



## A New York John Agnew?

The speculative theory which I pursued with initial enthusiasm was that our Belfast John Agnew might well have been the second son of John Agnew (1754-1820), a Belfast merchant who immigrated to Philadelphia in 1784 and moved to New York in 1797. Perhaps that son was the John Agnew, son of a New York merchant, who graduated with an MA at the University of Glasgow in 1812.

### Outline story

John Agnew sen. was a Belfast merchant and a Reformed Presbyterian. He took exception to being made to swear oaths on the Bible and so resolved to set sail for the USA immediately it was safe to do so after the American War of Independence had ended.

It's likely that he married Esther [also called Ann?] Stavely (1756-1843) before they both set sail for Philadelphia in 1784. Esther was the sister of the Rev William Stavely (1743-1825), a significant figure in the history of the Reformed Presbyterian Church (the Covenanters). He was a supporter of the Volunteers and the United Irishmen, though eventually he pulled back from the "tumultous and disorderly meetings" of the United Irishmen.

William Stavely had two sisters\*: Esther [presumably also known as Ann] who married John Agnew sen., and Eliza who married a Mr Cussack. Both sisters with their husbands moved to the USA.

\*Info from *Brief Biographical Sketches of some Irish Covenanting Ministers* [http://ied.dippam.com/ied\\_records/23272](http://ied.dippam.com/ied_records/23272)

William Stavely was born at Ferniskey a townland near Kells, Co Antrim in 1743. His father was Aaron Stavely whose family had originally come from the town of Stavely in England. Aaron Stavely owned a small freehold property at Ferniskey and was in comfortable worldly circumstances. He was brought up an Episcopalian but became a Covenanter from conviction. William Stavely's mother was a daughter of the Rev Patrick Vance, Presbyterian Minister of Ray, Co Donegal. William Stavely was the only son of the family which consisted altogether of 3 children.

After a few years in Philadelphia, the Agnews settled in New York, in 1787, at 9 Peck Slip where John's tobacco business flourished. They also had a house out of town. Peck Slip was one of principal wharfs in the city. It was on the East River and one of the two ferries to Brooklyn ran from Peck Slip. See the article on Page by Harold Goldstein about old New York's slips.

Their family certainly included William (born before 1790), John (perhaps born at the end of 1790 after that year's census, or early in 1791 – to fit the theory!), Cornelius (born 1799), daughter Mary Anne and daughter Jane.

Mary Anne Agnew married Rev Dr Alexander McLeod (1774-1833) on 15 September 1805. They had eleven children, only four of whom survived into adulthood.

William Agnew (1785-1869) married Elizabeth Thompson (1784-1876). They were the parents of Cornelius Rea Agnew (1830-1888), a leading USA eye and ear surgeon. Other children were John I.; Alexander McLeod; Ann Stavely (Mrs. Paton); Margaret Rea; William Renwick; and Andrew Gifford.

Cornelius Agnew, aged 21 was the only listed passenger (given as a USA resident and a merchant) on the brig *Helen* which arrived in New York on 7 February 1820. He was travelling to New York from St Bartholomew, Guadeloupe. The ship's master was William Gold.

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*The American* [newspaper], New York, Tuesday 26 June 1821

#### SHIP NEWS

Brig *Helen*, [Captain] Patterson, 35 days from Sligo, with coals, to John Agnew\*, 32 passengers.

\*Presumably John Agnew, the son (his father had died on 10 October 1820) – therefore scuttling my theory of this being the Belfast John Agnew.

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The **1790** US Federal Census for the City and County of New York, Montgomery Ward, has:

John Agnew, Head of Family.

|   |                                 |
|---|---------------------------------|
| Free White Persons - Males - Under 16:    | 1 [son William]                 |
| Free White Persons - Males - 16 and over: | 1 [John Agnew sen.]             |
| Free White Persons - Females:             | 2 [Wife and daughter Mary Anne] |
| Number of Household Members:              | 4                               |
| No slaves                                 |                                 |

By **1800** the family had grown. The 1800 US Federal Census for New York Ward 5 has:

John Agnew, Head of Family

|   |                                       |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| Free White Persons - Males - Under 10:        | 2 [sons John and Cornelius]           |
| Free White Persons - Males - 16 through 25:   | 1 [son William]                       |
| Free White Persons - Males - 26 through 44:   | 2 [John Agnew sen. perhaps + servant] |
| Free White Persons - Females - Under 10:      | 2 [daughters Jane and ?]              |
| Free White Persons - Females - 26 through 44: | 2 [Wife + daughter Mary Anne]         |
| Number of Household Members Under 16:         | 4                                     |
| Number of Household Members Over 25:          | 4                                     |
| Number of Household Members:                  | 9                                     |

By the **1810** census, the family\* appears to be at Manlius village, Onondaga, New York

|   |                                |
|---|--------------------------------|
| Free White Persons - Males - Under 10:        | 2                              |
| Free White Persons - Males - 26 through 44:   | 1 [John Agnew sen.]            |
| Free White Persons - Females - Under 10:      | 1 [Jane? or younger daughter?] |
| Free White Persons - Females - 10 through 15: | 1 [Youngest daughter or Jane?] |
| Free White Persons - Females - 26 through 44: | 1 [Wife]                       |
| Number of Household Members Under 16:         | 4                              |
| Number of Household Members Over 25:          | 2                              |
| Number of Household Members:                  | 6                              |

\*However, the appearance of 'Mary' in the property sales records for Manlius (see below) may cast doubt on whether this is the same family.

The **1820** Census took place on 7 August and John Agnew is listed at New York Ward 4.

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Free White Persons - Males - 10 through 15:         | 1 |
| Free White Persons - Males - 16 through 25:         | 1 |
| Free White Persons - Males - 26 through 44:         | 1 |
| Free White Persons - Males - 45 and over:           | 1 |
| Free White Persons - Females - 16 through 25:       | 2 |
| Free White Persons - Females - 45 and over:         | 1 |
| Number of Persons - Engaged in Manufactures:        | 3 |
| Free White Persons - Under 16:                      | 1 |
| Free White Persons - Over 25:                       | 3 |
| Total Free White Persons:                           | 7 |
| Total All Persons - White, Slaves, Coloured, Other: | 7 |

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This next from <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nyononda/MANLIUS/LAND1800.HTM>

**Property Sales** by date of recording / Town of Manlius

1800-1809

Agnew, John & Mary to D. Fisk 1809 (I, 224) lot 98

1810-1819

Agnew, John & Mary to A. D'Lamatter 1817 (T,260) lot 87

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Lakin, Charles A. *History of Military Lodge No. 93, Free and Accepted Masons*. Manlius, N.Y., 1893

The Military Lodge No.93 of free and accepted Masons in Manlius was granted its charter in 1802. John Agnew became an affiliated member on 6 June 1805.

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These next excerpts are some of the source materials and references. Sadly, the PRONI letter (pages 7 and 8 below) from Jane Agnew in New York to the Rev William Stavely in Belfast seems to rule out any connection at all with the John Agnew in Belfast!

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Page 175, 176

In the year 1790, the Rev. James Reid visited the United States, on a mission from the Reformed Presbytery in Scotland. Reaching New York, he became the guest of Mr. John Agnew, whose excellent and pious family then resided at Peck Slip. In early life this gentleman had united with the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Ireland, and now joyfully opened his doors to the preaching of the new missionary. He [Reid] baptized two children, William Agnew, afterwards a ruling elder in the church, and Mary Ann, then five months old, but subsequently Mrs. Dr. McLeod, the wife and the mother of the only pastors who have ever laboured in this church of which we are now writing. Mr. Agnew died in 1820, aged sixty-eight, both parents closing lives of eminent Christian consistency, and leaving children and children's children walking in the truth. "The righteous shall be held in everlasting remembrance" and this was the commencement of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in New York.

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<http://www.ebooksread.com/authors-eng/new-york-genealogical-and-biographical-society/the-new-york-genealogical-and-biographical-record-volume-62-ywe/page-21-the-new-york-genealogical-and-biographical-record-volume-62-ywe.shtml>

*The New York genealogical and biographical record*, Volume 62, pages 21 and 22

From an obituary of Cornelius Rea Agnew, "an oculist of world-wide reputation, and ... very prominent in educational, philanthropic, and religious circles".

"The founder of the Agnew family in this city was John, a "most staunch, intelligent and worthy Reformed Presbyterian." He was an emigrant from a place near the town of Conner, County Antrim, Ireland. For some time he was in business at Belfast, Ireland. It is believed in the family that it is of French extraction, and that after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, religious persecution drove its members to the north of Ireland, where they found a home near Belfast.

"John, before mentioned, came to Philadelphia in 1784, and to New York in 1787. His name appears in the city directory for the first time in 1789 as a tobacconist in Peck Slip. The business established by him has been continued by his descendants. He died\* Oct. 10, 1820, aged 67 years; and his wife Ann, a sister of the Rev. Wm. Stavely of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in the north of Ireland, died Dec. 31, 1842, aged 96 years. He had a country residence, called "The Orchard" on the north side of the road near what is now called 12th St., between the present 5th and 6th Avenues.

"His daughter [Mary] Anne was married Sept. 16, 1805 to the Rev. Alexander McLeod D.D., the minister of the First Reformed Presbyterian Church, then in Chambers St., and now continued in W.12th St., between 6th & 7th Avs. In this church, John Agnew, the founder, was an Elder. Another daughter, Jane, became the wife of the Rev. Samuel W. Crawford D.D. of Philadelphia. His other children were William, John, and Cornelius.

"William Agnew, son of the founder, and father of the subject of this sketch, followed the business of his father. He married Elizabeth Thompson who belonged to a Scotch family found in Pennsylvania before the Revolutionary War. Their monument in Greenwood Cemetery is inscribed with the date of his birth, May 27, 1785, and of his death Oct. 30, 1869; and with the date of the

birth of his wife Elizabeth Nov. 12, 1784, and with the date of her death, Sept. 29, 1876. Their children were John I.; Alexander McLeod; Ann Stavelly (Mrs. Paton); Margaret Rea; William Renwick; Cornelius Rea, physician; and Andrew Gifford.

“The remains of John Agnew, founder, were buried in the ground belonging to the First Reformed Presbyterian Church, which was in the eastern part of the square now bounded by 13th St., University place, 5th Av., and 12th St. In 1853 this ground was sold, and the remains of the Agnew family there buried, and those of many others, were removed to Greenwood Cemetery, in the part called Hill Girt Lawn. Here are to be seen monuments to representatives of four generations of the Agnew family who have lived and died in this city.” E. E.

\* He was said to be living at 313 Water St., NYC, when he died.

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Wylie, David G. *Our jubilee: the 150th anniversary of the Scotch Presbyterian Church, New York, 1756-1906*, New York, 1907.

Pages 64-66

In the years 1789-90, the Rev. James Reid, of Galloway, Scotland, a minister of the Reformed Presbytery of that country, made a visit to the lonely societies and scattered families who in this country adhered to the Reformation cause. Mr. Reid came from Galloway fragrant with memories of the martyrs and the scent of the heather. He had been as far south as the Carolinas and came to New York to embark for his native Scotia. Here, in the summer of 1790, he met Mr. John Agnew and his excellent wife, who then resided in Peck Slip, near Water Street, not far from the East River. During the few weeks that Mr. Reid remained in New York he enjoyed the grateful hospitalities of this pious family.

Mr. John Agnew was a native of Ireland, a Covenanter and a descendant of Covenanters from earlier times. Mr. Agnew had made a profession of religion in very early life in the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Ireland, and had married a sister of the Rev. William Stavelly, a man of truly apostolic character, whose name and memory are even to this day revered in the scenes of his former labours. Immediately before his immigration to the United States he was a merchant in the town of Belfast. His sudden resolve to emigrate to America happened as follows: He had been fined severely by the magistrate because he declined to follow the superstitious practice of kissing the book when he was called to make affidavit before him; and moreover, he had seen the windows of his store pelted and broken by the mob, because he had not joined in an illumination which had been ordered by the authorities on account of some victory gained by the British over the American forces in the War of the Revolution.

He was a dissenter from the British Constitution from principle; he disliked the English rule in Ireland: his instincts were republican; his sympathies were with America, and he sought an asylum on her shores. In one of the first ships that crossed the ocean after the Revolutionary War he sailed for Philadelphia, arriving there in 1784. He had therefore been six years in this country and three of these in New York when Rev. Mr. Reid found his way to his hospitable home. We are glad to have in our audience to-night a grandson of Mr. John Agnew – Mr. A. Gifford Agnew, now of the Fifth Ave. Presbyterian Church.

Wylie, Samuel Brown. *Memoir of Alexander McLeod*, New York 1855.

Page 72

About this time Mr. McLeod, by his marriage to Mary Anne Agnew, laid a solid foundation for domestic fecility [felicity]. This event took place on the 16th of September, 1805. Miss Agnew was an amiable, pious, and accomplished young lady, a member of his own congregation, and the daughter of Mr. John Agnew, one of his elders. Mr. Agnew was an emigrant from Ireland, county Antrim, near the town of Conner.

He had married a sister of the Reverend William Stavely, a pious and popular minister of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in the North of Ireland. Mr. Agnew had been long a resident in the city of New York, engaged in mercantile business, and by diligence, punctuality, and prudence, had become both highly respectable and opulent. He was a gentleman of sound judgment, of the most stern and uncompromising integrity, of undoubted piety, and a rigid adherent to the principles of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, he was particularly attentive to the religious education of his children; and Anne, a young lady of handsome person, agreeable manners, elegant accomplishments, and strong and vigorous intellect, attracted the attention, and won the love of the subject of this memoir. They were married. They lived in great happiness and mutual love. Their matrimonial union was in due time blessed with a son, whom they named after maternal, and paternal grandfathers, John Niel. This same son afterwards became his father's colleague, and is now his successor in the Chambers Street congregation.

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*New York Times*, 18 December 1897

### **Religious News and Views**

Centennial Celebration of the First Reformed Presbyterian Church of New York.

In Peck Slip, just below Pearl Street, there still stands the house in which the First Reformed Presbyterian Church of New York was organized exactly 100 years ago. The congregation now worships in Twelfth Street, just west of Sixth Avenue, and is to celebrate its centenary during a period of five days in the last week of the current year. The Peck Slip house was then a luxurious home, and its owner, John Agnew, was the man who suggested blowing up high buildings – they were high for those days – in order to check the great fire of 1833. The organizer of the congregation was the Rev. William Gilson, and, assisted by the Rev. James McKinney, he first administered the communion in a schoolroom in Cedar Street. After leaving the Cedar Street schoolroom the congregation went to an up-town site – Chambers Street, ...

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Source: PRONI D2013/1/2 (and online at <http://ied.dippam.ac.uk/records/30009> and <http://ied.dippam.ac.uk/records/35364> )

The online sources offer two letters, one dated 4 June, the other 24 June. Essentially they are the same letter, but with occasional word differences, none of which affect the overall sense. The version below uses the best of both, modernising a few words, like 'to' to 'too' as required; spelling out abbreviations like 'c'd' for 'could'

Letter from Jane Agnew, New York, addressed to her uncle, Rev William Stavely / Kellswater /  
Near Antrim [Town] / Co. Antrim / Ireland

New York, June 24th 1821.

My very dear Uncle.

It is with the hope of increasing the possibilities of hearing more frequently from you, that I take the liberty of writing you a few transient thoughts. In this object, there is I confess more of selfishness than of benevolence. Could I prevail on you, my much loved Uncle, to write [to] me, it is certain I would receive much higher gratification than I am able to give? I fear the letters which we wrote you some time ago respecting your visit to New York was not received by you, or your family, as you have not taken notice of them in any of your letters. The hope I have long cherished with myself of seeing you is I fear hopeless, but allow me to say there is no source from which I could enjoy more satisfaction, except the approbation of my God, than the enjoyment of your society for a time.

By the letters that my Mother and Brothers received from you, I find you are already acquainted with the severe wound we have all suffered, by the death of my lamented Father. I have felt the stroke deeply, and mourned it sincerely, although confidently assured that my loss is gain to him, for he longed with the Apostle to depart and be with Christ, I could have wished him detained with me a little longer. I think I never entered a year of my vain life with so many gloomy reflections. Bereaved of my indulgent father to whom I was very fondly attached, on whom so much of my affections were settled that I did not feel that submission to the will of God, which I ought for I could not give him up. I always thought tomorrow would be more favourable, until it came no more, I then felt that the heart which will trifle with its Maker, must necessarily break. But I had better reserve these gloomy Meditations than trouble you with them. I have to[o] sensibly awakened the remembrance of my happier days, which perhaps, it were better for me to forget for ever. I must be still and know that he is God, he is a Father who is too wise ere too good to be unkind.

While I mourn the loss of my Father, for all who knew him did so, I hope I am not insensible to the goodness of God in sparing so long with me my Mother. Although her health has for a long time been uncertain, and the stroke heavy, that has been laid on her, she is still able for the charge of her family. Age is however making inroads upon her.

You have heard that my Aunt Cusk [Cussack\*] has exchanged her day of trouble for a night of endless rest. I have often shed a tear of sympathy with her, over her unfortunate family. I remained with her during her illness though she could not speak for 8 days before her death. I felt a secret pleasure in waiting upon one so nearly allied to My Mother.

As my Brother is writing you, I need say little about our domestic concerns. We are at present at our summer house about 2 miles from the City. My Brother McLeod and family are with us. There has no distribution of property as yet been made, I believe my Brothers are more anxious to improve it than divide it. I mention this, because I know it will be satisfactory to you.

I am desired by my Mother to say to you that she is much pleased with the conduct of my Brothers, and that she wishes you to write [to] Cornelius who has wrote you two or three letters. I suppose you did not receive them, he has a very great desire to visit your Country, but cannot obtain my Mother's consent. You would be pleased with him did you know him; though so young he has been a member of the Church for some time and in turn with John performs family duties. My Sister and family are well, my Cousin Mary Anne is well but unhappy she has the misfortune to be united to a worthless fellow, we all try by our little attentions to make her lot more easy but her Husband is void of principle and therefore a continued source of uneasiness to her.

I fear I have tired you with this long letter. I will close it begging you to present me, together with my Mother, and Sister, most affectionately to my Aunt, for whom I do entertain sentiments of the highest esteem. And to all my cousins I would wish to be remembered with the hope of one day knowing them personally. If I am to be disappointed in this wish I do hope to be known, and to know, you all in a country where distance of place will not mar our fellowship.

I now bid you farewell, my revered and highly respected Uncle.  
May the Almighty bless you with his choicest blessings.

Jane Agnew.

\* Jane's mother, was the sister of Rev. William Stavely.  
Stavely's other sister, Aunt Cusk, was married to Mr Cussack.

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Source: <http://jondreyer.org/hal/slipsfoldnewyork.html>

## **Slips of Old New York by Harold Goldstein**

To someone approaching the age of 90, memories from youth are particularly precious, especially when they are clear and vivid, like the recollections of Marcel Proust, literature's preeminent explorer of his own memory, about a cookie he ate as a child, I remember, as a small boy, being taken on a walking tour of the New York city waterfront and seeing something that astonished and delighted me: a number of small harbours, inlets from the East River, rectangular in shape and about the size of a city block, in which rusty freighters and even a few sailing ships were anchored. Men trudged off them and into nearby warehouses, carrying on their backs bags of coffee beans, sacks of spices, and bunches of green bananas. Pungent smells of spices and roasting coffee permeated the air. I was about 9 years old, so this would have been in the early 1920s.

I learned that these inlets were called slips, and, although they have long since been filled in, they gave their names to the streets or squares that replaced them – familiar New York names like Old Slip, Peck's Slip, Catharine Slip, Market Slip.

After a long absence from New York I recently returned and settled in lower Manhattan. One day, walking on the cobblestones that pave the open square of Peck's Slip, I noticed on the north side of the square a line of sturdy stanchions, such as are used for tying ships' hawsers. A man in a cafe facing the square told me that at one time it had been all water out front: there had once been a harbour where now was solid land. This confirmed my own childhood memory.

The earliest slips go back to the days of Dutch New Amsterdam. The East River waterfront was swampy, and the area around what is now Front, Water and South Streets was covered by high tides. The Dutch, inveterate land-builders, filled in these swampy areas, leaving a few arms of the river reaching in to the land to shelter ships being unloaded. Slip-building continued after the Dutch: a sign on the Jasper Ward house, at the corner of Peck's Slip and South Street, says that the property was still under water in 1800, and the house was built in 1807. This appears to date the construction – or possibly an extension – of Peck's Slip, which is described as “a broad and commodious pier” in Mr. Ward's advertisements for his business in the New York Evening Post.

In early maps the East River's shore was punctuated by a series of gaps, like the missing baby teeth in a 7-year-old's smile. A guidebook to the city published in 1825 lists 12 slips on the East River:

- Whitehall Slip adjoining the Battery, at the bottom of Whitehall St.
- Exchange Slip, at the bottom of Broad St.
- Coenties Slip, at Coenties Alley, near Broad St.
- Old Slip, at the bottom of William St.
- Coffee House Slip, at the bottom of Wall St.
- Fly Market Slip, at the bottom of Maiden Lane
- Burling Slip, at the bottom of John St.
- Peck Slip, at the bottom of Ferry St.
- James Slip, at the bottom of James St.
- Market Slip, at the bottom of Market St.
- Pike Slip, at the bottom of Pike St.
- Rutgers Slip, at the bottom of Rutgers St.

(Another source lists 13 slips, including Catharine, George, and Charlotte Slips, at the bottoms of streets with the same names, but excluding Market and Pike Slips.)

To make room for these small harbours, the streets widen out as they come down to South Street, as do Wall Street and Broad Street, or whole squares were left open, as at Peck's Slip. The widest slips were Whitehall Slip and Peck's Slip.

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, ocean shipping tied up at the East River in these slips; on the Hudson side with its rocky shore and strong winds and waves, there were only five principal basins or docks from Cedar Street to Bank Street. An account of the time reported that in 1838 the first steam-powered ship to cross the Atlantic, the Great Western, sailed up the East River and docked at Peck's Slip, where a cheering crowd greeted it.

The slips were limited in size, while ships were getting larger. As New York's port grew, many piers and wharves were built out into the rivers, and these soon accommodated the bulk of the shipping traffic, but the slips continued to be used for smaller vessels. Coffee House Slip, at the foot of Wall Street was a terminal for a ferry to Brooklyn. Coenties Slip was a favourite docking place for barges that came through the Erie Canal and down the Hudson. (The name, a contraction of "Conraet's and Antje's" – Conraet Ten Eyck and his wife Antje lived there in Dutch days – is a sweet souvenir of the time when our town was a village.)

But the days of the slips were numbered. The Map Room of the main New York Public Library has a map dated 1857, showing only one water-filled indentation in the East River shoreline, Coenties Slip, reaching back about 250 feet from South Street to Front Street. This is confirmed by a report of the commissioners responsible for wharves and docks dated 1868, which showed Coenties Slip to be the only one remaining. A map dated 1898 showed a straight shoreline; all the slips had been filled in by that time

So sometime between 1825 and 1857 all but one of the slips had been filled in, and the last one disappeared before the end of the century. My vivid recollection as a nine-year old in the 1920's was an illusion, but it did reflect an earlier reality. Possibly I had seen a drawing of the scene and remembered it as if I had really seen it. Perhaps I had actually smelled the vividly-recalled odours of spices and roasting coffee while walking there in the 1920s, and they became coupled in my mind with the visual memory of a picture from an earlier era. These are the tricks memory plays on us. (Marcel Proust got a lot of mileage from that cookie, but, with due respect to a great author, I wouldn't bet on it.)

More of Harold Goldstein's *Memories of a Madman* are at Jon Dreyer's blogsite:

<http://jondreyer.org/hal/index.html>

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