A Forgotten Philadelphia Writer:
William Joseph Walter (1789-1846)

Between his immigration to Philadelphia in 1839 and his death on October 9, 1846, William Joseph Walter published seven books, some three score essays, and a considerable body of poetry, both original and translations. Yet Ellis Paxson Oberholtzer's *Literary History of Philadelphia* passes over him in silence, as do Joseph Jackson's *Literary Landmarks of Philadelphia* and the chapter on “Authors and Literature of Philadelphia” in J. Thomas Scharf and Thompson Wescott's monumental *History of Philadelphia*. Even though Walter was a Roman Catholic, he has also suffered neglect in the essay devoted to local writers of that faith in the recent (1976) *History of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia*. Only the chance that he composed a biography of Sir Thomas More has recently revived Walter's name among the readers of a serial emanating from Angers, France, *Moreana*, a journal devoted to the life and works of the one-time Lord Chancellor to Henry VIII of England. Walter published much more than his studies of More, however, and his achievements form a part of the intellectual activity of the early nineteenth century that gave Philadelphia its short-lived reputation as the foremost American center of literary culture.

Walter was English by birth. The year of that event but not the month nor the day can be ascertained from the burial records in the Philadelphia Municipal Archives, which coldly report that he was fifty-seven years of age when he came within the purview of the keepers of such lugubrious data. It is known that from 1806 to

---

1808 he studied at St. Edmund’s College, Ware, Hertfordshire, England, for he was one of those recusants to whom the universities remained legally, albeit in fact not entirely closed. St. Edmund’s, established only in 1793 after the Revolution had driven the English Catholic colleges off the continent, existed primarily for the training of men for the priesthood. Evidently young William Joseph Walter, perhaps affected by the mystical element in the current Romantic movement, gave some thought to the clerical profession. Even though he did not pursue this calling, he afterwards associated again with St. Edmund’s in the capacity of a member of the faculty. This experience, of unknown date and duration (although in 1812 he was described as “late of St. Edmund’s”) proved of inestimable value to him in America. “Professor” or “Former Professor of St. Edmund’s College” were labels that clung to him throughout his life. They consistently shine at the head of many of his Philadelphia compositions as the mark of distinction that certified his credibility in the local literary community. Especially did his academic background stand him in good stead among his Roman Catholic co-religionists.

Not as an unknown did Walter come to America but as an established scholar and man of letters. His earliest publications consisted of translations from the French—and the works that he undertook betray the Romantic bent of his young mind. The first was the Vicomte de Chateaubriand’s The Martyrs; or, the Triumph of the Christian Religion, in two volumes (London: J. Ebers, 1812), followed in 1815 by the same author’s Letter from Rome addressed to M. de Fontanes, from the firm of Keating, Brown and Keating; a new edition four years later combined both titles. Meanwhile in 1814, Walter translated for the same publisher a serious study in two volumes by J. D. Cochin (1726–1783) entitled Instructions on the Prayers and Ceremonies of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, prefaced by the translator’s hope that English Protestants and Catholics alike might benefit from his labor. It must have been found useful or edifying, at least to the Catholics, since a second, single-volume edition appeared in Dublin in 1843, while an undated edition had earlier come from the press of Joseph Murphy in Balti-

2 McNamara is the source for the dates of Walter’s attendance at St. Edmund’s.
more. Italian was another language that Professor Walter had mastered; he employed it in translating librettos for operas performed at the King's Theater in Haymarket. The British Museum possesses twenty of these, dating between 1818 and 1827, including several which Mozart had scored.

English poetry, however, was Walter's special interest and the area of his first scholarly literary endeavor. In 1816 he published *An Account of a Manuscript of Ancient English Poetry, entitled Clavis Scientiae, or, Bretayne's Skyll-Kay of Knawing, by John de Wageby, Monk of Fountains Abbey*. An addicted delver into manuscript treasures in the Public Record Office, the Bodleian, and other such depositories, Walter had unearthed this curiosity during a period of scholarly adventuring.

What determined Walter's reputation was his work on Robert Southwell, an Elizabethan Jesuit poet who suffered imprisonment and eventually execution in 1595. His interest in this long-forgotten writer Walter himself attributed to "the kindness of Mr. Southey, the Poet Laureate," and it all began, he wrote, "in a literary circle, at his [Southey's] charming and hospitable mansion on the banks of the Derwent. . . ." This declaration incidentally tells us all that is known with certainty of Walter's social and intellectual associations in his native country. It evidences the high regard in which he was held by some of the leading English litterateurs of his age. Thus inspired, Walter composed *A Sketch of the Life and Writings of Robert Southwell*, and appended it to a new edition of the old poet's verse. It was published in London in 1817 by Keating and Company. The success of this enterprise encouraged Walter's edition of *The Prose Works of Robert Southwell* with the same publisher in 1822. His efforts attracted the attention of Robert Aris Willmott, among others, who mentioned them favorably in his own *Lives of Sacred Poets* that appeared in London in 1834.

---


4 The edition of Southwell's poetry is sometimes referred to by the title *St. Peter's Complaint*, the name of the first piece printed therein, just as Walter's edition of the prose works is sometimes designated *Mary Magdalen's Funeral Tears*. The publisher in effect used two title pages for the books with variant readings, thus creating some of the bibliographic confusion.
The circumstances of William J. Walter’s move to America remain a mystery. At the time of his departure from England he was a party to litigation, as plaintiff, in the English courts, a suit which he later won but about which the details escape us. It may or may not have contributed to his decision to migrate. A possible clue to the circumstances, if not to the cause, for his crossing the Atlantic, can be gleaned from the preface of one of Walter’s earliest publications from Philadelphia. This is a thoroughly charming little book, his most creative work in the area of literature, entitled: *The Poet: A Metrical Romance of the Seventeenth Century. A Kep-sake for 1840.* E. L. Carey and A. Hart published it in 1840, although the preface has the dateline “Philadelphia, August, 1839.” The Rare Book Collection of the Free Library of Philadelphia owns a copy. *Allibone and Appleton’s Cyclopedia* knew nothing about it.

*The Poet* consists of 115 poems by seventy-two authors, plus three anonymous ones. Walter skillfully linked the selections together into a garland of verse, forming a narrative that describes the wooing and winning of a fair damsel, “Julia,” by a none-too-eager poetic swain, smitten in spite of himself. An engraving in the frontispiece depicts this “Julia,” hinting that she was more than a figment of Walter’s imagination. The book is a *tour de force* on the part of its scholarly editor. It displays a marvelous command of English poesy of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with cleverly appropriate selections from all the major writers and many obscure ones, such as Richard Flecknoe, Owen Felltham, Anne Fane Countess of Winchelsea, Lucy Marchioness of Wharton, Mildred Drayton and other such very obscure authors. The book’s dedication reads: “To Nicholas Biddle, Esq. This Cento from the Early Poets of England is Very Respectfully Inscribed.”

Nicholas Biddle, of course, was one of the leading figures in Philadelphia’s literary and cultural life, but how did he become the patron of William Joseph Walter? One can only conjecture. Biddle was a close friend of Robert Walsh, himself one of the luminaries of Philadelphia’s intellectual circles until he abandoned the city for Paris in 1837. Walsh’s home in the French capital became a gathering place for authors, scholars, and literary people of all sorts, just as it had been in Philadelphia. Professor Walter’s excellent knowl-
edge of French allows one to assume numerous visits on his part to that country, and he could very well have encountered Robert Walsh at one of his Parisian soirées. The fact that both Walsh and Walter were Roman Catholic men of letters would have given them enough in common to result in their personal acquaintance. Hence it is not beyond the realm of possibility that Walsh supplied the introduction to Nicholas Biddle which led the wealthy American to extend to the immigrant from England tangible support, which the latter then felt compelled to repay in the only way that he could—by the dedication of a book.

Some such backing as Nicholas Biddle could bestow would also explain Walter's instantaneous acceptance by Louis A. Godey who opened the pages of his Lady's Book to Walter. In this popular and fashionable monthly, Walter's contributions began to be published in the latter months of 1839. He was spectacularly successful. Forty-one items from his pen appeared in Lady's Book between September 1839 and August 1842. Twenty-five of these pieces are original poetry of a type to please the magazine's feminine audience: "The Indian Maid's Farewell," "The Stray Kitten," "The Sale of the Pet Lamb," "The Light Keeper's Daughter," and "Hide and Seek," among others. In addition he published nine translations of poems from Spanish, Italian, French and German, and three selections of verse by lesser English poets whom the Professor introduced to America. Walter's popularity can be gauged from the fact that his verse occupied the first page in all twelve issues of Lady's Book during 1841. Of his five prose essays in the same journal, three comprised a series called "Romantic Incidents in British History." In these he used material that he had gleaned from his intensive reading in the Tudor and Stuart periods, so that the articles were grounded in the historical sources without being too difficult for the superficial reader. In an age that lacked professional historical journals, the appearance of such studies in a periodical of the type of Lady's Book does not necessarily imply inferiority. Walter's articles dealt with Henry VIII's courting of Madame de Montreuil, Prince Charles' wooing of the Spanish Infanta, and the Scottish defeat at Flodden Field, all themes to touch romantic hearts.

But August of 1842 saw the abrupt end of Walter's contributions to Lady's Book, and the reason eludes us. Sara Josepha Hale at this
time became the dominant editorial figure of the magazine, and there may have occurred some quarrel between them. Or, Walter may have decided that it was time to terminate this profitable relationship in order to be free to concentrate on more serious work. He was, after all, a man who seems to have been motivated by religious inclinations more than any other, as his books on Southwell and most of his American volumes attest.

In this matter of motivation Walter differed from his fellow Catholics and Philadelphians Mathew Carey and Robert Walsh, both of whom had assimilated and in turn contributed significantly to the secular currents of the city’s life on a nonsectarian basis. Walter, on the other hand, desired to accomplish something distinctly, unmistakably Catholic. Perhaps his recusant heritage held him too firmly in its grip so that he remained ever sensitive to his status in a minority group. Besides, his was an age of strong ferment among English-speaking Catholics. The penal laws were falling into disuse or being revoked. The Emancipation Act of 1829 finally quashed all legal restrictions on Catholics in England. In the spiritual realm the Tractarian movement at Oxford University in the late 1830s was generating intense excitement on both sides of the Atlantic with its prospect of possible reunion of the Anglican and Roman communities.

Walter’s reaction to these stirring events can be seen in the single item of his correspondence which has survived. It is dated May 17, 1843: “The land of my birth and of my affection,” he wrote, “is exhibiting the extraordinary aspect of a people in a state of religious transition. My bosom, like that of many others, has yearned to throw in my mite towards the promotion of the good spirit, which is struggling for a birth.” His “mite” could only be the books that he was capable of writing. Moreover, he knew, too, that the Catholic bishops of the United States had recently issued a public statement lamenting the dearth of suitable reading matter for their followers, especially students. The corollary of that position was the hope that Catholic authors would surface who could write such acceptable literature and that publishers would be encouraged to make the corresponding investment.

---

5 Walter to Archbishop Samuel Eccleston, Philadelphia, May 17, 1843, Archives of the Archdiocese of Baltimore.
The Catholic Family Library was to be Walter’s response to these varied stimuli, a collection of irenic, scholarly, historical and biographical studies to serve American Catholics by furnishing them a serious literature of their own for the first time while complementing the theological developments among the Oxford divines. Subjects for future books had been in Walter’s mind for some time. The above-mentioned letter contains a casual reference to the mounds of notes he brought with him to America, laboriously copied in the libraries and manuscript collections of his native land. In fact, he must have brought a nearly completed manuscript of his own. Only a few months elapsed after his arrival in Philadelphia before his first American book was in press: Sir Thomas More. His Life and Times. Carey and Hart was his publisher, the same firm that shortly afterwards printed his The Poet, and in 1840 another American edition came off the press in Baltimore. This was to be the first of Walter’s Library. The scheme of combining his books into this distinct collection probably originated in this country where it was a common practice among book publishers. Actually the very name of the Catholic Family Library had been employed by the firm of Eugene Cummiskey in Philadelphia during the 1830s to designate a collection of devotional literature that he published.

This biography of the personable opponent of Henry VIII betrays the thorough research that generated it. The text incorporates lengthy passages and indeed complete documents from among the contemporary sources—as do all of Walter’s historical compositions, whether books or articles. His historian’s instincts very properly induced him to let his characters speak in their own words whenever possible. It was one of the most scholarly books, outside of the area of theology, produced by the Catholics of the United States up to that time. Sir Thomas More even attracted attention abroad. A London edition appeared in 1839, a free translation into French—a nice reversal of roles for Walter—was published in Tours in 1847, and from that a Hungarian version was made in 1859. Surely not

6 Yet Walter found resources available here too. The preface to his biography of Sir Thomas More, page v, includes a compliment to the Philadelphia public library (Library Company of Philadelphia), “an excellent institution, rich in most of the departments of learning. . . .”

7 I am indebted to Robert F. McNamara for the information about the Hungarian translation of Sir Thomas More. See his article cited.
many American authors of that time had their works reproduced, even indirectly, in the Magyar tongue.

The dedication of Sir Thomas More reads: "To Samuel, Archbishop of Baltimore, this Volume is Inscribed with Sentiments of the highest Respect and Esteem." To launch the Catholic Family Library in the best way to assure its success, Walter approached the American Catholic bishops, in person and by mail, to beg moral and financial support. They responded generously. Archbishop Samuel Eccleston of Baltimore earned his accolade by extending to Walter a loan of $610. Bishop John Hughes of New York, a former Philadelphian, contributed $100 more. In New Orleans Bishop Anthony Blanc arranged for a simultaneous publication of Sir Thomas More there, probably with a goodly subsidy. Bishop John England of Charleston used his considerable influence to have the library project endorsed by the prelates in their solemn Fourth Provincial Council of Baltimore in May 1840, and encouraged the author with enthusiastic letters. The Reverend Martin John Spalding, soon to become bishop of Louisville but then the president of St. Joseph's College in Bardstown, persuaded 230 subscribers to pledge to buy the book.8

Unfortunately no evidence exists in the published documents for Bishop Francis Patrick Kenrick of Philadelphia that might reveal his attitude toward Walter and his project. This deficiency is certainly due to their communicating in person rather than by correspondence. It is inconceivable that Kenrick, one of the best minds among the Catholic prelates, would not have backed Walter in every way. One of the three copies of the More biography in the library of Saint Charles Seminary, Philadelphia, has the inscription: "Presented by the Rt. Revd. Dr. Kenrick to Louis Laforgue, Sept. 8, 1839." Lewis (the usual spelling) Laforgue, was secretary to the organization of Friends of St. Charles Seminary that raised funds for the bishop. Evidently Kenrick expressed his approbation

8 Walter to Archbishop Samuel Eccleston. This letter is also the source of the information that the Council had discussed the Catholic Family Library. See the reference to "family" literature in Pastoral Letter of the Most Reverend, Archbishop of Baltimore, and the Right Reverend, the Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States of America, Assembled in Provincial Council, in the City of Baltimore, in the Month of May 1840, To the Clergy and Laity of their Charge (Baltimore, n.d.), 16.
for Professor Walter’s project by purchasing copies of his book to
distribute as gifts to those to whom he felt indebted for one reason
or another. The copy owned by the Library Company of Phila-
delphia is inscribed: “This premium has been awarded to John
McSweeney for improvement in history in the examination in the
College of the Athenaeum, 29th June, 1840.” Others were imitating
Kenrick.

Understandably optimistic, Walter threw himself into his work.
Three additional titles in the Catholic Family Library appeared in
short order: Mary, Queen of Scots: A Journal of her Twenty Years’
Captivity, Trial, and Execution, in two volumes (Philadelphia: Carey
and Hart, 1840); Sir Thomas More: A Selection from His Works,
which was often referred to as The Beauties of Sir Thomas More
from its sub-title (Baltimore: Fielding Lucas, Jr., 1841); and
St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, His Life, Elo-
quence and Piety (Philadelphia: M. Fithian, 1841; New York:
Kennedy, 1842). This last work took Walter far from his accustomed
subjects; it consists of a forty-four page biographical sketch, fol-
lowed by 219 pages of translated homilies. Another volume was
announced to present the life of Reginald Cardinal Pole, to be
followed, Walter projected, by a work tentatively titled “Sketches
of the Reformation in England, and anecdotes of the principal
agents in the same.” But neither the Pole nor the Sketches item
advanced beyond the planning stage, for by 1843 it was painfully
evident that the Catholic Family Library was in serious trouble.

The books simply were not selling. Walter’s own capital was
exhausted, and his printers refused to accept additional material.
He postponed again the repayment of his loan to Archbishop
Eccleston. Momentarily he found encouragement when his suit in
London ended with a judgment of $700 in his favor, but his lawyer
balked about forwarding the money.9 Walter took a position as a
clerk in an accounting firm, but his salary of forty dollars a month
barely sufficed to meet the needs of his family.10 Later he secured

9 Walter’s letter to Archbishop Eccleston details his problems.
10 Ibid. Walter first appears in the City Directories for 1843, in the occupation of an
accountant, with residence at Juniper above Pine. In 1844 he resided at 2 Whitecar’s Court,
then successively at 171 Catharine, and finally at 168 Spruce. As for Walter’s family, in his
letter to the Archbishop of Baltimore he mentions illness in his family as a cause of financial
hardship; and in his obituary in The Catholic Herald he is described as a devoted family man.
employment as secretary to William Peter, the English Consul in Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{11}

With his Library scheme lagging, Walter turned back to the periodicals—not to Lady's Book now but to The Religious Cabinet, a monthly that began in Baltimore in 1842 under the editorship of the Reverend Charles White. It became The United States Catholic Magazine from its second year on because a similar journal in St. Louis usurped its name. To the first four volumes of this magazine Walter contributed twelve articles on subjects literary and historical, but all touching the realm of religion. They consisted of a pair of essays on Robert Southwell and another on St. Bernard of Clairvaux; four on English history dealing with Cardinal Wolsey, Henry VII's mother the Lady Margaret, an abbess named Countess Ela of Salisbury, and James I; and others on Richard Crashaw, Fenelon, Chrysostom and Dieudonné de Gozon. In 1844 the Philadelphia publisher John Cunningham launched a small monthly, The National Catholic Register, with Walter as one of his chief advisors and contributors, but it failed after only six issues.\textsuperscript{12} The Lancaster antiquarian and historian Israel Daniel Rupp enlisted Professor Walter as a contributor to his encyclopedia of American religious sects: HE PASA EKKLESIA. An Original History of the Religious Denominations at Present existing in the United States (Philadelphia and Harrisburg: J. Y. Humphreys, 1844).\textsuperscript{13} Walter's section ran to fifty-eight pages, divided between a superficial survey of the evolution of the Catholic Church in the United States and a lengthy exposition of its dogmas. A gentle spirit pervades the essay. He must have enjoyed doing it.

Fugitive pieces from Walter's pen also appeared frequently in The Catholic Herald, the weekly newspaper of the Philadelphia diocese; his contributions and communications, sometimes anony-

\textsuperscript{11} Consul William Peter had literary aspirations too. A translation by him of a poem by Friedrich Schiller was published as an appendix to Walter's article "Dieudonné de Gozon. A Sketch from the History of the Knights of Malta (1340)," in United States Catholic Magazine, III (1844), 645–650.

\textsuperscript{12} Apparently the only extant complete set of the six published issues of this journal is that in the Woodstock College Library at Georgetown University.

\textsuperscript{13} This book has recently been reprinted from the enlarged edition of 1861, with the title The Religious Denominations in the United States (New York, 1975). In all editions Walter's name is spelled incorrectly as "Walters" within the text, but correctly in the Table of Content.
mous and sometimes indicated by the initials “W.J.W.,” are to be found in the poetry department of the paper for the most part. One sample might be cited. He took issue with an article in the London Catholic Magazine which asserted that a small Latin verse, supposedly written by the Emperor Adrian, could never be properly translated because of the lack of diminutives of endearment in the English language. The original reads:

Animula, vagula, blandula,
Hospes comesque, corporis,
Quae nunc abibis in loca?
Pallidula, nigida nudula,
Nec—ut soles—dabis joca.

Walter submitted the following translation which, regardless of the vacuity of the theme, demonstrates the graceful command of language that he had imbibed from his beloved Elizabethan poets:

Little, fluttering, elfin guest,
Fondling partner of this breast,
Whither dost thou wing thy flight,
Naked, shivering, pallid sprite?
All thy wonted graces fled,
All thy wit and spirit dead.

Walter’s last two books fall into the lowly “potboiler” category. The Catholic Keepsake (Philadelphia: M. Fitzian, 1845) aimed at the Christmas gift trade. This was, however, a perfectly legitimate enterprise. Philadelphia’s own Catherine H. Esling showed the way with fifteen consecutive years of her annual Friendship’s Offering between 1840 and 1855. But this sort of chore was far beneath Walter’s talents. His volume runs true to form. It is an anthology of brief, popular fiction and verse culled from many unspecified sources, interspersed with pious maxims, with very little from the editor’s own pen. The publisher advertised it as “a beautiful book... tending to amuse and interest the reader, as well as to fortify the mind in morality and religion....” It was reprinted at least once,

---

14 The Catholic Herald, Dec. 15, 1842.
15 Ibid., Oct. 23, 1845.
in 1877, but without identifying the editor. To literary merit it can lay no claim.

A few months before his sudden death on October 9, 1846, Walter finished another miscellany, this time a devotional one entitled *The New Following of Christ; or, Words of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. With a Commentary from the Apostles, Prophets, etc.* (Philadelphia: W. J. Cunningham, 1846). The book lists of the time have a profusion of such titles. Alert as always to developments among the Oxford Tractarians, Walter dedicated his last work to John Henry Newman. The preliminary announcement trumpeted Professor Walter's editorship as a fact that "will be sufficient to secure it an extensive circulation." Thus Walter's literary career, which began with a translation of a volume about the Mass, ended on the same clarion note of Catholic piety that had inspired him throughout his productive life.

Obituary writers were generous. In an unusually prominent, lengthy notice, *The Catholic Herald* for October 15 lauded William J. Walter for his domestic virtues, assigned him "an honorable and distinguished place among the first literary characters of the age," and viewed his last, devotional book as a pledge of his share in "those rewards which await the sincere and faithful follower of the Divine Redeemer." *The United States Catholic Magazine* prophesied that his work would "perpetuate his name in honor among the future generations." Philadelphia's daily Whig newspaper, *The United States Gazette*, fo: October 13, however, identified him as the secretary to the British Consul, without a word about his prose or poetry. One might have expected more from the *Gazette* since the name of its distinguished editor, Joseph R. Chandler, stood next to Walter's in several of the magazines to which they both contributed, and they shared membership in the same Church.

Not all authors of any literary epoch can stand in the front rank. William J. Walter did not. He was a scholar, not a creator of imaginative literature. Essentially, like many scholars, he was an editor at heart, an anthologizer. Yet his *Poet* displayed the lofty heights

---

16 See his "Communication," *ibid.*, Nov. 20, 1845.
18 Volume V, 631.
that his talent in that capacity could attain, and his biographies can still be read today. Industry and productivity distinguished his brief career in Philadelphia rather than enduring success. Although a man of Walter's dedication could easily have become polemical, he always avoided that snare, which is much to his credit, although a note of apologetics characterizes his choice of themes. While he would have been loathe to recognize it himself, it was his misfortune, in the final analysis, to be too denominational at a time when his denomination was intellectually not yet ready to embrace a man of his genius nor large enough financially to sustain it.

_Saint Joseph's College of Philadelphia_  
RAYMOND H. SCHMANDT