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A Note on Zane Grey's Lewis Wetzel

Kenneth E. Hall

Zane Grey presented to readers of his early Frontier Trilogy¹ a version of the frontiersman type in Lewis Wetzel, the famed Deathwind, scourge of Delawares and Shawnees in the Ohio Country. Grey's Wetzel is a wilder version of traditional frontier characters like Daniel Boone and the fictional Leatherstocking (Natty Bumppo) of James Fenimore Cooper.² John Hollow notes that Grey probably did not have access to, or did not use, some of the earlier treatments of the historical Lewis Wetzel (1764-1808), instead relying on biographical fact and legend about him from other sources (Hollow 118).

Lewis (Johann Ludwig) Wetzel was the son of German immigrants. He was one of several historical frontiersmen known as "Indian haters." Peter Bischoff, in his article in the present volume, gives a brief survey of Indian haters in early frontier fiction: John Moredock in James Hall's "The Indian Hater" (1829) and William Joseph Snelling's "The Devoted" (1830), the Quaker Nathan Slaughter in Robert Montgomery Bird's *Nick of the Woods; or, The Jibbenainosay* (1837), and John Moredock again in Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man* (1857).

Grey highlights Wetzel's solitary nature and his *doppelgänger* relationship with his Indian foes. The Romantic trope of the split character or the double, as in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, also figures in the Grey portrait, as Wetzel displays a calmer and a more savage aspect. This doubling can be seen as well in the contrast between the Girty brothers, especially Jim, and Wetzel. Lew Wetzel is typically presented as a man living outside civilization and driven by a motive of revenge against the Indians. Jim Girty is a man also outside white civilization, a renegade allied with the Indians. And Lew is sexually repressed, maintaining his distance from female companionship, while Jim Girty is an unrepressed, savage rapist. Wetzel expli-

¹ *Betty Zane* (1903), *Spirit of the Border* (1906), *The Last Trail* (1909).

² Hollow also notes these connections (116).

cityly associates Girty with the Indians. In fact, Lew characterizes Girty as more of a threat than the Indians for settler women:

"I'll allow Injuns is bad enough; but I never hearn tell of one abusin' a white woman, as mayhap you mean. Injuns marry white women sometimes; kill an' scalp 'em often, but that's all. It's men of our own color, renegades like this Girty, as do worse'n murder." (Grey, *The Spirit of the Border*, 364)³

A kind of bridge between the extremes is Jonathan (Jack) Zane, who is a borderman⁴ like Lew and who also shies away from women, but who retires from Indian-killing when he finally falls in love with a woman from Fort Henry.

As Grey describes him, Wetzel seems physically like an Indian but perhaps even more like a Romantic "wild man" akin to Heathcliff from Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* or even the monster from Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein*, as this description shows:

Helen [daughter of a new arrival to Fort Henry] ... saw a very tall man with extremely broad shoulders, a mass of raven-black hair, and a white face. ... [She] saw a cold face, deathly in its pallor, lighted by eyes sloe-black but like glinting steel. Striking as were these features, they failed to fascinate as did the strange tracings which apparently showed through the white, drawn skin. (Grey, *The Last Trail*, 191)

Like both these characters, Wetzel lives with an unresolved trauma which causes him to seek revenge. According to the account in *Betty Zane*, this was largely the result of the massacre of most of his family in Virginia by Indian marauders (Grey, *Betty Zane*, 42). Like one of his spiritual descendants, Ethan Edwards of *The Searchers* (1956), Wetzel is a man driven by an often uncontrollable hatred.

³ Girty is described in cartoonish Romantic villain terms, with hints of anti-Semitism, by Nell in *The Spirit of the Border* as having "a greedy, wolfish face, with a long, hooked nose" and later by the narrator in demonic terms: "Nothing could be more revolting than that swarthy, evil face turned pale with fear. Girty's visage was a ghastly, livid white" (Grey, *The Spirit of the Border*, 348, 369).

⁴ "It is necessary we have such' ... 'and they cannot be bordermen unless free as the wind blows," explains Col. Zane (Grey, *The Last Trail*, 172). The Colonel elaborates on this description of the bordermen later in the novel by distinguishing them from other frontiersmen in their "marvelously developed woodcraft," "wonderful physical powers," especially their "fleetness of foot" (Grey, *The Last Trail*, 236). Jonathan Zane is the brother of Col. Ebenezer Zane and Betty Zane.

Lew is also endowed with nearly superhuman abilities. Like Hawkeye, he is an unerring marksman. He is described as a "giant," with bone-crushing strength and lightning reflexes.⁵ He can track almost better than an Indian, and he seems almost tireless. Grey even implies that he has otherworldly energy, as more than one character hears a moaning in the wind when Deathwind is near (see Grey, *The Spirit of the Border*, 328). A transplanted Virginian, he is, like Wister's Virginian character, a man who does not quite seem to fit into white civilization. As a borderman, he is neither a typical frontiersman nor a settler, but a man on the margins, not even comfortable in Indian society, but existing liminally between two worlds.



A highlighted aspect of Wetzel's appearance in the Grey novels is his very long hair. Although his reason for maintaining such unusually long locks might well be his desire to blend into Indian appearance so as to deceive them,⁶ the unshorn mane also recalls Samson, who derived his great strength from his hair, which symbolized his

⁵ Perhaps not a giant for our time, Wetzel does appear to have been of larger than normal height for his own time. Carroll recounts that Wetzel's remains when examined in 1942 "revealed a broad-shouldered man of five feet nine inches in height" (Carroll 90n15).

⁶ Or, as Hollow implies, Wetzel becomes his enemy (115-16).

dedication to God (*Judges* 16:17). Unlike Samson, who was almost frustrated in his vengeful quest (by Delilah), Wetzel does not allow himself to be "shorn" -- that is, emasculated--by contact with a woman and thus wreaks terrible revenge on the Indians and the white renegades. The one exception to this procedure is his sparing of Chief Wingenund, his longtime enemy, after Nell protests to him that the chief has converted to Christianity (Grey, *The Spirit of the Border*, 425-26). Although Wetzel pursues him, he elects not to fire at him after he sees the chief preparing to bury, in Christian fashion, his daughter Whispering Winds, who had been killed by Jim Girty along with her husband Joe Downs.

Like some other bordermen, Wetzel is civilized to at least some extent by the power of feminine influence. Nevertheless, he remains for Grey a figure beyond civilized limitations, who may be used as a weapon by the fort dwellers but who acts in many cases beyond their control. He represents the darker side of men like Col. Zane, who has accepted his role as patriarch of the fort, enforcing and even making laws. Even Wetzel perceives that his time as borderman is limited due to the growing presence of settlers and the diminishing influence of the Indians.⁷

The characterization of Wetzel, like other frontier personalities, is a combination of history, legend, and outright tall tale telling. Like Samson and Heracles, he is attributed superior power over wild animals, as Samson kills a lion, and Heracles, while still an infant, kills two serpents; and Lew and his brothers are depicted in accounts as killing and eating a wolf at an early age. His presentation in Grey's work shares features with Cooper's Natty Bumppo, such as his facility with firearms, including reloading on the run and winning shooting contests. (The contest in *Betty Zane* is characteristic of such competitions as Wetzel wins by bettering a near-perfect shot by his closest rival, as do Robin Hood in *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1939) and Lin McAdam in *Winchester '73* (1950) (Grey, *Betty Zane*, 119.)

⁷ Wetzel is in some sense a tool of the civilizers, who will discard him eventually but who cannot always control him, rather like the enforcer Luca Brasi in Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972).

A recurring feature of Grey's presentation of Wetzel is his astonishing speed and stamina. These qualities were affirmed by his contemporaries, as in the following summary of an account by Caleb Wells:

When attacking an Indian camp with Wetzel, Wells began chasing an Indian only to be outrun by Lewis. By the time Wells reached the stricken Indian, Wetzel had tomahawked and scalped him. Since Wells had considered himself swift of foot, he later challenged Wetzel to a race of one hundred yards. Not only did Lewis easily win the race, but he discharged his rifle at the beginning, reloaded as he ran, and fired again as he reached the finish line. (Carroll 83)

Carroll also examines the reloading on the run tales, finding them plausible enough while noting that the full capabilities of Wetzel's frontier rifle, notably its improved accuracy over a smoothbore, would not have been exercised under such circumstances as he may have had to reload "with unpatched balls of considerably less size than the caliber of his rifle" (Carroll 84). Wetzel shares this ability with, at least, the cinematic Hawkeye reloads and fires while running along a mountain ridge at the climax of Michael Mann's *Last of the Mohicans* (1992). Like other such frontier or woodsman heroes, from archer William Tell to Lin McAdam in *Winchester '73*, Wetzel is an incomparable marksman, as Grey depicts him as winning a shooting contest and killing his foes at great distances, as in his killing Chief Red Fox at Fort Henry, where "[t]wo hundred yards was not proof against Wetzel's deadly smallbore" (Grey, *Betty Zane*, 139).

John Hollow observes that although Zane Grey intended to tell the tale of Betty Zane's rescue of Fort Henry, this focus was reset by his fascination with the Wetzel character, who becomes the real star of the three novels (Hollow 111). This is hardly surprising, as the historical and the fictional Wetzel fascinates because of his personal magnetism, his contradictory persona, and the sheer energy of his exploits.

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