



THE
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 OF HISTORY AND BIOGRAPHY

Robert Montgomery Bird, Editor

VERNON L. PARRINGTON called him "probably the ablest man of letters that Philadelphia produced" during the period of literary revival in the city in the eighteen-thirties and forties.¹ Certainly, Robert Montgomery Bird combined versatile talents with an unsparing application of energy to the task of furnishing Philadelphians with a first-rate newspaper which would be an effective spokesman for the Whig Party, the commercial interests of the community, and which would purvey the news of the day. George R. Graham and Morton McMichael, proprietors of the *North American*, were happy to obtain Bird's services as an editorial partner in the newspaper which they were attempting to rehabilitate.

A playwright, Bird enjoyed wide acclaim, and the pre-eminent Thespian of the day, Edwin Forrest, welcomed the opportunity to perform his plays.² His knowledge of Latin, Greek, Spanish, French and Italian enabled Bird to engage in diverse literary pursuits. His title of "Doctor" had been genuinely earned, since he had received his medical degree at the University of Pennsylvania in 1827, and at one time he had filled the chair of *Materia Medica* and Pharmacy at the Pennsylvania College until that institution closed in 1843.³ He

¹ *Main Currents of American Thought* (New York, 1927), II, 191.

² E. P. Oberholtzer, *A Literary History of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1906), 243.

³ Pennsylvania College (now Gettysburg College) had a "Medical Department" located in Philadelphia. See H. G. Hefelbower, *The History of Gettysburg College, 1832-1932* (Gettysburg, 1932), 123.

practiced medicine but a few months, since he was more interested in research, and he had begun chemical experiments looking to the development of a cheaper process for the manufacture of niter and saltpeter. His removal from New Castle, Delaware, to Philadelphia in July, 1847, to edit the *North American*, put a stop to his experimentation.⁴ Wide reading, particularly in romance, made up for an obscure and probably limited formal schooling, and by the time he assumed his editorial labors with Graham and McMichael he had already traveled in southern and western United States and in Europe. Much of this travel had been undertaken in the interest of his health, which "had been endangered by a too diligent application to books." At his death in 1854 his literary output included fourteen volumes of prose fiction and four dramatic tragedies.⁵

Bird brought not only an enviable reputation as a writer to the *North American*, but some welcome additional cash. The journal was happy to announce that "Dr. Bird, whose high attainments in literature and science are universally known and appreciated, will take charge of the miscellaneous department."⁶ Despite a reluctance to leave New Castle, Bird was moved to join the *North American* staff in the hope of providing greater financial security for his family.⁷ He had hoped for appointment as head of the newly established Smithsonian Institution at Washington, which he had helped publicize in a widely read article first appearing in the *North American* in 1844, but dimming prospects for this post led him to entertain the idea of entering the newspaper enterprise as "joint proprietor and editor."⁸

Not a wealthy man, Bird was compelled to borrow money for the venture, and in this he appears to have had some early difficulty. In June, 1847, a Delaware friend, J. P. Comegys, wrote Bird that his bank was unable to advance the necessary sum at that time because of the tight money market, but that "I do sincerely hope, my dear Dr., that your inability to procure the useful here will not prevent

⁴ Mary M. Bird, *Life of Robert Montgomery Bird* (Philadelphia, 1945), 120.

⁵ *North American*, Jan. 24, 1854.

⁶ *Ibid.*, July 1, 1847.

⁷ M. M. Bird, 120.

⁸ C. E. Foust, *The Life and Dramatic Works of Robert Montgomery Bird* (New York, 1919), 132.

you from raising it elsewhere.”⁹ Bird turned eventually to his personal friend and Whig Party luminary, John M. Clayton, United States Senator from Delaware, who was soon to become Secretary of State in the Zachary Taylor Cabinet. Possibly he accepted aid from Clayton as a last resort, revealing that he was under obligation to Graham and McMichael to raise the money. Clayton did not fail him, but he warned Bird “to be well satisfied before you venture further [that] . . . the property you are about to buy [is] really worth what you are to give for it.”¹⁰ Bird obtained an advance from the Farmer’s Bank of the State of Delaware amounting to \$27,000, with Clayton named as his surety. In the Bird Papers may be found a copy of the following agreement in McMichael’s handwriting:

Philad^a, June 23, 1847

Rec’d of for R. M. Bird Twenty-six thousand dollars, secured by Bond of Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore Rail Road Company, for Thirty-thousand Eight hundred dollars, being in full for one third the joint establishment of the North American and United States Gazette Newspaper, including all the properties appertaining to the establishment to the amount of one third as above stated.

GRAHAM & McMICHAEL

Clayton wrote to Frederic Mayer, Bird’s brother-in-law, shortly after Bird’s death that

My friend’s anxiety to get into the business induced him to sell the Rail Road Loan far below what it cost me & was intrinsically worth, & I endeavored to restrain him from selling till this depression was over. But he was, I believe, under some obligation to McM. to raise funds by a day certain, & so sacrificed the loan.¹¹

Bird’s role in *North American* affairs from midsummer 1847, until his death in January, 1854, is a tale of his efforts to furnish Philadelphians with a conservative, commercial, and capable newspaper, while at the same time making it pay well enough to enable him to discharge his financial obligation to his friend. In the first of these two aims he was in a measure successful, and whatever

⁹ Comegys to Bird, June 19, 1847, Robert M. Bird Papers, Library of the University of Pennsylvania; all manuscript material hereinafter cited, unless otherwise noted, is from the Bird Papers.

¹⁰ Clayton to Bird (undated).

¹¹ Clayton to Mayer, Feb. 8, 1854.

credit accrues to the journal as a competently edited publication belongs primarily to Bird. In the second aim he was but partially successful. His investment in the paper gave him only a third interest, but he carried more than his share of the editorial burden. Graham was engrossed in his various speculative projects, McMichael's talents were primarily managerial, and their nominal editorial associate, Robert T. Conrad, was interested in a political career and was frequently off lecturing. These outside diversions led the proprietors to welcome Bird, and because they needed more money in 1847 to carry on the enterprise, were happy to sell him the third interest.¹² In consequence, Bird bore the load of editing, silently at first, but with mounting resentment. In an undated note to Clayton, written sometime in the spring of 1848, he explained his status.

I do, I may say, all the writing of the paper (the judge [Conrad] has scarcely furnished three articles in three months) and my whole time from 7 to 8 A.M. to 1 next A.M. every day, is laboriously occupied in my duties, and relaxation or pleasure of any kind are things I never know. I have not time to read many papers,—they are read for me by others (the Wash. papers by McM.) who hand me anything to be commented upon.

In a memorandum to Graham, dated June 19, 1848, he wrote:

The experience of a year satisfies me that the concern cannot be made safe and prosperous as it ought to be without the entire devotion of all the proprietors' time and functions to all its interests, and a systematic regulation of functions such as will produce some equitable division of labors.

Although much of the credit for the financial and journalistic success of the *North American* in the latter 1840's is due Graham, a "go-getter" par excellence, it was Bird's pen that brought it editorial distinction. During his tenure the journal was, in the words of A. K. McClure, "the first daily journal in Philadelphia with an editorial staff that compared favorably with the staff of the best New York journal . . . which shaped political conviction and action."¹³ Frederick Hudson termed the paper "the most spiritedly-managed news-

¹² E. P. Oberholtzer, *Philadelphia: A History of the City and Its People* (Philadelphia, 1912), II, 220.

¹³ Howard M. Jenkins, ed., *Pennsylvania: Colonial and Federal* (Philadelphia, 1903), III, 195-196.

paper in Philadelphia at that time." According to Hudson, "It was the *North American* that inspired the other journals in Philadelphia to great efforts and helped to infuse more energy in the operations and the enterprise of the *Tribune* in New York."¹⁴

Certainly, Bird soon became one of the more influential Whig editors of the nation, and his advice was sought by the party leaders. James E. Harvey, Washington correspondent for the paper, wrote Bird in 1848 that "Crittenden applied to me this morning to get you to write a sketch of Taylor, his battles, & the various accidents [incidents?] connected with his life. . . . Toombs, Stephens & others have also spoken to me today, but it was evidently after consultation." Harvey urged Bird to accept the task. "You are a man of labor & must undertake it." And, he added significantly, "I need not tell you that it is highly important for you & the N.A. to be concerned in this matter." A few days later Harvey was calling for speed. "I have promised the performance on your part and we must get through with it. . . . I think the young men in the office might materially assist the object." He recognized that "this is a severe imposition on your kindness & not a slight demand upon your industrious habits," and he suggested that "our good friend Mac [McMichael] must mount the editorial tripod to relieve you in part."¹⁵

Bird applied himself to the task, and upon Harvey's suggestion dispatched the "Sketch" chapter by chapter to the latter at Washington. When the final chapter was delivered Harvey praised it highly. "A residence of a month or two in this latitude [*sic*] would cure some of that virgin modesty which you brought up from Delaware," he wrote. "If you ever get into Purgatory, the prayers of the party will be offered for your speedy release—of course I mean any purgatory that is worse than that of editing a daily newspaper."¹⁶ If Bird anticipated any more tangible reward, he failed to receive it. "You ought to be Dep'ty Collector, or Inspector at New Castle," Clayton assured him, but no such payment was forthcoming and Bird remained with the *North American*. He could take solace in the growing respect and esteem of his fellow Whigs, and the fame of the paper as a solid party organ increased. In the Bird Papers is a

¹⁴ *Journalism in the United States from 1690-1872* (New York, 1873), 182-183.

¹⁵ James E. Harvey to Bird, June 12 and 20, 1848.

¹⁶ Harvey to Bird, July 12 and 17, 1848.

form letter addressed to Whig leaders urging that they do everything possible to extend the circulation of the *North American*, since on all the leading Whig principles "it is sound to the core, and its expositions are not only wise and truthful, but they are enforced with a spirit and power which make them eminently impressive." This mis-sive was signed by John M. Clayton and Truman Smith.

Sensitive, self-effacing, and shy, Bird's relations with his partners were not wholly happy. He was "essentially a man of the closet," and his aversion to crowds led him to avoid when possible "all public assemblies." Taking little pleasure in "spectacles of any sort," it seemed to be not only the choice but "the necessity of his nature to live in retirement." He could not exist without books, which he preferred "to the choicest exhibitions of oratory." His correspondence and private memoranda to himself reveal an introversion that must have given him some uneasy moments in the presence of McMichael, the polished orator and after-dinner wit, or with Graham, the promoter, businessman, and talented entrepreneur. Bird's wife recognized that "he certainly had no claims to that species of enterprise . . . that leads to material success."¹⁷

His editorials were what might be expected of "a loyal American of Whig principles and broad literary culture," and in his eyes, Whiggery was synonymous with patriotism.

We hardly open a Whig newspaper that does not apologize for the political matter with which its columns have been crowded during the recent Presidential canvass. . . . A soldier fresh from the wars might just as well apologize for fighting the battles of his country. . . . For our own part we have neither explanations nor apologies to offer. At no time has our paper been more patriotically employed.¹⁸

On most public questions Bird was a traditionalist. "We are content with the country as it is—the Constitution as it is, the Union as it is," and he sought to avert the perils of the "innovations brought about by the present Administration."¹⁹ He exhibited a decided anti-British color, not only because of his Whig predilections against free trade, but because he still resented what he deemed the cavalier treatment accorded him by Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton when Bird

¹⁷ M. M. Bird, 124.

¹⁸ *North American*, Nov. 11, 1848.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Aug. 24, 1847.

was visiting England in 1834.²⁰ Yet, the *North American's* reputation as a newspaper which avoided partisan extremism began under Bird's editorship. He would not substitute personal abuse for discussion of public questions as he saw them. On one occasion this policy drew a mild protest from Clayton: "Will not your paper lose all your warm hearted Whig subscribers by the 'dignified' and complimentary course it adopts towards our bitter enemies?"²¹

His sense of personal integrity prevented him from taking an undue advantage in his peculiar position as editor of an influential commercial daily. His widow reported that he once refused to publish a series of articles "from a most esteemed literary friend . . . on a prominent railroad interest" because he happened to own some of the stock. The article was intended to promote confidence in the securities. "Dr. Bird saw clearly this advantage of publication, but he had certain singular, peculiar, and very rigid notions as to bribery and corruption, and any left-handed ways of advancing his interest." Some weeks later, having disposed of his shares, "he sent word he was now free to publish the articles, as he owned nothing in that quarter." Again, he refused to allow the publication of inflated circulation figures as a means of impressing advertisers. "It may be the New York way," he told a staff member, "but it will not suit Philadelphia—and whatever way it is, I never countenance a lie." Nor would he permit the "hands" to be paid in the "uncurrent money" of the times, on the ground that "whatever losses the proprietors might endure should not be shared by their hands."²²

A meticulous worker and writer, Bird's editorials were the products of considerable thought, preliminary drafts, rewriting, correction and polishing. Many of the drafts of his articles, still filed in his papers, show evidences of erasures, insertions, rephrasing and revision, all of which made the completed work a literary production. He apparently penned miscellaneous thoughts and ideas on various scraps of paper—envelopes, old drafts of speeches and lectures, the reverse side of letters, discarded literary manuscripts, and on the margins of old newspapers. Most of his political editorials began in quiet vein, but as he wrote the importance of his subject and the strength of his

²⁰ Foust, 84-86.

²¹ Clayton to Bird, Aug. 29, 1849.

²² M. M. Bird, 122-123.

convictions heated his pen as he employed exclamation marks, dashes, and italics for emphasis. Frankly a Whig journal, the *North American* under Bird directed most of its attention to the rank and file of that party rather than to the general public. Despite his almost incessant ill-health, he was indefatigable, and during the pressure of his last illness he almost daily penned editorials, "some of which, especially the last, written only ten days before his death, were of a most pleasant lively nature."²³

During the six years of his connection with the journal, Bird was ever conscious of his financial obligation to Clayton, which in the beginning amounted to \$30,800. He was in a delicate position in that he was indebted to his close personal friend and he edited a journal which espoused the political principles held by that friend. Later, as Bird encountered difficulties on the *North American*, he was anxious that the intimate relationship with Clayton be not strained over the debt.

Clayton was no Shylock, and he wrote to Bird from time to time not to worry about the obligation. "If you discover your newspaper speculation is a bad one, break it off at once and get out of it. I will submit to a severe loss rather than see you unhappy." A few days later, learning of a temporary illness of Bird's, he wrote expressing in warm and eloquent language his sentiments of regard:

May God bless you & heal you! I have become so deeply & ardently attached to you that any misfortune to you effects [affects?] my own happiness more than I choose to tell. Let the loan & money all go to the devil. All I ask of you is to save your life. Let me have my friends [and] . . . I will bear any loss (if there be any loss) but one—that is the loss of your life.²⁴

In 1852, Clayton had a codicil attached to his will in which he directed the executors of his estate not to press payment for the residue of the debt, then slightly more than \$25,000.²⁵

The influence of both men in party affairs depended on keeping knowledge of this financial association from the public. It was common practice for politicians to promote their careers by the purchase

²³ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁴ Clayton to Bird, Dec. 26 and 30, 1847.

²⁵ A copy of this codicil is in the Bird Papers. Bird's death found him owing Clayton \$21,000. Clayton to Frederic M. Bird, June 22, 1856.

or subsidy of a newspaper, and had the Clayton-Bird arrangement become common knowledge their position would have been awkward. In 1849, a rumor of their connection got about and Clayton wrote to Bird that "I have thought of a mode of getting out of the scrape. I have assigned your[s] to James F. Clayton. He does not know it. *Knowing this*," Clayton underscored, "you can now say that it is untrue that you owe me anything or that I have the slightest interest in the paper." Aware that this was not wholly candid, Clayton thought it permissible to admit "that I lent you money for which you felt kindly to me—but now say boldly that you owe me nothing but good will."²⁶ Some months later the *North American* made a categorical denial that Clayton had ever had "any kind of interest in or connexion with this paper of any character whatever,—beyond that interest, at least, which springs from friendly relations with its editors, and that connexion which may be said to unite . . . all the members of a political party." The writer continued with the statement that Clayton had never been accorded full justice in the columns of the paper. "Equally from the pride of independence and the delicacy of friendship . . . Mr. Clayton has always been treated . . . with more reserve and distance than any other leading Whig in the country."²⁷

This was perhaps technically correct. The warmest encomiums were reserved for Henry Clay. There was nothing particularly singular in the fact that the editors of a leading Whig daily should be in substantial agreement on public policies with a prominent Whig senator, nor is there evidence to show that Bird did not arrive at his convictions independently. What the reading public did not know, however, was that the editor welcomed advice, assistance, and inside information from a public figure who deemed it advisable to keep his contributions to the *North American* hidden from general knowledge.

Whatever the moral question involved, the paper did profit through its editor's close friendship with Senator and later Secretary

²⁶ Clayton to Robert M. Bird, Apr. 14, 1849. Clayton warned Bird in this note to tell no one of the arrangement, "not . . . even your wife," and above all not McMichael, whom Clayton did not fully trust. "He told it [Bird's obligation to Clayton] & C. Dupont helps to tell it. It has played the devil with me. . . ."

²⁷ *North American*, Sept. 27, 1849.

of State Clayton.²⁸ His letters to Bird abound in bits of advice, suggestions, proposals, recommendations and warnings as to the stand which should be assumed by the paper. "Be on your guard!" he wrote upon Millard Fillmore's ascent to the Presidency in 1850. "Do not let the N.A. be for or against the new dynasty."²⁹ Numerous "Private and Confidential" communications reached Bird from Washington in which Clayton revealed probable official policy or reaction on the part of the government—all of which was calculated to give the *North American* a reputation for prescience in political matters. Reporting that "it is certain that Cass (not Benton) is to be chairman of the Military affairs in the Senate," Clayton suggested that the paper carry an article "guessing at these facts and foretelling that if true they forbode the explosion of the loco foco party & the election of General Taylor."³⁰ Following his appointment to head the State Department in 1848, Clayton made available to Bird communications dealing with departmental affairs. "I herewith send you for publication . . . a copy of Taylor's message communicating the British Treaty of 19 April 1851 to the Senate. It has never been published." Again, "I send you a copy of a letter which I have rec'd from Mr. Crampton, so that on the first day after I speak you may publish it as a Magnetic Telegraph. Nobody else has any copy of it."³¹

Occasionally, Bird appealed to Clayton for guidance.

Pray drop me a line—if only a line—to give me a hint what the d—l the Whigs are going to do with Taylor. . . . I have just seen a man fresh from Washington—and anti-Taylor too—who declares that Taylorism is in the ascendant . . . and that the Whigs don't care about anything . . . but his nomination. It seems to me incredible.³²

²⁸ There was some confusion about Clayton's relations with the *North American*. A letter writer in the *Washington Union* credited McMichael with being Clayton's "drill-master in Philadelphia." See issue of July 15, 1850.

²⁹ Clayton to Bird, July 10, 1850.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, Dec. 13, 1847. A number of these communications ended with the demand: "Burn this & write me you have burnt it." For some reason Bird did not comply. Clayton once charged Bird with indirectly violating a confidence, and the latter, hurt, suggested that the friendship was at an end. Explanations in order continued their association. See correspondence: George P. Fisher to Bird, Oct. 29 and 31, 1849; Bird to Clayton (draft), Nov. 2, 1849; Clayton to Bird, Nov. 4, 1849.

³¹ Clayton to Bird, Oct. 26, 1851; Jan. 9, 1854.

³² Bird to Clayton (copy), May 4, 1848.

Clayton was in a position to gauge the rise and fall of the popularity of the *North American* in Whig circles. "The N.A. is universally acknowledged to be the ablest Whig paper that has ever been published," he wrote in February, 1848, but three months later he reported that among Whigs in Congress, "the complaints against the paper are very violent."³³

Clayton, himself, was not always satisfied with the operation of the newspaper. He once complained that a speech which he had delivered had been "murdered by your Reporter (a darned scoundrel) aided by Mr. McMichael."³⁴ If at times he was irritated (and sometimes James E. Harvey's correspondence to the journal infuriated him), he never completely abandoned either Bird or the *North American*. He was anxious that the editors should do nothing to disturb party harmony or lessen the chances for party success in an election year. "Be cautious. I fear we shall encourage the Loco Focos."³⁵ "You are managing affairs so in Philadelphia as to have no real friends in either party."³⁶ Once he advised Bird to withdraw from the paper. "Quit it, I *enjoin* you. It will ruin you if you do not. It would damn any party it professes to aid."³⁷

As a leading member of the anti-Clay faction of the Whig party, the Delawarean must have found the *North American* a sore trial at times. Clayton did not blame Bird for this state of things. McMichael, it turned out, was a fervent Clay advocate. Clayton's correspondence with Bird during this period not only exhibits his growing irritation with many of the journal's editorial expressions, but it is a rich vein of information on the attitude of some important Whig leaders in respect to Clay's quadrennial aspirations. "Taylor is the choice of the Whigs here," he had written from Washington in 1847, and he later characterized Clay's conduct "as bad as possible."³⁸ Whether Bird adopted this view or not, McMichael remained a devoted admirer of the Kentuckian, and managed to insert frequent

³³ Clayton to Bird, Feb. 3 and May 13, 1848.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, July 8, 1852.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Nov. 23, 1848.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Jan. 26, 1852.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, Feb. 25, 1848. A brief paragraph complimentary to John C. Calhoun elicited from Clayton: "In God's name, who did write such a pack of stuff?" See Clayton's letter of Dec. 17, 1848.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Dec. 20, 1847; July 22, 1848.

leaders in praise of Clay. In November, 1847, the journal had reported that "our partner, Mr. McMichael, has been at Ashland for a week past and has kept us advised of all movements up to the latest moment."³⁹ Clayton protested to Bird that the *North American* was antagonizing Whig leaders in Washington by its effusive praise of Clay.

There is much feeling here among the men I respect against the course of the *North American* on the Presidential Question. Mr. Crittenden says the Report of the Taylor Meeting in that paper is represented by the Speaker to be unfair & untrue. Yesterday, I attempted to defend the paper against him & others on this subject.⁴⁰

If McMichael was aware of Clayton's (or Bird's) attitude, it did not prevent him from getting in a few final licks for his hero. The recommendation advanced by a group of Whig Congressmen that Taylor be extended the party nomination in May, 1848, was followed by a letter to the *North American* signed by "Vindicator," in which the anti-Clay faction was described as "the aristocracy of the party . . . actuated in part, perhaps, by a desire to dictate . . . or by strong personal animosities" against Clay.⁴¹ Clayton reacted with indignation.

The article in the *North American* of yesterday signed "Vindicator" is believed to have been written by Mr. Clay, or at his instigation. It has excited great indignation against you all. I fear you will have cause duly to regret it. In my humble opinion the Editors owe the Whigs of the Congress . . . a very explicit apology.⁴²

Bird and McMichael may or may not have discussed and finally resolved their preferences in regard to the Whig ticket, but the *North American* maintained a technical impartiality on the subject in its columns. It ostensibly favored no particular aspirant, "preferring to commend all, and to defend all . . . rather than to advocate one at the expense of others." Taylor's subsequent nomination provided an opportunity to heal the breach, which the journal had steadfastly

³⁹ *North American*, Nov. 16, 1847.

⁴⁰ Clayton to Bird, Feb. 25, 1848.

⁴¹ *North American*, May 12, 1848.

⁴² Clayton to Bird, May 13, 1848.

refused to admit existed, and the editors endeavored to sell the Whig nominee to the electorate.

The name is one of renown . . . a name that recalls the idea of a character full of the manliest elements and republican virtues . . . a name, in short, without a stain or flaw. . . .

In raising the banner of General Taylor, the *North American and Gazette* performs nothing more than a duty.⁴³

The Clayton-Bird relation in respect to the *North American* was not a one-way affair. The former often requested small editorial favors. "Oblige me by publishing in your columns the article I herewith send you," or "Copy into the *North American* the article published by Gales & Seaton in there [*sic*] paper of Friday last. It was an Editorial written by me & printed in the *National Intelligencer* on July 8, 1850."⁴⁴ Again: "Your publishing this will put us out of pain & free me from any unjust suspicions. Let it be done without delay."⁴⁵ Clayton's prior protestations that he had no desire for political preferment may have been sincere, but on the day following Taylor's nomination to the Presidency he wrote Bird:

Do me a favor. Republish from the files of the *North American* of 1847 (I think about Feb'y or March) the short speech I made in the Senate in defense of General Taylor for the armistice and capitulation of Monterey. . . . Send a copy *marked* to the *National Intelligencer* with a request in writing on the paper to publish it. That paper never did publish it.⁴⁶

For the duration of the 1848 campaign the unity so necessary to party success was never again disturbed in the columns of the *North American*. Following Taylor's election in November, Clayton illustrated this harmony in a note to Bird: "Crittenden begs in a letter rec'd last night to get McMichael or you to say in the N.A. that old Zach is never so terrible as when bored by these flatter[er]s for office who outbrag all others."⁴⁷

In one respect, however, the firm of Graham, McMichael and Bird displayed almost complete disregard for Clayton's feelings and

⁴³ *North American*, June 10, 1848.

⁴⁴ Clayton to Bird, Jan. 20, 1851; Jan. 9, 1853.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Mar. 28, 1846.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, June 10, 1848. Bird complied with this request in the *North American* of June 14, 1848.

⁴⁷ Clayton to Bird, Nov. 25, 1848.

desires. At times the course of the *North American's* Washington correspondent, James E. Harvey, who wrote under the nom de plume of "Independent," drove Clayton almost to apoplexy. As early as December, 1847, Clayton had advised Bird to discount the accuracy of Harvey's information, adding that "Mr. Harvey has to write letters . . . or else you would not pay him for it." When "Independent" began to reveal confidential matters procured from government sources so as to be threatened with a Senate investigation, the Senator wrote the editor that "Mr. Harvey is somewhat *imprudent*. He seems to court a Senate investigation & may thus get it."⁴⁸ A few months later the correspondent referred slightly to the supporters of a certain bill (of whom Clayton was one) and Clayton's ire was further aroused.

I have read with great pain the evidences repeatedly given in the paper by Mr. Harvey of a disposition to belie the compromise bill as it is called. Were there no insincerity as well as arrogance in this fellow ['s] letters on the subject I might bear it. But I will not in respect for myself any longer either support or aid in supporting this man. Look at the man's insinuation in your paper of Thursday.

For you I have & shall ever cherish the warmest feelings of friendship and regard—But this newspaper must no longer be sent to me or my family. . . .

Is it not a d—d pretty piece of rascality to get me to aid in circulating this newspaper among all my constituents to the tune of 1,000 subscribers and then employ it to tell them I am a scoundrel & have "compromised principles"? This newspaper shall never enter my dwelling again.

Ever faithfully your friend
(but damn the newspaper)
JNO. M. CLAYTON⁴⁹

Evidently Clayton's choler subsided, undoubtedly to Bird's great relief, for he continued to subscribe to the *North American*, and subsequently considered supporting Harvey for a State Department post (perhaps to get him off the paper's staff), although he deemed him "a d—d ill-natured croaky fellow."⁵⁰ This move failed to get rid of Harvey, and he became increasingly critical of the State Department, then headed by Clayton. In January, 1850, Clayton addressed

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, Dec. 26, 1847; Mar. 5, 1848.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, Aug. 4, 1848.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, May 21, 1849.

a note to Bird replacing the usual "My dear Bird" with a colder salutation, "My dear Sir."

I entreat you for God's sake & my sake & your sake to recall Mr. Harvey from Washington. If you do not I shall go mad. His constant exposures of the secrets of my department has disgraced me.

I will *never* forgive you or McMichael if Mr. Harvey is not forthwith called away. I must resign at once if he remains a letter writer here. . . . P.S. I might as well be in Hell as have him here.⁵¹

This antipathy to Harvey carried throughout Clayton's administration of his Cabinet post and into the 1852 presidential campaign. "The mercenary fellow who notoriously writes for an office has sunk the paper so far that I am sick of it," the Delawarean wrote in January, 1852. Yet Harvey remained on the staff as a featured writer, which perhaps measures Bird's lack of influence over his partners. Harvey persuaded the partners by some means that he was indispensable.⁵²

Clayton's anger at Harvey undoubtedly dismayed Bird, but this was a minor annoyance compared with others that afflicted him in connection with the enterprise. In the summer of 1848, he discovered that Graham's financial speculations were endangering the solvency of the firm. He had chafed at what he deemed an unfair distribution of editorial labors and now he began to entertain darker suspicions. On June 19 he penned a memorandum to Graham voicing his fears that "an ordinate increase in expenses" required "resolute retrenchment and careful management." He suggested placing the paper on a "cash basis" after July first, "both for economy's sake, and to restore its credit which has been hurt." In a private memo to himself (perhaps intended as notes to aid him in conference with his partners) he set down what he believed were the unfortunate developments of the past year's mismanagement.

One year of the N.A. has been *wasted*, and money thrown away. We ought to and might have cleared \$18,000 instead of 11,000. . . . It is worse

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, Jan. 30, 1850.

⁵² In an undated note in the Bird Papers Harvey evaluates his services to the journal. "There is a large amount of public advertising . . . in Washington to be secured through *personal* attention. I need say if my connection should be continued, it will be my pleasure & endeavor to secure this and such other benefits as my intercourse & acquaintance . . . will afford."

than useless to go on for a 2d year in the system of the 1st. Better far to wind up—to sell out and close the acc't at any sacrifice than to do so. . . . I can neither afford nor consent to do so. I must begin to make money immediately, or retire; above all I can run no more risks. I have no option in the matter. . . .

Apparently, some unforeseen circumstance prevented Bird from communicating his views to the partners, for on June 22 in a lengthy note to Graham he elaborated on his position. He expressed a mild protest that Graham had failed to keep agreed appointments with him in order to discuss the situation, "but I make no complaint." Nevertheless, Bird informed Graham that he had turned down literary offers, "upon two of which alone I had a guarantee-offer to the amount of \$2,500," in the presumption that "our paper offered the basis of a certain independence." In this expectation, Bird continued, he had been disappointed, and "as it is, the credit of the concern is impaired—its solvency publicly doubted—its character seriously injured—and its influence greatly lessened." He would not presume to guess as to how these results had been brought about, "but this . . . is certain, that unless they are counteracted, the downfall of the establishment and *my ruin* are inevitable." He reminded Graham of his financial obligation to Clayton, and recommended reform in the business operations of the paper. "Some one must attend to the supervision of its affairs—not nominally, but really and practically." Bird believed Graham himself was most competent to undertake this, but only if he divested himself of his numerous outside interests and diversions. He proposed that Graham devote his full energies and time to the legitimate affairs of the *North American*, otherwise he considered it an "utter impossibility of my going through another twelve months as I have passed the last."⁵³

But the editor was to receive an even greater shock. Within a month he was to discover, "almost by accident, that the checks of 'Graham & McMichael' have for some 'time past been sold to Brokers, & that while I have been taught to regard the raising of \$1,000 as a peculiar privilege, discounts have been obtained on the credit of the firm for some \$32,000." He thereupon delivered "a

⁵³ That Bird considered this memorandum important is seen in the fact that two preliminary drafts, both carefully worded and edited, appear in his papers.

positive and pre-emptory notice" to his colleagues "that I protest." To Graham he penned another memorandum:

This strikes me as so seriously irregular . . . that I felt myself bound . . . to put an immediate stop to it, by delivering to Mr. Miskey in the presence of McM, who concurred and acted with me, my positive instructions on the subject.

Graham apparently denied ever having used the name of the firm for outside purpose without the knowledge and benefit of his partners, and Bird accepted his word at face value. He was soon to discover this to be a mistake. In June, 1848, Graham had drawn on Thomas McElrath, of New York, a draft of \$2,500 "until we get in our July rec'ts for the N.Amer.," and had pledged payment on July 10. On that date, with the remission not forthcoming, McElrath wrote to the firm of "Graham & McMichael," inquiring as to when he might expect the draft to be honored.⁵⁴ McMichael replied the following day in a note:

I regret to say that neither myself nor my partner, Dr. Bird, had the slightest knowledge of the transaction . . . referred to by you, and that the name of our firm was used on that occasion wholly without our knowledge and consent. . . .

As Mr. Graham is absent, and left no funds to meet your draft, it will necessarily be returned to you.⁵⁵

This episode forced the withdrawal of Graham from the partnership and he liquidated his shares, turning them over to McElrath and Elijah Van Syckel, each assuming one-sixth part of the enterprise. In the new indenture drawn up, Bird saw to it that a clause was included providing that each partner "shall personally contribute, or procure to be contributed, in an equal degree, the attention, labor and skill required and necessary to edit and publish the said newspaper, and to carry on the business of the said co-partnership." The *North American* was now to be published by "McMichael & Bird."⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Thomas McElrath to Graham & McMichael, July 10, 1848.

⁵⁵ McMichael to McElrath, July 15, 1848 (copy).

⁵⁶ The *North American* was only one of the victims of Graham's extravagance. He also lost his immensely popular *Graham's Magazine*. See Oberholtzer, *A Literary History of Philadelphia*, 264, 277.

From this time until his death, Bird drove himself in his anxiety to meet the obligation which he had incurred. In December of that year he seriously considered retiring from the paper, as Clayton periodically urged him to do, weary over the tribulations concerning Graham, "which have greatly encouraged the desire to sell."⁵⁷ Never in robust health, he was subject to frequent respiratory infections. He did not like Philadelphia, longing for New Castle, which "with all its faults I prefer to all the Philadelphias that are, were, or will be."⁵⁸ His wife sensed his discontent and wrote less than a week after he had joined the *North American* that "I trust that matters will be settled and arranged that you may run away from newspapers, and steam engines and closely packed brick houses, at least every Saturday."⁵⁹ His letters to his wife include frequent apologies for being unable to leave his desk, but he did get away for an occasional respite, although he felt obliged to waste as little time as possible in discharging his debt to Clayton. "Anxiety . . . as to the conduct of the paper . . . brought on what was then called 'suffusion of the brain,' and he died after a relatively brief illness on January 23, 1854."⁶⁰ "Its [the *North American's*] labors, and more especially its troubles, killed him," wrote Mary Bird to her brother. "He was cut off just as he was beginning to reap the reward of his toil."⁶¹ Clayton sorrowingly wrote to the widow:

Washington, Jan'y 23, 1854

My dear Madam,

I have this moment received with the deepest grief the intelligence of the death of my friend, your husband, Doctor Robert M. Bird.

Your sorrow may be greater than mine. But it is impossible that it can be more lasting. I shall grieve for him while I have life. . . .

When I can better control my own feelings, I will write to you again.

I am, my dear Madam, your most afflicted but faithful friend.

JOHN M. CLAYTON

⁵⁷ The Bird Papers include a draft of an advertisement: "For Sale—an interest in an old well established & highly profitable newspaper in a neighboring city. . . ."

⁵⁸ Bird to Mary M. Bird, Aug. 23, 1848.

⁵⁹ Mary M. Bird to Bird, July 4, 1847.

⁶⁰ A. H. Quinn, "Robert Montgomery Bird," *Dictionary of American Biography*, II, 287.

⁶¹ Mary M. Bird to Frederic Mayer, July 5, 1854.

Perhaps Bird's greatest contribution to Philadelphia newspaperdom in general and to the *North American* in particular, was his emphasis on the well-written and readable paragraph. His influence on political journalism is less clear. E. P. Oberholtzer considered Bird, along with Robert Walsh of the *National Gazette*, and Robert Morris of the *Inquirer*, as "superior for the literary quality of their writing," but, he added, "they did not exert the influence upon the side of journalism which so nearly allies it to politics, and makes it a factor in directing our public life."⁶² This evaluation accords too little credit to Bird, because he did play a significant and respected role in at least one faction of the Whig Party when that party was enjoying success at the polls. His dislike for editorial vituperation, however, may have rendered him colorless to a generation which took its politics seriously, and probably militated against his filling a highly positive role. Beyond question he was greatly admired and respected by his contemporaries as a journalist, a littérateur, a political savant, and as a man. Obituaries are usually highly effusive, but the judgment of a *North American* writer (probably McMichael) deserves extended quotation.

The intellectual and moral qualities of Dr. Bird, his unsurpassed store of information, his quick and clear judgment, his ability . . . and his unusual facility of composition, peculiarly fitted him for the duties of a journalist. Of the manner in which these duties were performed in this journal, of the varied abilities and unvaried integrity of purpose, loyalty to the right, chivalric opposition to the wrong, it perhaps does not become us to speak. But we may say that never was a nobler nature devoted to more noble ends than the dedication made of his talents, during the period his mind informed these columns. . . .

It is our desire to speak with modesty and moderation . . . but we do not hesitate to assert that our late associate was, if ever man was, a genius. . . . It is a grief to lose, from the scene of life, such a nature.⁶³

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⁶² Oberholtzer, *Philadelphia: A History of the City and Its People*, II, 223. Oberholtzer says elsewhere (*A Literary History of Philadelphia*, 268) that Bird was the figure "upon whose work its [Philadelphia's] claims must principally if not solely depend" as a literary center.

⁶³ *North American*, Jan. 24, 1854.