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PAUL ISELIN WELLMAN: AMERICAN WRITER

by

Thomas Fox Averill

Kansan Paul Iselin Wellman was a newspaperman and a writer of popular history; he was a novelist and screen writer; and he is probably best known, at least in these parts, for his books set in the Great Plains and Kansas. His two best-selling novels, his eighth and ninth books--The Walls of Jericho, 1947, and The Chain, 1949 (both Literary Guild selections)--were set in Kansas towns which closely resemble Dodge City and Wichita respectively. Both novels received mixed reviews from the critics, but on one thing all who wrote about Wellman's books agreed: the setting is the one totally authentic thing about them. The alumni magazine of his college wrote: "This series of novels dealing with a fictitious town growing to a city in Kansas has dramatized the plains country for millions of readers."[1] Jericho was a composite town, even though, as the magazine pointed out, seven different Kansas cities and one each in Nebraska and Iowa laid claim to being the original model. The Walls of Jericho sold over 700,000 copies in two years, and the movie rights to it sold for $100,000, a top figure in 1947. Paul Wellman became successful and wealthy. Over the next 17 years, he wrote 23 more books. His total of 31 books sold about 5,500,000 copies in his lifetime, and that does not include the re-releases in paperback. The books grossed over 20 million dollars, of which Wellman saw about 10% or $2,000,000.[2] Wellman was one of that special breed of writers--an American popular novelist.

Paul Wellman came to Kansas via Oklahoma and Africa and Utah. He was born in Enid, Oklahoma, on October 14, 1895, the son of Frederick Creighton Wellman and Lydia Jeanette Isely. When he was six months old his parents went to Angola to become medical missionaries and there Paul mastered the language of the Bantu of the Umbundu tribe and helped his father translate songs and sermons. In 1903, eight-year-old Paul and his brother, Frederick, were sent to live with relations in Utah, and then went to their maternal grandparent's home in Brown County, Kansas. Six years later his parents returned to the United States and were divorced. Alice Wellman Harris, Paul's sister, who was born in 1900, says this about the divorce: "My parents have not been happy. They did not believe the same religion. Momma relied on the Bible to direct her; Poppa poisoned his mind by reading Kant and Rousseau and Schopenhauer."[3] Mrs. Wellman returned to the somewhat cold bosom of her family, moving to what Paul always called "holy bleeding Kansas" with her four children (Paul's other brother is Manley Wade Wellman).

Paul's father, Frederick Creighton Wellman, was indeed a free-thinker, an ambitious, energetic and brilliant man. He started as a medical missionary, becoming an expert on tropical diseases, then went on to have many other careers, as well as six wives. He changed his name at one point to Cyril Kay-Scott, at least for his careers as painter and later curator of the Denver Art Museum and for his career as writer of both

journalism and novels. He was also a banker and economist, a mining engineer, a college professor and dean, and a published linguist. When he wrote his autobiography in 1943, he titled it Life Is Too Short. He was not reunited with his original children until the 1930s, when they all met again in Wichita.[4] Yet his influence seemed part of all their lives--both positively and negatively.

Alice writes:

> Our family lighted in Wichita, Kansas, at the home of mother's parents. We'd been there only two days when one of my uncles--a man with growing children--considered me carefully as I spoke to him. He said "Keep your eyes down, Alice Faye. They're exactly like your father's." This was the "Wellman Taint," as we four Wellman children labeled it. It drew us together, first in the unit of defense against some shame fastened upon us that we couldn't understand, and then in a unit daring to defy the set of values that had so condemned us. And we never lost our concord of feeling.

In fact, the Wellmans started an "Us Against It" club. The "It" was the Isely Victorian morality. The first principle in their tribal code was: "Outwit all disapproving relatives who see Wellman wickedness in us." All four of them spoke in African dialect and could therefore further insulate themselves from their hostile relatives. They were even perceptive enough to call the United States "the world of work, woe, and worry."[5]

Soon Lydia Wellman left Wichita for Cimarron, where she worked for her brother, C.C. Isely, who owned a chain of lumberyards. His brother Frederick recalls that Paul, at about this time, "began talking with oldtimers around Cimarron and Dodge City. And then is when he really started his interest in writing and story-telling."[6] A young boy raised in Africa might be able to see closely into and appreciate the Great Plains, what must have been for him a whole new culture--one that included cowboys and Indians and sodbusters and ranchers, one as romantic as the African culture he knew. He met the people of western Kansas on their own ground. Feeling responsible as the eldest son in a fatherless household, he landed a job as a ranch hand at the early age of 14, and worked summers thereafter to help support the family. To both his brothers, Frederick and Manley, and his sister, Alice, he was the best big brother possible. All three write of him with the greatest respect and admiration.[7]

At 16, in 1911, Wellman returned to Wichita to live with his grandparents and finish high school. In 1913, he attended Fairmount College, now Wichita State University, and then, lacking money, he quit for a year and became a ranch hand in Cimarron again. He finally finished his degree in 1918. While at Fairmount, he edited the college newspaper and yearbook and he acted in plays. Upon graduation, he married Florence Tobias. Then he enlisted in World War I, serving from late 1918 until 1919.

After the war, he returned to Wichita and took a job as a reporter for the Wichita Beacon. His first wife died about 1921 and according to his brother Manley, Paul went through a difficult time:

> At night he and I would put on the gloves and box. He was a good boxer and lethal puncher. He was the only one who ever knocked me down in a boxing match, and he did not hesitate to do it. Afterwards, we might walk for miles in the dark, speaking hardly a word. Back home, worn out, he could sleep. He was fortunate in his second marriage to Laura Bruner.[8]

By the 1920s, Wellman was a tall, dark-haired, burly man whose permanent features included a ubiquitous pipe, a fondness for poker, storytelling and whiskey, and a good sense of humor. He moved over to the Wichita Eagle and began spending his evenings writing accounts of the Great Plains Indian wars. He published these in the Town Crier, the Sunday supplement of the paper. Later, he collected, expanded and edited these stories, and finally had them accepted by Macmillan in book form. These were his first books, Death on the Prairie, 1934, and Death in the Desert, 1935.

On the strength of these books, he was hired away from Wichita and went to the Kansas City Star in 1936. There he worked on the telegraph desk and wrote editorials and headlines. Headline writing is difficult to do, but Wellman was a whiz with them. A telegraph operator working on a newspaper has to be very good at headlines because all the news that comes over the telegraph is very fast-breaking, and a headline always has to reflect the latest events. At the Kansas City Star, according to Theodore M. O'Leary, Jr., Wellman was well-respected for this ability. W.R. Reddig, then on the staff, had written a book about the Thomas Pendergast machine which at the time controlled Kansas City. Reddig spent six months trying to think of a title and finally gave up. He asked everyone in the newsroom to come up with suggestions. After only a few minutes, Wellman titled Reddig's book. He called it Tom's Town.[9]

During his time on the Star staff, from 1936 to 1944, Wellman kept at his writing with a passion that never left him. He would work late into the night after putting in his eight-hour day. After the publication of his first novel, he wrote:

> To write a book you must practically drop all interests in life outside your job . . . . You begrudge every minute of your so-called leisure which is devoted to anything else. At home you write with a sort of furious intentness. Between whiles you become discourteous to your friends, cross with your family, a Scrooge in your home, and you live the life of an anchorite.
>
> * * * * *
>
> In the end the book is published . . . As for your family--they breathe a sigh of relief. They have been Ishmaelites, outcasts from the world,

> monastic dwellers. They have been patient long-sufferers under the irritability of mental creative work. They have fended for you, excused for you, babied you, and in every way possible made things easy for you. And they are darned glad it is all over.
>
> But they regard you with some apprehension in their eyes. It's like the drink habit, this writing, and they have the well-founded fear that before long you'll be doing it again.[10]

By the publication of his seventh book, in 1944, his first Kansas novel, The Bowl of Brass, his pace was too much for even him. He had stomach ulcers and they became increasingly a health problem. He almost died when they began bleeding profusely one time and his doctor forced him to decide between journalism and book writing. He chose book writing, and in 1944 he went to Hollywood and became a screen writer. After two and a half years he quit, saying that "writing for Hollywood consists of taking some lunatic's idea, then putting it into words for him."[11] He also said that studio work was destructive to creative writing. So Wellman became his own boss, and he was a hard and successful task master. His next two books were The Walls of Jericho and The Chain, two more Kansas-based books, and his greatest popular successes. Both were made into films. Of course, he did write 23 more books, over one per year, until 1966.

In that year, Wellmen underwent surgery to his stomach, and a suspected malignancy there was confirmed. A few months later he was awarded an honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from the University of California at Los Angeles, where he was a booster of the athletic program and where he knew the Chancellor, Franklin D. Murphy, who was also a former Kansan. Wellman's siblings, Frederick, Manley and Alice, went out to California to attend the UCLA ceremony. They were all in their sixties and spent more than a good evening toasting their childhood "Us Against It" club which had brought them so close together in a bleak world. As Paul said, "We had no life except what we could create together, but that was good enough."[12]

It was good enough, in fact, to keep them close for the rest of their lives and to inspire them to fine accomplishments--all in spite of what their Kansas kinfolk called their "Wellman taint." The Kansas folks had thought the children so tainted that their mother should not even think of educating them. An uncle came to the house once to suggest that Paul should be a cowboy, Frederick a hand on a chicken and truck farm, Manley a farmhand, and that Alice should hire out.[13] Frederick Creighton Wellman, M.D., became one of the United States' leading plant pathologists and has traveled all over the world researching plant diseases, once helping to save the coffee crop in South America. Manley Wade Wellman became a writer of historical fiction and children's books and he has over 70 to his credit. Alice became a singer, dancer and actress on Broadway and later a writer of children's books, with 12 in her canon. In the battle of "Us Against It," the Wellman Us won, which is what the four of them

toasted only three weeks before Paul's death of stomach cancer on September 17, 1966.

Several threads run as constants through Wellman's life and his work. He was a plainsman. He lived on the Great Plains for 27 years and he studied it all of his life. In a Topeka Capital article of March 4, 1949, Wellman was quoted as saying: "Someone once said that the eastern part of Kansas is an extension of Missouri, the southern part an extension of Oklahoma, and the western part an extension of hell."[14] It was this hell, this country that made people larger than life, this land of cowboys, Indians, cattle, wheat and oil that caught Wellman's literary imagination. Wellman was tempered by his life in Kansas, which is something he examined in his four Jericho novels--Bowl of Brass, The Walls of Jericho, The Chain, and finally, in 1956, Jericho's Daughters. He made a sincere attempt to delve into the meaning of Kansas and its people. From the same Capital article:

> The people of Kansas themselves are no more homogenous than the terrain in which they live. The variegated habit of mind to Kansans on any subject whatsoever is a matter of amazement, and sometimes amusement to others. Yet the appearance of divergency is more apparent than real. In the essentials which really count, Kansas is a highly competent unit. Perhaps the underlying reason for this is best expressed in the state motto: "Ad Astra Per Aspera." Freely translated, that could be rendered: "To the stars the hard way."[15]

In each of his Kansas novels, Wellman is concerned with how people with ideals and dreams can reach for the stars and transcend the difficulties of their lives. Those difficulties include a harsh land with temperamental weather, and a culture which stresses material over spiritual success because physical survival is so hard won. The ideals in Wellman are love, justice (especially for the poor--including the farmers of western Kansas) and religious faith. Because these difficulties and ideals are so typical of the American, as well as the Kansas, experience, and reflect the American dream as traditionally defined, Wellman's novels also tell much about the character of America--its land, its people, its politics, its business and its history, all from the microcosm of the Great Plains.

Here is some Paul Wellman commentary, taken from the Kansas novels.

On liquor laws:

> No Kansan likes to do anything easy. He raises his crops hard. He takes his religion hard. To be able to get licker easy would just be contrary to nature for him. So he makes laws to keep him from gettin' it . . . which makes it harder, which gives mo' of a point to drinkin' it, an'

> behold, yo' Kansan thereby derives greater satisfaction of soul out'n it.[16]

On the Kansas landscape:

> The high plains at first gave him an overpowering impression of emptiness. Never before had he beheld such a sky--the cosmic vault of blue appeared to occupy a good three fourths of the world, making small and unimportant the scattered farmhouses with their meager clumps of ragged trees and inevitable windmills.
>
> But though the vastness at first oppressed him, eventually it distilled in him a sensation of fetterless freedom which he grew to love almost jubilantly.[17]

On gossip:

> . . . an ugly, dirty little story, of the kind that is always running through every rural community which is starved for something to vary the dull round of its existence.[18]

On the townsite as a reflection of the people:

> A town of false fronts. All the little, squalid, one-story buildings have false fronts to make them look like two-story structures; and people have assumed false fronts, too. Never in my life have I encountered so many fourflushers.[19]

On sin:

> The Kansas seven were: dancing, cards, the theater, non-attendance at church, tobacco, drinking and profanity. To the peculiar mental bent, the chief zest of which is the regulation of the lives of others, not even theft, murder, or adultery seemed somehow so important as these seven sins.[20]

Wellman most likely learned these seven sins in his Kansas grandparents' house. Alice Harris wrote about morning prayers there:

> We had to kneel on the hardwood floor and our knees hurt. Then too, both grandfather and grandmother prayed so long after the Bible reading. They would pray in tremulous tragic tones for all the sick and sad people they knew. This took an interminable time but it took much longer for them to pray for the good people they knew to be spared from the demon rum and the devil's weed nicotine and the frivolities of dancing, cards, wasting time at Satan's own temptation--the movies, the theater, non-character-building books, and doing anything that was not God's work on Sunday.[21]

Back to Paul Wellman on how a politician can win the Kansas heart: "Kansas loves a man without blame and without blemish, of pure and spotless character--true. But . . . Kansas loved one thing even more: a sinner who has been saved, a brand from the burning."[22]

Wellman was not, of course, without his flaws as a writer. His characters have little psychological depth; his dialogue is somewhat stilted; his plots often take unaccountable and awkward turns. When criticized, Wellman explained himself:

> I'm a story teller and my theory of writing is to keep the way the story is told from intruding on the story itself. Style is secondary. Some of the reviewers seem to think that's my principal weakness. But if so, it's a weakness I'm going to continue to cultivate.[23]

And that's what he did. Wellman also had great trouble portraying women, revealing himself as what one colleague on the Star called an "anti-feminist."[24] His overstated generalizations often weaken his writing, as in this passage about a woman lawyer pleading a case:

> The appeal was intimately concerned with herself--but it was not for herself. It was for another she pleaded. The drama of sacrifice which is woman.[25]

Or:

> It was the notions counter at which Belle stood. Needles and pins, and spools of thread, and elastic, and shoelaces, and buttons, and hat pins, and emery cushions, and sewing baskets. The infinite minutiae of which women's lives are comprised.[26]

Such passages appear page after page. Wellman admitted that he had difficulty with his women characters. He included them, even featured them, in his books, saying that no novel could be great without them. In his last Jericho novel, Jericho's Daughters, he tries his hand at bringing women into the world of men. Here's one of his characters, the questioning Mary Agnes Wedge: "Who made all those rules that keep women from doing almost anything that's fun? I'll tell you. Women made them--and women maintain them, like self-established concentration camps of custom, because women prefer the imprisonment with its indolence and protection to freedom with its risks and dangers!"[27] Jericho's Daughers is about how Mary Agnes gains her freedom, with a lot of risk and a lot of dangers, but finally with some triumph. It is one of Wellman's better books, though almost no contemporary critic thought so.

No matter what else can be said, Paul Iselin Wellman's books, with both their strengths and their flaws, were very popular. The key to understanding why is in

understanding how well Wellman captured the Kansas and American experience. He knew this very traditional experience because he lived it. He was an immigrant, coming to Kansas from Africa when eight years old. He was a cowboy, and learned firsthand to appreciate the open spaces of Kansas; he understood, because it was his own, the American fascination with the West. His life, and the lives of many of his characters, is a progress from rags to riches. Wellman and all his siblings had to start all over in Kansas, working hard to make ends meet in an environment both physically and spiritually harsh. All of them dreamed great things for themselves, and, through hard work, achieved their dreams--Paul became that great American success story, the Hollywood millionaire, which even today seems to be the next best thing to being president (in fact, the one doesn't exclude the other).

Also, all of Wellman's life he was a very traditional American. He fought in the war, he treated writing as much as a business as an art, he held very typical attitudes toward work, towards women and towards American history. He was a great sports enthusiast all his life. He was perhaps ahead of his time only in the great sympathy he had for the American Indian, and in the regard that the American Indian held for him. He was a Democrat, perhaps a reaction against Kansas Republicanism and provinciality, for he had reacted to many other things about Kansas--the small-mindedness and fundamentalist religion in particular.

This reaction against, or rebellion, is ironically a large part of Wellman's life. As soon as he left home, for example, he changed his middle name from Isely, the family name of his mother's kin, to Iselin, a name of his own creation. This put him in his father's camp. It was a declaration of his individuality, which makes him similar to so many other Americans just starting out--Jay Gatz becomes Gatsby, after all.

And so Paul Iselin Wellman pursued his dream. Behind him was a father who was a quintessential liver of the American dream, a true rugged individualist. In his own life were fundamental American experiences--he was immigrant, cowboy, hard-boiled journalist, workaholic. He was rebelling against all his mother's kin and against Kansas, but he rebelled by succeeding, as everyone around him had predicted that he and his brothers and sister would not do. His own living of a typical American success story, perhaps several success stories, along with his keen perception of Kansas and the American West, infuse his novels and account in great part for their tremendous success and popularity.

NOTES

1. University of Wichita Alumni, April, 1958, p. 5.

2. Facts on book sales, movie rights, and general biographical information not otherwise noted were gleaned from the extensive clippings file on Wellman at the Kansas State Historical Society library.

3. Alice Wellman Harris, from an unpublished autobiographical manuscript made available to Tom Averill in 1979.

4. C. Kay Scott, Life Is Too Short (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1943).

5. Wellman Harris ms.

6. Frederick Creighton Wellman, from a letter sent to Tom Averill, October 29, 1979.

7. I had the good fortune to receive many good letters from Wellman's brothers and sister during the course of this research.

8. Manley Wade Wellman, from a letter sent to Tom Averill, October 27, 1979.

9. Theodore M. O'Leary, Jr., formerly on the staff of the Kansas City Star, from a telephone interview conducted on November 28, 1979.

10. Kansas City Star, May 21, 1939.

11. New York Herald Tribune, Weekly Book Review, February 16, 1947.

12. Wellman Harris ms.

13. Ibid.

14. Topeka Capital, March 4, 1949.

15. Ibid.

16. Bowl of Brass (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1944), p. 29.

17. The Walls of Jericho (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1947), p. 20.

18. Bowl of Brass, p. 171.

19. The Walls of Jericho, p. 26.

20. Ibid., p. 68.

21. Wellman Harris ms.

22. The Walls of Jericho, p. 138.

23. Kansas City Times, August 3, 1966.

24. O'Leary interview.

25. The Walls of Jericho, p. 369.

26. Ibid., p. 334.

27. Jericho's Daughters (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1956), p. 15.

The Wellman Canon

Death on the Prairie, 1934

Death in the Desert, 1935

Broncho Apache, 1936

Jubal Troop, 1939

The Trampling Herd, 1939

Angel With Spurs, 1942

Bowl of Brass, 1944

The Walls of Jericho, 1947

Death on Horseback, 1949 (combines Wellman's first two books)

The Indian Wars of the West, 1949 (formerly Death on Horseback)

The Chain, 1949

The Iron Mistress, 1951

The Comancheros, 1952

The Female, A Novel of Another Time, 1953

Glory, God and Gold, 1954

The Blazing Southwest, The Pioneer Study of the American Southwest, 1954

Jericho's Daughters, 1956

Portage Bay, 1957

Ride the Red Earth, 1958

Gold in California, 1958

The Fiery Flower, 1959

Indian Wars and Warriors--East, 1959

Indian Wars and Warriors--West, 1959

Stuart Symington, 1960

Race to the Golden Spike, 1961

A Dynasty of Western Outlaws, 1961

Magnificent Destiny, 1962

The Greatest Cattle Drive, 1964

Spawn of Evil, 1964

The Devil's Disciples, 1965

The House Divides: The Age of Jackson and Lincoln, 1966

The Buckstones, 1967 (published posthumously)

The Callaghan, Yesterday and Today (privately printed history of a ranch)