

‘Nothing has ever come within cooee’: *Ben-Hur* down under ca. 1900

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Abstract:

A photographer can take a picture randomly. But when people are posed in odd formations, then photographed from an unusual angle, analysts have cause to infer a message that someone wished to send. In a photograph taken in 1904, 15 km from Sydney, the message concerned self- and other-control. The vehicle for this message was audiencing of a site-specific assemblage of the best-selling historical romance *Ben-Hur* (1880); a spectacular – but controversial – stage-version of this Holy Land crowd-pleaser; reception of both in Australia, the U.S. and England; and the slur, ‘wild colonial.’ By probing visual and verbal indicia, I reconstruct the message and identify the dancing-master who devised it by teaching his middle-class young adult students the Ben Hur Chariot Dance. My findings augment research on audiencing, on visual fan studies, and on theatre history. In addition, my findings enhance knowledge of receptions of *Ben-Hur* over its first 20 years, and of popular art generally, by adding memories’ role. Where do memories come in? Most visually, in the photograph’s documentation of an audience for “Professor” Edward Evans’s dance. Strong in these watchful elders’ memories, I contend, was Sydney’s furor for the *Ben-Hur* stage-show.

Keywords: *Ben-Hur*, Australia, dance, audiencing, reception, photography



Figure 1. G.A. Hills, 'Ben Hur Formation Dance, Sydney.' National Library of Australia, PIC BOX PIC/13201/#PIC/13206.

A posed photograph implies an agenda. It's patent that this photo, taken in 1904, was posed since otherwise, the dancers would not have stood so long with their backs to so much of their audience. If there is a message, though, that this visual was meant to convey, it comports uncertainly with signs of chafe from a few dancers – the man, for instance, who stands with one knee raised, and each woman who extends a foot. Was every chafer eager to start a dance they considered good fun? Or would interviews reveal that one, or more, wished to be done with choreography that they considered dull guff? Interviews are not possible, now. Much can be learned, still and all, if this visual record is meshed with verbal ones. Particularly, a mesh of visual and verbal records can index the pressure of memories. For people in the visual scrap of 1904, one powerful memory was of a stage-show that had thrilled audiences two years earlier, 15 km from the site of the dance. 'Nothing,' a journalist had enthused, 'has ever come within cooe of the great chariot race.'¹

This article contributes to audience research by chronicling the back-story of the Ben Hur Chariot Dance and, no less, of the photo. My findings put geopolitical implications into conversation with thoughts for *Ben-Hur* specialists, and terms local to Australia: 'larrikin' and 'wowsler.' Most importantly, my findings map memory. Audience studies do not always

tackle memories. Memories inform the Chariot Dance photo, nonetheless, in that no one in this scrap of the past can have been unaware of the stage *Ben-Hur* that even detractors had judged a ‘gorgeous, dazzling and exciting spectacle.’²

The journalist who used the Dharug word ‘cooee’ was making a point: the site of the spectacle was Australia. The stage-show of Lew Wallace’s 1880 novel began in his home-country in 1899, when the curtain rose on a Broadway adaptation. Twenty-seven months after that, while *Ben-Hur* was still packing houses in New York and touring to large U.S. cities, a full-panoply re-use of its script, music, and stagecraft opened in Sydney. Australia’s bustling East Coast city embraced this *Ben-Hur* as warmly as U.S. show-goers did: with a ‘frenzy of enthusiasm and delight.’ Indeed, a journalist in Perth – over on the West Coast – mocked that Sydney-ites supposed *Ben-Hur* to be as thrilling as cricket.³ This jab, and others that followed, help to explicate why two years later, a well-to-do town near Sydney hosted the only performance, known now, of the Ben Hur Chariot Dance. People in the sepia-toned 21 cm x 22.5 cm photo had ready access to Sydney newspapers and news; in fact, some lived there. However, the town in which they danced and watched, Parramatta, enjoyed its own news organs and social events: e.g., the Chariot Dance. By investigating dancers’ chafe in 1904, I demonstrate how an ambitious-for-its-day photo records audiencing, in one locale, of an international favorite, at a moment in the favorite’s never-static fame.

If you are not familiar with Wallace’s romance, no worries: just conjure a race in which friends, turned foes, compete bitterly. I say more about the race in due time. It takes time, also, to set up my claim about geopolitics. Already though, I can explain how I worked: I tuned to the photo. Early group photography did not typically capture action. Bodies tended to be controlled for technical and social reasons; thus, depictions of hunt clubs or wedding parties posed participants standing shoulder-to-shoulder in stiff lines. This norm makes the Chariot Dance photo’s depiction of extended feet and a raised knee notable. Comparison with another ambitious photo from ca. 1900, similarly composed, suggests additional deviations from the norm. William Henry Wong Ying hauled a camera some distance above a grassy area to photograph neatly dressed girls – who are surely of British descent – dance ‘round a maypole, while girls and some boys, who are as neatly dressed and as surely of British descent, stand in formation. All of the children were performing, in a way. None, though, chafed. Complete body control marks a difference from the Parramatta photo. Also, in Ying’s photo, the adults, who watch the children, stand.⁴ In contrast, George A. Hills’s photo includes a seated audience that looks more like show-goers in a theatre. Two further differences are equally important: in Hills’s photo, the audience outnumbers the performers *and* faces his camera. The layers in Hills’s photo find little analogue in Ying’s.

It could seem over-reach to claim that audiencings of the Chariot Dancee *had* to include memories. Yet I argue that memories of Sydney’s brief but ardent ‘pash’ for *Ben-Hur* were in the minds of everyone in G. Hills’s photo. One rememberer, for example, was the ‘Professor’ who had taught the young adults, of some privilege (but not extreme privilege), to dance in harnesses made of ‘prettily coloured ribbons.’ Edward Evans is not the photo’s focus, but he is easy to pick out, since he is the only person on the dance floor in formal

evening attire. Formal attire does not suggest the 'very rollicking' event promised in announcements of the Chariot Dance. There is better reason, though, to suspect other rememberers' disappointment with it: the *Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate* said that the dance was 'supposed to be a close imitation of the famous chariot race in the story of "Ben Hur".' The word *supposed* implies lack. Yet not everyone agreed. Speaking for other rememberers in the photo, the *Auburn News and Granville Electorate Gazetteer* judged the Chariot Dance a 'splendid imitation' of *Ben-Hur's* knuckle-tightening thrill.⁵



Figure 2. William Henry Wong Ying, 'Children's display, Princes Park, Maryborough.' Pictures Collection, State Library of Victoria, #49182171.

Both news reports teeter on what I review, ahead: there was enough diversity in Down Under receptions of *Ben-Hur* that it is risky to assume that either journalist had read Wallace's 400+-page cornucopia of love, lust, intrigue, scene-painting, high-flown rhetoric, vengefulness, ethnographic research, geography lessons, and a Christian ending – or seen the show. Consider, from this vantage, the *Argus's* use of the word 'supposed,' and it may imply uncertainty from an observer who had no idea how Wallace, or the show, had romanced. The same may have been true of Evans, his students, and their watchers. No dancer or watcher of 1904 was obliged, after all, to have perused, in whole or in part, the book that had been 'read, reviewed, criticized, and even preached about' throughout

Sydney while the stage-spectacular packed Her Majesty's Theatre. All that is sure is that each dancer and watcher had bought a ticket to the soiree which was sure to be decorous due to its aegis: a 'Cinderella dance.'⁶ This rubric advertised that the fun would end by midnight. No knife-fights would mar the event (though they did mar some Parramatta dances that ended up on police blotters). This distinction noted, the *Argus's* disagreement with the *Auburn News* raises a question that some dancers' chafe visualises: did the genteel Chariot Dance measure up to what each person in the photo had heard, read, seen, or imagined, of *Ben-Hur*?

To recover the strands of audiencing (and memories) that this question brings to light, I chronicle Australia's reception of *Ben-Hur* before Evans's students danced. I hold that Hills's photo shares an agenda with the dance's choreography, and with aspects of journalism about its lone performance. I hold further, though, that the *Argus's* and *Auburn News's* reports diverge from the photo and from each other. The photo's and choreography's shared agenda is clear: be it known that young ladies and gentlemen of the local middle class danced in a way that their elders invigilated in a gracious town hall in the Granville electorate of Cumberland County – a county that, intended readers knew, included Sydney. Where, then, is divergence? The *Argus* and *Auburn News* offered alternative perspectives because their staff-writers championed *Ben-Hur* as each 'audienced' this loved and loathed tale. Evans, however, was not simply reacting to the tale, but strategically deploying *Ben-Hur's* fame to defend people like his students: people who were willing to exert self- and other-control in service to social harmony. The *Ben-Hur*-specific reason why his students could be thought to need defense was Sydney's furor for the show. Public *abandon*, and news of it, mattered in the early years of Australia's shift into relative autonomy from Crown rule – Federation – because unrestrained displays gave onlookers (further) cause to believe that people who used the word 'cooe' were wild colonials.

Proponents of this belief could look to guffaws in England and the U.S. about Australian cuisine as exotic as billy tea and parrot pie; Australian terrain as weird as Uluru (AKA Ayres Rock); some Australians' convict forebears; and/or a taste, Down Under, for the song 'Wild Colonial Boy.' To learn instead though from Hills's photo, I surmise that he was hired much as the musicians in the photo were paid to play. By 1904, 15 km was no weary travel between Sydney and Parramatta. Still, someone had to haul the camera high to photograph the dancers from a steep-ish angle. A valid inference is that someone else, who was in charge, imputed value to elders who watched, to rosette-laden ribbons, and to polished floorboards. The fact that no dancer smiles leads me to believe that chafe was not something that a few dancers were told to enact. Rather, chafe was an effect of the concentration needed to perform what some dancers found fun but others thought dull guff: the chariot dance's 'imitative prancing steps.'⁷ *Ben-Hur* fans may be thinking that Wallace's chariot race mentions no prancing or rosettes. They are right. I explain these additions as a mediator's attempt – specifically, a choreographer's attempt – to substitute the thrill of control for a thrill of horror. If you do not associate *Ben-Hur* with horror, read on.

By studying this posed record of a dance that *invites* audiencing but also *records* audiencing, I compile a ca. 1900 slice of the history of *Ben-Hur's* reception worldwide. A 'methods' issue is how visual-verbal converse can gird other inquiries: it could be edifying, for instance, to consult diaries to learn how childhood dances 'round maypoles led to town hall soirees. To account instead, though, for the Parramatta photo's inclusion of elders who waited to watch (quoting the *Argus*) 'with intense interest,' I prioritize the camera-angle that sets watchers in the photo, as well as viewers **of** the photo, in judgment. Who summoned this judgment? I attribute it to the man who taught the Chariot Dance and, I believe, posed the photo. History knows little of Evans. Yet his obituary records this sliver: he named his home 'Lohengrin.' In Australia ca. 1900, there was nothing geopolitical about admiring Richard Wagner's music. The sliver directs attention, rather, to how long Evans would have reflected, and how hard, on rebukes of Wagner fans who were said to grow 'too invested' in their devotions and – worse – to invest 'in the wrong ways and for the wrong reasons.'⁸

Scolds of this kind slid seamlessly to *Ben-Hur* when Sydney hosted the show: the expensive *Morning Herald* sighed, for instance, that 'the popular voice will be all in favour of the fifth act ... where ... Messala and Ben Hur are seen racing round ... in mad career.' The proper thrill, according to this bastion of decorum, was the show's Christian finale. Many fans agreed. It does not appear, however, to have been a quest for Christ that motivated J.C. Williamson, a U.S. actor turned Sydney theatre manager, to import the Broadway *Ben-Hur* to his new home months before London enjoyed its thrills. Williamson was a master of promotion. Yet even without his efforts, journals had cause to spread news of a show that was 'of paramount interest' in Sydney. We know that it was news all the way out in Perth when Sydney-ites ran pell-mell in their 'rush to witness' *Ben-Hur*. It was not just outsiders, though, who queried the ardor with which show-goers, in the thousands, gave the chariot race 'a great ovation, each night.'⁹ To excuse such ardor, the *Sydney Referee* published the 'cooee' claim: the race was terrific! Yet this claim is just one marker of Sydney's fling with *Ben-Hur*. Other markers include a report, as ticket-sales ramped up for the show, that Sydney's 'libraries cannot supply the demand' for Wallace's book; news, once Williamson's 'much-boomed' show opened, that each night's audience 'shouted itself hoarse in admiration for the chariot race'; and reiterated attestation, until this *succès fou* closed, that this part of the show caused 'riotous' excitement among people who could spare the cost of a ticket: thus, people like those in the photo taken two years later.¹⁰

These verbal gleanings explain why Evans, his students, and the people who watched them, brought memories – ineluctably – to Parramatta's Auburn Town Hall. In the photo, shims of dark floorboard hold performers, and their teacher, apart from watchers. Any or all of these people may have seen Williamson's show, or known someone who had. More to the point, some, or even all, of these people would have taken a stand on the episode in *Ben-Hur* that was, for many, its peak-thrill. The realistic way in which Wallace romanced the chariot race made it a family favorite and a staple at read-alouds. Add Williamson's show, though, and the roar of the crowd occasioned a *Sydney Sunday Times* report which supports

my contention that memories were non-volitional – ineluctable: the penultimate thrill, in a thrill-packed production of nearly five hours, drew an ‘outburst of cheering’ from each night’s audience, ‘such as will, no doubt, long be remembered.’¹¹

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The *Sunday Times* report indicates why the Parramatta chariot dance was a repeat engagement even for people who had not seen the show: they had read about audiences’ shrieks and cheers. Some dancers and watchers would have known, besides, that Lew Wallace had dared greatly when he made Jesus a character in a tale. His dare pleased large crowds since, once *Ben-Hur*’s sales gathered force, they soared. For the next 20 years, U.S. book sales stayed high with help, in and after 1899, from the stage-spectacular that affirmed a New Yorker’s opinion in 1891: the book’s appeal ‘rests chiefly with the eight pages in which is described the chariot race.’ A Texas newspaper agreed by reprinting this claim. Agreement turned caustic though just before the show opened: ‘What people most wanted,’ sniped *Harper’s Weekly*, ‘whether they were conscious of the fact or not, was the horses.’¹²

Harper’s Weekly was on sale in Sydney. Yet that matters little if shared values explain why the *Sydney Sportsman* went further than a Frenchman who blasted any *Ben-Hur* fan who was fool enough to suppose that God in Christ is served by fiction ‘based on mutual hatred and vengeance.’ It may be relevant that the *Sportsman* reported racing news. For sure, though, this periodical charged that show-goers who cheered Judah Ben-Hur in the chariot race applauded ‘foul riding.’ This accusation is anachronistic since, if Ben-Hur had broken any rules of chariot racing, Messala would not have had to pay off the wagers he had staked on himself to win. In contrast, the charge ‘humbugs and self-deceivers’ is correct in a Christian context for this reason: Ben-Hur has grown so bitter against Messala that, in the race’s last lap, he topples the Roman’s chariot. This life-threatening act of vengefulness is deliberate: it requires a ‘cunning touch of the reins.’ Some adaptors have rejected this horror; for instance, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’s second *Ben-Hur* (1959) – the one starring Charlton Heston – had Messala topple his own chariot, from fear. Upholding instead what Wallace wrote, Williamson staged ‘the fall of Messala, hurled like Phaeton from his car in headlong descent,’ so vividly, that ‘the cheering can only be described as frantic.’¹³

Memories of this show, or news of it, helps to explain why chafe in the 1904 photo may record disappointment. First, ladies’ pinned-up hair affirms what pearl necklaces cue: no topple will occur. The *Argus*’s report of the dance backs up these indicia by identifying fabrics in the ladies’ long skirts: delicate voile, for instance, and light tulle. Evans is unlikely to have told his students what to wear. But he did arrange them into ‘chariots’ harnessed so loosely that a mis-step could reduce the dance to slapstick. Harnessed triangles that put men under women’s control elicited a chuckle: who, asked the *Auburn News*, held the whip hand?¹⁴ Some Parramattans, though, may not have liked that joke, or the dance. Their representative can be the woman who turns her face from the camera. Sure, in contrast, are

rosette-laden ribbons that physically mandated, and visually signaled, control. Control was *de rigueur* at Evans's soirees. Yet when a dance was named for *Ben-Hur*, controlled movement can only have been intended to refute allegations of over-enthusiasm by advertizing how little chariot-race enthusiasts need to cheer, or ineluctably *do* cheer, like mobs, brutes, or hordes.

In Evans's day, these nouns mapped to the slur, 'wild colonial.' Public displays at which neatly dressed children danced decorously 'round a maypole, or stood in formation, can be understood as fighting this slur. Waging the fight with them, I contend, was the dancing-master who taught his students to perform as 'chariots' that did not topple. Such teaching was perilous due to the ease with which ribbon could shred. Thin dowels too, held jointly at waist-height, might have slipped from a grasp. All the while, there was peril to a dance in which dowel-holders could not use their arms for balance since, if even one 'horse' stumbled on, for instance, a fallen rosette, its 'chariot,' or another, could topple. Now, add the fact that several of the musicians in the photo sit apart from their fellows, not holding their instruments, and it is far from clear whether the Chariot Dance was accompanied by music. No journalist mentioned accompaniment by a *Ben-Hur* composition like the one that a U.S. band, led by John Philips Sousa, was said to perform so thrillingly that 'the running' of the chariot race is 'certainly heard and almost seen.' Rounding out my contention that Evans was trying to push-back at Sydney's 'dramatic rage' – to quote the *Auburn News* in 1902 – is the photo's invitation to pass judgment that was ineluctably comparative due to the dance's name and to memories.¹⁵

Chronicling of the Chariot Dance's back-story continues with this question: where did Evans find the choreography? A few weeks before his soiree, the *Argus* hailed the Ben Hur Chariot Dance as 'the latest continental sensation.' I query this description, however, since the *Auburn News* spoke of 'the latest American craze' and said that Evans's Ben-Hur dance was a 'recently imported American and Continental novelty.' Earlier, moreover, the *Argus* had asserted that this dance was 'particularly popular ... in the social circles in the old country' – which meant, to most *Argus* readers, England or Scotland.¹⁶ Behind my 'where did Evans find?' question is knowledge of a scholar's collection of Ben-Hur products ca. 1900 which includes no dances. It would have been easy to choreograph a Chariot Dance that was near-identical to the 'grand march' that many Australian soirees included: simply add ribbon-reins, and arrange dancers in triangles that showed up best from on-high. The decision, instead, to hail an import that had pleased crowds elsewhere, bespeaks the 'colonial cringe' that led many Down Under arts-lovers ca. 1900 to judge local efforts, such as a new dance, inferior. This cringe was an outgrowth of the slur, 'wild colonial.' Another outgrowth, though, may be revealed by a gap in the records: although newspapers in the greater Sydney area announced upcoming performances, in 1905, of the 'very extra special' Chariot Dance, I found no news of performances taking place.¹⁷

This indication that Parramatta's Chariot Dance was a one-off bulks up reason to equate some chafe, at least, with grouse. Simultaneously though, announcements of

upcoming Chariot Dances hint that Evans choreographed this novelty and hired Hills to record its only known performance. Why think so? Two reasons. First, no Parramatta newspaper is likely to have asked Hills to travel out from Sydney. The *Auburn News* did not have the budget. But even the successful *Argus* – which favored the same news: church and sporting activities, local government wrangles, Boy Scout meetings, and so on – made little use of photos. Second, it is true that Auburn Town Hall managers could have hired Hills to produce an image that indicated their venue’s size and décor. Yet inasmuch as it was Evans, surely, who tried to drum up enthusiasm for a repeat Chariot Dance, it is more likely that he hired Hills to record its debut. It is his agenda, these thoughts indicate, that the photo and choreography record.

Threading through Evans’s agenda, I contend, was a Down Under way of reacting to rollick: as a ‘larrikin’ or as a ‘wowsers.’ Larrikins were young Australians, most often lads but sometimes lasses, who enjoyed rowdy dance. Larrikins were more famed, however, for flouting genteel strictures: think of Teds or Ah Bings, low-riders or ‘macks,’ Apaches or ganguro girls ... whichever authority-affronting youth-culture was rife in the era and corner of the globe you know best. By 1900, the word ‘larrikin’ was shifting from its first association, with crime, toward its present-day usage: young adults who were rambunctious but good-natured – just having fun. Evans would not have shifted far enough, in his use of this slang-term, to promote the Chariot Dance as a ‘larrikin hop.’ Some Parramattans though may have signed on for rollick because they sought a gentrified hop. If so, they had cause to chafe at a dance so prissy that it earned the tag, ‘wowsers.’ This slang-term was less flexible than ‘larrikin’ since it was always pejorative: a wowsers is the sort of wet blanket who tromps on other people’s pleasure.¹⁸ If any of Evans’s students had signed on for chariot dancing, expecting a gentrified larrikin hop, they surely grouched, behind set faces, about wasting time on a dance that was new, fair enough, but no thrill.

Tack this discussion to the clash between Parramattan journalists, and questions arise. Was it wowsers to demand fidelity to the race as Wallace had written it? Or was it larrikin to grouse, ‘give me topple’? Analysts who interrogate Hills’s photo from this perspective can understand rosette-laden ribbons as counters to the horror of Ben-Hur risking Messala’s life when he causes his former friend to fall under rushing horses’ sharp hooves. As plausibly, however, analysts can interpret these eye-catching restraints as signaling the antithesis of scrambling farce: self- and other-control. I say more soon, therefore, about Wallace’s plot. For now, I preview that my discussion makes room for larrikins, wowsers, and geopolitics on its way to delineating memories’ effects on first, second, and later audiencings: repeat engagements.

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Discussion moves next to the photograph’s shims between dancers and watchers. This documentation of dark but bright – which meant, well-polished – floorboards reminds chroniclers that social dance was part of genteel Australian life. There was nothing

obligatory for all that, or obvious, about using dance to delectate *Ben-Hur*. Delectators elsewhere chose, rather, to:

- sing a song or market a product based on Wallace's book (as some U.S. fans did),
- name a hotel for this tale (Seoul) or race chariots in a hippodrome (Paris),
- put a school under this moniker (Uttar Pradesh) and a print-shop (Kerala)
- or christen a son 'Ben Hur' (U.S. and Malaya).¹⁹

It is not incidental, from this angle, that soiree-attendees had surnames as English as Lambeth, Winsor, and Hawksford, while 'Evans' was uncertain: though this surname could be English, its birthplace was Wales. So what? Evans may have felt surveilled by Lambeths, Winsors, and Hawkesfords as he taught the Chariot Dance. A clearer message, though, in the extant visual and verbal scraps, is that elders invigilated young adult dancers who had been raised in a wild land.

This message is congruent with a self- and other-control heritage as decorous as Sir Roger de Coverley and the Lancers. Who were they? Not people, but ballroom dances that had emigrated to Australia from Britain. To some fun-seeking Australians, such dances were wowser: kill-joy. These people preferred larrikin hops or the naughty high kicks in the smash music-hall success, 'Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay' (1891 England; 1892, Australia). People of this sort might dance, also, to a song made from the poem, 'Waltzing Matilda' (1895). They could not dance to this song though at an Evans soiree because the Banjo Patterson poem, that would become an unofficial Australian national anthem, was thought 'common' – vulgar – during his lifetime.²⁰

Moving from dance to post-dance soiree-ing, the *Argus* reported that after the Chariot Dance and a nice meal, Parramatta's Mayor presented Evans with a gift that his students had paid for: an engraved silver strop-case. A gift made of silver was no trinket. Analysts of audiencing learn more, nonetheless, from knowledge that a strop-case was where a man stored the balsa-slab on which he sharpened the razor that tidied his face for polite society. I am stumped to think of a gift that could have semaphored more clearly, without falling into vulgarity, 'body control.' I tie the gift, on this basis, to rumination that *Ben-Hur* was exactly the book and, later, the show, that guardians of middle-class decorum would deem worthy: so adrenalin-stirring yet so defensible due to the conclusion in which Ben-Hur joins other Jews in following Jesus. As strong a case could be made, however, that Cinderella dance-attendees agreed with the journalist who reamed Wallace's 'gentle Yiddisher' for 'foul riding.' An effect of this agreement could have been scorn for show-goers who cheered Ben-Hur. Making that scorn more likely in certain quarters, in early Federationist days, was 'White Australia' sentiment that included anti-semitism.²¹ These thoughts may seem far from a strop-case. Actually though, this gift could bespeak agreement between students who liked chariot dancing, and students who grouched about it, in that regardless whether a given student thought the dance fun, or dull guff, all agreed that it inculcated (and displayed) control.

This possibility returns attention to audiencings of *Ben-Hur* Down Under that differed from audiencings elsewhere. I have said that Sydney's audiencing was ardent. Now, discussing Australia generally, this finding sets the note: before the late 1890s, newspapers took little heed of Wallace's tale. A rare exception was the decision in 1887 by an Adelaide newspaper – thus, print for residents of the state of South Australia – to publish *Ben-Hur* serially. It would be another eight years, though, before an Australian firm offered a copy of the book with purchase of its soap flakes. In between, whoever wrote the 'Mother Knows' column for the Sydney-based *Australian Journal* felt confident that readers had read or heard about *Ben-Hur*.²² This confidence may have been strongest in Sydney's state, New South Wales. But even there, people could read what Wallace had written *or* a book marketed under the same title: a version amended by English publishers. The subtitle on the latter reminds analysts how much Wallace had dared: though he had subtitled his swashbuckler, 'A Tale of the Christ,' English publishers preferred a more decorous, 'Days of the Messiah.' Look inside U.S. and English editions, too, and changes multiply when English publishers altered passages without Wallace's knowledge.²³

Diverse receptions did not stop with varied editions. To the contrary, diverse receptions could take root in reviews of Wallace's book, such as one in 1881 in a U.S. arts-and-letters journal that was on sale Down Under, but also like the sort published in an English anglers' magazine that kin could have posted to an emigrant. News of Wallace's tale might travel to Australia, also, in personal mail, via visitors from abroad, and by shipboard converse when rich Australians took holidays, middle-class Australians journeyed for family reasons or work, and Australian laborers left home in search of better pay. These ways of forming expectations of a Ben Hur Chariot Dance bear on people who performed or watched. Each bears as hard, however, on the decision to dance not merely as chariots but specifically as the chariots in *Ben Hur*. All this, even if Williamson had been new at his trade. Inasmuch as he was, rather, a master-showman, these possibilities bear, with news of his show's 'conspicuous feature,' on the photo that includes what could have been left out: audiencing.²⁴

Say it again, therefore: people in the photo may not have read the book or seen the show. Or, one or all may have read the 'penny "boiling down"' that was advertised in Tasmania. Abridged editions remind chroniclers that even admirers may not have read each word Wallace wrote – as does a report, from a city 240km north of Sydney, that later chapters pall. No Australian ca. 1900 read all this newsprint. Yet even if people in the photo had been far from home during Sydney's frenzy, friends would have told them about the furor. Those friends, or others, might have recalled as well, however, defenses of show-goers who lost control. 'As Ben Hur gradually overtakes and defeats' Messala, the *Bega Southern Star* advised, 'excitement intensified until a person of the coolest temperament would be excused for throwing his or her whole soul into it.'²⁵

The Bega Valley was, and is, in New South Wales. The 440 km between the Valley, and Sydney, make it unlikely that many *Southern Star* readers had seen Williamson's show. This newspaper had cause, nonetheless, to defend show-goers against a jab in Perth that

charged Sydney with recreational treason against British heritage; against *Schadenfreude* in Queensland when Williamson closed the show abruptly due to a fire ('summary squelching'); and against tut-tutting in the city that competed hardest with Sydney for arts authority: 'It is hard to see,' a Melbourne newspaper opined, 'how [*Ben-Hur*] is a story of Jesus.' In 1902, this doubt was not new. By then, though, this doubt had more-than-arts meaning when it emanated from the city that was Sydney's chief rival in a quarrel over where to put the new Federal capital.²⁶ Federation was, obviously, unifying. A divisive facet of colonial life survived the transition, even so: inter-state rivalry. That rivalry may explain why Perth newspapers charged Sydney with supposing *Ben-Hur* more thrilling than cricket. Certainly, though, inter-state rivalry often set Melbourne, the leading city in the state Victoria, against Sydney in New South Wales.

Turn that geopolitical lens on journalism about frenzy for Wallace's pulses-pounder and/or Williamson's, and an implication of Melbourne's doubt about *Ben-Hur* snaps into focus: insinuation that Sydney was too wild to house the Federal capital. Evans would have known more than this, however, when he taught the Chariot Dance and posed his students for a camera, on high: a few months after Williamson closed his *Ben-Hur*, London boo'd the same script, music, costumes, and so on, so fiercely that the show was shut down. When that debacle was reported in Adelaide, it must have sparked giggles – or tut-tuts – at Sydney's larrikin-ism.²⁷ That reaction does not explain fully why, two years later, Evans taught young New South Wales-ians to dance as chariots. It would be odd, though, for him to have forgotten London's thumbs-down. It would be as odd, I submit, for watchers to have forgotten that geopolitical news; indeed, some dancers may have recalled it by chafing.

I share one last thought, ahead, on the posed photograph that implies an agenda: a message to convey. Before adding that installment, though, to this chronicle, I tackle Melbourne's question. *Was Wallace's* romance a story of Jesus or a crude thrill-ride? Answers to this question can be replies, also, to rebukes of investment in wrong ways, for wrong reasons. My answer explains what some fans, around the globe, have long known: *Ben-Hur* may be a story of Jesus yet may not be (and, in some embraces, isn't now, just as it wasn't, for certain fans, ca. 1900). This answer is another route by which to 'surface' audiencings that varied. The heart of the answer is nonetheless a shared concern: repeat engagements.

* * * *

Disdain for *Ben-Hur* among experts in literature, as the 20th-century academy defined that subset of stories, explains the long gap between the book's heyday and scholars' attention to what Wallace had wrought. At last though, in 2009, Howard Miller did a stellar job of affirming what many fans have long known: Wallace romanced a protagonist – *not* hero.²⁸ The cunning touch of the reins that cripples Messala told these fans how desperately *Ben-Hur* needs what he has not earned: forgiveness through grace. Australians who approved this homily could ignore arraignments of self-deceit and humbuggery; they could even judge

the arraigners, wowsers. How, though, could moral agents think themselves right to cheer while Ben-Hur commits an act that should evoke repulsed horror? One reply could be that moral agents were under no compulsion to cheer. They were free, rather, to read the eight pages in the book, or watch the fourth act in the show, with grief for a good man gone wrong. Alternatively, if moral agents found themselves cheering, they could – and surely, often did – come to their senses when the chapter ended or the curtain fell ... and they felt their breathing slow while they adjusted their mussed hair, straightened their neck-ties or ruffles, and otherwise recovered from their lack of self-control.

This analysis gains from work by film scholars. Shortly before Miller presented vengeful Ben-Hur as a ‘foil’ for Jesus’s compassion, Marcia Pentz-Harris, Linda Seger, and R. Barton Palmer argued that Wallace plotted so that readers would ‘convert the rush of adrenaline’ that so many have felt during the chariot race ‘into a sympathy that leads to deeper piety and hence to a more profound and personal sense of faith.’²⁹ Allegations of foul riding are just one sign that *Ben-Hur*’s roller-coaster plotting did not enthrall each receptor or deepen all pieties. Pentz-Harris, Seger, and Palmer do well, even so, to call attention to peaks and ebbs which go far to explain why Christians might read *Ben-Hur* repeatedly or re-attend the stage-show: *only* by repeat engagements could they test their self-control in the manner of athletes doing ‘reps.’ Other fans could re-read the book or re-attend the show for more mundane thrills. For Christians though, each repeat engagement of *Ben-Hur* could be a strengthening religious work-out. Similar use of the horror that decent people should feel, when Ben-Hur topples Messala, was available for people who were not Christian. The only difference, a small one in terms of Wallace’s plotting, was that the work-out could strengthen their adherence to their moral code.

Ribbon-reins in the Parramatta photo affirm Wallace’s plotting in this aspect: Ben-Hur’s victory in the race relies on self-control that enables him to control others – Messala, yes, but also spirited horses. Add geopolitical context to this plotting, and ribbon-reins suggest that ‘Professor’ Evans taught his students to *fanfaronade* self- and other-control which could shape impressions of middle-class White Australians. This argument raises the possibility of a patriotic agenda meant to defend the Federation, rather than Sydney and its environs only, from the slur ‘wild colonials.’ A Classics scholar of our day interprets cheers for Messala’s toppling in a way that follows this path: fans can enthuse for Ben-Hur’s ruthlessness, Maria Wyke proposes, because they see an oppressed subject’s triumph over a haughty empire.³⁰ She does not specify Australians, or the early 1900s. It would not be odd, though, if some people in the 1904 photo were descendants of Britons who had been sent Down Under due to lack of self-control that led to crime. Returning to Evans, he could have explained his decision to teach chariot-dancing in this way: to feel or display enthusiasm is no bad thing as long as receptors keep it under control. I infer this lesson from rosettes that make ribbon-reins and harnesses’ dowels eye-catching; from heritage concerns and larrikin-wowser *agon*; and from education for sober conduct in service to a self-governing future. These elements of the Parramatta photo suggest this message: whatever wildness Sydney had indulged in, two years earlier, Evans’s students controlled

their ardor. What about elders? Provision of seats for them suggests a tribunal to judge whether dancers fell prey to the ‘high-strung excitement’ of many Sydney show-goers or, more respectably, had fun while they kept themselves, and others, on a taut rein.³¹

Why wait years, though, to produce visual evidence that Parramatta had itself in hand? I surmise more than a little embarrassment, in New South Wales, when London boo’d the *Ben-Hur* that had ‘wowed’ Sydney. Looking specifically at Parramatta, I consider that town’s reception of *Ben-Hur*. Bypassing the advertisement of 1895 that was lonely, on the one hand – the only advert of that kind I found in Parramatta newspapers before 1902 – and irrelevant, on the other, since Sydney book-shops were near, I conclude this inquiry by examining a few more verbal scraps.

Parramattans knew by early February 1902 that Williamson’s show, made from ‘the great book of the moment,’ pleased crowds. If, however, they read the cheeky *Sydney Bulletin*, they could also learn that most folk ‘will require to view “Ben Hur” twice before’ they can credibly claim to ‘ha[ve] seen’ this eye-popper since one attendance, only,

leaves a sensation of wheels turning in the brain, and eyes full to bursting with impressionist pictures – holy places ... land-scapes, sea-scapes, escapes of slaves, wicked ballets, veiled Jewesses, unveiled Egyptianesses with undulating hips and silken swathed ankles, gods, gardens, soldiers, processions, tents, and jewels.³²

Ears could feel overwhelmed too, this reporter added, when ‘voices of Romans, Jews, Arabs, pirates, ancient rag tag and bygone bobtail smite you with an ear-memory like unto the blowing of a simoon.’ A few weeks later, the *Argus* reported that the Parramatta library had bought a copy of *Ben-Hur*. This article did not say whether the edition was U.S. or U.K. Even without that information, though, news of a book-purchase distances show-goers, who were dazzled by stagecraft, from readers who sat down with the tale Wallace had written. No library patron was forced, obviously, to read *Ben-Hur* cover to cover. There was, however, enough of a yen toward this story that a local minister gave a ‘magic lantern’ lecture on it several times in 1902 (but not earlier).³³

Two years would pass before Evans taught young adult New South Wales-ians to dance as controlled chariots. The decision to record their dance photographically could bespeak completion, a few months earlier, of Sydney’s electrical grid: a mark of modernity. Far more is on show, however, in George Hills’s photo for analysts who chronicle. No verbal-visual mesh can tell posterity whether a given chafer was eager to start a dance that they considered good fun, or to be done with dull guff. No more can this mesh reveal whether anyone in the photo thought that the dance measured up to what they had heard, read, seen, or imagined of *Ben-Hur*. My inquiry contributes, still and all, to audience studies which may lie far from that worldwide favorite, from 1900, from Australia, and from dance. The reason is, I have sketched how past engagements *had* to inform Australian experiences of

Ben-Hur, ineluctably, for a few years after 1902, regardless whether a person had read Wallace's cornucopia or seen Williamson's show.

The critical premise of this inquiry is that a posed photograph indicates an agenda: a message to convey. The photo that, I contend, Evans arranged to have taken, folds in memories. Interviews with Evans, his students, and their watchers would reveal more than I have noticed and, thereafter, conjectured. By studying past acts and agendas now though, when interviews of that kind are impossible, analysts can mesh visual and verbal scraps to increase comprehension of memories' impacts on audience engagements, as well as repeat engagements, long ago.

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Notes:

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- ¹ George A. Hills, 1904, *Ben Hur Formation Dance*, National Library of Australia, nla.obj-44486702; 'Tamworth Hospital Ball,' *Inverell Times*, 12 July 1905, 3; and 'Her Majesty's – Ben Hur,' *Sydney Referee*, 26 February 1902, 10. I found these scraps of the past in the outstanding database, Trove.
- ² 'Music and Drama,' *Sydney Sportsman*, 26 February 1902, 2, Trove.
- ³ 'Amusements,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 February 1902, 3; and 'Behind the Footlights,' *Perth Daily News*, 8 March 1902, 3. Both, Trove.
- ⁴ William Henry Wing Ying, 'Children's Display, Princes Park, Maryborough,' State Library of Victoria #49182171, Trove.
- ⁵ 'A Novel Dance,' *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*, 7 June 1904, 6; 'Prof. Evans' Cinderella: A Brilliant and Dashing Dance,' *Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate*, 17 September 1904, 11; and 'A Springtide Social: PROFESSOR EVANS' CINDERELLA DANCE,' *Auburn News and Granville Electorate Gazetteer*, 17 September 1904, 5. All, Trove.
- ⁶ Ares, 'Her Majesty's Theatre,' *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*, 25 February 1902, 4, Trove.

⁷ 'Springtide'; and see, for instance, <https://theconversation.com/parrot-pie-and-possum-curry-how-colonial-australians-embraced-native-food-59977>.

⁸ 'Prof. Evans'; 'Death of Mr. Evans,' *Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers Advocate*, 22 December 1917, 2, Trove; and Daniel Cavicchi, *Listening & Longing: Music Lovers in the Age of Barnum* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 174, italics in original.

⁹ 'Amusements,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 February 1902, 3, Trove; Ares, 'Her Majesty's'; 'Behind'; and 'Woman's Page,' *Sydney Freeman's Journal*, 8 March 1902, 24, Trove.

¹⁰ Ares, 'Her Majesty's'; 'Her Majesty's – Italian Opera Farewell,' *Sydney Referee*, 5 February 1902, 10, Trove; 'Ben Hur. The Semi-Scriptural Play,' [Sydney] *Truth*, February 9, 1902), 2, Trove; and 'Pointed Pars,' *Bowral Southern Mail*, 28 February 1902, 1, Trove. I do not know how much tickets cost, to Williamson's show. Guesstimating though from the prices of tickets to a much less spectacular show that he staged in 1901, I think that the cheapest seat cost at least 24 pence, and the dearest about 72, while Wallace's book could be purchased, in a 'budget' but illustrated and unabridged edition, for nine.

¹¹ 'The Theatres,' *Sydney Sunday Times*, 9 February 1902, 2, Trove.

¹² 'The Chariot Race,' *Galveston Daily News*, 18 October 1891, 18, Gale 19th Century US Periodicals; and John Corbin, 'The Stage-Illustration of Ben-Hur,' *Harper's Weekly* 43:6 (16 December 1899): 98. N.B.: the House of Harper was Wallace's publisher. However ca. 1898 the firm had come under new management due in part, some commentators say, to Wallace's demand for a huge pay-out for his final romance, which sold poorly.

¹³ S. C. de Soissons, 'Still "Quo Vadis",' *New York Times*, 9 April 1898, RB244, Proquest Historical Newspapers; Redrof, 'Random Rinkles,' *Sydney Sportsman*, 26 February 1902, 3, Trove; Wallace, *Ben-Hur A Tale of the Christ*, ed. David Mayer (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 350.

¹⁴ 'Springtide.'

¹⁵ 'Marine ...,' *Washington Post*, 5 May 1891, 1, Proquest Historical Newspapers; and 'Brevities,' *Auburn News and Granville Electorate Gazetteer*, 15 February 1902, 1, Trove. The rest of the *Post* article's title is torn away.

¹⁶ 'Auburn,' *Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate*, 27 August 1904, 2, Trove; 'The District Chatterbox,' *Auburn News and Granville Electorate Gazetteer*, 10 September 1904, 4, Trove; 'Springtide'; and 'Auburn,' *Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate*, 20 August 1904, 2, Trove.

¹⁷ 'Prof. Evans'; 'Novel Dance'; 'Springtide'; and Jon Solomon, 'Coda: A Time-Line of *Ben-Hur* Companies, Brands, and Products,' *Bigger than Ben-Hur: The Book, Its Adaptations, and Their Audiences*, eds. Barbara Ryan and Milette Shamir (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2016), 191-211. See also Arthur Phillips, <http://ausnatives.org/the-cultural-tinge/>; and 'Park Improvement,' *Auburn News and Granville Electorate Gazetteer*, 25 February 1905, 1, Trove.

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¹⁹ See <https://www.hoosierantiquebicycles.org/benhur.html>;

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²⁰ Melissa Bellanta, "'Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay": Lottie Collins' Act and the Not-so-modern Girl,' *Nineteenth-Century Theatre and Film* 37:1 (2010): 3-13; and Jon Stratton, 'Producing an Australian Popular Music: From Stephen Foster to Jack O'Hagan,' *Journal of Australian Cultural Studies* 31:90 (January 2007), 157.

²¹ Redrof, 'Random.'

²² 'Mother Knows,' *Australian Journal*, 1 July 1892, 591, Gale 19th Century UK Periodicals.

²³ *Ben-Hur* also reached Australia via travelers who brought editions that a German firm produced in English; see Charles Johanningsmeier, 'Exporting America via Leipzig, Germany: Tauchnitz Editions and the International Popularization of American Literature,' *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 112:2 (June 2018), 222.

²⁴ 'Olympic Ball Chariot Dance,' *Sydney Sunday Times*, 10 May 1914, 14, Trove; 'Amusements,' *Sydney Evening News*, 10 February 1902, 8, Trove; and 'Her Majesty's – Italian.'

²⁵ 'Our Sydney Letter,' *Hobart Mercury*, 12 March 1902, 5; Portia, 'Boudoir Confidences,' *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 10 February 1902, 3; and Benedict, 'Around the City: A Word about the Theatres,' *Bega Southern Star*, 26 March 1902, 4. All, Trove.

²⁶ 'The Prettiest Thing,' [Brisbane] *Queensland Figaro*, 26 March 1902, 6; 'Sydney Shows,' *Melbourne Table Talk*, 27 February 1902, 23; and, e.g., 'Sydney City Chatter,' [Hay] *Riverine Grazier*, 25 February 1902, 3. All, Trove. N.B.: Hay is part of New South Wales.

²⁷ 'Echoes from London,' *Adelaide Register*, 4 April 1902, 8, Trove.

²⁸ Miller, 'The Charioteer and the Christ: *Ben-Hur* in America from the Gilded Age to the Culture Wars,' *Indiana Magazine of History* 104, no. 2 (June 2008): 153-75.

²⁹ Pentz-Harris, Seger and Palmer, 'Screening sentimental male power in *Ben-Hur*,' *Nineteenth-Century American Fiction on Screen*, ed. R. Barton Palmer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 121.

³⁰ Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 17.

³¹ Benedict, 'Around.'

³² 'Granville,' *Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate*, 8 February 1902, 2; 'Sundry Shows,' *Sydney Bulletin*, 15 February 1902, 12. Both, Trove.

³³ *Ibid.*; 'Granville,' *Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate*, 15 March 1902, 2, Trove; and e.g., 'Ben Hur at All Saints,' *Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate*, 17 May 1902, 4, Trove.