Robert Waln, Jr.: Quaker Satirist and Historian

It is not surprising that Robert Waln, Jr., a Philadelphia Friend who published eight books between 1819 and 1825, should now be largely forgotten. Waln’s satires on Philadelphia society in the Monroe era are so imitative of eighteenth-century British models that they lack genuine sharpness; yet occasional passages are fresh and original. His two major historical studies, an ambitious history of China and a popular life of the Marquis de Lafayette, are full of prejudice. His most interesting work may well be the posthumously published account, brief and factual, of the Asylum for the Insane established near Frankford by the Society of Friends. Here Waln, treating a subject he knows thoroughly and cares about, avoids the triviality of much of his satiric work, as well as the errors of scholarship evident in the longer historical books.

That Waln was fundamentally a serious, somewhat moral writer is not surprising when one considers his family background. His father, Robert Waln, an influential Philadelphia merchant, was a powerful conservative spokesman in city and state politics, and a vociferous opponent of the liberal Hicksite Quakerism. The elder Waln’s letter books have considerable value to the social historian: letters to business associates in such widely scattered trade centers as London, Lisbon, and Canton give lists of articles of export and import; letters of instruction to supercargo officers and shipmasters contain minute information on the functions of these officials and on their relationship to the ship owner; a series dealing with his father’s estate illuminates legal procedure of the day; and throughout the six large manuscript volumes are recorded vivid comments on Waln’s Philadelphia, as, for example, the several references to various yellow fever epidemics.

2 In manuscript, at The Library Company of Philadelphia.
The father's business activities have direct bearing upon the son's literary career. The family wealth and social position made possible a leisure through which young Waln was able to read widely and to achieve some technical skill in both prose and verse. Moreover, he was sufficiently interested in the Waln trading enterprise to ship to China as supercargo officer on one of his father's vessels; the impressions he received during this trip are recorded in his book on that country.

Robert Waln's first published volume, *The Hermit in America on a Visit to Philadelphia*, is a rather feeble satire modelled after the popular work *The Hermit in London*, a fairly typical eighteenth-century collection of familiar essays. Waln does not paraphrase his model, but although his structure is different, his point of view is similar: an urbane, detached amusement at the affectations and vanities of aristocratic society. Waln's leading character and mouthpiece is the "hermit of Guiana," a traveler who finds his first impressions of Philadelphians worthwhile enough to leave to posterity. By using this device, Waln assumes the advantages of a stranger's fresh observation. But there are disadvantages, too—such as accounting for the information the hermit needs—and these disadvantages Waln surmounts in the most rudimentary ways: through overheard conversations, chance street meetings, and unlikely confidences.

Almost immediately upon his arrival in Philadelphia, the hermit is invited to the home of a well-to-do citizen. Thereafter, he is able, through fortuitous associations, to observe polite society in such pursuits as parties, morning calls, walks, and theater-going. His remarks are usually caustic. He notes the inadequacy of a Philadelphia host, a merchant, who, having invited many people to his salon, cannot endure the inane group, and excuses himself on a transparent pretext. Furthermore, he fails to provide the entertainment his guests have been led to expect, and the food is both poor and scanty. But if the host is rude, his guests are worse. They stand about in large groups, uttering platitudes and showing off their finery. The hermit's courtly bows to the ladies are returned "by a profound courtesy from the old, and slight inclination of the head from the young."

---

Besides the ineptitude of polite society, the hermit sees other details of the city's life. During a morning's stroll, he criticizes Philadelphia Quakers for their self-interest, particularly for their refusal to fight for their country. He delivers the most violent part of this tirade just outside an open shop door, from which presently emerges a Quaker, who proceeds to answer the hermit's criticism. The man's courtesy and logic reveal to the hermit how ill-conceived his own outburst was. Here Wain defends his own religious group; if the scene itself is artificial, the passage at least compresses standard arguments about the Society of Friends.

Philadelphia eccentrics are satirized in the person of a Mr. Quotem, who never utters a remark, even in reply to a question, except with a quotation from Shakespeare. The initial conception of this character is amusing enough, but the sketch soon becomes merely a test of the author's ingenuity in manipulating conversation so as to introduce passages from the plays. A more original note is struck in the last chapter of the collection, "The Theatre," in which Wain ridicules empty-headed dandies who attend the theater, particularly for their inane slang phrases, such as "cart-horses," "in for the plate," and "up to slum." This piece also satirizes the city's volunteer firemen's associations, by describing young volunteers calling out "Fire!" merely for the fun of alarming the citizens and of creating a confusion.

Sketchy and faulty as The Hermit in America may seem now, it was well enough received to warrant Waln's bringing out a second edition in the same year. Virtually the same material is retained, but the author has dropped the introductory shipboard scene and substituted an essay called "Poets and Painters"—a satirical summary of leading Philadelphia exponents of those arts. The value of this change is questionable, for the new chapter fits in less appropriately with the book's basic structure than did the former episode, which gave a setting and a springboard for the subsequent narration. One other chapter, "Human Leeches," is added—a lampoon on social climbers.

Having with apparent success ridiculed some of the more glaring foibles of the city's inhabitants, in a prose which, while not strikingly original, is amusing and competent, Waln next turned to verse, and

in 1820 brought out two satirical volumes, *American Bards* and *Sisyphi Opus*: or, *Touches at the Times*. The first of these, a long poem bemoaning the state of American poetry, is concerned so much with figures now obscure that the point is blunted; the second, with its wider range of subject matter and its greater variety of technique, is more effective. This volume, *Sisyphi Opus*, is essentially a verse rendition of the satirical *Hermit* material. Beginning with a conventional statement of his purpose, that of recording fashionable manners, Wain takes up such Philadelphia types as the antiquated belle, ridiculous in her efforts to snare a husband; the beau, disgusting in his lechery; the matron, "laudable" in her effort to teach her daughter "all the wiles of art"; the maiden, lovely in her naturalness; and the fop, ludicrous in his preoccupation with fashion:

> The snail-like pace that leads his Chinese feet  
> Along the tonish walks of Chestnut Street.

Wain notes the prevalence of gluttony. He calls attention to the poverty of the theater and to the low quality of Philadelphia criticism. And in perhaps his most amusing vein, he reproduces inanities of conversation:

> "A fine night, madam!"—"Yes; extremely so."
> "O! you are here at last, sir; does it snow?"
> "No, madam, rain; confound such devilish weather,  
> It seems though heaven and earth would come together."
> "Lord! sir; how vulgar! you had better say  
> Pitchforks point downwards."—"Did you like the play?"
> "Like it! with that sweet angel Mrs. Bartley!"
> "Have you read Poet Paulding?"—"Yes, ma'am, partly."

Though Wain's two verse satires are mildly amusing and graceful, there is a distinct amateurishness about them. The verse is sometimes rough, words are often chosen for rhyme alone; and *Sisyphi Opus* lacks a coherent, integrated plan. That Wain was not satisfied to remain in this genre is indicated by the inclusion in *Sisyphi Opus* of thirteen lyrics, personal statements on the themes of love and death, together with a topical poem condemning slavery. These short

---

5 *American Bards. A Satire* (Philadelphia: Published for the Author by M. Thomas, 1820).
6 *Sisyphi Opus: or, Touches at the Times. A Satire. And Other Poems. By the Author of "American Bards."* (Philadelphia: Published by J. Maxwell and Moses Thomas, 1820).
poems are not memorable, but they indicate their author's versatility in using different verse techniques, the rhyme schemes and line-lengths both being varied. His interest in these more serious themes, which is also evident in the moral attitude behind all the satires, may foreshadow his later abandonment of satire and his complete concern with factual prose. However, he was to publish one more humorous work—one which contains not only his best "light" writing, but some of the best writing he ever published. This volume, *The Hermit in Philadelphia,* which appeared in 1821, was described as the "second series" in the hermit's observations.

Doing away with the tiresome structure which creaks so noticeably in the first edition, Wain chooses ten topics to lampoon: coquettes, dandy-slang, female slanderers, fashionable conversation, Philadelphia amusements, spoiled children, elections, lotteries and quacks, summer resorts, and imitation of foreign customs. Although he has touched on some of these topics before, his treatment here is at once more expert and more detailed. He displays a surer handling of dialogue; he compresses incidents more tightly; and he achieves a greater variety through such devices as including two glossaries in his piece on conversation, and using the letter form in his sketch on summer resorts. Moreover, his selection of incident is better; everything in the volume is relevant to the basic plan.

The first piece, "Coquettes," portrays the coquette, because of her endless flirtations and her determination to postpone marriage, as the greatest enemy of her own sex. This moral is illustrated by the pathetic story of Miss Heartstone, who "puts off" her suitor Mr. Trustall until the gentleman dies; henceforth Miss Heartstone is an object of popular ridicule. "Female Slanderers," another satire on women, tells how Mr. Single is unable to hire a suitable maid for fear of the whisperings of those dowagers who always spread gossip about bachelors; he is even afraid to employ a Negress. "Philadelphia Amusements" comments on the poor quality of the theater, music, dancing, and sports, and laments the little use made of the library for pleasure. "Spoiled Children" tells how a wife by indulging her two children ruins their lives and wrecks her own home. "Elections" ridicules the supremacy of the "mob-ility" in municipal politics.

"Letters from Long Branch" is a clever series of letters giving different points of view on a fashionable seaside resort.

The most interesting piece in the volume, however, is the fourth, "Fashionable Conversation." Here Wain develops a theme he treated with less success in *Sisyphi Opus*. Besides quoting typically inept conversations between two persons who meet on the street and among a group of "morning callers," the author appends a glossary of common terms with their peculiarly Philadelphia meanings, and a list of fashionable mispronunciations. Particularly effective are some of the definitions:

At home: The domestic amusement of three hundred visitors in a small room to yawn at each other.

Not at home: Sitting in your own drawing-room.

Bore: Everything that a person dislikes; it also means any person who talks of religion.

Coach-man: A great or accomplished gentleman.


Day: Night; or strictly speaking, from 10 P.M. to 6 A.M.

Husband: A person to pay your debts.

Home: Everybody's house but your own.

Honour: Standing fire well.

Highly-Accomplished: Reading music well; painting flowers for the border of a screen, and a talent for guessing charades.

Matrimony: A bargain.

Modest: Sheepish.

Religion: Occupying a seat in some genteel church.

Dining-out: Getting drunk.

Love: Dollars and cents.

Some of the fashionable mispronunciations are interesting examples of genteelisms of Wain's time:

Duty: djuty
Tune: tshune
Sky: skeei
Master: mauster

Can't: caunt
Tyrant: tirrant
Byron: Birron
Moore: More

Southey: Sutthey

*The Hermit in Philadelphia* shows definite improvement over Wain's preceding satires, both in range and in technique. But whether the author was tired of this medium or dissatisfied with the reception accorded his satires, or for some other reason, he turned
next to an entirely different kind of writing. All his subsequent books are purely factual in content, and they attempt things quite far removed from the purpose which lies behind the first five volumes.

Before 1819 Waln had evidently done considerable research on the history of China. The importing and exporting business of his father, which had shifted from the West Indies to the Orient, gave him further opportunity for investigating that country. He shipped as supercargo officer on one of his father's vessels, and spent four months between September, 1819, and January, 1820, in Canton, absorbing additional information and recording personal impressions. The result of these endeavors was a monumental compilation of historical, religious, economic and social data concerning the great Asiatic country, the full scope of the work being summarized on the title page:

*China; comprehending a View of the Origin, Antiquity, History, Religion, Morals, Government, Laws, Population, Literature, Drama, Festivals, Games, Women, Beggars, Manners, Customs, &c. of that Empire, with Remarks on the European Embassies to China; and the Policy of Sending a Mission from the United States to the Court of Pekin. To Which Is Added, A Commercial Appendix, containing A Synopsis of the Trade of Portugal, Holland, England, France, Denmark, Ostend, Sweden, Prussia, Trieste, and Spain, in China and India; and a Full Description of the American Trade to Canton, Its Rise, Progress, and Present State: with Mercantile Information, Useful to the Chinese Trader and General Merchant. By Robert Wain, Jr. Philadelphia: Printed and Published for the Author, by J. Maxwell, 1823.*

If he is never entirely successful in bringing all these considerations into a well-integrated whole, Waln nevertheless shows here a truly impressive ability to work in large forms. He has collected literally hundreds of observations on China—and on India and Egypt as well—from Greek and Roman to eighteenth-century European writers. Much of the material shows an anthropological interest in primitive customs far in advance of his time, as when he painstakingly weighs evidence for and against the major theories of the origin of the Chinese. His interest in Oriental philosophy, though of a different kind, occurred before that of Emerson and other writers of the "American Renaissance." The book must stand as an early example of American historical research. It has, certainly, its faults—for instance, Waln's point of view is hardly impartial in such a passage
as that comparing the inhabitants of India and China, in which a Western superiority seems to assert itself:

There is certainly a general resemblance between the Hindus and the Chinese, the two most numerous nations of Asia. They both exhibit the same smooth and polished surface of character. Both are distinguished by apparent courtesy, quietude, and domesticity; and more unfavourably, by meanness, cowardice, deceit, and dishonesty.⁸

In the same year that saw the publication of China (1823), and in the following year, Waln edited the Biographies of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence. And in 1825, the year of his death, appeared Waln’s biography of the Marquis de Lafayette.⁹ If the book on China occasionally betrays a disapproval of a people toward whom he did not feel entirely sympathetic, Waln’s Life of the Marquis de Lafayette reveals an opposite bias in favor of the French hero and of our own national hero George Washington. There is little subtlety in the author’s characterization—Lafayette and Washington are consistently praised and their enemies universally condemned. Waln’s approach sometimes reminds one of Bancroft’s.

Scarcely had he set his foot upon our soil, before his gallant spirit mingled in enthusiasm with that of the brave warriors, whose brows were still contracted by the sternness of warfare, whose ears were still ringing with the shouts of battle, whose swords were yet reeking with the blood of their oppressors.¹⁰

This passage at once suggests the strength and weakness of the book. It has a narrative, colorful sweep which makes it good reading; particularly in the battle scenes, Waln conveys Lafayette’s heroism and his relish for adventure. But the passage also indicates Waln’s liberal use of his imagination in interpreting the facts of history, as well as his preoccupation with style. As history, the biography has limitations; as a story well told, it can still be read with pleasure.

⁸ China, 184.

Poulson’s Daily Advertiser, a popular Philadelphia newspaper, carried the following obituary in the July 9, 1825 issue: “Died, suddenly, on the 4th inst., at Providence, R. I., in his 31st year, Robert Waln, Jr., of this city.”

¹⁰ Life of the Marquis de Lafayette, 35.
Later in 1825 appeared Waln's last work, a short essay describing the Friends' Asylum for the Insane, near Frankford. This excellent work, a historical and descriptive account of the asylum, combines a minute description of the physical plant with a brief historical survey and a summary of the theories used for the cure of patients. In humane treatment of the insane, the Friends seem to have been enlightened. Waln describes their system of allowing the patients to "work back to health," the male inmates doing farm work and heavy chores around the grounds, the women performing such domestic tasks as washing. Except for the most violent, the inmates were not confined. The superintendent and his family mingled freely with the patients, even taking meals with them. Kindness and sympathetic understanding prevailed, and only when these failed were other measures taken.

When persuasion and mild means fail, resort must be had to that principle of fear, which has a salutary effect upon all society. In such cases, recourse is had to the shower-bath, immersion in water, solitary confinement, and, very rarely, the strait waistcoat, or leathern straps.

Waln's account of the asylum reveals not only his command of clear, pictorial prose, but also his genuine humanitarian instincts. One sees a sympathy for the unfortunate inmates, and a desire to better their lot, as when he advocates improved walks upon the grounds, the installation of a ninepins course, and the purchase of birds and animals to comfort the patients and to awaken them to "social and benevolent feelings." And in the passage analyzing the precautions taken against fire, he shows an understanding of the truly pitiable condition of helpless, bewildered insane persons trapped in a blazing asylum.

It is, of course, idle to speculate on what a writer might have done had he lived a few years longer. But Robert Waln, Jr., might well have grown in stature. His technical competence, his wide range of interests, and his serious purpose are unquestionable assets. He did not publish any really important book, and the best of his books have


12 Ibid., 243.
numerous flaws. It is possible, however, to read even faulty works of a minor author with pleasure, particularly when those works include some of the brighter sketches of *The Hermit in Philadelphia* and the factual account of the Asylum for the Insane. And although Wain as a literary figure probably deserves the almost complete obscurity which has been his lot, his career and his publications still have value for the social historian who wishes to investigate the active life of Philadelphians during the Monroe administrations.

*Purdue University*  
*William S. Hastings*