

An Incurable Romantic: The Life and Loves of John Moore McCalla, Jr.

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“The old year, 1859, is gone, forever, thank Heaven. God only knows what I have endured in the past year. I have suffered from disease, and I have seen, one after another, my worldly hopes fade away. Gladly would I expire with this year. The dawn of the new year sheds no rays of light upon my paths, I am stricken, I am hedged in. God alone can deliver me, and he seems to have forsaken me in living. My only hope is the hope of an early death.”

– *McCalla diary, 1859.*

“You must believe me when I say that I am now, and am to be yours, to love you and to protect you and to cherish you against the world combined. I often dream of our future life and I cannot but believe that we will be as happy as most people.”

- *letter to Helen Hill, August 23, 1862.*

“Oh! Helen, you can’t imagine how provoked I become when I hear people say they will not do this or that which in itself is all proper and agreeable because “the world” will talk. I only have a deep rooted contempt for such weak-minded creatures.”

- *letter to Helen Hill, April 15, 1863.*

According to the *Records of the D.C. Medical Society*, John Moore McCalla was born on May 24, 1835 in Lexington, Kentucky, received his M.D. in 1853 at Columbian College, retired from practice on Feb. 21, 1877, and died April 30, 1897: the unexceptional profile of an apparently unexceptional man. But while John McCalla’s medical career was modest, he was in many ways the ideal American gentleman of his day: a cultured, well-educated professional, at home in the worlds of business, science and art, a pious church-goer and devoted father. Had his diaries and letters not survived, we would have lost the remarkable record of a man whose life illustrated many of the social and sexual contradictions of 19th century Washington. When McCalla’s granddaughter Helen Goldsborough organized the family papers fifty years ago and began to read his diaries, she was astounded by what she found. She wrote:

“To me he was a very strange, tragic, gifted & extraordinary person. I was shocked when I first read the diaries in the fifties when I brought them to Leeland to find out that he evidently was a homo – I told [my friend] Bird and she said I should burn the diaries but I didn’t feel that way. After all he was my grandfather. Now I am very glad I did not destroy them. His attachment for other men seemed to run through the entire period of the diaries but that phase was only a segment of a very diverse personality.”

“There were men, many different ones, always a dominant one. They always seemed to be many years younger & their attitude towards him seemed to make the difference of joy or complete depression for periods. Some of them were also friends of the family & they would come & chat with “everyone in the dining room” for a while & then he and the particular man would retire to his “office” upstairs “smoke, talk of intimate matters which concerned both of them, drink whiskey and lie on the bed,” sometimes for an afternoon. They come back to him in dreams & he often visited their graves on the anniversary of their deaths. But that’s enough of that side of his life.”

Though her grandfather’s male lovers shocked Helen Goldsborough, his close relationships with women were equally noteworthy.

Though John McCalla was born in Kentucky, his family moved to Washington when he was eleven. He attended a local elementary school and then Columbian College (the predecessor of George Washington University) and its medical school, from which he graduated in 1853. He practiced medicine for several years, without much success, and took a clerical job in the Census Bureau in 1861 to make ends meet, then moved to the War Department the following year. When threatened with dismissal because of his Southern sympathies, McCalla took a position as Acting Assistant Surgeon in the Union Army (September 1863), which also freed him from the threat of conscription. At the end of the war, he resigned his commission and returned to civilian life. In April 1864 he married Helen Varnum Hill after a two-year long-distance courtship and became the manager for his wife’s family estate in Washington. Though he did not find this work particularly congenial, it was not too demanding either and Helen’s income provided the family with comfortable accommodations and servants, though it took many years for them to afford their own home. They had three sons, who died in infancy, and two daughters, Isabel and Louisa, whom he doted on. McCalla built a house at 820 17th Street where he died in 1897 at the age of 63. His wife Helen died in 1906, aged 69.

John showed a romantic temperament from an early age. In 1845, a Lexington girlfriend named Labelle wrote him a curious letter:

“I did not intend falling in love with any one, excepting yourself, but as you said in your first or second letter, that you had left your heart in New Hope, I thought I might conscientiously carry on a flirtation, as you had set the example. You must know what shock you gave my tender and devoted heart in thus making that acknowledgement. Ah! John how could you be so cruel as to distress me in that manner. But I have in a great measure recovered and have given my heart away. You know we must have something to love, or we would not exist.”

Even discounting for irony and Victorian sentimentality, this is a remarkable announcement directed toward an 11-year-old boy, but John himself wrote in the same manner even then.

John's diaries and letters document his fascination for – and to – women. He always had a wide circle of female friends of all ages, both married and single, and he constantly escorted them to church or social events, visited them at their homes, and sought out their company on vacations. Helen Hill described a reading group at Berkeley Springs resort in 1859:

“About eleven o'clock in the morning, some of us commenced the “reading-class,” so called, although Dr. McCalla was the only one who read aloud, the rest of us being occupied with our [sewing]. Our party consisted of seven persons, Meta Van Ness & her aunt, Hattie Randolph, Doyne Smith, Miss Neale, Dr. McCalla and myself. I imagine that we must have formed quite a picturesque group, as we were seated under the trees with Dr. McCalla in our midst.”

John loved being the object of female attention, and receiving it from six women at once was doubtless the high point of his day. John described his special fondness for a number of women; a partial list includes Ernestine de Faiber, Henrietta Glenn, Fannie Ladde, Lizzie McLain, his cousin Georgia Morris, Cornelia Randolph, Molly and Sally Smith, Miss Snead, Lizzie Waters, and Anna Zevely, in addition to his wife Helen Varnum Hill. All of these women were close friends, but there is clear evidence of only one sexual affair, that with the singer-dancer Ernestine de Faiber, who performed in Washington in 1863 and who fascinated many of McCalla's friends. After some weeks of aggressive pursuit, she agreed to see him:

“Dec. 3. This morning I called on Ernestine twice, she was not in; I called again during the afternoon and had a delightful “interview.” Dec: 5. I called on Ernestine at 11.30 a.m. by appointment and then again at 5.30 p.m. I gave Ernestine my [picture] and she gave me a locket.”

While sailing on a ship sponsored by the American Colonization Society, he described a dream about Henrietta “Etta” Glenn (Mrs. J. K. Harwood), which illustrates the passionate feelings he cultivated even after his friends married:

“November 23rd, 1861. Last night I had a dream so vivid and so pleasant, that in thinking of it to-day, I am able almost to forget the discomfort the pitching of the vessel causes. I thought I was with E— G— H— and she told me she was unhappy in her married life, that her husband was not the man she once thought he was, and that which she had once blushing acknowledged to me, has all along, is now, and ever will be true.

“Still in my dreams, our forms shall meet
“Like kindred streams too long apart
“And in my visions, false yet sweet
“Thou will be mine – wherever thou art.”

John corresponded often with Mrs. Harwood and visited her in Baltimore several times a year, from 1860 to the 1880s, usually meeting her at the home of her mother, Mrs.

Glenn; he described these meetings as “glorious.” Her husband is rarely mentioned, but McCalla did try to find a job for him in July, 1867.

John loved women, but he loved men even more, and his journals relate about two dozen “attachments between men” between 1848 and 1890. Among his attachments were Dr. A. Jackson Boulware, John P. Franklin, Thomas Harrison, Samuel Keighler; John Martin,¹ Dr. Thomas Maury, Alpheus Middleton, Charles R. Newman; Frank O’Brien, Albert Ransom; J. S. Rudd; George H. Thompson, Bernie Wolff; and possibly George Yates, who died with Custer at Little Big Horn in 1876.

Dr. A. Jackson Boulware was John’s first serious love. They met at Columbian College and became intimate in 1848. John remembered the night forty years later in his diary:

November, Saturday 3. 1888. “This being the anniversary of dear Jack Boulware’s birth, and the fortieth of his birth-night party in room 38 at Col. College [at Meridian Hill Park], I walked out to the site of the dear old building & reached there just after sunset. I walked over about where 38 & 50 & 17 used to be and was completely under the influence of the old spell and realized, too painfully, how great that old love was. As I walked home I watched the two planets, again close together, which Jack used to call himself & me. During the evening I looked at his likeness & the picture of old Columbian college and read over some of his most friendly letters and I placed under my pillow his likeness, given me in 1848, and some of his hair and three of his most affectionate letters, and so once again, dear Jack and myself slept together.”

After college, Boulware moved to a farm in Spotsylvania County, Virginia and rarely saw John, but he named his son McCalla in his honor. After Jack’s death, John stayed in touch with McCalla Boulware until the end of his life.

Miss Cornelia Randolph was McCalla’s oldest and closest female friend. John described their early relationship – in a revisionist sort of way – to his fiancée Helen Hill in a letter of December 1862, after Cornelia had sent Helen an old photograph of John.

“I am at a loss to know why Miss Randolph sent you that picture. I will tell you how she came by it. Some years ago [in 1851], I made a visit to Charlestown, V^a. About a week before starting, I had a vivid dream that in making the expected trip, the cars were thrown from the track, and I was much injured. I told Miss Cornelia of the dream and how much it worried me, as I had had some vivid dreams which had come true. She requested me to have my picture taken for her before I left, and as I liked Miss Cornelia, and believed her to be my friend, I was pleased at the request and readily granted it. I made my journey, had a pleasant visit and returned in safety. If Miss Cornelia chooses to part with the picture,

¹ McCalla particularly appreciated a physical type represented by Ernestine de Faiber, John C. Martin and the actor Harry Murdoch: “Dec. 14, 1866, “Mr: H. S. Murdoch, a young actor in the piece, reminded me forcibly of E. de F. and J. C. M.” and Jan.23, 1867: “The handsome little Murdoch acted Didier Barbeau.”

(and I would not expect her to keep it, *as I do not visit her now,*) it belongs only to me.”

In a second letter (January 1863), he says:

“I believe that two motives caused the person who owned the picture to send it to you, the first, the intention to make you believe that in the past years of my intimacy with that lady and her family, *I had paid her particular attention, had even been engaged, but as we were never married, to leave you to infer that I had been rejected;* the second, believing perhaps that our love was somewhat influenced by personal appearance, to show you a picture taken some years ago in a different style of beard and dress might do away with the delusion.” [Emphasis added.]

John’s relationship with Cornelia shows great emotional intimacy and not a little sexual tension. Cornelia may have been acting mischievously or she may have actually been attempting to end the relationship, out of jealousy or the belief that John and Helen were an unsuitable match.

Yet Cornelia remained John’s close friend; she was his baptismal witness and the godmother of his oldest daughter. And she continued to play jokes on John after his marriage. In January 1869, John met Cornelia’s cousin Tom Bolling, an engineer laying out the Washington Railroad, who was boarding at the Randolph house. McCalla soon began a passionate affair with Tom; his diary for February 14 says, “Tom returned to my house. After dinner, we laid on the bed and smoked and talked of private affairs. I feel that God has given me a new friend whose affectionate intercourse will compensate me for all the losses of last year.”² A week later, John discussed this affair with Cornelia and she could not resist the impulse to make him jump: a few days later she told his wife Helen that Tom Bolling and his brother Richard were going to be transferred out of town. When Helen told John, he was panic-stricken and he rushed to Cornelia’s house to learn the details, but found out she was only toying with him. Cornelia never married, but remained in John’s life as an affectionate irritant until the end.

John first mentions his great love Charley McCormick in March 1859: “I spent some time during the morning in painting for Miss Helen V. Hill’s prayer-book, after which I walked out to the Asylum³ (to spend the night with Charley) where I am now writing, sitting with Charley in the Dispensary. “*verbum sapientibus satis*” [Latin for “a word is enough for the those in the know”]

² McCalla describes their close relationship several years later: *Wednesday 14, 1869* A few friends were invited to spend the evening at the house to celebrate this the fifth anniversary of my marriage, viz. my wooden wedding. Tom came in from the Relay, and looked gorgeous, was the beau of the evening. How proud I was of him! We had a delightful time, and danced the German for over two hours. We received about 30 wooden presents. Tom walked home with the Randolphs, and after his return, we had a talk in the parlor till 3 a.m.

³ Charley was a resident student at the Washington Asylum.

McCalla explained his affection for Charley to Helen in a remarkably frank letter:

“I am, perhaps, over sensitive about speaking of D^r M^cCormick because my attachment to him has been so warm and romantic and constant for four years, that I fear if I begin to allude to him, my affection might cause me to become tiresome. You have read of the love that existed between David & Jonathan, Damon & Pythias and between Arthur Hallam and Alfred Tennyson, and Lord Byron and the Duke of Dorset – such an affection I have for the blonde and blue-eyed Charley, and between such a feeling and “love” it is hard to draw the dividing line; and though there are strong and noble attachments between women, they cannot begin to feel or understand the regard of which I have spoken, and they are therefore apt to sneer at the expression of such a friendship between two men.”

He discussed this relationship with Helen at length – without alluding to sex – and she encouraged it by referring to Charley affectionately in her own letters. McCalla even thought of arranging for Charley to marry Helen’s younger sister Isabel, though she was too young to consider this seriously. The affair ended painfully at the end of 1863, perhaps because of Charley’s infidelity, but Charley was still willing to travel to New York to be John’s best man the following year, and they had physical relations at least twice after their respective marriages. John always remembered McCormick with great affection; he visited his grave for decades after his death and later helped his son find work.

Helen Varnum Hill first mentioned John McCalla in her diaries in February 1857 when he came to her house for an evening of parlor games. The Hills and the McCallas knew each other as neighbors, as well as through shared politics and religion. John became a frequent and welcome visitor at the Hill’s and though he brought Helen books and flowers, he was not a serious love interest in the late 1850s. After her parents’ death in 1860, Helen moved to the New York home of her uncle Joseph B. Varnum. In June 1862, John became engaged to Helen and from that time, John conducted his courtship by letter, writing to Helen several times a week. Many of Helen’s circle – and perhaps some of John’s – opposed the match. Helen’s Uncle Joseph dismissed him as a “trifler,” possibly because of his wide circle of lady friends, and sent John a private letter urging him to end the engagement, which John promptly forwarded to Helen. John dismissed their criticisms as slanders and jealous interference, but his protests appear somewhat self-conscious.

Curiously neither Helen nor John mention their engagement in their diaries and after their marriage, Helen played a minor role in John’s journals. In part this was a convention of Victorian writing, which strove to avoid commonplace or “delicate” subjects; for example neither Helen nor John mention her pregnancies in their diaries, only the birth of their children. After their marriage, their social lives were largely separate, and this too was not uncommon for the time. For all that, their marriage seems to have been successful; they had five children, shared many hobbies such as opera and art collecting, and were, if not a passionate, at least a comfortable couple.

McCalla’s friendships, especially with men, were mercurial and he sometimes complained of his lovers’ coldness and ingratitude. He offered a post-mortem on one rela-

tionship by declaring that “a deep and honest affection has been unworthily bestowed upon an indifferent and unappreciative object” and of another lover he says: “Oh! to think that any one, calling himself a man, could be so fickle and so ungrateful. God forgive him, I cannot.” In spite of, or maybe because of, his affectionate disposition, McCalla was plagued with depression throughout his life. On Jan.1, 1855, at the age of 19, he wrote: “All hail, New Year’s day! thankful that another year of my existence is gone forever.” When he was surrounded with friends and his business affairs were going well, he was cheerful and outgoing, but in times of stress, he retreated into himself and took to his bed for days with minor health problems. He himself recognized his predilection for depression, and wrote: “I am improving in health, but I am subdued in spirit, not in any especial grief, but an ever present consciousness of unrest and non-happiness, desiring what I cannot obtain.” McCalla did have genuine ailments, including a serious respiratory condition, probably emphysema, allergies, arthritis and rheumatic fever. It is difficult to say whether his depression was the result of his social situation, genetics or even Victorian culture, which exalted the melancholy martyred soul.

McCalla’s greatest source of strength and comfort was his faith, and in particular his belief in God’s unconditional love. He was a very devout Episcopalian and attended church as often as five times a week. He expressed fear that he could not understand God’s will or live up to his standards, but resolutely commended himself to Divine mercy with the motto “God is love.” Interestingly, John saw no conflict at all between his faith and his sexual activity. For example, he slept with Charley McCormick the night before he was baptized into the Episcopal church; Charley, on the other hand, being a good Irish Catholic, would not sleep with John the night before taking Holy Communion. John also believed God played a role in his romantic affairs. When he fell in love with George Thompson, he wrote: “I shall ever remember with awe and pleasure the experience of the last three days. In it I recognize the hand of God and praise His holy name that His will was consistent to my prayers. God grant that Col: Thompson & myself may be friends and helps to each other!” And when his hopes for a relationship with George Yates disintegrated, he wrote: “I still feel very sad. I wonder why God permits me to be tried by placing my affections upon unworthy objects. I accept any discipline that will bring me “safe into the haven.””

When McCormick moved in with him in 1863, McCalla wrote, “I am once more content, and situated as I desire to be always,” but at the same time he was aggressively courting Helen Hill. The question arises: if he felt so strongly about Charley, why did he marry Helen? where did his heart truly lie? McCalla was in most respects a conformist, in spite of his protestations. He yearned for stability, social respectability, and above all love and fidelity; his greatest fear was abandonment by those he loved. By the time of his marriage, he had already had several passionate and long-lasting male relationships. None of these had turned into permanent partnerships, and perhaps they were never intended to. On September 15, 1863, as he took up his position at Seminary Hospital in Georgetown, he wrote in his diary: “This is the last night I perhaps will ever spend with Charley as my room-mate, and the thought of parting makes me sad for my love for him is “deeper than that of a brother,” but these changes must take place, for “such is life.”” A legal union with a man was impossible and his experience with Charley and others made him keenly aware

of the possibility of fickleness in his male lovers. His attraction to women and social convention made marriage inevitable, and of the options available to him in 1864, marriage to Helen Hill was clearly the best. Helen was pretty, well educated, amiable and almost rich; she had common sense and showed an independent spirit, which appealed to him. He had discussed his affections for men, or at least for Charlie McCormick, with her, and she clearly accepted this; indeed she may have found this aspect of his personality charming, considering her fondness for his flamboyant friend, Dr. E. Tucker Blake.

But why did Helen marry John? She had had several marriage proposals by 1862, but none suited her. The answer may lie in her Uncle Joseph's letter to McCalla, intended to discourage their marriage. He claimed that Helen said she liked McCalla better than anyone else who paid attention to her. Perhaps Helen was too independent for most, or perhaps she wanted to return to Washington, which would have discouraged some New York suitors. Certainly, many men of that day might have objected to their wife's keeping control of her own money, as Helen did. Of course, John McCalla had many attractive qualities as well. He was a college-educated professional, good-looking, mild tempered, and artistic by inclination. He shared and encouraged her hobbies and her independence of spirit and he did not try to take over her finances. Helen Hill could have done much worse.

How many people knew about McCalla's attachments? This question is difficult to answer since understanding of the variety of human sexuality expression was limited in 19th century America. John's emotional attachments to men were obvious; such strong same-sex attachments were common enough and would not necessarily have elicited comment. John frequently wrote to Helen of his fondness for Charley McCormick. How much more he told her, or how much she deduced, is unknown, although she had a keen eye for her friends' romances, even when they were clandestine. But she welcomed at least one of her husband's lovers into the family: Tom Bolling, who visited the family for years, was known as "Uncle Tom" by the children and after John's death, he gave away his eldest daughter Isabel in marriage.

There is no clear evidence that McCalla's parents or siblings were aware of his sexual activity. It is reasonable to assume that they did, but propriety forbade open discussion and there was no recognized identity of "homosexual" at the time. According to Helen, John's friend Tucker Blake was disliked by some people, probably because he was somewhat affected and histrionic, which John was not. Perhaps relevant is the fact that John was not close to his father until after his marriage, when Helen encouraged closer ties. This distance may have been due to differences in personality or political and religious views or it could have been due to his sexual activity. It is also noteworthy that of four siblings who survived to adulthood, John was the only one to marry and he never mentions any romantic partners of his sisters or his older brother, who died of alcoholism. It is possible that John was not the only "family" family member.

Obviously McCalla's lovers knew of his affections, as did his close friends and the parents of at least three of his lovers, whom he saw socially. In early 1866, John helped found the Misanthrope Club, a social club whose membership was largely bisexual or homosexual, and he remained an active member until September 1867. The club continued

until at least 1879, and thirty former members attended a reunion in 1888. Members included John A. Baker and Seaton Munroe, who founded the Metropolitan Club; John Franklin, attorney and organist at St. Paul's; Eugene Philippe Jacobson, a Polish-born attorney and Congressional medal of honor winner; Samuel L. Phillips, attorney, and Col. W. G. Moore, private secretary to Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson and Superintendent of the District Police from 1886-1898 – all prominent in Washington society. The more interesting question, then, is not how many people knew of McCalla's attachments, but how common and socially acceptable such affections were in 19th century Washington. A good deal more work needs to be done on the subject.

To sum up. John McCalla's story has a modern ring to it. He moved to D.C. as a child, had his first sexual experience in college, and entered the Army medical corps in the mid '60s to avoid being drafted in a war he strongly opposed. After the war, he developed a circle of homosexual and bisexual friends, indulged a taste for opera and antique collecting, went through a series of lovers, and then in the '80s bought a house on 17th Street. But, as his granddaughter noted, that was only one side of a very diverse personality. He was also an inveterate ladies' man, a loving father, a dutiful husband and a diligent businessman, all of which he managed while suffering from chronic depression. John Moore McCalla, Jr. was truly a strange, tragic, and extraordinary person and his papers throw a welcome light on a little-known facet of Washington's - and America's – remarkable and complex social history.