

Obituaries

ALBERT BONI

There are few legendary figures of our times who were prime movers in the creation of the rich literary tradition of twentieth-century America. Albert Boni—publisher, bookseller, literary agent, theatrical producer, editor, photographer, inventor, bibliographer, bookman—was one of this distinguished company.

Many of the details of Albert Boni's life are not absolutely fixed. Most of the standard biographical sources cite his birthday as October 21, 1892, but in response to an inquiry in 1961 from the Awards Committee of the National Microfilm Association Boni replied 'Born October 21 or 29, 1892.' His birthplace was New York City but his boyhood and teenage years were spent across the Hudson River in Newark, New Jersey. It was clear to his parents early on that their older son had a will and an intellect to be challenged. He was encouraged to pursue undergraduate study at Cornell in 1909. A year or so later, he transferred to Harvard with the intention of pursuing a career in the law, but at the end of his junior year, in 1912, he convinced his parents that he be allowed to try his hand at book publishing. His first effort, a Socialist tract by Robert Blatchford, the well-known English journalist, was supported by funds earmarked for law school expenses. The venture was a success, selling 60,000 copies and providing an auspicious and profitable beginning to a distinguished publishing career.

Publishing one successful title in 1913 encouraged Boni to become more intimately and deeply involved in the book world. He joined with his brother, Charles, in establishing the Washington Square Book Shop, which became a center for

many young intellectuals and writers who gravitated to Greenwich Village. The Bonis published works of little-known authors, established the Little Leather Library series, and even supported the founding of the Washington Square Players and the Theater Guild.

Having established himself as a publisher and bookseller of imagination, Albert Boni joined in partnership with Horace Liveright in 1917. Success was quick in coming to this firm with the publishing of the first twelve titles in the Modern Library of the World's Best Books series. But more important to the cultural life of the nation, these publishers gave support and encouragement to a host of brilliant young writers including Eugene O'Neill, Theodore Dreiser, and Ezra Pound.

Differences in style and opinion led to Boni's early retirement from the firm. He spent the next three and one-half years in Europe as a literary agent, freelance reporter, and tourist. While in the Soviet Union, he participated in a political rally in Petrograd but soon ended up in a Soviet prison on suspicion of being an American spy. He did, nonetheless, establish many contacts in Europe which enabled him to acquire Kaiser Wilhelm's memoirs of World War I and later, in 1929, to persuade Leon Trotsky to publish his *History of the Russian Revolution*.

In 1923 Boni again returned to the publishing business by uniting with his brother in the firm Albert and Charles Boni, Inc. As in previous publishing efforts, Boni attracted and encouraged a brilliant array of young and talented writers, including Colette, Ford Madox Ford, D. H. Lawrence, Will Rogers, Upton Sinclair, and Thornton Wilder. The publishing firm soon developed a notable record of achievement and probably would have weathered the difficult days of the Depression of the 1930s had it not been for the market resistance to their new 'Paper Books' subscription publishing program.

During the difficult days of the Depression Boni, following another of his many interests, began experimenting with the microreproduction of printed images. Fifteen years of experi-

mentation with photography and miniaturized printing led to the creation of a new publishing venture, the Readex Microprint Corporation, and to a program for the reproduction in microform of the texts of extensive collections of the literature of Western civilization.

It was through the Readex Microprint project to republish the texts of books published in the American colonies or states before 1801 that Albert Boni's publishing career intersected the path of the American Antiquarian Society. Boni's elaborately simple idea for Microprinting on durable paper had great appeal to the late Clifford Shipton, AAS director. For many years Shipton had recognized the need to preserve the unique and priceless collection of early American imprints at the Society, while at the same time he felt the obligation to allow scholars the world over to have access to the texts. Microprint provided a solution to this dilemma.

In 1954 the Council of the Society approved a project for the Microprint publication of the texts of all American books printed before 1801—a prospectus worked out cooperatively between Boni and Shipton. Boni wished to use the vast collections of the American Antiquarian Society as the core collection as well as the editorial base for the conversion of the original texts to the Microprint format. The endeavor was calculated to provide the scholarly community with the texts of all extant early American imprints in a durable format which could be read with the aid of a reading machine and which could be stored easily, conveniently, and compactly.

Albert Boni followed this project for twenty years with the eyes of a stern and demanding parent. His wife, Nell van Leeuwen, was able to provide some managerial assistance, but no detail was too small or insignificant to escape his personal attention.

As Boni worked closely with the Society and learned more fully of its collection, he made occasional gifts to augment the holdings or to improve the technical capabilities for reading

and copying the Microprint format. In 1971 the regular pressures and occasional tensions of the publishing venture were forgotten as Albert Boni was elected to membership and attended the annual meeting of the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester.

Boni retired from his publishing career in 1974 with the respect and admiration of a worldwide community of scholars who benefited from his many publishing enterprises. He moved to Ormond Beach, Florida, where family and friends hoped he would compile his memoirs of sixty years as a distinguished democratic autocrat of the American publishing industry.

He died at his Florida home on July 30, 1981, and is survived by his wife, Nell, and his son, William.

Frederick E. Bauer, Jr.

ROGER PLACE BUTTERFIELD

Roger Butterfield believed that American history could best be understood as politics in action. 'Politics,' he once wrote, includes 'everything that importantly influences the fate or mood of the nation at any particular time. American politics began with the boundless idealism of the Declaration of Independence, and it has . . . attained the seemingly boundless destructive power of the atom bomb.' Roger Butterfield possessed the power to describe and analyze human actions, and he harbored an ironic humor that was typified by his fascination toward George Lippard, an eccentric nineteenth-century Pennsylvania reformer and writer.

Roger Butterfield was born on July 29, 1907, in Lyndonville, New York, to Roy Lyman Butterfield and Ethel Place

This memoir of Roger Place Butterfield is reprinted, with additions, with permission of the Massachusetts Historical Society from the *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 93(1982):115-18.

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