

Remembering the Past: A Story of Murder

BY MARYANNE FELTER, Ph.D.

All my life I have been pretty sure that I am not Irish. My mother was born in north-Italy—so there is no question on that side. My father, born in the Bronx, was the son of Edward Felter and Edith Delaunay. The Delaunay side is likely French. The name Felter, however, has always puzzled us. Depending on who answers which genealogical questions, we have been told that the name is either English, German, or Dutch. What has had me mystified, however, was my father's first name: he was christened (Episcopalian) Robert Emmett Felter.

Once I started doing Irish studies in college, the name resonated, and I began to wonder why on earth his parents would have named him after the Irish patriot, even though they spelled “Emmet” with two t’s. The answer is: they did not. Robert Felter’s name was meant to be Norman Felter. My father, who had no recollection, of course, of the actual event, could only tell me what he remembered from his childhood. It had something to do with the doctor, he said, who delivered him on the kitchen table on Nelson Avenue on December 11, 1926, in the Bronx. Dr. Walsh, who was an Irish-American, had (so my father was told) grabbed the record of birth before my grandparents had the chance to name their first child and filled in the name Robert Emmett, spelling the middle name incorrectly—if he were trying to name him after the

patriot. Curious, I thought. But a much better name than Norman, and I let it go at that.

But now, as my father gets older, he remembers and recounts many stories from his youth. And recently, when he was showing me his birth

certificate, we started talking about Dr. Walsh and his presumptuous naming of the child he delivered. “Strange thing,” my father said. “I don’t know much about Dr. Walsh, but I do remember my parents and their friends sitting around the kitchen table—hushing the conversation whenever I came in—talking about Dr.

Walsh in connection with some drug scandal. And I don’t know why I think this, but I think he may have been murdered.” That was enough to pique my interest. “Murdered for selling illegal drugs?” I asked. My father admitted he knew very little; no one had ever talked with him about it, and he could only remember fragments of information that, for some reason, he was not supposed to hear. My aunt, too, also delivered by Dr. Walsh in 1929, remembers being told that the killer had broken into Walsh’s office looking for drugs.

Dr. William J. Walsh was murdered. And the more I read the *New York Times*, the stranger the murder seemed, and the more interesting William Walsh became. First, let me set the record straight: William J. Walsh was not murdered for selling illegal drugs. At least I think he was not. Still, when I try to piece the



Illustration:
The certificate of birth for Robert Emmett Felter, as completed by Dr. Walsh in 1926. The name intended for him by his parents was Norman Felter. Courtesy of Maryanne Felter.

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story together and make sense of it, I find too many gaps. And it leaves me believing that my grandparents and their friends might have been talking about some interesting rumors they did not want my father to hear about back in the 1930s.

“Ex-Convict Shoots Physician in Office and is Slain in Chase.” So reads a front page headline in the *New York Times* on December 15, 1932—six years and four days after Dr. Walsh had decided my father should be named after the Irish hero. Three days later, buried on page 28, the *New York Times* reported “1,000 at Funeral of Dr. W.J. Walsh: Mgr. J. H. McMahan Officiates at



Photo:
Robert Emmett Felter
and his mother about
six months after he was
born. Courtesy of
Maryanne Felter.

Mass for Physician Slain by Ex-Convict.” William Walsh was only 41 years old. He left his wife, his mother, and three small children: John, 10; Robert, 7; and Jean, 2. (Robert was one year older than my father. Was his name Robert Emmett too?). Still curious, I thought. But let me start from the beginning and try to understand the life of a

murdered Irish-American physician who was important enough to be honored by 1,000 people when he died—but who was not important enough to be remembered, except in the obscure family history of a non-Irish-American family now living in upstate New York.

FROM THE BEGINNING

William Walsh grew up in New Britain, Connecticut, son of Mr. and Mrs. John J. Walsh. His brother Charles was an assistant District Attorney at one time; his other brother, John, a lieutenant in the U.S. Navy—just as he himself had been during the First World War.¹ William was a “leading high school athlete” who went to Fordham in 1911 and made “a name for himself as a baseball pitcher and basketball player.”² He must have been good since he “worked out for a time with the New York Giants.”³ And, shortly after the war, Walsh, who had a practice at 676

Riverside Drive, also became the team’s physician, a job he held until he was murdered.

The drug scandal my father remembers hearing about may have been the one reported in 1929, three years before Walsh’s death. In May 1929, the wife of one of his patients summoned him to the house: she had awoken that morning to find her husband, Joseph D. O’Brien, one-time secretary and president of the American Baseball Association, “lying seemingly unconscious on the bathroom floor.”⁴ When Walsh arrived at the home shortly before 9 a.m., O’Brien was dead. The *New York Times* reported that Walsh explained that his patient had taken a solution of cyanide of potassium mixed 8 years earlier by Mrs. O’Brien and put into an old bottle labeled “Rhubarb and Soda,” a cure O’Brien thought he was taking for his headache and indigestion.⁵ Walsh reported to the *Times* that “the smell of rhubarb and soda was so strong in the poison bottle that he was about to take a teaspoonful of it to prove to himself that the contents agreed with the label on the bottle. Suspecting that the bottle might contain poison instead, Dr. Walsh notified the medical examiner.”⁶ Hmmnn. Was there something else going on here that my grandparents may have been whispering about? The poison had been mixed 8 years earlier; Mrs. O’Brien told the *Times* she had left it “lying near the kitchen sink”⁷ because she saw a mouse in the house that Tuesday night, had sprinkled some of the poison on a piece of bread, and had scattered the crumbs about the house. Maybe. But O’Brien had “incurred [Giant manager and baseball powerhouse John J.] McGraw’s displeasure in some fashion [and had been] summarily... moved out [of his position as President of the American Baseball Association] and replaced by [James J.] Tierney.”⁸ Maybe I am making a mountain out of a mousehole. But I can imagine a good Irish-American wanting to cover up a suicide so Mrs. O’Brien’s husband could be buried properly in St. Raymond’s Cemetery. I probably would have thought nothing about it except for the Walsh murder two years later and the memory of those family rumors.



MISTAKEN IDENTITY

Walsh was a friend of the infamous John J. McGraw, the manager of the Giants from 1902 until he retired in 1932. Noel Hynd writes that as McGraw got older, “most jarring of all [his old-age difficulties] was the death of [his personal physician, Dr. William J. Walsh.”⁹ The murder would have jarred anybody, as it did my grandparents and as it still does me. Hynd reports that the murder was “a case of mistaken identity,” that “the murderer...had an old festering grudge against one William Walsh, M.D.... and that the convict had shot the wrong man.”¹⁰ This seems to be the story that is most reported—if it is remembered at all. But the old newspaper articles tell a different story. And once again, memory seems to provoke questions.

Walsh’s murderer was John William Wilson, alias Frank Madden, aka Victor Hugo, aka Frank Clute, aka Frank Enright. Wilson had a long criminal history. Convicted of robbery in the Bronx in 1923, Wilson was sentenced to Sing Sing for 6 to 16 years. In 1930, convicted in White Plains of grand larceny, he had received a

suspended sentence. Curiously, in 1931 Wilson was once again convicted of grand larceny in, once again, White Plains—and yet again his sentence was suspended. But he was, according to the *Times*, “ordered to return to Sing Sing for violation of parole.”¹¹ I have to wonder why Wilson was running loose, who he might have known in the corrupt world of New York City politics of the day that he was able to avoid these sentences, and why the reports of his murder of Walsh do not fit together.

The day after the shooting, the *Times* reported that Walsh “had expressed a premonition of impending disaster to [his] friend George Murphy...when his caller, who said he was John William Wilson of 122 East Forty-sixth Street, arrived at the office at 8 p.m. Explaining that the man had telephoned the night before, Dr. Walsh told Mr. Murphy that he felt nervous about seeing him.”¹² Murphy heard three shots coming from the next room shortly after Wilson was admitted. Running into the examining room, Murphy “Wrest[ed] the doctor’s pistol from its holster [and] ran after his assailant.”¹³ Two policemen making a phone call from a phone booth on

Photo:
Graduates of the 1917 Fordham University Medical School class that included William J. Walsh. Specific identification of Dr. Walsh is not possible. Courtesy Fordham University Library, Archives & Special Collections, Bronx, New York.

the street joined the chase. At 144th Street and Broadway, Wilson ducked into a cab whose driver quickly fled from the stationary vehicle while



Photo:
Robert Emmett Felter
on a Bronx rooftop
early in the 1930s.
Courtesy of
Maryanne Felter.

Wilson fired at his pursuers. They fired back. According to the *Times*: “He fell, shot five times in the head and body and died almost immediately.”¹⁴ What a chase: almost right out of a movie!

The next day, John McGraw told reporters that “Dr. Walsh must have been the victim of mistaken identity, since he was sure that the physician had had no enemies.”¹⁵ And by December

17, buried on page 38, an autopsy report showed that Wilson was “intoxicated [when he] mortally wounded Dr. Walsh.”¹⁶ The day after the first news headlines, the *Times* reports a mistake: “an autopsy revealed that the former convict who shot the physician for some unrevealed reason, was not killed by police bullets, as previously reported, but committed suicide.”¹⁷ Already the story has sunk to page 3. Dr. Milton Halpern, the medical examiner, found Wilson died from a .32 caliber bullet; the police officers and Murphy were carrying .38 caliber weapons. This discovery, said the *Times*, led Halpern to the theory that Wilson “might have killed himself after the hip and abdomen wound[s from the .38 caliber] convinced him that escape was impossible.”¹⁸ Commissioner Mulrooney said “the motive of the slayer must have been robbery, and this view was concurred in by Detective Lieutenant Walter Sullivan.”¹⁹

The motive? Robbery, of course. So said Detective Stephen Love who was “satisfied... that [Wilson] had selected his intended victims by chance.”²⁰ But what chance? And how do we explain that in the murderer’s pocket were 15 bullets and “a slip of paper bearing the name of Dr. Robert Emmett Walsh of 652 West 170th Street.”²¹ Robert Emmett Walsh—the wheels in my brain start spinning. But there are thousands of Walshs, certainly hundreds in New York at the time. And Robert Emmett (also spelled with a double t) would have been a common enough name for an Irish-American from a patriotic

family. Still.... The *Times* reported that “Dr. R.E. Walsh’s name immediately precedes that of Dr. W. J. Walsh in the classified telephone directory.”²² R.E. Walsh reported that he was not related to W.J. Walsh. But then why was Robert Emmett Walsh one of “fifty honorary pallbearers” who escorted the casket?²³ Did he simply feel a connection to his murdered colleague and wish to honor him at the funeral? Was Wilson going through the phone book looking for Walshes to rob? What kind of grudge would he need to settle with a man whose identity he did not know?

Almost too much was made of identifying the caliber of the bullets, as if someone were trying to cover something up. And when, a year later, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia honored “honorary police surgeon” [William J.] Walsh along with seven other policemen—“brave men who have been killed in the performance of duty”²⁴—once again, I start to wonder about those rumors and the memories. Killed in the line of duty? What duty? As if there were not already too many open questions, I will add one more: was the Dr. Robert Emmett Walsh the same Dr. Robert Emmett Walsh who shows up as team physician to the Yankees later on in 1941 and after?

REMEMBERING DR. WALSH

On the *Times* obituary page for December 17, 1932,²⁵ William J. Walsh has not one but six notices of death. The family notice is on top, followed by one from the J.J. McCormick Association (that requests its members to attend the funeral), St Elizabeth’s Hospital (where Walsh was a surgeon and member of the executive committee), Fordham Hospital (where he was an attending physician), The Valentine Mott Association, and the Audubon Medical Society, both of which also request members to attend Walsh’s funeral. Given his notoriety and the importance these groups and the thousand mourners attached to Walsh, it is surprising that the story of his murder was accepted so easily the way it was.

Why the team physician for the New York Giants, who had a medical practice at 676 Riverside Drive in Manhattan, should have found

EX-CONVICT SHOOTS PHYSICIAN IN OFFICE AND IS SLAIN IN CHASE

Wounds Dr. W. J. Walsh of the
Giants on Riverside Drive—
Victim Had Feared Visit.

ASSAILANT BATTLES POLICE

Killed After Running Revolver
Battle on Drive, Broadway
and in 144th St.

Dr. William J. Walsh, physician of the New York Giants Baseball Club and an honorary police surgeon, was shot three times and critically wounded last night in his office at 678 Riverside Drive.

His assailant, an ex-convict who had got in by posing as a patient, was himself killed in a revolver fight with two policemen and a friend of Dr. Walsh who pursued him through three blocks of crowded streets to 144th Street near Amsterdam Avenue.

Dr. Walsh had expressed a premonition of impending disaster to the friend, George Murphy of 808 Harding Place, the Bronx, when his caller, who said he was John William Wilson of 122 East Forty-sixth Street, arrived at the office at 8 P. M. Explaining that the man had telephoned the night before, Dr. Walsh told Mr. Murphy that he felt nervous about seeing him.

Mr. Murphy tried to reassure the physician, recalling to him that he always carried a pistol. He tried to learn the basis for Dr. Walsh's nervousness, but the physician disclosed only that Wilson had telephoned for an appointment Tuesday evening, saying that he wanted to bring his brother for a consultation, and that he had put Wilson off at that time on the ground that the hour was too late. The police denied a report that Dr. Walsh had asked them for a guard at that time.

Saw "Patient" Reluctantly.

Mr. Murphy and Mary Connery, the office nurse, went into the X-ray room adjoining Dr. Walsh's office when the patient was admitted.

himself in the Bronx (up the street from Yankee Stadium, no less) delivering my father in 1926 is something no one in the family seems to know. The walk across Highbridge from Coogan's Bluff to the Bronx was a short and easy one. And Walsh's practice could clearly have extended into the Bronx. But no one knows the real answer. Why William Wilson was not in prison where he was supposed to be and what he was doing calling on Walsh with a gun is also baffling. It is possible, of course, that Walsh's murder was a senseless one. But it is equally possible that it was not.

No one remembers Dr. William J. Walsh—a man who so loved his Irishness that he would name another person's child after his hero. One wonders how many Robert Emmetts he may have named in the Bronx and upper Manhattan during the 1920s and early 30s. Maybe hundreds. But that, like much else about this story, is just supposition.

Perhaps John McGraw's widow best captures the lure of this story: in her biography of her late husband she writes, "Despite the passing of old comrades, the worst blow came in December with the fantastic murder of John's physician, young Dr. Walsh.... There was no explanation for the shooting, except mistaken identity, for the convict had called another Dr. Walsh. It was an inexplicable blow, the kind that clinches at your consciousness and won't let go."²⁶

There is an impulse to make stories neat, to bring order to the chaos, to find closure. When I started this research into my father's story, I wanted to find a way to tie it in stereotypical ways to New York "Irishness"—to connect Walsh with not only McGraw but also Tammany and Irish cops and the seamy side of New York City politics. But no matter how I tried to force the pieces, how many questions I found unanswered, how close I came to making connections—it would not all fit together. But regardless, it is a story worth looking at—not just for myself but also for Irish-America, for as Ian McBride says, "For national communities, as for individuals, there can be no sense of identity without remembering."²⁷



John J. McGraw, manager of the New York Giants, National League leaders, 1901-1912.

Illustration:

(left) *The story of Dr. Walsh's murder late in 1932 made front-page news in New York City. Courtesy of the New York Times.*

Photo:

(above) *John J. McGraw, manager of the New York Giants baseball team. Dr. Walsh served as his personal physician and as the club's team physician. Courtesy of Cleveland Public Library.*

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- 8 Noel Hynd. *The Giants of the Pologrounds: The Glorious Times of Baseball's New York Giants* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 173.
- 9 Hynd, p. 290.
- 10 Hynd, p. 291.
- 11 "Ex-Convict Shoots Physician," p. 3.
- 12 Ibid, p. 1.
- 13 Ibid, p. 3.
- 14 Ibid, p. 3.
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- 16 "Walsh Slayer Intoxicated." *New York Times* 17 December 1932, p. 38.
- 17 "Ex-Convict's Shots," p. 3.
- 18 Ibid, p.3.
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- 26 Blanche Sindall McGraw, *The Real McGraw* (New York: D. McKay and Co., 1953), p. 327.
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- 1 According to the 1910 US Census, the Walsh family was living in New Britain Ward 1, Hartford, Connecticut . The members of the household at that time were: John J. (aged 47), Mary E. (aged 45), William J (aged 19), John A. Jr. (aged 17), Charles B. (aged 15), Mary C. (aged 14) and two others, possibly domestics: Anna A. Dunn (aged 27) and Anna Schmidt (aged 18).
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Notes