

1989

The Search for Januarius MacGahan

Dale Walker

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.utep.edu/carl_hertzog

Comments:

Number 1

Recommended Citation

Walker, Dale, "The Search for Januarius MacGahan" (1989). *Carl Hertzog Lecture Series*. 2.
http://digitalcommons.utep.edu/carl_hertzog/2

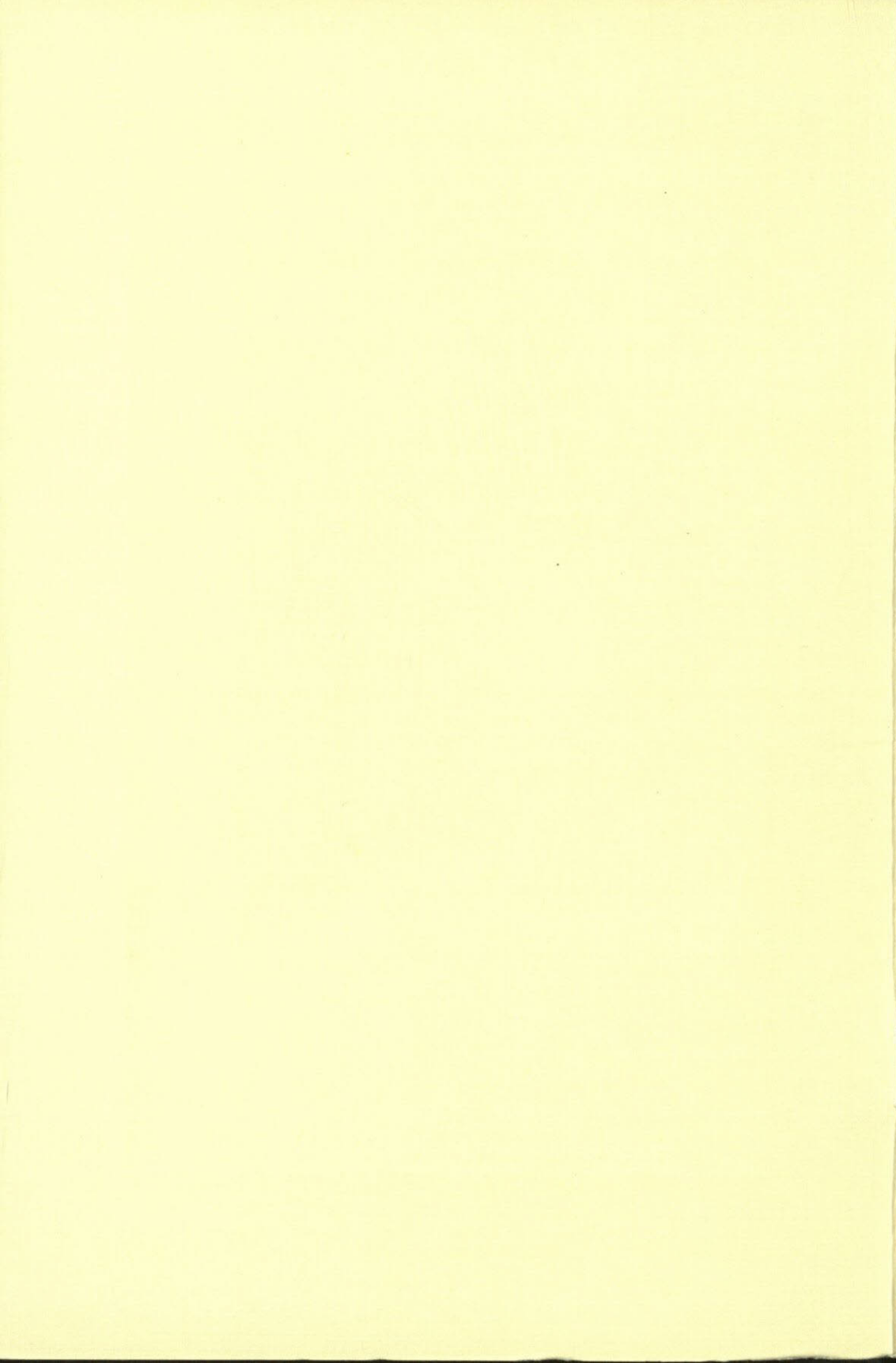
This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Texas at El Paso Library at DigitalCommons@UTEP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Carl Hertzog Lecture Series by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UTEP. For more information, please contact lweber@utep.edu.

Carl
Hertzog
Lecture Series



The Search for
Januarius MacGahan

by
Dale L. Walker



Carl
Hertzog
Lecture Series



The University of Texas at El Paso

Copyright © 1990
Texas Western Press
The University of Texas at El Paso
El Paso, Texas 79968-0633



The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements
of American National Standard for Information Sciences.
—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-
1984.

Published in September, 1990, in a printing limited to 500 copies

The Carl Hertzog Lecture Series

The Hertzog Lectures, inaugurated on February 5, 1989, and presented annually in the month of his birth, honor the memory and life work of the "Printer at the Pass," J. Carl Hertzog (1902-1984).

A premiere typographer and book designer long before his association with the University of Texas at El Paso, Mr. Hertzog brought his international renown to the then Texas Western College in 1948 and launched Texas Western Press in 1952, serving as its director until his retirement in 1972.

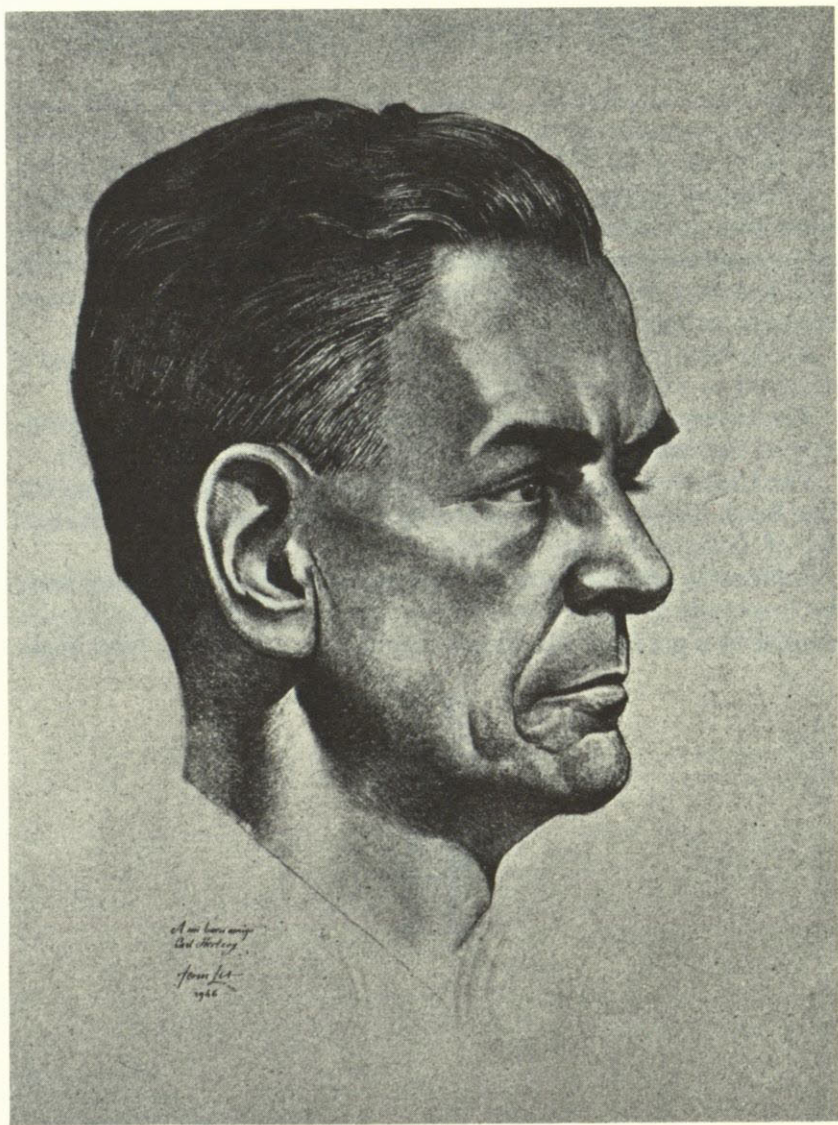
Books bearing the distinctive Carl Hertzog colophon reached a standard of excellence that is unexcelled to this day.

The University Library's Special Collections section is the repository of the extensive Hertzog Collection of books and papers.

The Carl Hertzog Lectures and the annual Carl Hertzog Prize for Fine Book Design, are sponsored by the Associates of The University of Texas at El Paso Library.

Publication of these Lectures is made possible through a grant from the Associates to Texas Western Press; the Carl Hertzog Prize is made possible by a gift from Mr. Joseph Goodell, Jr., of Buffalo, New York.





(Drawing by Tom Lea, 1946)

J. Carl Hertzog
1902 — 1984

The Search for
Januarius MacGahan

by
Dale L. Walker

February 5, 1989

Carl Hertzog Lecture Series, No. 1



Dale L. Walker with the Lubomir Daltchev statue of Januarius MacGahan in New Lexington, Ohio. (Photo by Alice McCord Walker)

I

It is a great honor to be the first — or any other number — in this series of lectures in honor of Carl Hertzog.

In speaking to you about my "Search for Januarius MacGahan," it might help for me to set the stage for this search, to say something about the quarry of this strange pursuit — the man with that lilting Irish name, Januarius Aloysius MacGahan — and just why a search for him was necessary.

My biography, *Januarius MacGahan: The Life and Campaigns of an American War Correspondent*, was published by Ohio University Press in June 1988 and since it could scarcely be called a bestseller and since, of the number of copies sold thus far only a few have been sold in El Paso, it is probably a pretty safe assumption that few, even in this fine audience of book people, have heard of Januarius MacGahan.

Indeed, the fact that so few, anywhere, have ever heard of him is the principal reason why I searched for him, found him, and told his story.

Let me explain who he was, first by giving you the least eloquent line ever written about him, then the most eloquent.

The least eloquent line appeared in the New York *Herald*. Now, this was the great newspaper, owned in MacGahan's day by James Gordon Bennett, Jr., which had given MacGahan his start as a journalist and war correspondent and which had sent him off to wars in France, Spain and Central Asia and even on an arctic expedition in 1875.

When MacGahan died of typhus in June 1878 in Constantinople, the *Herald*, in its long obituary — a column and a half under the heading, DEATH OF MR. MacGAHAN — A HERO AND A MARTYR contained this line:

"Mr John A. MacGahan was born in St. Louis in 1846 and was, therefore, thirty-two years of age."

This seems innocent enough, doesn't it? But consider: in this 18-word sentence in the newspaper which gave him his career, there are four errors of fact:

He was *Januarius* MacGahan, not "John."

He was born in New Lexington, Ohio, not "St. Louis."

The year of his birth was 1844, not "1846."

And, he died three days before his 34th birthday and was therefore, clearly, not "32 years of age."

Now, the most eloquent statement about him.

To find it, you must visit the town of New Lexington, about fifty miles southeast of Columbus on the fringe of Appalachia.

On the corner of East Brown and North Main streets in New Lexington there is an ornate old courthouse, built in 1887 in the Victorian-rococco style of the day.

From the front steps of this gingerbread-colored courthouse, if you look straight ahead, you will see a stone man about ten feet tall walking toward you.

He has a pen in one hand and a notepad in the other and he is in full stride. His head is bald on top and he has a full beard and moustache and wears a buttoned-up frock coat, trousers and high military boots. He has a case of some kind — perhaps for field glasses — slung over this shoulder and hanging at his side.

This is a striking statue of Januarius MacGahan, carved from some pocked brown volcanic rock by Lubomir Daltchev, a Bulgarian-American sculptor, and unveiled in the New Lexington town square in June 1984.

But the eloquent words are not on the statue but close by, in Maplewood Cemetery, easy walking distance behind the old courthouse and up a shady hill.

You can ask any of the cemetery's caretakers and they will point the way to MacGahan's grave. He was buried originally at Pera, outside Constantinople, in a cemetery reserved for non-Muslim foreigners, but in 1884 his coffin was borne by warship back to the U.S., then by rail to his hometown of New Lexington.

The gravestone, a huge rectangular granite marker resting on a mighty plinth, commands the entire cemetery. To the right of it is a cannon of unknown date and origin, to the left a bust on a pedestal — a grim, blockish work which resembles Lenin more than MacGahan.

On one side of the marker is the name MacGAHAN in letters about a foot high.

On the other side are the words

LIBERATOR OF BULGARIA.

I've stood before this marker several times, once in a crowd of people, many of them visiting the cemetery for the first time, on Memorial Day.

Somebody always whispers — "Liberator of Bulgaria? What does that mean? Who was 'MacGahan' anyway?"

This too tells why here had to be a search for Januarius MacGahan.

II

I need to confess to you that when I first came across MacGahan's name and a few particulars about his career, I did not know there would have to be a search for him. If I had known — at least if I had known how long the search would take — I would probably not have been the searcher.

I didn't know it then, but my search for Januarius MacGahan began in about 1966 when I read Richard O'Connor's biography, *The Scandalous Mr. Bennett*.

O'Connor was my friend and writing mentor and I had the very good fortune in 1966 to collaborate with him on a book about John Reed, the radical American journalist and who wrote that classic book on the Russian revolution, *Ten Days That Shook the World*, who died in 1920, who is one of but two Americans buried in the Kremlin Wall and who was the subject of that splendid 1981 film, "Reds."

O'Connor lived in Ellsworth, Maine, and during a visit I made up there in the winter of 1966, when we were finishing the John Reed book, I had read his *The Scandalous Mr. Bennett* and had a question for him.

In his Bennett biography, O'Connor had mentioned in the same breath as the name Henry Morton Stanley — the New York *Herald* correspondent and African explorer who "found" Dr. Livingstone — the name Januarius MacGahan. O'Connor said that Bennett had a genius for spotting talent and stories and that the Stanley expedition to Lake Tanganyika to locate Dr. Livingstone stood as the classic example of this.

He said that in Bennett's stable of venturesome young "specials" — the word used then for foreign correspondents — was a farmboy from Ohio who had done remarkable work for Bennett in the Franco-Prussian War, the Carlist War in Spain, on an expedition to Turkestan in 1873, and even on a Bennett-sponsored arctic expedition to find the fabled Northwest Passage.

"What about MacGahan?" I asked Dick O'Connor. "He sounds too good to be true."

O'Connor sipped his martini, blew out a cloud of cigar smoke and said something like, "He *is* too good to be true. I couldn't find much about him. You ought to tackle him."

But I did nothing about tackling MacGahan until December 1969 after I came across a brief reference to him and a sample of his war correspondence in a book titled *A Treasury of Great Reporting*.

(I know these details because I have kept every scrap of paper on this project. I must have subconsciously wished, twenty years ago, that I'd be asked to tell the story behind my "search" and so I kept all the evidence.)

In fact, I was searching for material for a magazine article. I have published several hundred of these over the past thirty years and have always considered myself a periodical writer, not a book writer. I am very comfortable in the range of 2,000 or 2,500 words, which is the normal length of a magazine story, and most of what I wrote then, as now, were off-beat pieces for historical magazines.

Anyway, here is some of the information I learned about MacGahan from *A Treasury of Great Reporting*, edited by Richard B. Morris and Lewis L. Snyder, published in 1949 by Simon & Schuster, and to this day one of my favorite books:

Januarius Aloysius MacGahan — the name alone got my interest — was an Ohio farmboy who somehow came to the attention of James Gordon Bennett, the eccentric publisher of the New York *Herald*. MacGahan, the book said, made his reputation first during the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 where, among other exploits, he interviewed Victor Hugo, was taken prisoner during the Commune and nearly executed, and rode with the Polish nobleman Dombrowski at the barricades of Paris.

In 1873, the journalism treasury revealed, MacGahan's renown soared after a *Herald* assignment in Central Asia.

(If you have romance in your soul and if names like Samarkand, Tashkent and Turkestan cause your nostrils to flare, you can appreciate what it was like to discover that MacGahan traveled to the Aral Sea and the River Oxus, then made a grueling journey across the Kyzil Kum desert to intercept a Russian army marching against the ancient khanate of Khiva; that he became a close friend of the Grand Duke Nicholas, brother of the Czar, that he rode with Cossacks as they pursued wild Turkoman tribesmen . . . well, you see my drift.)

MacGahan, my journalism anthology revealed, also covered the Carlist War in Spain and went an arctic voyage on a ship named *Pandora* to find the Northwest Passage and traces of the lost expedition of Sir John Franklin.

In 1876, this intrepid Ohioan went out to the Balkans, there to report on alleged "atrocities" committed again Bulgarian peasants by their Turkish rulers.

These "atrocidity dispatches," the book said, created a sensation in Europe, inspired former Prime Minister Gladstone to a furious denunciation of them

in a famous pamphlet he wrote, and whipped up world-wide animosity against the Turks.

"MacGahan's stories," the editors of *The Treasury of Great Reporting* said, "provided a spark that ignited the Russo-Turkish War and led to an independent Bulgaria."

I learned too that MacGahan fell victim to a fatal illness in Constantinople soon after this obscure war was over and that he died there at the age of 34.

I learned that the Czar of all the Russias was reputed to have said that had MacGahan lived, he could have been the ruler of Bulgaria and that he "was long revered as that country's liberator."

Now, even if I had been only a casual reader, let alone a person searching for the subject for a magazine article, this would, to say the least, have have piqued my curiosity.

Imagine this: an Ohio farmboy comes out of nowhere, becomes a famous war correspondent, helps spark a war in the Balkans, helps liberate a Balkan nation, is thought of as a possible *ruler* of that nation. . .

Why had I never heard of Januarius MacGahan before?

The answer to this question, it turned out, was pretty simple: Nothing of any consequence had ever been *written* about him.

It took me awhile even to learn this basic fact and by the time I learned it, I was *hoping* nothing of any consequence had been written about him because I wanted to be the first to write something of consequence about him.

III

With very little "secondary" source material to work with, I began looking for the "primary" stuff and in 1971 learned, after a tortuous process, that MacGahan had at least one grandson still living. The Ohio State Historical Society said they believed he lived in upstate New York and the postmaster in Albany helped me find this man.

He turned out to be a retired psychologist with a doctorate from Columbia University living in Haines Falls, in the Catskills of New York. His name was John MacGahan and when I wrote to him he didn't write back.

So I called him. He was very cool to my questions about his grandfather and my excruciatingly diplomatic questions about "family papers" and photographs.

I sent him a letter O'Connor had written for me, recommending me as a good and professional writer, honest and dependable. I sent him a copy

of our Reed biography, which had been published by Harcourt, Brace in 1967 as *The Lost Revolutionary*, and I sent a packet of magazine articles I had published.

I called him again, several times. He eventually warmed up to me and by the end of a year of writing and talking, he introduced me to his brother, a physician in Bloomingdale, New Jersey, and told me of his two sisters. There were *four* grandchildren!

I began getting, a dribble at a time, photocopies of letters and clippings and other documents from the MacGahan family archives.

Over the years before I came along, it turned out, several writers and researchers had asked the MacGahans about their once-famous grandfather, but most had somehow fallen by the wayside after making grand promises. One person wrote a sensational newspaper story in which, to paraphrase Adlai Stevenson, the writer separated the wheat from the chaff, then printed the chaff, and it soured the MacGahan sons and daughters from cooperating with anybody.

I was very careful with the material they sent me and hungered for more. I needed to see and read and take notes on everything the family had saved.

Ultimately the MacGahan heirs entrusted me with all the family papers and insisted I keep all of them until I finished the book — or whatever it was I was going to write.

Almost everything in the boxes sent to me had been accumulated by MacGahan's only son, Paul. It was a chaotic mass of paper but it was all pure gold.

These are the kinds of things I at last had to work with:

- MacGahan's letters to his mother during his sojourns in Europe during the Franco-Prussian War and Paris Commune;

- MacGahan's European letters to friends, even more revealing than those to his mother;

- samples of MacGahan's hand-written despatches from France, Spain, Turkestan, the Balkans, often in pencil on flimsy onion-skin paper, fading and fading away, sometimes in ink and steel-nibbed pen in that peculiar and cramped backhand style I came to know so well. Among these were MacGahan's interview with Victor Hugo, then in exile on the island of Jersey;

- scrapbooks of clippings of MacGahan's work and all the things written about him after he died;

- his expense accounts, book contracts, even his war correspondent credentials and passports;

— photographs, including one of the actual farmhouse where MacGahan had been born in 1844, another of him as a 17-year-old schoolteacher, others taken in Europe during his campaigns — one of him wearing a *boina*, a muffin-shaped kind of cap fancied by Carlist sympathizers in Spain in 1874; one taken on the eve of his arctic expedition, and a very revealing one, showing a man who had aged far beyond his years, taken just a few months before his death in the British hospital at Galata, outside Constantinople;

— two or three photographs of MacGahan's wife, a lovely Russian woman named Varvara Nicholavna Elaguine.

(Since there was so little about her in these priceless papers, Varvara became a very serious problem for me, unresolved for a very long time.)

The search for Januarius MacGahan did not end with my having access to the MacGahan family archives. In fact, those papers made me realize how much I still did not know and how much I had yet to learn.

For example, there were these gaps:

— Just who *was* Varvara Elaguine? How did she and MacGahan come together? What was their story in the brief time they were married and what happened to her after MacGahan's death? (I knew only that she never remarried and that she died in Brooklyn in 1904.)

— How did MacGahan get to Europe in the first place and how did he get a job with the New York *Herald* during the Franco-Prussian War? There was an absolute blank in his story in the 1869-70 period and I could not fill it except with that old and always unsatisfactory ploy of saying, "Nothing is known of MacGahan's whereabouts in 1869-70, but is likely that he . . . etc."

— Was it true that the Bulgarians considered him a "liberator" of their nation? What do they think of him today or is he remembered at all?

IV

By the time I had sorted and assembled the MacGahan papers and read every page and taken my notes, I had good luck from the People's Republic of Bulgaria as well. With the help of then Congressman Richard C. White's office, I made contact with the information office of the Bulgarian Embassy in Washington. I wrote them at length requesting they put me in touch with a scholar, preferably at the University of Sofia, to whom I could direct some questions about MacGahan.

I never met the Mr. Kirilov who did this for me, but he not only put me in touch with a Dr. Dobrimir Chilingirov at the University of Sofia but

Dr. Chilingirov sent me a superb unpublished manuscript of his own, which he had translated into English, on the subject of MacGahan's contributions to Bulgarian independence from the Ottoman Turks, and on how Bulgarians commemorate MacGahan to this day.

The story of Varvara (called "Barbara" after she moved to America) Elaguine and her life with MacGahan came together in 1984 when John MacGahan, the grandson I had contacted so many years before, sent me a final packet of papers — papers neither he nor his brother or sisters knew existed — which he found in a trunk in the family home in the Catskills.

In this packet were many long letters and several original and unpublished memoirs of Barbara's.

One of them had the title "In the Twilight of the Czars" and in it she told the history of her family (her father was a wealthy landowner and among the first to free his serfs, in 1861, following the proclamation of Czar Alexander II) and her own life story, including accounts of her girlhood visits to Yasnaya Poliana, the estate of her father's great friend, Count Leo Tolstoy, only six miles from the Elaguine estate at Tula.

Another, in a diary-like notebook, contained Barbara's poignant memoir of her turbulent life with the American correspondent Januarius MacGahan from their first encounter on a roadway outside Yalta in the Crimea to the birth of their son in Biarritz while MacGahan was in Spain with the Carlist army, to her husband's tragic death from typhus in the Turkish capital in the summer of 1878, soon after the end of the great Balkan war between the Russians and Turks he had covered so magnificently for the London *Daily News*.

From these newly-found papers I was also able to piece together what MacGahan had been doing in Europe in 1869. He had been at an art colony at a town called Ecouen north of Paris, and while I am not dead certain to this day, I believe he got his job with the *Herald* because of his linguistic abilities in French.

(I should perhaps point out that I had long ago abandoned the idea of a mere magazine article on MacGahan. Actually I did eventually write three or four periodical pieces about him before my biography was published, for such publications as the *Columbus Dispatch Sunday Magazine*, *The Ohio Motorist*, and the like.)

The book ended up at 115,000 words — just about fifty-seven-and-a-half times the length I am most comfortable with.

Ohio University Press published the book in June 1988 in an edition of 1,000 copies, handsomely printed, bound and jacketed and priced at \$30.

They sold 720 of these in the first month after it was released. That is what my royalty statement shows.

I'm hoping it will be reprinted in paperback but do not know if it ever will be. It may have run its course.

Now this biography of Januarius MacGahan occupied me off and on — admittedly, mostly off — for 18 years prior to its publication and those numbers seem awfully *low*, don't they? Only 1,000 copies printed, only 720 sold?

Well, patently, there has to be a reason other than money for writing books like these.

I hope, in telling you a little about this search for Januarius MacGahan, you will appreciate some of those other reasons.

For me it was a matter of wanting to know more about a figure worth knowing more about; a matter of wanting to tell a worthy story that had not been told before, perhaps to give a rightfully high place to a personage out of our history who earned that high place but who unaccountably slipped into anonymity.

Also, on a less lofty plane, there was this simple truth: I was curious about Januarius Aloysius MacGahan.

Actually, I still am.

Dale L. Walker

A native of Decatur, Illinois, Dale L. Walker, son of a career Army sergeant, came to El Paso in 1959 after a four-year Navy enlistment and graduated from Texas Western College with a B.A. in journalism in 1962.

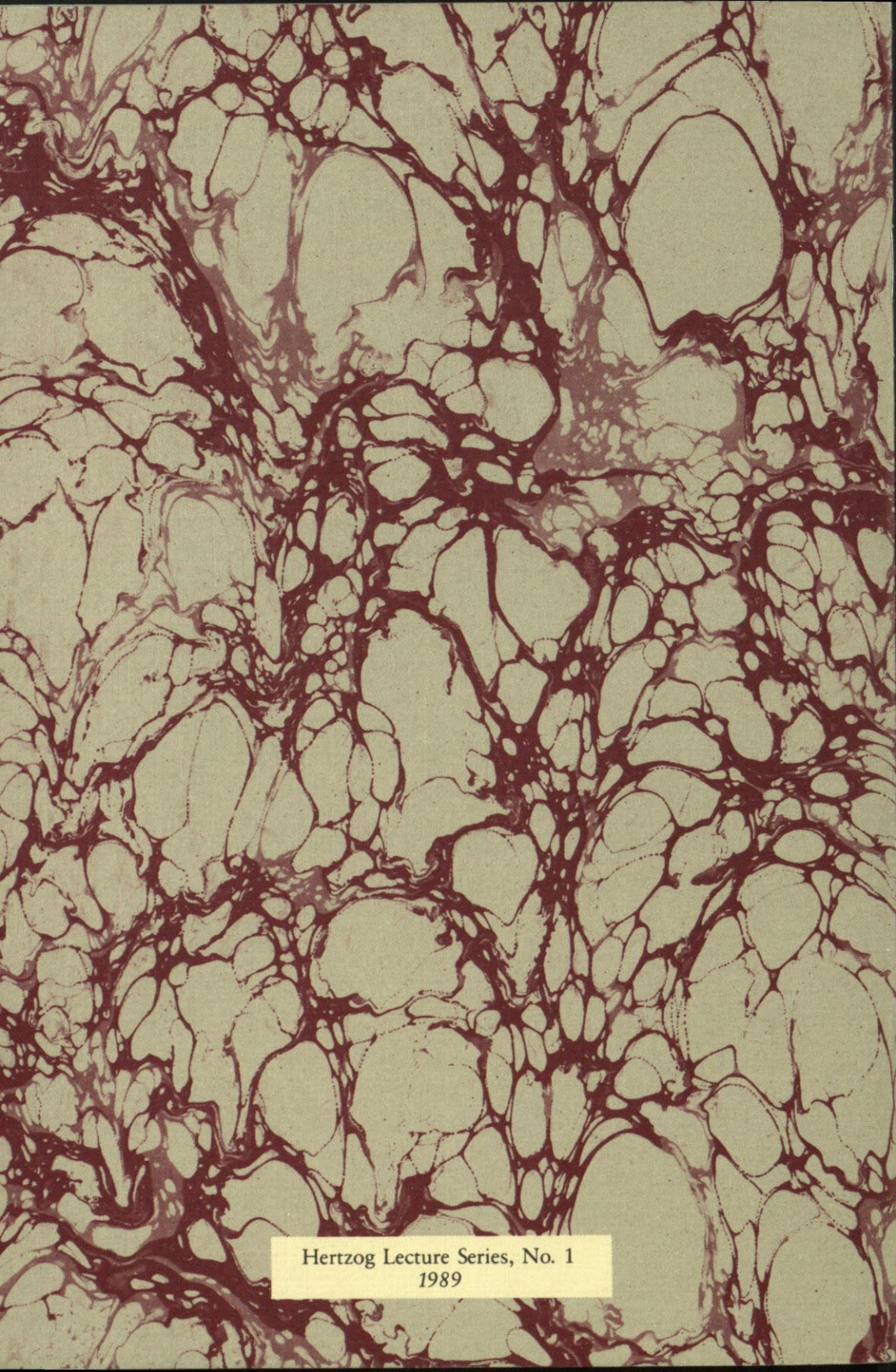
Walker joined the University staff in 1966 as director of the News Bureau (later the News and Publications Office), serving in that capacity, and as editor of the University's quarterly magazine *Nova*, until 1989. In 1985 he was named director of Texas Western Press and supervised both offices until 1989 when he became fulltime director of the Press.

A prolific freelance writer since the mid-1950s, Walker is author of 13 books, some 400 magazine articles and countless book reviews and newspaper columns. He served as books editor for the *El Paso Times*, books columnist for the *El Paso Herald-Post* and currently writes a weekly books column for the *Rocky Mountain News*.

He is a member of the Texas Institute of Letters, Western Writers of America, Inc., and the National Book Critics Circle.

Among Walker's books are *The Lost Revolutionary: A Biography of John Reed* (with Richard O'Connor, 1967), *Buckey O'Neill: The Story of a Rough Rider* (1975), *Will Henry's West* (1984), and *Mavericks: Ten Uncorralled Westerners* (1989).

His *Januarius MacGahan: The Life and Campaigns of an American War Correspondent* was published by Ohio University Press in 1988.



Hertzog Lecture Series, No. 1
1989