilization, he spared no effort to locate him and gather all that lingered in the old man's memory. No endeavor was too hard if at the end of the trail he found a representative of some old tribe, who remembered fragments of...fantastic legends told by his fore-fathers, tales of old kings and councilors, mighty warriors and their conquests, that still burned as memories of the time when he was a youthful warrior.

At an early age, Fred resolved not only to be a writer, but also to be a spokesman for the Indians' long vanished culture and way of life. At the same time he would pay homage to the river and mountains with which the Columbia's original inhabitants had felt so intimate a bond. Unlike many youths who entertain vague notions of "being a writer:" Fred had precise goals in mind:

To make Oregon as famous as Scott made Scotland; to make the Cascades as widely known as the Highlands;...to make the splendid scenery of the Willamette the background for romance full of passion and grandeur, grew more and more into the one central ambition of my life.

Despite his determination, the odds were against him. His family was extremely poor, and he had received virtually no formal education. Except for a few months in 1876 when the Balches lived near Portland and he was able to attend Mount Tabor School, Fred was taught entirely at home. His father and tutor, James A. Balch, had graduated with a law degree from Wabash College, Indiana, although he never practiced. After migrating to Oregon by wagon train in 1851, he tried his hand at various trades, including the business of making daguerreotypes, before attempting to farm near Goldendale. The senior Balch cultivated a genuine interest in poetry, music and history, all of which he encouraged in his son. It was he who insisted on christening Fred "Homer:" a name that seems to have influenced Fred's self-image as a recorder of heroic action.
Mrs. Delia Coon, who was Fred's instructor at Mount Tabor, later recalled that her 15-year-old pupil was surprisingly well acquainted with the standard works of English literature. He had already devoured Milton's Paradise Lost, Scott's poetry, some of Shakespeare's plays, and Macaulay's essays, which he greatly admired. Mrs. Coon remembered that Fred rather naively inquired whether Dickens' David Copperfield were worth reading and where he might find a copy. In the days before public libraries, books in farming communities were rare and hard to come by. When new settlers moved into the area, Fred invariably sought them out to see if they had any books to lend.

Like that of most of his neighbors, James Balch's farming was not a financial success. Moving from Portland back to Goldendale and thence to the tiny community of Lyle on the north side of the Columbia, the Balches worked hard merely to survive. Besides performing the endless round of farm chores, Fred repeatedly hired himself out to help harvest other farmers' crops.

Times became even leaner in 1882 when a drought ruined the Balches' crops. During this period, James Balch apparently suffered a nervous breakdown and was sent back to Indiana to live with his widowed sister, with whom he remained the rest of his life. An older step-brother had already left home, so Fred assumed the burden of supporting his invalid mother and two younger siblings. He got a job working as a day laborer laying track for the Oregon Railway and Navigation Company on the south bank of the Columbia. Each morning he hiked downhill to the river, rowed across, and then spent 10 hours breaking rock for the railroad bed. Each evening he rowed back several miles upstream, climbed the 700-foot hill to the farm and studied and wrote by firelight far into the night.

Bone-weary but fiercely determined, Fred composed his first novel, Wallulah, beside a large open fireplace into which he threw pine knots that would flare brilliantly, providing illumination for his work. James Balch approved of his son's literary ambition, but the content of Wallulah distressed Fred's mother, Harriet Maria Snider Balch. Deeply religious, Harriet Balch had wanted her son to become a Christian minister even before he was born. Instead, Fred was then an agnostic, fascinated by the natural religion and mythology of the Indians, which he enthusiastically incorporated into his novel.

Harriet Balch had endured an exceptionally difficult life, her illnesses and disappointments compounded by her son's rejection of Protestant Christianity. An orphan from Indiana, she had accompanied the Robert Crawfords, her informally adoptive family, across the continent to Oregon in 1852, when she was 16. She had been twice married and widowed, with a child by each of her two husbands, when James Balch married her about 1860. Fred was born in December 1861.

Harriet's unyielding desire to convert her son bore unexpected fruit in December 1882, about the time of his twenty-first birthday. After attending a revival meeting at the Lyle schoolhouse, Fred suddenly embraced evangelical Christianity. Like many new converts, he now saw the world in exclusively black and white terms: the demands of his new faith precluded any ties with Indian paganism. Wallulah and all his attempts to depict the pre-Christian Indian world must be destroyed.

His younger sister Gertrude vividly recalled the night of Fred's sacrifice. "With an expression of firm determination," he tossed page after page of his beloved manuscript into the flames.

We were all horror stricken for we knew how much he had labored over it and how much it meant to him, but he persisted until the huge stone fireplace had devoured the last page.

At that moment Balch resolved to devote his life "to preaching the gospel instead of writing novels." True to his vow, Balch immediately became a lay minister for several churches at Lyle, Mount Pleasant, White
Salmon, Hood River and other nearby communities. To the end of his short life at age 29, he never faltered in his dedication.

The material rewards of his new calling were no greater than those from farming. On the flyleaf of his copy of Dante, he noted that his first year of preaching had netted "nothing"; the second, one dollar; the third, $150; and the fourth, $300. By 1886 Balch, whom his neighbors had previously considered rather strange for his intellectual pursuits and passion for Indian lore, had been generally accepted as a trustworthy and committed minister. In 1889 his largest congregation, in Hood River, Oregon, sent him to the Pacific Theological Seminary in Oakland (now the Pacific School of Religion at Berkeley) to obtain a degree in theology. He studied there until his final illness forced him to leave in the spring of 1891.

Fortunately for literature, Frederic Balch gradually overcame his conversion-inspired view that writing fiction is incompatible with the Christian ministry. At the time of his death in June 1891, he had published only one novel, The Bridge of the Gods, but he was busy revising a second, Genevieve, A Tale of Oregon (issued posthumously in 1932), and had completed several poems and prose sketches, as well as six chapters of a new historical novel, Kenasket, an adventure story about the Northwest Fur Company. Without exception, each prose work pays sympathetic tribute to Indian myth and culture.

Fred's second novel, Genevieve, is set in the Pacific Northwest of 1886-87. Largely autobiographical, it reflects the author's increasingly balanced appreciation of both the Indian and Judaeo-Christian traditions. His central character, Guido Colonna, is of mixed Indian and Italian blood, which gives him a peculiar sensitivity to the Indians' predicament and to white racial prejudice. Like his creator, the originally skeptical Colonna eventually adopts a boldly progressive faith that recognizes the universal brotherhood of all people and anticipates the ultimate "redemption of the whole human race." Embarrassed by his initial rigidity, Fred later apologized to a friend for having been so "hide-bound."

Fred's renunciation of his writing was only temporary, but another sacrifice made a few years later affected the rest of his life. This second renunciation was his decision to give up an attachment to Genevra Whitcomb, a young woman from a prosperous Lyle family. Long remembered by her neighbors as outstandingly pretty and vivacious, Genevra resembled Fred in possessing a quick, sometimes caustic wit. Usually together only in the presence of others, the pair courted through barbed repartee, which may have inflicted some telling wounds. Whatever the cause, they decided to part. Fred may have felt unqualified to propose marriage to a girl whom he could not comfortably support on his meager income. In the fall of 1885, Genevra left Lyle to attend a girls' school in The Dalles, about nine miles upriver.

A bitterly cold winter followed, during which Genevra contracted pneumonia and, after brief illness, unexpectedly died. She was 19 years old. The night following her death, her body was brought downriver by rowboat to Lyle for burial. The heavy snowfall and below-freezing temperatures of January 1886 left the Columbia River settlements isolated and, as a result, the Whitcomb family asked Fred Balch to conduct Genevra's funeral service. Fred agreed, although he later remarked that it was the most painful experience of his life.

He managed the ordeal well, until the coffin lid was lifted for a last farewell. As Fred later wrote, "When I looked upon her dead face with the little heap of salt on the still lips, it all came back, and I knew that I was looking for the last time upon the face of the only girl I would ever love." The realization of the depth of his feeling for Genevra came late to Fred, but it never left him. Even while studying at the Oakland seminary and afflicted by incurable tuberculosis, Fred devoted his evenings to recapturing Genevra's memory. He dedicated Genevieve to "one, now dead, whose name gives the book its title and whose character is portrayed in its pages." The titular heroine has an intelligence, grace and simple dignity that Balch thought characterized the best type of "Oregon girl."
While in seminary, Fred wrote Gertrude that he had met an interesting Scottish lass who resembled Genevra in her lively conversation, but the attraction only served to intensify his sense of irreparable loss.

After all these years the girl who died at Lyle is more to me than any girl or woman living. If I ever marry anyone it will have to be, I am afraid, a marriage without love, which is not supposed to be desirable.

Today, Frederic Balch and Genevra Whitcomb lie only a few yards apart in the oak-shaded Balch Cemetery near Lyle. Located high atop the bluffs overlooking the Columbia, their grave sites face south toward the white pyramid of Mount Hood. Just out of sight, beneath the lava cliffs, is Memaloose Island, where, as Fred wrote, "the Indian death wail sounds forever."


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