Boies Penrose, 1902-1976

Agnes Repplier in her biography of Dr. J. William White relates his calling on Boies Penrose's father when Boies was eight-years old. He found the boy playing with a toy train which he was loading up with odds and ends. "Hello, Boies," he said, "where are you running your train to?" "To Zanzibar," was the reply. "And what's your load?" "Witches, and ghosts, and hobgoblins. And there are n't any witches, and there are n't any ghosts, and there are n't any hobgoblins." "Why then," asked the bemused visitor, "are you running a trainload of them to Zanzibar?" "Because," said the child, "the people of Zanzibar don't know there are n't any."

As this episode indicates, Boies Penrose had an early interest in strange and out-of-the-way places, an original mind, and an interest in trains. In later life he was to own a miniature train, large enough to carry several people, which he ran on tracks laid down on the broad acres surrounding "Barbados Hill," his residence at Devon.

Named for his uncle, the United States Senator and powerful Republican "boss" of Pennsylvania, Boies Penrose was born in his parents' town house, 1720 Spruce Street, Philadelphia, on November 20, 1902. A descendant of Bartholomew Penrose, a shipwright who came to Philadelphia from Bristol, England, in 1698, Mr. Penrose was the son of Dr. Charles Bingham Penrose, Professor of Surgery at the University of Pennsylvania, and Katherine Drexel Penrose, daughter of Joseph William Drexel, banker and art patron.

His formal education was received chiefly in New England—six years (1915-1921) at St. George's School, Newport, Rhode Island, and then Harvard, from which he graduated in 1925, Cum Laude in Historia. Two years earlier Boies Penrose had made his first trip abroad, sailing in the Cunard Line's Scythia, nine days from Boston to Liverpool.

Virtually every year found him returning to Europe, particularly to England. From 1928 to World War II he had a house in Somerset,
where he spent about half the year. During this time he accumulated much English furniture and bric-a-brac, mainly of the eighteenth century, purchased largely in antique shops at Bath. After World War II, when he relinquished his English residence, this furniture was brought to “Barbados Hill,” where it bore testimony to its owner’s cultured taste.

Mr. Penrose visited Austria frequently, fatherland of the Drexel family. During the 1930s he made about a dozen walking trips of some 150 miles each through the Tyrolean Alps. Pack on back, staff in hand, sometimes with companions, sometimes alone, he covered most of the eastern Alps on these pedestrian tours. In addition, he paid many visits to Italy, Spain, and Portugal. During World War II, in which he received a commission in the Air Corps in April, 1942, he saw service in Algiers before being separated from the Army as a Captain in January, 1945.

Never engaging in business, Mr. Penrose devoted his life to scholarly pursuits, becoming a collector of books, manuscripts, and maps of a geographical nature relating to Tudor and Stuart times. While at Harvard he had taken a course in bibliography under Dr. George Parker Winship, and he had received a further stimulus toward collecting by the inheritance of rare volumes formerly owned by his Drexel grandfather.

It was mainly in the 1930s that he gathered together his important library. Unlike most other collectors, his income did not suffer materially during the Great Depression, being maintained as a result of conservative investment policies dating back to his father’s belief in government bonds. He was thus able to capitalize on the times, purchasing from English dealers, notably Lionel Robinson and Quaritch, and also at Sotheby’s auctions. During this time Mr. Penrose established close friendships with a number of distinguished English scholars.

In 1971 he dispersed a portion of his collection at two sales held at Sotheby’s. In the introduction to the first of their two catalogues—The Celebrated Library of Boies Penrose Esq., FSA, FRGS—the auctioneers stated:

Of the many distinguished collections of books, both private and institutional, which have appeared in these rooms in recent years there have been few which need less introduction than this. The richness of the
collection and the fastidiousness with which it has been assembled were both made possible by the quality of the material which became available during the period of the great Britwell, Leconfield, and Lothian dispersals. The importance of the theme—much the same as its collector's equally celebrated Travel and Discovery in the Renaissance—need hardly be stressed. Dealing with a comparatively short period of time during which Europeans reached almost every corner of the globe, the collection demonstrates in particular the impact of all this activity on Tudor and early Stuart England.

Collecting led to writing. Mr. Penrose's first book was The Sherleian Odyssey, published in London in 1938. ("My first book—it should have been my last," observed the author with a typical touch of wry humor.) Urbane Travellers followed in 1942, bearing the imprint of the University of Pennsylvania Press. Next came his most distinguished effort, Travel and Discovery in the Renaissance, mentioned previously in Sotheby's statement. Published by Harvard in 1952, this book has gone through seven printings and several paperback editions. Goa, Queen of the Orient, a bilingual account of the capital of Portuguese India, published in Portugal in 1960, earned its author the Portuguese decoration of Officer of the Order of Santiago. Lastly, in conjunction with Michael Strachan, appeared The East India Journals of Captains Kjeling and Bonner, printed in Minneapolis in 1971.

Another aspect of Mr. Penrose's scholarly career was his role as a lecturer. He conducted a course in English history at St. John's College, Annapolis, and delivered occasional lectures on historical geography at Ursinus College. In 1953 Ursinus bestowed upon him the honorary degree of Doctor of Literature, and a few years later he was elected to its Board. Still another facet of his broad cultural background has seen him assisting museums with their collections. For a time he served as a volunteer in the Prints and Drawings Department of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Later, he classified the Historical Society of Pennsylvania's rare prints.

Mr. Penrose was affiliated with a number of organizations. He served on the Board of the Library Company of Philadelphia from 1933 to 1950, was elected to the Board of the Philadelphia Zoological Society in 1935, became a member of the Visiting Committee of Harvard University's Houghton Library in 1940, of the Board of the Athenaeum of Philadelphia in 1941, was honored by election to the American Philosophical Society in 1966 (and of its
Wistar Association, 1967), and in 1969 was made a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London. An eminent member of Philadelphia’s Shakspeare Society, his banquets served up for a number of its annual meetings were memorable events, giving full play to his connoisseurship of food and wine.

One of his favorite associations came about in 1933 when he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society of London. This membership played a major role in his literary life as he did much of his writing at that Society, profiting greatly from its wealth of biographical and bibliographical material.

As for social clubs, Mr. Penrose enjoyed the fellowship of several, notably the Philadelphia Club, which he joined the year after he graduated from Harvard. Lunching there on a tankard of ale and veal and ham pie was a pleasant occasion. Naturally, he was chairman of the Club’s library committee. He was also a member, elected in 1957, of London’s Garrick Club, a membership from which he derived much pleasure.

Of all the many associations and influences in his life, Mr. Penrose took the most consistent interest in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Becoming a member in 1927, he was elected to its Board the following year, perhaps the youngest person to serve in that capacity. From 1948 to 1961 he was one of the Society’s Vice-Presidents, and in the latter year he was elected President, a position he held until the spring of 1975, when, because of illness, he relinquished that office and was named President Emeritus, the first to be so honored.

Early in his career with the Society, he established the Boies Penrose fund for the collecting of photographs of old Philadelphia, which eventuated in an immensely valuable collection. In the 1930s when Julian P. Boyd was Librarian (a title since changed to Director), Mr. Penrose’s role at the Society became a truly active one. Dr. Boyd called on him for many book reviews for The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography. In addition, he wrote a number of articles for the Magazine, including “The Early Life of F. M. Drexel, 1792–1837,” and “Prints and Drawings in the Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.” His most recent contribution to the Magazine was in 1974, when he reviewed David Quinn’s England and the Discovery of America.
His fifteen years as President of the Society saw him conducting its many Board meetings, introducing with wit and insight the speakers at its public meetings, and contributing generously to its financial needs. He worked closely with the several Directors who headed the Society’s staff in his time, and was unfailingly sympathetic to the problems they faced.

Had he been, as the diarist Sidney George Fisher scathingly classified them, “a mere man of business,” Mr. Penrose’s career could not have been so productive of contributions of lasting value. With time at his disposal, he developed a rich cultural life, some of the fruits of which have been mentioned here. A modest man, he was inclined to consider his life as rather aimless, yet very enjoyable. But the word “aimless” does not apply. As scholar, collector, author-historian, and warm friend, one can conclude that he took an accurate aim on life and achieved many satisfying goals.

*Historical Society of Pennsylvania*  
*Nicholas B. Wainwright*