**Watkin, Absalom** (1787–1861), reformer and diarist, was born in London, 27 June 1787, the only surviving son of Elizabeth (‘Betty’) (née Sayer) and Thomas Watkin. His father, who was from Flintshire landed stock, and was a farmer, Guardsman, and then a publican, died when Watkin was 14. Watkin was taken into employment by his uncle, John Watkin, partner in a Manchester cotton broking firm, a firm of which Watkin became the proprietor in 1807 after the retirement of his uncle.

Watkin remained head of this firm, eventually styled Absalom Watkin and Son, and primarily operating as a yarn and cloth commission agents, until his death, but he was not a natural businessman, and it remained a modest enterprise, providing an adequate but often precarious income which probably rarely exceeded £200-£300 a year. In 1815 he was nearly bankrupted by an unwise investment; and although he estimated his total wealth in the 1830s and 1840s at £4000-£5000, solvency was a constant and sometimes crippling anxiety. He was a a supporter of mercantile charities like the Commercial Clerks Association, and in later life a director of Manchester Fire Assurance Company and the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railroad Company, but his underlying antipathy to the ‘abominable’ factory system was apparent in his fervent sympathy with the short hours campaigns of the 1830s.

Before his father’s death Watkin received a limited formal education in a number of adventure schools in Bromley and London. Thereafter he was self-taught, and books and literature became, as he said, ‘the one great, enduring and uncloying pleasure’ of his life. His intellectual life was formed by a number of mutual improvement groups, including the small informal ‘literary society’ he helped establish in 1815, and the semi-public Manchester Literary Club which he joined in 1826. He accumulated an extensive and valuable library, and took an active role in promoting Manchester’s civic literary culture, especially the Manchester Athenaeum. Although he published little, apart from a few essays which appeared in the *Manchester Iris* in the 1820s, and remained a reluctant if usually effective public speaker, from 1803 until 1856 he kept a detailed diary, selections from which appeared in a number of posthumous publications, and which offers a vivid picture of Manchester in its years as the shock city of the industrial revolution.

On 3rd November 1814 Watkin married Elizabeth Makinson (1789/90-1866), daughter of William Makinson, Esq., of Bolton, and later schoolmaster of Manchester, the sister of one of his close friends. The marriage brought four children, Elizabeth (1817-64), Edward William Watkin (1819-1901), John Woodlands Watkin (1821-70), and Alfred Watkin (1825-75), but it was not a happy one. Watkin displayed many of the status anxieties common to self-made men, and came to think of his wife as vulgar and uncultured. He described her as ‘careless, sluttish, imprudent’. They quarrelled over domestic expenses and management, and over what she suspected were Watkin’s improper intimacies with other women. Inclined to depression and anger, on at least one occasion Watkin hit her.

In public life what his grandson described as his ‘innate modesty, and almost childlike humility’ was really a further reflection of his insecurities. Watkin never felt at home with the Manchester merchant ‘princes’. He had for some years as a young man been a Methodist lay preacher, although he later attended the Church of England, and this background fuelled his discomfort with the heavy-drinking cultures of public sociability. He greatly admired John Thelwall, and he moved in the circles of the Peterloo radicals in the 1820s, but despite suggestions that he drafted Manchester’s post-Peterloo remonstrance, it was only during the agitation preceding the 1832 Reform Act that his contacts with Manchester’s middle class radicals developed into personal involvement in politics. He quickly became one of the inner circle of ‘Manchester School’ radicalism. He helped formulate the campaign for the incorporation of Manchester, and was on the first list of city magistrates. He was a founding member of the Manchester Anti-Corn Law Association in 1838, and active in the Anti-Corn Law League and the National Public Schools Association. Generally a voice for moderation and caution there is no evidence that he played a significant role in shaping the strategy of these groups. Instead his niche was as the Radicals’ primary drafter of memorials, placards and petitions. It was therefore characteristic that his brief jump from obscurity to international exposure in 1854 was the result of an exchange of letters with John Bright, whose anti-Crimean war stance drove Watkin into rallying pro-war sentiment in Manchester. Although this public controversy has been taken as symptomatic of the ebbing of middle class support which brought Bright’s epoch-marking rejection as the city’s MP in the 1857 general election, their personal and political relations remained cordial and Watkin was nominally a member of Bright’s 1857 committee.

From around 1807, first with his mother, and then also his wife and family, Watkin lived in Ravald Street, Salford, moving to Broughton Lane in 1822, Stony Knolls (Bury New Road), and finally in 1834 to a modest but comfortable semi-rural country house, Rose Hill, Northenden, about six miles south of Manchester, where he was able to indulge in his enthusiasms for gardening and walking. Prone throughout his life to bouts of illness, between 1855 and 1857 he suffered a series of increasingly severe strokes which left him confined to home, barely able to speak. During these last years he was nursed by his son Edward and daughter in law Mary Briggs. He died 16th December 1861 at his home and was buried at the Parish Church, Northenden, on the 20th December 1861.

**Likenesses**

???? Minasi, portrait, 1821 published in Goffin, between 194 and 195

William Bradley, portrait, published in David Hodgkins, *The Second Railway King* (2002), facing 364, and previously in AE Watkins, ed, *Absalom Watkin. Extracts from his Journal* (1920)

Anon, family photograph, published in Goffin

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