



Louis de Wohl: Shady Astrologer, MI5 Recruit, Christian Storyteller

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Abstract

Using files declassified and released to Great Britain's National Archives, this article shows how Britain's domestic spy agency, MI5, recruited Louis de Wohl (1903-61), a flashy Hungarian astrologer and Christian writer to create horoscopes for Adolf Hitler during World War II. De Wohl was a controversial figure. His origin story does not check out. His MI5 handlers found him showy. And recent journalists dismiss him as a 'persuasive fake'. Yet his pre-war fictions were adapted for cinema, his later theological novels remain bestsellers, and his personal story deserves greater attention if we are to better understand Christian historical fiction's popularity.

Keywords

Louis de Wohl, Christian historical fiction, astrology, World War II, literary saints

I

'Never trust the artist. Trust the tale. The proper function of a critic is to save the tale from the artist who created it'.¹ What D. H. Lawrence is customarily assumed to have meant by this advice to the academic is this: value what the fiction writer has produced, the poem or the short story, and bracket or set to one side the novelist's biography and what it is they think they have accomplished with their work. 'An artist is usually a damned liar', Lawrence declares, and their art, if it is art, offers readers the only truth that counts.² Fair enough. We know next to nothing about Homer, certainly not enough to know if he was habitually sincere or a compulsive liar; so we focus on *The Odyssey*, its twenty-four books of dactylic hexameter, and there we have our work cut out for us.

¹ D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: T. Seltzer, 1923), p. 3.

² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

But sometimes biographies matter. Occasionally life and literature coalesce, resulting in a story that discloses the storyteller. Consider Johnny Cash, whose ‘Man in Black’ sobriquet not only captures the American country musician’s on-stage clothing, but also his vocal commitment to social justice for the poor as well as racially disadvantaged persons.³

The Man in Black’s 1986 novel about Saul of Tarsus, *Man in White*, is a work of Christian historical fiction.⁴ I first read it in 2010. And that was about the time I began drafting the project that would become the book my publisher released in 2022 – a book that takes twelve much less famous writers and draws on my conversations with them to communicate both the choices and contexts behind their tales, and to reveal their own sense of what current followers of Jesus can learn from the storied faith that pulsates at the heart of their publications.⁵ D. H. Lawrence would not be amused. But back to the Man in Black. Reading *Man in White* through the lens of Johnny Cash’s convoluted life, one senses how and why the drug-addled singer-songwriter used Christian historical fiction to create an emotional connection with the troubled Apostle. Saul’s story of fall and redemption made Cash aware of how sin and grace are woven throughout the mingled yarn of his own life.⁶ And Cash admitted as much in his two autobiographies, deploying Pauline phrasing to describe his own Damascene experience, which occurred in October 1967 in Nickajack Cave on the Tennessee River.⁷

Cash tells us that he journeyed into the Cave for two or three hours. Only when his flashlight gave out, and darkness descended on him,

³ For details, see Richard Beck, *Trains, Jesus, Murder: The Gospel According to Johnny Cash* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), pp. 29-33.

⁴ Johnny Cash, *Man in White: A Novel about the Apostle Paul* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986).

⁵ Darren J. N. Middleton, *The Writer and the Cross: Interviews with Authors of Christian Historical Fiction* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishing, 2022). For a podcast interview on this book, see: <https://practicing-gospel.blubrry.net/2022/11/28/the-writer-and-the-cross-with-darren-middleton-pge-80/>

⁶ Graeme Thomson describes Cash’s internal division:

The Man in Black was never black and white. Conflict ran through him. Conflict between wired and straight; God and the devil; the Saturday night sin and Sunday morning hair shirt; loving patriarch and wayward son; country conformist and eternal rebel. Jack [his late brother] and John. And on it goes. He was always trying to resolve this essential contradiction in his music. Every testament of faith has a quiver of doubt; every hymn a whiff of cordite; every original sin comes with the certainty of an Old Testament bolt of judgment.

Thomson, *The Resurrection of Johnny Cash: Hurt, Redemption, and American Recordings* (London: Jawbone Press, 2011), p. 38.

⁷ Johnny Cash, *Man in Black: His Own Story in His Own Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975). Also see Johnny Cash with Patrick Carr, *Cash: The Autobiography* (New York: HarperOne, 2003).

did he experience an unusual alchemy in his soul: God gifted Cash with a sense of peace and challenged him to quit the amphetamines that threatened to cut short his life. Darkness and light. Blindness and insight. Sometimes biographies matter. But what was it that Lawrence said? Artists are ‘hopeless liars’.⁸ Johnny Cash is no exception. ‘The problem with the story and the way Cash told it is twofold. First, Nickajack Cave was underwater in the fall of 1967, as a Cash historian discovered after an extensive check of weather records. Second, Cash did not quit drugs that day’.⁹ Sometimes truth is stranger than fiction.

But the truth is, also, simply this: Johnny Cash inspired my book of interviews with authors of Christian historical fiction. The earliest titles in this genre date from the 1830s, when imaginative efforts to situate historical or fictional characters in true-to-life settings revealing the faith of the authors as well as the protagonists first surfaced. Christianity’s patristic period featured heavily in the novels of the Victorian era: St Cyril of Alexandria shows up in *Hypatia, or New Foes with an Old Face*, which Charles Kingsley first published in 1853; St Perpetua takes center stage in *The African Fabiola: or, The Church of Carthage in the Days of Tertullian*, which Joseph P. O’Connell first released in 1887; and, St Athanasius appears in Emma Leslie’s 1895 novel, *Sowing Beside All Waters: A Tale of the Early Church*.¹⁰ Even Johnny Cash connects to this nascent stage of the genre’s development. He wrote *Man in White* after consulting the New Testament scholarship of Frederic W. Farrar, especially Farrar’s *Life and Works of St. Paul*, which first appeared in 1879, three years before Farrar served as a pallbearer at Charles Darwin’s funeral, and sixteen years before Farrar published his own Christian historical fiction, *Gathering Clouds: A Tale of the Days of St. John Chrysostom*.¹¹

Stories introducing lay Christians to their forebears in faith have been enjoying success ever since the days of Frederic W. Farrar. And the reason seems simple enough: many followers of Jesus value beautifully written, deftly characterised and pulse-quickenning literary art that often seems more satisfying than dry, frequently tedious textbooks about theological doctrine. My book, *The Writer and the Cross*, surveys twelve recent stories. Texts include an illustrated children’s book about St Ireneaus of Lyons, a novel about Martin Luther’s Reformation, a screenplay focusing on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and even a tale

⁸ Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, p. 2.

⁹ Robert Hillburn, *Johnny Cash: The Life* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2013), p. 321.

¹⁰ Charles Kingsley, *Hypatia, or, New Foes with an Old Face* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1902); Joseph P. O’Connell, *The African Fabiola: or, The Church of Carthage in the Days of Tertullian* (New York: D & J Sadlier, 1897); and, Emma Leslie, *Sowing Beside All Waters: A Tale of the Early Church* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1895).

¹¹ Hillburn, *Johnny Cash*, p. 440. Also see F.W. Farrar, *Gathering Clouds: A Tale of the Days of St. John Chrysostom* (New York and London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1895).

about Pope Francis narrated in popular manga style. I talk to the artists at some length. Most of them are little known or emerging storytellers. Some have published their work with a church or denominational press, others with a major publishing empire or popular print-on-demand platforms. All of them seem as eager as those of former times to show that past Christian lives can engage today's faithful, and many interviewees seem as fascinating as the Christian historical fictions they have published.¹²

Working on my book has been instructive. I have learned how to trust tellers *and* their tales. And one artist, retired Lutheran pastor Arlon Stubbe, left our June 2020 conversation inspired to pen another fiction. *An Inscrutable God*, his novella about Nicaea told from Arius's point of view, was published one year later.¹³ It's been fun. Yet what I would love to do is go back in time and converse with Louis de Wohl.

Born Ludwig von Wohl-Musciny, 1903, in Berlin, Germany, De Wohl published almost two dozen novels based on the lives of historical theologians, mostly canonised women and men, from 1947, the year he formally returned to the Roman Catholic Church, until his death, following a heart attack, in 1961, in Lucerne, Switzerland. Some might say that de Wohl represents the gold standard of Christian historical fiction in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Perhaps. But the gold seems tarnished these days. And his real life appears stranger than his fiction.

Making use of a personal file declassified and released to Great Britain's National Archives in 2008, this article sketches the story of how Britain's domestic spy agency, MI5, recruited Louis de Wohl to create horoscopes for Adolf Hitler and other Nazi leaders during the Second World War.¹⁴ De Wohl was a polemical figure. His own origin story does not check out. His MI5 handlers found him embarrassingly showy. And many historians of British intelligence now dismiss him

¹² Backstories repay close attention. I first presented this essay as a paper at the March 2022 meeting of the Southwest Commission on Religious Studies (SWCRS). Interestingly, my research turned up at least one SWCRS connection to the topic of Christian historical fiction. Joe Barnhart and Linda Kraeger, regular paper presenters at the SWCRS conference across the years, co-authored their own novel on Puritan America. See Linda Kraeger and Joe Barnhart, *Trust and Treachery: A Historical Novel of Roger Williams in America* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2004). Joe served SWCRS well, and he received the region's John G. Gammie Distinguished Scholar Award in 2005-06. In late July 2008, however, Linda and Joe were caught in crossfire when a gunman entered their church in East Tennessee. Linda died. And the story made national news. Recently, Joe reflected on Linda's legacy. See: <https://www.utmedicalcenter.org/joe-barnhart-shooting-survivor/>

¹³ Arlon Stubbe, *An Inscrutable God: Arius and Nicaea—A Novella* (Self-published: CreateSpace, 2021).

¹⁴ The National Archives of the United Kingdom. KV 2/2821(1), (2), (3), PF49321, Louis de Wohl. Also see: <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C11439609> For details on MI5's place in the history of British Intelligence, see Christopher Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5* (New York: Penguin, 2010).

as a persuasive con-artist.¹⁵ Yet six of de Wohl's pre-war novels were adapted for the silver screen; his post-war Christian stories remain best-sellers, according to Ignatius Press, his publisher; and, I suspect that de Wohl's story deserves greater attention if literary scholars are to better understand the development of the now highly successful genre of Christian historical fiction.¹⁶

II

I Follow My Stars, the autobiography that de Wohl published in 1937, two years after moving from Germany and taking up exile in London, reads like fiction, bejeweled with dazzling details surrounding his champagne birth; his links to Hungarian nobility; his preference for taking female leads in school dramas; his nightly dreams about Imperial Rome; and, his friendship with famous actor and director Fritz Lang.¹⁷ De Wohl first started writing at the age of six. His teachers were amazed, others compared him to Miguel de Cervantes, and a play about Jesus of Nazareth appeared by the time de Wohl turned seven.¹⁸ He spent time working in a bank in Berlin during Germany's social revolution, and he grabs our attention with a lively retelling of the atmosphere and action surrounding monetary inflation, financial panic, and the proscription of the Jews; although de Wohl's family background remains murky, and this despite MI5's deep dive into his regal ancestry, there is little doubt that he was at least partly Jewish.¹⁹

De Wohl's later escapades were just as imaginative as his youthful exploits. From bank teller to fashion designer, he eventually settled on a literary career, which he appears to have pursued with edgy enthusiasm. *I Follow My Stars* reveals, for example, that he once convinced an editor that he could write about the seedy side of Berlin through the eyes of a foreigner, an Englishwoman that he created and then named 'Miss Edith Alice Gordon'.²⁰ De Wohl spent ten days as Edith: 'She was smart, all in black, with a silver fox fur collar, big pearl earrings, a

¹⁵ See: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/7276217.stm and <https://www.theawl.com/2012/04/the-inconvenient-astrologer-of-mi5/>

¹⁶ In an e-mail to the author, dated September 19, 2018, Ms. Eva Muntean (Ignatius Press) confirms that de Wohl's fictionalised biographies of the saints sell very well, and seem to have done so every year since his death in 1961.

¹⁷ Louis de Wohl, *I Follow My Stars* (London: G. G. Harrap, 1937), pp. 9-10, 14, 49-50, 67. A thorough account of de Wohl's astrological predictions appears in James Parris, *The Astrologer: How British Intelligence Plotted to Read Hitler's Mind* (Cheltenham, U.K.: The History Press, 2021).

¹⁸ De Wohl, *I Follow My Stars*, p. 27.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 59-64; 212. Also see The National Archives: KV 2/2821 (1), PF49321, Item 295a.

²⁰ De Wohl, *I Follow My Stars*, p. 190.

rather conspicuous bracelet, eye veil, [and] red-lacquered finger nails', he said.²¹ Not surprisingly, *I Follow My Stars* amounts to mythopoesis, James Parris declares:

By then [1937] an accomplished novelist and screenwriter, de Wohl's skill lay in constructing a story, marshalling, manipulating and controlling facts and images for dramatic effect. To that extent, the work could never be taken as actual self-portrait, nor would de Wohl the entertainer have intended it to be. He was working to create a theatrical effect, a memorable performance, rather than attempting to recreate the past accurately.²²

Writing also gave de Wohl the resources for extensive travel. He lived in Egypt as an Arab, witnessing ceremonies restricted to religious insiders, and his time on the African continent seems to have inspired an ideological pushback against mere naturalism or gross reductionism. By the mid-to-late 1920s, de Wohl was speaking of the world as spiritually significant, with 'supernormal' signs everywhere, evident to all peoples, albeit to some more than others.²³ A quick study, de Wohl became interested in astrology around 1930, and the German stargazing community embraced him.²⁴ Although he rejected planetary predestinationism, or some version of cosmic fate, he accepted that certain interstellar 'tendencies' influence our lives.²⁵ And he framed everything he had to say within a pantheistic metaphysics of connection.²⁶ 'There can be no more feelings of loneliness', he declared, 'for one is always conscious of one's close harmony with the universe, and yet never before does one feel so free and independent'.²⁷ The sheer act of 'to be' itself, the Christian God creates, sustains, and guides 'all aspects, laws, and planets' within our unfolding cosmos, de Wohl believed.²⁸

Nazi Party members sought de Wohl's advice in the mid-1930s. They asked him to cast horoscopes and foretell events, since high-ranking officials by this time believed the positions of the stars affected human actions and character development, but de Wohl demurred.²⁹ He fled

²¹ Newspapers around the world reported this story of the Hungarian writer who sought his material in disguise. I first discovered de Wohl's remark in *The Daily Examiner*, Friday, November 19, 1937, p. 11.

²² Parris, *The Astrologer*, p. 19.

²³ De Wohl, *I Follow My Stars*, p. 113; also see p. 126.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 125-42.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

²⁶ Although de Wohl does not use this term, which was first coined in 1821, his philosophical overlay shares some important points of consanguinity with pantheism.

²⁷ De Wohl, *I Follow My Stars*, p. 141.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

²⁹ It seems that de Wohl arrived in London and persuaded British intelligence that Adolf Hitler and his team relied on astrology. Hitler had a personal astrologer, Karl Ernst Krafft, but de Wohl overstated the extent to which Hitler consulted Krafft or any stargazing specialist, according to James Parris. See Parris, *The Astrologer*, pp. 10-11, 39, 47-68, 75-79, 83-87,

Germany, settled in London, and then approached British Intelligence with his plan to act as a one-man secret service of the skies—reading the astrological charts of the pivotal players in World War II. The plan worked. Great Britain's *Sunday Express* published the country's first newspaper column on astrology in 1930, and even if some commentators routinely dismissed the study of zodiac signs, the British people seemed sufficiently intrigued by 1935, the year de Wohl arrived in London, and so the Hungarian writer seized the cultural moment. De Wohl became an active informant for MI5 in 1938, one year after publishing *I Follow My Stars*, and he went on to charm several leading figures in British political life, including Lord Halifax, the Foreign Secretary, with his aspect analysis of Hitler's horoscope. By 1940, de Wohl had created his own department, the Psychological Research Bureau, within the Division of Psychological Warfare, and he was working hard to persuade his MI5 handlers of astrology's worth as a weapon in the war against Germany.³⁰

Yet de Wohl was a rising star threatening to eclipse the sun. I say this because the memos in his declassified personal file suggest many of his superiors found him insufferable. De Wohl 'is extremely vain and has, in fact, many of the characteristics of a prima donna', wrote one officer. 'He is likely to be governed by nothing but self-interest'.³¹ De Wohl was denounced as 'a dangerous charlatan and confidence-trick merchant', pilloried as 'a complete scoundrel', and maligned as 'a bumptious seeker after notoriety'.³² There is very little doubt that de Wohl created consternation among many officials. They struggled to confirm his aristocratic attribution, for example, and some were concerned that he might be an imposter, even a double-agent, because his wife had taken up residence in Chile, where she had been spotted socialising with German expatriates known to be Nazi sympathisers.³³ De Wohl's handlers also questioned his notice-me flamboyance. Several

215-19, 245-52. Coincidentally, a novel about de Wohl and Krafft is available. See David Bryant Perkins, *Hitler's Astrologer: A historical novel based on the true story of how the Third Reich used astrology* (Mustang, OK: Tate Publishing & Enterprises, 2013).

³⁰ Parris, *The Astrologer*, pp. 71-89.

³¹ The National Archives: KV 2/2821 (3), PF49321, Item 157a. It seems de Wohl made public his deep desire to secure an Order of the British Empire award (OE) for his services to King and Country. The National Archives: KV 2/2821 (1), PF49321, Note 183.

³² The National Archives: KV 2/2821 (3), PF49321, Item 149a; The National Archives: KV 2/2821 (1), PF49321, Note 148; and, The National Archives: KV 2/2821 (2), PF49321, Item 228a.

³³ On de Wohl's past, and the questions surrounding his origin story, see The National Archives: KV 2/2821 (3), PF49321, Items 117a, 125b, 131a. On de Wohl's wife, Alexandra Betzold, see de Wohl, *I Follow My Stars*, pp. 51, 75, 82-83. Also see The National Archives: KV 2/2821 (3), PF49321, Item 108b. At least one officer claimed personal knowledge that Louis de Wohl was 'well known in pre-war days in Germany as a Nazi'. The National Archives: KV 2/2821 (2), PF49321, Item 262a.

did not care for the way he seemed to overshare.³⁴ Although he signed the Official Secrets Act, for example, he never seemed to tire of regaling London party guests with his spy stories. De Wohl also informed his friends that he had been made a captain in the British Army, and he often wandered through the nation's capital in uniform, even if his personal file reveals very few details concerning this commission. After 1941, then, British intelligence officers were worried. Most thought de Wohl was off-putting, even shifty, and they noted that his forecasts were frequently hit-and-miss, certainly too ambiguous to take seriously as military strategy.³⁵

Although de Wohl came across as a pretender with a mysterious, if not murky, past, senior intelligence officials deemed him suitable enough to send to the United States to conduct anti-Hitler propaganda. De Wohl arrived in New York City in June 1941. Pitched to US audiences as a 'modern Nostradamus', de Wohl was sensational, appearing before capacity crowds and giving numerous interviews on the radio and in newspapers.³⁶ He returned to the United Kingdom in February 1942. But no one was there to greet him. The work dried up. And by 1943, two years before World War II ended, de Wohl was no longer employed in any kind of secret activities.

III

This fate – a loss of importance as well as income – triggered an identity crisis, which de Wohl managed in two ways. He returned to writing, especially historical novels, which instantiated 'the blend of fact and fiction with which he always felt at ease', and he rediscovered the Roman Catholicism of his youth.³⁷ Faith and fiction became de Wohl's way of surviving the years following World War II, when so much lay in ruins, and like many of the novelists – from Graham Greene to Iris

³⁴ The National Archives: KV 2/2821 (2), PF49321, Items 201b, 229a, 272a, 282b. Also see The National Archives: KV 2/2821 (3), PF49321, Items 131a, 135a, 157a, 175a. It seems that a newspaper astrologer, 'a rival soothsayer', complained to the Home Office that de Wohl was a consistently indiscrete talker, often heard bragging that he had 'been appointed official Astrologer to the British War Office'. See The National Archives: KV 2/2821 (3), PF49321, Item 114a.

³⁵ The National Archives: KV 2/2821 (2), PF49321, Items 201b, 228a, 282b.

³⁶ This phrasing appears in a US press packet, which is included in de Wohl's personal file. See The National Archives: KV 2/2821 (2), PF49321, Item 260. Also see Ellic Howe, *Nostradamus and the Nazis: A Footnote to the History of the Third Reich* (London: Arborfiel, 1965). Finally, see Parris, *The Astrologer*, pp. 211-15, 239, 251-58.

³⁷ Parris, *The Astrologer*, p. 233. Additionally, Parris informs us that MI5 soon discovered de Wohl's plans to write a wartime memoir, which he eventually published in 1952, and so he remained under surveillance until late 1945. De Wohl became a naturalised British citizen one year later. See Parris, *The Astrologer*, pp. 227-29. Also see Louis de Wohl, *The Stars of War and Peace* (London: Rider & Company, 1952).

Murdoch – featured in Allan Hepburn’s recent study of Christianity in mid-century British literature, de Wohl used theologically-informed stories as a framework to communicate his hope for divinely-grounded peace and stability.³⁸ ‘British writers worked out their answers to the question of man [in World War II’s immediate aftermath] in spiritual terms, often, though not exclusively, by recourse to the novel’, Hepburn contends.³⁹ And in his own struggle for spiritual wisdom, de Wohl reached back into Christian history, probed the narratives of Christian doctrine’s makers and remakers, and then voiced how their discipleship – often forged in times of evil and suffering as well as conflict and war – addressed the postwar period’s atmosphere of loss and uncertainty:

Thus in a way my career started at the end of the war. What it was I wanted to write about became clear to me very soon. I had seen the terrifying effect of a false ideal. Millions of Germans fell for the dynamic charlatanism of Hitler, they tried to ape him, to become little Hitlers themselves. And there is no country where people do not look up to someone and try to imitate him or her. Most people want to be led, if only by some outstanding example in this field or that. Therefore much depended upon these examples. Now what would be the examples that God would wish us to follow? Christ, of course. But then, Christ was not only a Man, He was also God, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity; and how could Mr. Smith hope to imitate Him?

Perhaps that was the main reason why the Church taught us to venerate the saints. They were human, and many of them had to combat all kinds of faults to reach sanctity in the end. I began to read books about saints. Soon I realized that most of them were written by devout people – mostly priests and nuns – for devout people. I could not imagine that anyone living at the outer fringe of the faith, to say nothing of a non-religious person, would read them. Yet it was exactly that type of person who needed a saint’s example and guidance more than anyone else.

I began to ask questions and found that for a great many people a saint was ‘a person who was a religious fanatic’, or ‘a medieval phenomenon’, or simply ‘someone who prayed all the time’ (which last was much nearer the mark, though not in the sense they meant). Saints were ‘plastercast figures’, ‘goody-goodies’, ‘disagreeable zealots’. Of a hundred people I asked, not one replied ‘saints are what I ought to be’ or ‘saints are examples to be followed’.

But I had read enough now to sense, to feel, to know that apart from being just that, they were the most thrilling, the most interesting, the most courageous and even the most glamorous people of all. I decided to write historical novels whose heroes and heroines were saints.

³⁸ Allan Hepburn, *A Grain of Faith: Religion in Mid-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 28, 222.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

Soon enough I discovered that the problems of the saints – and all around them – were the problems of our own time, and that they and only they were able to solve them.⁴⁰

Concisely, the art of fictionalising the lives of Christian saints became de Wohl's lay apostolate.

'The most vital necessity of our time is the rediscovery of the Cross in our hearts', de Wohl once explained to an interviewer, 'so I wrote *The Living Wood*, the story of St Helena who rediscovered the True Cross'.⁴¹ This novel, the first in a series of Christian historical fictions, appeared in 1947. In May 1948, de Wohl journeyed to Rome, had an audience with Pope Pius XII, and the Holy Father urged him to write about St Thomas Aquinas; a novel about the thirteenth-century Doctor of the Church appeared in 1950. In the years following, de Wohl produced a steady stream of stories focusing on Christian thinkers and themes. A novel based on St Augustine appeared in 1951, for example, and a literary retelling of the life of St Ignatius Loyola surfaced one year later. One or two of de Wohl's stories, like his 1958 tale of St Francis of Assisi, were adapted for film. Other fictions focused on St Francis Xavier, St Paul the Apostle, St Benedict of Nursia, and St Catherine of Siena.⁴² Each story received glowing notices. 'Here the dry bones of history put on flesh', one reviewer wrote.⁴³ Another said: 'Each [novel] is a masterpiece in its own right. Though differing in treatment, they are in one way alike—in the author's capacity for presenting the Saint of his choice as a living character, moving in a world that becomes astonishingly real through his genius for re-constructing the period and its atmosphere'.⁴⁴ The seemingly vain de Wohl no doubt enjoyed such commentary.

So much for the tale(s). Can we trust the teller? The declassified file on de Wohl gives us pause, since it shows that British intelligence struggled to see where truth ended and deceit began with de Wohl, the unreliable narrator of his own life. D. H. Lawrence once more: 'An artist

⁴⁰ This comment appears in an autobiographical sketch that de Wohl made shortly after the war ended, See http://www.catholicauthors.com/de_wohl.html

⁴¹ Ibid. For the novel, see Louis de Wohl, *The Living Wood: A Novel* (Philadelphia, J. B. Lippincott, 1947).

⁴² Louis de Wohl, *The Quiet Light: A Novel about Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Philadelphia, J. B. Lippincott, 1950). Also see the following fictions: *The Restless Flame: A Novel about Saint Augustine* (Philadelphia, J. B. Lippincott, 1951); *The Golden Thread: A Novel about Saint Ignatius Loyola* (Philadelphia, J. B. Lippincott, 1952); *The Joyful Beggar: A Novel of St. Francis of Assisi* (Philadelphia, J. B. Lippincott, 1958); *Set All Afire: A Novel of St. Francis Xavier* (Philadelphia, J. B. Lippincott, 1953); *The Glorious Folly: A Novel of the Time of St. Paul* (Philadelphia, J. B. Lippincott, 1957); *Citadel of God: A Novel of Saint Benedict* (Philadelphia, J. B. Lippincott, 1959); and *Lay Siege to Heaven: A Novel of Catherine of Siena* (Philadelphia, J. B. Lippincott, 1960).

⁴³ *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, September 17, 1950, p. 33.

⁴⁴ *Melbourne Advocate*, June 17, 1954, p. 10.

is usually a damned liar, but his art, if it be art, will tell you the truth of his day'.⁴⁵ De Wohl's interviews tell us explicitly who he wrote for and exactly why. In the faith of the Christian saints, the conflict-weary and anxiety-ridden de Wohl found consolation, and he offered his novels as a series in imaginative apologetics, showing the post-war generation the way through artistic beauty to the contentment and peace of Christian faith.⁴⁶ Meaningful reading of faith-filled fiction, especially literary art about the storied Christian past, can foster spiritual formation, de Wohl believed.⁴⁷ His novel on St Augustine focuses on the theologian of grace's restless heart in the last days of the Roman Empire. De Wohl's tale about the Poor Man of God draws lessons in faith from the battle between Assisi and Perugia. And de Wohl's story about St Thomas Aquinas sets the Common Doctor's serene discipleship in the context of the Crusades, his noble family's dysfunction, and the turbulence of Frederick II's court. In the end, de Wohl's work falls into the category of literary hagiography but not in a way that should at all be dismissive. And I cannot imagine reading or teaching Christian historical fiction without using the story around his stories as a guide.

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⁴⁵ Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, p. 2.

⁴⁶ Again, see the short autobiography, http://www.catholicauthors.com/de_wohl.html. Also see Parris, *The Astrologer*, pp. 233-46.

⁴⁷ This faith in reading novels for spiritual formation pulsates at the heart of some recent books for preachers and lay Christians. See Austin Carty, *The Pastor's Bookshelf: Why Reading Matters for Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2022); Paul G. Doerksen, *Take and Read: Reflecting Theologically on Books* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016); Marcia Ford, *God Between the Covers: Finding Faith Through Reading* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2005); Cornelius Plantinga, *Reading for Preaching: The Preacher in Conversation with Storytellers, Biographers, Poets, and Journalists* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2013); and, Jessica Hooten Wilson, *The Scandal of Holiness: Renewing Your Imagination in the Company of Literary Saints* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2022).