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Christopher Morley's Philadelphia

Edited, and with an Introduction,
by Ken Kalfus

Illustrated by
Walter Jack Duncan
and Frank H. Taylor



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A NOTE ON SOURCES

Unless otherwise noted, the essays in this volume are taken from Christopher Morley's *Travels in Philadelphia* (David McKay, 1920).

"In Philadelphia" appeared in *Hide and Seek* (George H. Doran Company, 1920).

"The Urchin at the Zoo," "Making Marathon Safe for the Urchin," and "Walt Whitman Miniatures" appeared in *Mince Pie* (George H. Doran Company, 1920).

"Pershing in Philadelphia," "Pine Street," "An Early Train," "Ridge Avenue," "In West Philadelphia," "The University and the Urchin," and "A City Notebook" appeared in *Pipefuls* (Doubleday, Page & Co., 1921).

"Going to Philadelphia" appeared in *Plum Pudding* (Doubleday, Page & Co., 1921).

"In Honorem: Martha Washington" appeared in *The Powder of Sympathy* (Doubleday, Page & Co., 1923).

"Notes on Rosy" first appeared in the *Saturday Review*, December 24, 1927, and was published in book form in *Off the Deep End* (Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1928).

"Elegy in a Railroad Station" appeared in *Gentleman's Relish* (Norton, 1955).

"A Westminster Abbey in Philadelphia" appeared in the *Philadelphia Evening Public Ledger*, June 24, 1918. This is its first publication in book form.

The passage about Haverford opens Morley's autobiographical novel *John Mistletoe* (Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1931).

"Footnote on Philadelphia Cricket" appeared in *A Century of Philadelphia Cricket*, edited by John A. Lester (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1951).

"Gentles, Attend!" appeared in facsimile form in Alfred P. Lee's *A Bibliography of Christopher Morley* (Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1935). According to Lee, the text was published originally on newsprint paper. Shortly after

Morley arrived in New York, he offered the piece, as a "passport," to a friend moving to Philadelphia.

A number of people and institutions have assisted the collection of these essays. I wish to thank Inga Saffron, Howard Mansfield, Steven Rothman, the Print and Pictures Department of the Free Library of Philadelphia, the Pennsylvania Historical Society, the Quaker Room at Haverford College's Magill Library, and the University of Pennsylvania's Van Pelt Library.

KK

INTRODUCTION

PHILADELPHIA, the writer Christopher Morley declared early in this century, is "a surprisingly large town at the confluence of the Biddle and Drexel families. It is wholly surrounded by cricket teams, fox hunters, beagle packs, and the Pennsylvania Railroad."

The city has changed somewhat since Morley, the late novelist, essayist, playwright, poet, raconteur, columnist, and prodigious luncher, first wrote about it so engagingly and facetiously. The Biddles and the Drexels no longer dominate the city's imagination, and neither do cricket nor the hunt. Amtrak, of course, now sprints the track laid by the Pennsylvania Railroad. Philadelphia nevertheless remains a surprisingly large town, one with a character and physiognomy that Morley might still recognize, and a history and literature that has become, alas, neglected.

Morley, best known for his novels *Parnassus on Wheels* and *Kitty Foyle* and his Bowling Green column in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, died in 1957, after publishing some 50 books. Despite enjoying literary distinction in the 1920s and 1930s, Morley had faded into relative obscurity by the time of his death. The work he left behind, about itinerant booksellers and "White-Collar Working Girls" like Miss Foyle, about great American cities and the pleasures of the table, is largely unfamiliar to the current generation of readers, who, given the opportunity, are likely to relish his style, his wit, his exuberant championing of the written word, and his keen appreciation of the places in which he found himself.

Morley became the quintessential New York journalist-about-town, but he accomplished some of his best work before that as a young man in Philadelphia. For two years (1918-1920) he was a columnist for the Philadelphia

Evening Public Ledger, publishing a series of casual essays in its editorial pages. The best of these pieces, now in your hands, comprise the most illuminating, lively, and endearing prose yet written in this century about this city.

At a time when America was still getting used to the idea of immigration from eastern and southern Europe, Morley ventured deep into Philadelphia's "Mediterranean colony," the famous Italian Market, whose shops, as the reader of this collection will discover, often embraced "a queer union of trades," such as the combined "funeral agent and detective bureau" and the "bookbinder and flower shop." From his Chestnut Street newspaper office he listened for "the light sliding swish of the trolley poles along the wire, accompanied by the deep rocking rumble of the car, and the crash as it pounds over the crosstracks." And throughout his columns, in the years during which the monumental amenities along the Benjamin Franklin Parkway were being raised, he voiced an abiding optimism in Philadelphia: "I walked down the Parkway yesterday morning visualizing that splendid emptiness of sunshine as it will appear five or ten years hence, lined with art galleries, museums and libraries, shaded with growing trees, leading from the majestic pinnacle of the City Hall to the finest public estate in America."

When he left for the *New York Evening Post* early in 1920, Morley collected his articles in a volume entitled *Travels in Philadelphia*, in which most of the following essays appeared. The book, published by the David McKay Company at 604-608 South Washington Square and reprinted for the last time in 1937, was introduced by A. Edward Newton, the Philadelphia bibliophile and writer whose home is described in Morley's "Darby Creek" essay. Newton confesses some astonishment that Philadelphia could be worth writing about. He asks, "Who, but [Morley], could find in the commonplace, sordid, and depressing streets of our city, subjects for a sheaf of dainty little essays,

as delightful as they are unique? For say what you will, to most of us the streets of Philadelphia are dirty and depressing." Newton notes that it is "a thousand pities" that Morley was leaving for New York, but he doesn't blame him for the defection.

Indeed, Newton was grateful for the literary presence with which Morley invested Philadelphia. Elevating the city into a place fit for our imaginations to inhabit, Morley discovered protagonists and stories in its alleys and parks, among its new citizens and among the pedestrian elements of daily life (especially those elements having to do with eating). Years later Morley looked back and said it was in Philadelphia that he "first learned to some small extent, what I call a sense of human life and human significance, a sense of the significance of human life and human suffering, human aspiration and passion and despair, which is the vibration in which literature and art begin."

Philadelphia is too often obsessed by 1776; these essays, most of them fixed upon a single, previously unremarked moment in Philadelphia's history, reveal just one of the city's many other pasts. These essays shed light on our present, too, for much of the city that Morley explored remains intact for the "saunterer" with the eye and the patience to discover it.

CHRISTOPHER DARLINGTON MORLEY was born in the Philadelphia suburb of Haverford on May 5, 1890, to British parents. His father, a professor of mathematics at Haverford College, took a position at Johns Hopkins University when Chris was 10, moving the family to Baltimore. Chris, who would later write about his Haverford childhood with great warmth, returned to the college in 1906 as a freshman. His first book, a poetry collection entitled *The Eighth Sin*, was published in England in 1912, while he was studying at Oxford. The following year he went to work at Doubleday, Page and Company in Garden City, Long Island, as a

reader and a book publicist. Publishing magnate Cyrus H.K. Curtis repatriated him to Philadelphia in 1917, first as an employee of the *Ladies' Home Journal*, and then of the *Evening Public Ledger*. Morley, his wife, Helen, and their infant son took up digs at 1722 Pine Street and in suburban Wyncote, upon which he bestowed the name Marathon. (In keeping with this Persian Wars theme, he would later call their Roslyn, Long Island, home Salamis Estates.)

Morley worked in a number of positions at the paper. Many of his contributions appearing on the paper's spirited editorial page were unbylined, or bore pseudonyms like "Dove Dulcet," "Socrates," or simply the tag line "CDM." Morley's favorite pseudonym was Andrew McGill; he and his best friend Page Allinson, whom he called Mifflin, shared the conceit that they were the McGill brothers. When he was promoted to columnist, Morley dashed off a characteristically playful note:

Dear Mifflin, Better take to
reading the Evg. Ledger, as
they've bought A. McG. body,
soul and bungstarter!

Andrew.

Morley's column first ran on March 11, 1918 and appeared at irregular intervals two or three times each week. The articles were usually found on the lower right-hand side of the page underneath the day's editorial cartoon, sometimes alongside his own verses. He also introduced a column, the Chaffing Dish, which was a grab bag of verse and sketches, including readers' submissions.

It was in Philadelphia that Morley established his literary character: good-natured, whimsical, and, being somewhat disengaged from the period's progressive literary movements, ultimately middle-browed. *Parnassus on Wheels* was published while he was in Philadelphia and he wrote its

sequel, *The Haunted Bookshop*, here, as well as numerous essays and poems for national periodicals. By the time he left for New York, the 29-year-old author already owned a large reputation.

Morley's indefatigable and fluent writing made him a fixture on the New York literary and newspaper scene. At the *Evening Post* he started the Bowling Green column, which he later brought to the *Saturday Review*. He continued to write novels, short stories, and poetry, and to produce plays, and the later work in this collection shows that he maintained his affection for Philadelphia throughout his life. In New York he helped establish the famed organization of Sherlock Holmes enthusiasts, the Baker Street Irregulars, and he played key roles in the births of the *Saturday Review* and the Book-of-the-Month Club. *Kitty Foyle*, which was made into a 1940 movie starring Ginger Rogers, won him more fame and the kind of money one could not earn from books alone.

In the three years that the adult Morley lived in Philadelphia, the city rushed from wartime, with its accompanying shortages and labor unrest, through the influenza pandemic (which claimed more Philadelphians than the war did), and then into Normalcy. The appeal of Morley's articles lies in part in their contemporary flavor, heightened by references to the League of Nations, bolsheviks, Henry Ford, and General Pershing. These references are often parsed in the day's idiom, some of which may puzzle the reader and, with its condescensions and casual bigotries, may also offend him. Morley's essays, as you shall see, are evocative of their era's failings as well as its charms.

Perhaps Philadelphia, which Morley saw as profoundly conservative, never fully embraced the Jazz Age, nor the other Ages scheduled to follow, but time has worked itself on the city all the same. Gone are Dumont's Minstrels on Arch, the Indian Pole (blown down in a hurricane, say local residents), and Orange Street by Washington Square. The

Ronaldson Cemetery on Bainbridge Street is now the site of a playground and ballfield. Willow Grove is no longer known for its amusement park, though a massive mall there now accommodates today's preferred pastime, shopping. The celebrated Mercantile Library on South 10th Street has been replaced by a more ordinary facility on Chestnut. Morley's beloved Ludlow Street, then an alley of bookstores just south of Market, has been almost entirely submerged beneath block-sized buildings and parking lots.

Yet much of Morley's Philadelphia continues to show through the patina of postmodernity. The Italian Market still "breathes the Italian genius for good food." The Mint is still here; so is Penn Treaty Park, now virtually unknown to modern Philadelphians. The Poe House has been elevated, per Morley's request, into a national landmark. Philly and Camden still share claims to Walt Whitman, and Walt's ferries, recalled herein, will soon be running again between the two cities. The stone building engraved with the name of the Tripoli Barber Supply Company, on Ninth below South Street, no longer offers "the Vesuvius Quinine Tonic"; it's now an antique shop, but the building and the engraving remain, as if materialized directly from these pages.

The editor of this collection hopes the reader will use it as a guide book, a literary companion to a place whose literary qualities have been either denied or long forgotten. From a space of 70 years, Morley reveals to us the city we so carelessly inhabit, demonstrating that these "dirty and depressing" streets mark a landscape of human endeavor a city worth reading about and a city worth tending.

KEN KALFUS
PHILADELPHIA
AUGUST 1989

CENTER CITY

Sauntering

SOME FAMOUS lady who was it? used to say of anyone she richly despised that he was "a saunterer." I suppose she meant he was a mere trifler, a loungeur, an idle stroller of the streets. It is an ignominious confession, but I am a confirmed saunterer. I love to be set down haphazard among unknown byways; to saunter with open eyes, watching the moods and humors of men, the shapes of their dwellings, the criss-cross of their streets. It is an implanted passion that grows keener and keener. The everlasting lure of round-the-corner, how fascinating it is!

I love city squares. The most interesting persons are always those who have nothing special to do: children, nurses, policemen, and actors at 11 o'clock in the morning. These are always to be found in the park; by which I mean not an enormous sector of denatured countryside with bridle paths, fishponds and sea lions, but some broad patch of turf in a shabby elbow of the city, striped with pavements, with plenty of sun-warmed benches and a cast-iron zouave erected about 1873 to remind one of the horrors of commemorative statuary. Children scuffle to and fro; dusty men with spiculous chins loll on the seats; the uncouth and pathetic vibrations of humankind are on every side.

It is entrancing to walk in such places and catalogue all that may be seen. I jot down on scraps of paper a list of all the shops on a side street; the names of tradesmen that amuse me; the absurd repartees of gutter children. Why? It amuses me and that is sufficient excuse. From now until the end of time no one else will ever see life with my eyes, and I mean to make the most of my chance. Just as Thoreau compiled a Domesday Book and kind of classified directory of the sights, sounds and scents of Walden (carefully recording the manners of a sandbank and the prejudices of a

woodlouse or an apple tree) so I love to annotate the phenomena of the city. I can be as solitary in a city street as ever Thoreau was in Walden.

And no Walden sky was ever more blue than the roof of Washington square this morning. Sitting here reading Thoreau I am entranced by the mellow flavor of the young summer. The sun is just goodly enough to set the being in a gentle toasting muse. The trees confer together in a sleepy whisper. I have had buckwheat cakes and syrup for breakfast, and eggs fried both recto and verso; good foundation for speculation. I puff cigarettes and am at peace with myself. Many a worthy waif comes to lounge beside me; he glances at my scuffed boots, my baggy trousers; he knows me for one of the fraternity. By their boots ye shall know them. Many of those who have abandoned the race for this world's honors have a shrewdness all their own. What is it Thoreau says, with his penetrative truth? "Sometimes we are inclined to class those who are once and a half witted with the half witted, because we appreciate only a third part of their wit." By the time a man is thirty he should be able to see what life has to offer, and take what dishes on the menu agree with him best. That is whole wit, indeed, or wit-and-a-half. And if he finds his pleasure on a park bench in ragged trousers let him lounge then, with good heart. I welcome him to the goodly fellowship of saunterers, an acolyte of the excellent church of the agorolaters!

These meditations are incurred in the ancient and noble city of Philadelphia, which is a surprisingly large town at the confluence of the Biddle and Drexel families. It is wholly surrounded by cricket teams, fox hunters, beagle packs, and the Pennsylvania Railroad. It has a very large zoölogical garden, containing carnivora, herbivora, scapple-ivora, and a man from New York who was interned here at the time of the Centennial Exposition in 1876. The principal manufactures are carpets, life insurance premiums, and