

Albert Boni:
A Sketch of a Life in Micro-Opaque

AUGUST A. IMHOLTZ, JR.

IN A VOICE OF AMERICA INTERVIEW¹ in early 1972, Albert Boni, then seventy-nine years old, said in reference to his discovery of the microprinting process—the reason we are assembled here today in this great library of the American Antiquarian Society—that it all began one day many years ago in the early 1930s at a meeting of the Circle of Confusion,² a small group of inventors, publishers, writers, artists, photographers, and avant-garde intellectuals to which Boni belonged. One of the members gave a talk on photographic enlargement, showing how a human eyelash

1. January 3, 1972. A copy of the VOA broadcast tape is in the Readex Archive in Chester, Vermont.

2. Despite the humorous-sounding name, 'circle of confusion' is a technical term in photography. In optics, the circle of confusion is a measurement used to describe how out of focus a point is allowed to be on a film negative before the fuzziness becomes noticeable on a print made from that negative. In photography, the circle of confusion is defined as "the largest circle of blur on a film negative that will still be perceived by the human eye as a clean point when printed at 8" × 10" size and viewed from a normal viewing distance of 2–3 feet." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Circle_of_confusion.

AUGUST A. IMHOLTZ, JR., is Readex vice president for government documents. I am particularly grateful to Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Bock of Chester, Vermont. Mrs. Bock, a granddaughter of Albert Boni, and her husband Tom, who worked with Albert Boni, shared many family documents and recollections and encouraged my work on this project. I am also grateful to the following individuals: Mrs. Marie Boni and Ms. Nell Hughes of Springfield, Vermont; Daniel S. Jones, Barbara Westine, Dee Sheldon, David Braden, David Loiterstein, and Michael G. Walker of NewsBank, inc., the parent company of Readex; Mr. and Mrs. Edmund Kulsick; Thomas Adams; Kenneth E. Carpenter; Sir Charles Chadwyck-Healey; Donald Farren; Clare Imholtz; Ellen Dunlap, John Hench, and Thomas Knoles of the American Antiquarian Society; Eugene Garfield; and Daniel Shanefield. Any errors are entirely my responsibility.

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Fig. 1. Albert Boni as a young man. (NewsBank collection).

could be blown up ten thousand times so that the pores in the surrounding skin resembled craters on the moon. Throughout the presentation Boni sat in absolute silence, he recalled long after the event, because he was thinking that the miracle of photographic manipulation which he was being shown, was, in true Circle of Confusion fashion, completely backwards: if something relatively small could be made extremely large, why could not the reverse photographic process be applied to printing, thereby reducing the space occupied by lines, pages, books, and

even whole libraries? At the recording of that 1972 interview with Voice of America commentator Sidney Paul, Boni was already an elderly man—one can hear his voice cracking at a few points—and the story he tells is only one version, perhaps the last, of the foundation myth of the idea for what would become the Readex Microprint. We shall consider another variation on the story shortly, but first some background material on the man himself.

It is of course hard, if not impossible, to summarize in a few minutes the life of anyone, let alone an individual as complex and of such wide-ranging interests as Albert Boni, but I shall attempt to give you a small composite picture of the man, framed rather like a cell in one of those millions of micro-opaque cards he produced. (See figure 4.) What I shall offer in outline is a portrait, sometimes opaque, of Boni framed within four coordinates: politics, plays, photography, and publishing—themes that recurred throughout his life and, I will suggest, helped to shape it.

In 1884, Albert Boni's father, Solomon, still in his teenage years, came to the United States from Russia. He was naturalized in 1890, and a year later he went back to his native land for a time, returning to the United States on the liner *La Gascogne* from Le Havre on June 1, 1891, with his wife, Bertha Laslawsky.³ About a year and a half later, on October 29, 1892, Albert Boni was born in New York City. His father was then twenty-six years of age, and his mother was nineteen years of age. On Albert's birth certificate Russia was listed as the country of birth of both parents. His father's occupation is given as 'type writer' (what we would have probably called a clerk typist a few decades before word processors made that occupation obsolete), and his first name is clearly written as Solomon. When Albert's father became Charles S. rather than Solomon Boni I do not know, but when he died in

3. There are several variations in the spelling of the name of Albert Boni's mother. 'Laslawsky' represents my transcription of her name as handwritten by a clerk on Albert's birth certificate, but there are other variants including 'Saslasky' and even 'Selzter.' The latter occurs in the supposedly authoritative *American National Biography*, John A. Garraty and Marc C. Carnes, eds. 24 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3: 173.

1934, the *New York Times* obituary notice referred to him as Charles S. Boni, a vice president of the Prudential Insurance Company.⁴ The Boni family was a Russian Jewish one which, like so many other immigrant families, quickly assimilated itself into life in the United States at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. By the time of the 1900 census, the Bonis were well enough off to have a live-in servant.

The family moved to Newark, New Jersey, because of Charles's position with Prudential. Almost sixty years later in a speech to librarians, Albert recalled that as a four-and-a-half-year-old he would walk a mile to visit the Newark Public Library,⁵ a recollection much in the vein of the young Abraham Lincoln—and probably deliberately so. There in Newark he attended Barringer High School and, at the age of sixteen, became the youngest secretary of the local chapter of the Socialist Party. In 1909 he enrolled at Cornell University intending to become an engineer but after a year decided to pursue a law degree and transferred to Harvard where his younger brother and future business partner in several ventures, Charles, was a freshman. At Harvard, Boni joined the Socialist Club but, seeking a broader range of discussion, he soon founded the Liberal and Republican clubs, both of which survive to this day. But despite the stimulation of his extracurricular discussion groups, Boni grew disenchanted with undergraduate life in Cambridge, especially since he had taken all of the sociology and economics courses then offered by the university and that was the direction into which his interests were taking him. Although there may have been other reasons for his departure—we simply do not know—Boni certainly is not alone in the class of Harvard dropouts who nonetheless became famous.

After leaving Harvard without a degree, Boni exhibited some of the persuasive skills that would guarantee success in his several publishing careers by persuading his father to give him the money

4. *New York Times*, January 15, 1936, 19.

5. Albert Boni, 'Microprint Original versus Microphotographed Edition of Documents,' *American Documentation* 2 (1951):150.

that their remaining years at Harvard would have cost, so that he and his brother could open a bookstore in Greenwich Village. This early sales effort did take some months to close but Boni finally won over his at-first reluctant father, and in 1913 Albert and Charles opened their bookstore at 95 Fifth Avenue. In addition to offering works of modern literature and left-wing politics, they began to publish books themselves. The first book the two brothers published under their imprint of Albert and Charles Boni was *Not Guilty* by the now largely forgotten British socio-economic determinist Robert Blatchford. Not too long afterward followed *Socialism and Anarchy* (1914), an early book written by an author who would later become much better known, Will Durant. Both titles, however, indicate a certain political bent. *Not Guilty*, interestingly, was published in a hardback edition selling for fifty cents and a paperback version for twenty-five cents.

On the basis of their initial publishing successes, *Not Guilty* having sold one hundred thousand copies, the brothers moved their store to 137 McDougal Street, occupying two rooms at the front of the Liberal Club, renamed their little establishment the Washington Square Bookshop, and launched several new enterprises.

Their first venture was the Little Leather Library, founded by Albert Boni, Charles Boni, Harry Scherman (then a writer of mail-order copy with the J. Walter Thompson Agency), and Maxwell Sackheim (also of the Thomson firm) in 1915. The tiny books, measuring three inches by three and three-quarters inches—you can see one in the exhibition case—were sold at first through Woolworth's five-and-ten-cent stores and later also by an installment plan in boxed sets of thirty books, sometimes accompanied by bookends. The leather volumes were issued in brown suede leather, green leather, red leather, and possibly other variations. More than one hundred titles were issued. 'Woolworth's sold a million copies a year, and 35-40 million volumes were sold by mail.'⁶

6. Gordon B. Neavill, 'Little Leather Library,' <http://palimpsest.stanford.edu/byform/mailling-lists/exlibris/1995/09/msg00167.html>

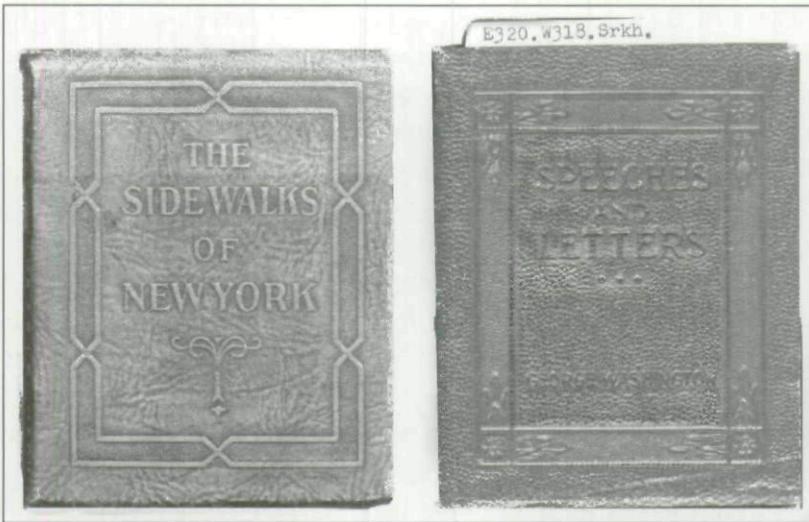


Fig. 2. The Little Leather Library (1915–1923), of which Albert Boni was a co-founder, was a highly successful format for selling books through Woolworth's stores and then by mail order. Two titles in the series included in the collections of the American Antiquarian Society are *The Sidewalks of New York* by Bernardine Kiely and *Speeches and Letters of George Washington*. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

Why Albert and his brother decided in 1918 to sell their shares to Scherman, who almost a decade later would establish the literary-installment marketing giant Book-of-the-Month Club, is not clear.

Their second enterprise, one not nearly as profitable nor as long-lived as the Little Leather Library, was the literary magazine *The Glebe*, published by Albert and Charles Boni. It was edited by Alfred Kreyborg and Adolf Wolff with cover art contributed by Man Ray. *The Glebe* lasted through only ten issues but succeeded in publishing, sometimes for the first time, some very important authors. Issue number one, 'Des Imagistes: An Anthology' (February 1914), 'included poems by Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, Ford Madox Ford, Hilda Doolittle, and William Carlos Williams.'⁷

7. *American National Biography*, s.v. 'The Glebe.'

And then the third enterprise, though not at all solely a Boni undertaking, was the Washington Square Players, which Albert helped to establish under the direction of Lawrence Langner. The players held their first performance in one of the rooms of Albert and Charles Boni's Washington Square Bookshop. A few years later, under Langner's direction, they became the New York Theatre Guild.

In 1915 the Bonis had rented retail space in New York's famous Flatiron Building at the corner of 23rd Street and Fifth Avenue in order to sell volumes of the Little Leather Library during the Christmas sales rush of 1915. While stopping for pastry at the Dutch Oven restaurant next to his Washington Square Bookshop, Boni mentioned to Nora Van Leeuwen, one of the café's owners, that he needed someone to mind their store in the Flatiron building. 'She suggested her younger sister Nell, a widow with an infant son who had just arrived from Holland. Boni lunched with Nell, hired her at once, and two years later married her.'⁸ It was one of the smartest things he did, for Cornelia Van Leeuwen, or 'Nell' as she liked to be called, was to prove a silent but extremely important partner in his publishing and entrepreneurial activities as well as in his life itself.

Mention of the name Boni to most people surely calls to mind the publishing house of Boni and Liveright, one of the most famous publishers of the first half of the twentieth century with its equally memorable and even more long-lived series, the Modern Library. The seldom smooth partnership between Albert Boni and Horace Liveright happened almost by accident. There are several versions of how it came about but the following sequence seems to be more or less agreed upon. In 1916 both Boni and Liveright were working individually in space provided to them in the Wallerstein advertising agency. Before Boni met Liveright, he had explained to Alfred Wallerstein his idea for publishing a

8. Donald Braider, 'Profile of Albert Boni,' 16. Unpublished manuscript in possession of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Bock, Chester, Vermont.

new series of books under the imprint of the Modern Library. Wallerstein was so impressed by the plan that he verbally agreed to become a partner with Boni in the venture. However, when Boni discussed with Liveright his success with the Little Leather Library and told him he hoped to undertake a new publishing list of established classics and works that would, in Boni's view, become classics, Liveright was eager to join the venture. Liveright's father-in-law contributed \$12,500, and Boni put up \$4,000. Wallerstein, Boni later suspected, had all along not really wanted to risk the investment and was only too happy to have facilitated the publishing marriage between Albert Boni and Horace Liveright. It is amusing to note that each of the partners had asked their mutual friend, Lawrence Langner, whether he could trust the other, and to each Langner's reply was 'no.'⁹

The initial twelve titles in the Modern Library were *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, by Oscar Wilde; *Married*, by August Strindberg; *Soldiers Three*, by Rudyard Kipling; *Treasure Island*, by Robert Louis Stevenson; *The War in the Air*, by H. G. Wells; *A Doll's House*, by Henrik Ibsen; *The Red Lily*, by Anatole France; *Mlle. Fifi*, by Guy de Maupassant; *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, by Friedrich Nietzsche; *Poor People*, by Fyodor Dostoyevsky; *St. Anthony*, by Maurice Maeterlinck; and *Pessimism*, by Arthur Schopenhauer.

Priced at sixty cents a volume, the new Modern Library books were welcomed by the press, libraries, college teachers, students, and the general public. A reviewer wrote in the *Philadelphia Evening Telegraph*, 'I have four of the admirable little volumes and think them a remarkable piece of workmanship for the price.'¹⁰ Unfortunately, however, there was something fishy about the titles in the first list—a fish oil used in the imitation leather binding of the volumes tended to give off ever so slight an odor of cod liver

9. Tom Dardis, *Firebrand: The Life of Horace Liveright* (New York: Random House, 1995), 50.

10. Dardis, *Firebrand*, 53.

oil, which was as unwelcome in the library, home, or university as it was in the kitchen.¹¹

Albert's uncle, Thomas Selzer, who was editor of the political periodical *Current Opinion* and had served as an editor for Max Eastmann's magazine *The Masses*, offered to invest \$25,000, backed by funds from Felix Warburg, in the firm of Boni and Liveright. Against Boni's fears that having Selzer as a partner might lead to dissension, Liveright won him over and Boni and Liveright became a troika with 'Uncle Toby' as a silent member. The injection of the Selzer-Warburg capital enabled the expansion of the Boni and Liveright list beyond the initial Modern Library offerings. Nonetheless, Boni's initial misgivings about his uncle's influence in the firm proved well grounded—Selzer seemed more keen on playing the partners against each other than following a consistent line. Eventually, the disagreements between Liveright and Boni became so intolerable that they agreed one or the other had to go.

Before the divorce, however, Boni wrote a letter to George Bernard Shaw in 1917 asking him to write an anti-war play, to which Shaw replied, in Shavian script for which Boni needed a translation, that he would like to accommodate Boni but for the fact he already had a contractual relationship with the American publisher Brentano and therefore would need a more definite offer.

Here is Boni's previously unpublished letter to George Bernard Shaw, dated November 19, 1917, which illustrates well his entrepreneurial boldness, foresight, and political convictions:

Dear Mr. Shaw:

Over the Top, by Guy Empey is on its way to sale of a million copies; *My Four Years in Germany*, by Ambassador Gerard is running it a close second. The American public is being fed up on the usual commonplace jingoism. It is about time that someone supplied an intellectual check on its emotions—in other words, we should like a war book from you.

11. Dardis, *Firebrand*, 54.

We feel certain that your reactions to the war must have led to some expression, additional to the articles that have already appeared. Something sane and dispassionate at this time, coming from you, might have a decisive influence on public opinion.

Very truly yours,
BONI AND LIVERIGHT, Inc.

Signed Albert Boni¹²

Boni withdrew from the firm before a more definite offer could be tendered to Shaw, the 'story' being that in July 1918, Liveright and Boni flipped a coin to see who would sell his share of the company to the other. Boni actually won the toss, at least according to his account, but lost the firm; his wife Nell was recovering from an illness, and he did not believe he could raise the required sum in ten days as the coin-toss rules had stipulated.¹³ According to another version Liveright had won¹⁴—which account to believe is a toss up. Boni clearly had been the stronger editorial force, though both partners had a talent for recognizing important young authors and the value, in both senses, of publishing continental works in the United States. Temperamentally they could not have been more dissimilar. One critic described Liveright as 'a hard-drinking philanderer who handed out book advances the way Babe Ruth handed out autographed baseballs,'¹⁵ a depiction that applied neither to Boni's lifestyle or approach to business. Although the partnership lasted only into 1918, the imprint of Boni and Liveright persisted until the end of 1928—just as a divorce might be delayed for the sake of the children, here one might say for the books—when Liveright finally dropped his former partner's name.

12. Albert and Charles Boni, Inc. Records, 1916–1974. University of California, Los Angeles. Collection No. 1462. Box 4, Folder 24.

13. Braider, 'Profile of Albert Boni,' 21.

14. Dardis, *Firebrand*, 67.

15. Terry Teachout, 'Huckster and Publisher' (review of *Firebrand: The Life of Horace Liveright*) *New York Times Book Review*, July 16, 1995, 11.

Nonetheless, Boni and Liveright became the most exciting publisher in the United States in the years before, during, and after World War I. A small sample of the authors whose works they issued includes: George Meredith, George Bernard Shaw, Thomas Hardy, Ivan Turgenev, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Arthur Schnitzler, Anton Chekhov, and G. K. Chesterton. All of them have become classic writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and many are still available under the Running Torchbearer colophon of the Modern Library.

Before the termination of their curious partnership, Liveright had badgered Boni into getting the rights to a book by Lenin, any book by Lenin. Finding the works of the father of the Russian Revolution a bit dull even to someone interested in economics, Boni settled instead on publishing Trotsky's short work, really a long pamphlet, *The Bolsheviks and World Peace*. The work had sold more than fifteen thousand copies when President Wilson's *deputatus*, George Creel—director of the United States Public Information Office—demanded that Boni and Liveright discontinue the sale. Two years later, after Boni had departed, the firm of Boni and Liveright published John Reed's masterpiece *Ten Days That Shook the World*—the title reportedly having been chosen by Liveright's attorney, Arthur Garfield Hays. These two political works go some way to making more plausible, both theoretically and coincidentally, the intriguing story of how Boni came to be imprisoned in Moscow.

In 1919 Albert and Nell Boni went to Holland to obtain the rights to Kaiser Wilhelm's memoirs—how that came about is another story in itself, but in brief Boni was acting as an agent of the McClure's Syndicate and his wife knew the family of the estate next to the estate in Droon where the Kaiser was exiled. Boni came close to obtaining the rights to the memoirs—which were composed in English, incidentally—but that deal fell apart. Following an abortive attempt to travel to Russia with the Polish Communist Karl Radek, Boni decided to go to Berlin in 1920 hoping to meet en route Ignacy Jan Paderewski, the great pianist, composer, and national political leader

of Poland. For this purpose, he had also brought a letter of introduction—a kind of backup to his Kaiser Wilhelm overture—before travelling onward to Russia as well. Nell remained in Berlin. As his ship slid into the wharf at Reval, to his great surprise Boni heard his name being called. He stared for a few moments at the smiling man on the gangway, finally recognizing him as the Soviet publications commissar to whom in New York some two years before he had offered to pay a royalty for Trotsky's *Bolsheviki and World Peace*. Boni's entry into Russia was now assured.

After a series of accidents and tortuous events, Boni travelled by train from Moscow to Petrograd, as St. Petersburg had been renamed by the Russians at the beginning of World War I, in the company of John Reed and James Connolly, Jr. The next morning Boni and Connolly went to the Smolny Institute on the banks of the Neva River. Originally conceived as a convent, it had become a school for girls before the Communist party had established its headquarters there after the revolution. Connolly caught sight of Lenin and said to Boni, 'Come on and I'll introduce you to the old man.' As Lenin was crossing the large courtyard, Connolly approached him and said in Russian something like, 'Vot Tovarish Boni, predstabil tel burzhuznoi amerikanskoi pressi—Here is Comrade Boni, he's a representative of the bourgeois American press.'¹⁶ Lenin, according to Boni, smiled and taking each of them arm in arm, marched out through the gates of the Smolny Institute. There is a *News of the World*-like motion picture newsreel showing Lenin marching arm in arm with Connolly, the son of the Irish nationalist, on one side of him and Boni, the onetime sixteen-year-old secretary of the Newark, New Jersey, Socialist Club on the other.

A week later Boni, upon returning to his apartment in Moscow after attending a diplomatic party, was arrested. He spent the next three weeks in Lubyanka, the infamous Cheka and later

16. Braider, 'Profile of Albert Boni,' 42.

KGB prison in central Moscow, followed by two months in the Alexandrovsky prison camp outside Moscow, without ever learning the charges against him—he later came to believe he was suspected of being an American spy. He had of course not complied with all the new Soviet regulations for foreigners—it would have been impossible even to have known what they were, let alone do so; and surely hundreds of others had similarly erred. It is true that on the train from Petrograd to Moscow he had infuriated Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin by suggesting that some musicians in the train car, after playing songs of the revolution, play the Russian national anthem—strains no longer pleasing to the great Bukharin.

In a letter to Nell Boni, Horace Liveright showed his concern for his former partner's welfare and how he, to a small degree, assisted in the efforts to publicize Albert's plight.¹⁷ Through her letters to Lenin and with some assistance from Emma Goldman, who was in Russia at that time, Nell secured her husband's release from imprisonment at Alexandrovsky. He joined her in Reval and the two Americans headed back to Berlin. A number of journalistic assignments, including a series of articles for the *Manchester Guardian*, probably more important for the self-promoting publicity and extensive high-level contacts they produced than for the salary they represented, occupied Boni's time throughout the remainder of 1920 and much of 1921 as he continued to pursue the rights to the Kaiser's memoirs.

Back in New York, Boni once again went into business with his brother Charles. They purchased the publishing house of Lieber and Lewis in 1923 and with its titles as a basis founded Albert and Charles Boni Publishing Company. For the first six

17. 'I do hope that by this time you and Albert are back in Berlin. About a month ago a reporter from the NY Tribune telephoned me that Albert was in prison in Moscow and he got from me some biographical data. Since then I have learned through Ben Schlessinger of the International Garment Workers Union that Albert has been freed.' Liveright to Nell Boni, undated, 1920? Boni, Inc. Records. Box 4, Folder 5.15.

months the firm operated out of the basement apartment of a house at 19 Barrow Street in Greenwich Village and then moved to 39 West Eighth Street. The new publishers' first list in 1924 included Jim Tully's *Beggars of Life*, Will Rogers's *Illiterate Digest*, and Joris-Karl Huysmans's *Down There*, together with a reissue of the English translation of that author's notorious *A Rebours*, which had first appeared in the United States under the Lieber and Lewis imprint and created at the time something of a sensation because of its sexual content. The next year they brought out *In the American Grain*, by William Carlos Williams, whom the Bonis had first published in their short-lived literary magazine *The Glebe* some years before, and also Ford Maddox Ford's very successful *No More Parades*, which, according to Peter Dzwonkoski's account, 'went through two printings in the first two weeks,'¹⁸ among many other titles.

These books and others were so successful that the brothers Boni expanded their operations. They inaugurated in 1926 a new series of classic titles in low-priced editions edited by Van Wyck Brooks that they called the American Library—a continuation of the idea of and perhaps a nominal competitor to the Modern Library. They next purchased the list of Uncle Toby's publishing firm, Thomas Selzer, Incorporated, and moved to 66 Fifth Avenue. Their Cosmos Library, another new series, was devoted to popular science books. The volumes, which included *Einstein's Theory of Relativity*, *Love Life of Plants*, and *The Natural History of the Child*—to name only a few of the first twenty titles—were priced at ten cents each. The full Boni list grew with the addition of Gertrude Stein's *Making of Americans*, Ford's *A Man Could Stand Up*, Upton Sinclair's *Oil*, Max Eastmann's *Breaking Through Marx and Lenin: The Science of Revolution*, and Leon Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*. Radical politics were counterbalanced by Boni's interest in French

18. David Dzwonkoski and Carmen Russell, 'Albert and Charles Boni,' *American Literary Publishing Houses, 1900-1980: Trade and Paperback*, 49 vols. (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1986), 46: 55.

literature, especially symbolist poetry, so they issued Baudelaire's *Prose and Poetry* and in 1927 the remainder of Scott Montcrieff's translation of Marcel Proust—Thomas Selzer had brought out the first several volumes of *Remembrance of Things Past*—beginning with *Cities of the Plain*.

Having published Thornton Wilder's first novel, *The Cabala* in 1926, they brought out in 1927 one of their most successful works, Wilder's *Bridge of San Luis Rey*, which continues to sell to this day. During the American occupation of Germany after World War II, it was one of the American titles issued in German translation as part of the massive allied de-Nazification re-education program. The last Thornton Wilder novel to be published by Albert and Charles Boni was *The Woman of Andros* in 1930. Wilder later left the Bonis for Harpers.

During the late 1920s, Boni also issued the art journal *Creative Art*, which ran from 1927 to 1933 under his sponsorship. In some ways it was a visual arts counterpart to his earlier journal, *The Glebe*. The annual *Decorative Art* was also one of their offerings.

Their former partner's Book-of-the-Month Club (BOMC), established by Harry Scherman in the same year Albert and Charles Boni opened, or reopened, for business, had begun to cut significantly into the mainstream publishing market. To compete with the BOMC, the Bonis inaugurated the Charles Boni Paper Books Club. They 'offered twelve paperbound titles a year—each book's cover and endpapers attractively designed by Rockwell Kent—for a five dollar subscription. As a further inducement, free copies of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927) were offered to all subscribers.'¹⁹ A copy of that very book, a premium book if you will, is visible in the exhibit case here at the American Antiquarian Society.

In response to the Boni paperback offensive, Louis Brentano retaliated against what he may have viewed as dirty discount pricing by refusing to sell Boni books (the non-subscription books)

19. Dzwonkoski and Russell, 'Albert and Charles Boni,' 46:55.

any longer in the Brentano stores—a small blow followed a few months later by a big one, the Great Depression of 1929, from which the firm of Albert and Charles Boni never really recovered. This was not so much, I think, because it could not have adapted successfully but rather because the Bonis' interests were being directed elsewhere. Charles resigned in 1930 to start the Living American Art Company, and a year later Albert sold the inventory of his Boni Books to Doubleday Doran, which had already started the Literary Guild Book Club, among others. Also in 1929, Albert built the Fifth Avenue Playhouse in Manhattan, thereby demonstrating his continuing interest in the performing arts.

Not long after, photography became Albert's new passion. Photography, or more correctly, the idea for the use of photography in printing texts in greatly reduced format, came to Boni—and this is version two of the foundation myth—at a party given by Manuel Komroff in 1932. Komroff, a writer and editor with a strong interest in photography, showed Boni an album of prints of photographs he had taken with his Leica. 'The first picture was a contact print of Komroff sitting in a chair. Succeeding pages consisted of enlargements of an increasingly small area of the original negative, including the final photograph, a four-by-five-inch print of a corner of Komroff's eye. The image was fuzzy, but Boni found the detail remarkable.'

There is some contradiction here, an account dating from the late 1950s, with the *Voice of America* version some fifteen years later. As already noted, there exist other versions of the story as well.²⁰

During the 1930s Boni became increasingly preoccupied with studying photography, with the goal of using microfilm technology to create a form of microprinting. His main textbook was Dr. Josef Maria Eder's *Ausführliches Handbuch der Photographie*, a sixteen-volume work that was a model of *deutsche Wissenschaft*. By

20. Braider, 'Profile of Albert Boni,' 96. A slightly different account may be found in Kayla Landesman, 'Readex Microprint: An Historic Perspective,' *Government Publications Review* 15.5 (1988): 463-70.

the late 1930s, Boni thought he had solved the fundamental problems, chief of which was transferring the reduced film, microfilm, image to a printing plate, and producing an image on paper that would be legible with proper magnification and would last. The whole process had the following steps:

1. Microfilm the text,
2. Put the negative strongly and securely against a lithograph of stone or steel,
3. Flash light through the transparent parts of the negative,
4. Transfer the actual image onto the plate,
5. With ink transfer the image to paper.

“The lithograph was stone or steel which was coated with photosensitive material of just the right degree of adhesion. At first gelatin with a chromate additive was used but later a polyacrylate plastic was chosen. The difficult part was getting it to release from the lithograph after exposure, and then adhere strongly to the printing plate and harden after that so it would not release again.²¹ This technical description is courtesy of Professor Daniel Shanefield who worked for Albert Boni long after the process had been successfully developed.

Another problem was that the degree of light, and therefore heat, that needed to be concentrated on the paper’s micro-image in order to reflect the text so it could be read on a specially designed reading machine (which Boni eventually named the Readex), ran a very real and very dangerous risk of igniting the paper.

As the experiments with the printing press continued—you can see in the exhibit case a photograph of what they eventually looked like—Boni became a consultant to Lessing Rosenwald, the son of the founder of Sears Roebuck and the greatest American bibliophile of the first half of the twentieth century, in his ill-fated International Film Book Company. This was an attempt, begun in 1937, to produce and market microfilm-based versions

21. Daniel Shanefield. Personal communication with author, September 20, 2005.

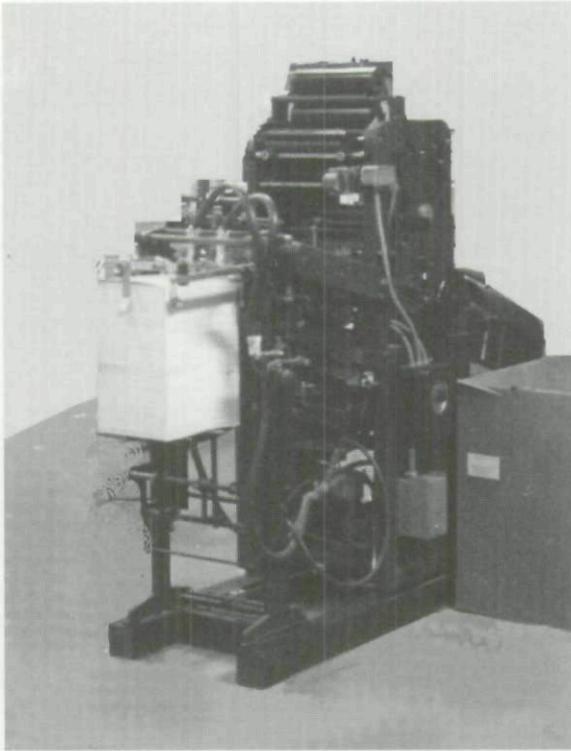


Fig. 3. The press developed to produce the microprint cards from the plate onto which the reduced film image had been transferred. (Newsbank Collection)

of the Gutenberg Bible, Audubon's *Birds of America*, and numerous Currier and Ives lithographs from the New-York Historical Society. The main investors were Rosenwald himself; Richard Patterson, vice president of RCA; and Warner Pratt. In spite of many promises and much publicity, the company went out of business in 1939 without having produced any works.²²

Following the termination of his consulting responsibilities to the aborted International Film Book Company, Boni auspiciously made

22. Braider, 'Profile of Albert Boni,' 103.

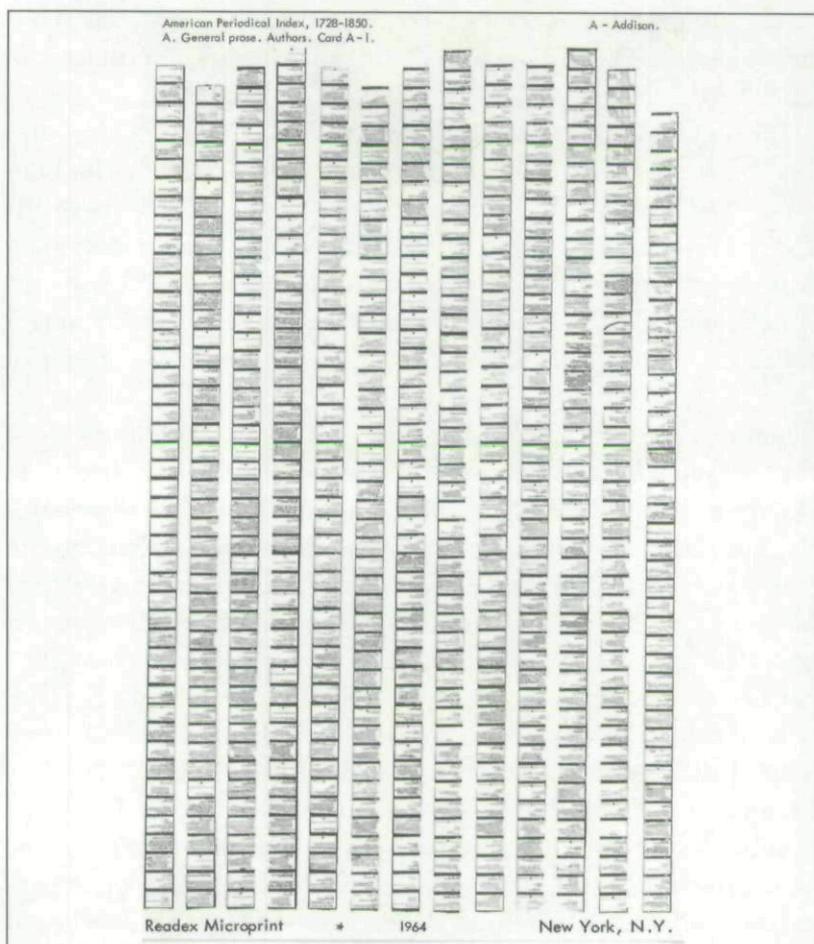


Fig. 4. Readex Microprint card. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

the acquaintance of Edgar L. Erickson, a University of Illinois history professor who wanted to find an economical way to republish the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sessional papers of Britain's House of Commons—six thousand quarto and folio volumes totaling almost five million pages. Nell Boni undertook the arduous task

of organizing this vast body of largely disorganized materials while her husband struggled with some lingering technical problems of his microprinting process that he thought he had solved.

He capitalized his company, newly named the Readex Corporation, with the principal stockholders being Boni, Rosenwald, Leonard Weil, and W. T. Fisher, the latter two both officers of the Corn Products Refining Corporation. A contract for providing Microprint sets of British sessional papers was signed with the American Historical Association, thanks to the efforts of Professor Erickson.

Then disaster struck. The first print run of the Microprint cards for the initial installment of the British sessional papers had to be destroyed because the dye in the ink ran, and ran erratically. So difficult was it to examine each frame that the whole production run was discarded. Boni turned to the General Aniline Corporation for help because they had promised that their diazo dye process would be lightfast. However, they too failed Boni, so he brought a breach of contract suit against the German company in 1943. But with World War II intervening, the suit could not be settled until 1948. Little filming could have been done during the war anyway because of the compromised Atlantic sea traffic, the ongoing bombardment of London, and the shortage of materials in the United States. During this period Boni moved his Microprint operation to Chester, Vermont, where, in one form or another, it has remained for over half a century.

To supplement his income beyond what he was continuing to receive in royalties from the titles published under the Albert and Charles Boni imprint, Boni became a consultant, editorial rather than technical, to Penguin Books' New American Library and World Literature. And he still worked away at perfecting the microprinting process, finding some relief through making use of a 'dry ink.' His suit against General Aniline was settled in his favor but for nothing like the \$250,000 he had sought. Unable to proceed and meet his commitments, Boni then was forced to acquire

the still-outstanding shares of the original Readex company and refinance the corporation—an effort in which he was aided by an attorney named George Hourwich, who would later own a small share of the company. Fortunately, at this juncture, the Champion Paper Company developed and marketed a ‘highly glazed paper to which the name Kromekete was given. It proved to have, for the Microprint process, a number of unique merits: its thickness was extremely consistent to close tolerances, it accepted the ink without any running at all, and it met the requirements for archival paper established by the National Bureau of Standards.’²³

The British sessional papers were begun again in earnest and other large Microprint projects were undertaken. The Sabin bibliography, not the texts of the entries in Joseph Sabin’s *Bibliotheca Americana* but the bibliography itself, was issued in Microprint. There followed, as success warranted, the texts themselves of the materials catalogued in Charles Evans’s *American Bibliography: A Chronological Dictionary of All Books, Pamphlets and Periodical Publications Printed in the United States of America from the Genesis of Printing in 1639 down to and Including the Year 1820, with Bibliographical and Biographical Notes*. Dr. Clifford Shipton of the American Antiquarian Society played a crucial collaborative role with Albert Boni in this undertaking, as we are hearing today from Marcus McCorison, who succeeded Shipton here at the American Antiquarian Society and worked with Boni on this and subsequent projects.

And although the Evans collection contains many plays, Boni went on to publish in Microprint a collection called *Three Centuries of English and American Plays*, edited by Henry W. Wells with support from G. William Bergquist, formerly of the New York Public Library. This collection amounts to more than five thousand dramas and was followed by *English and American Plays of the Nineteenth Century*—approximately twenty-eight thousand titles. Once again one sees Boni’s interest in drama affecting, at least to some degree, his publishing decisions.

23. Braider, ‘Profile of Albert Boni,’ 109–10.

In his Landmarks of Science collection, based on bibliographical work originally done by Sir Harold Hartley and with the assistance of Duane H. D. Roller, Boni brought out some ten thousand volumes of historical scientific works published from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries.

Parallel to the British sessional papers, there was a Microprint edition of the United States Congressional Serial Set, the documents, reports, and journals of the Senate and House of Representatives—a total of about twelve million pages that Readex Digital is now converting, like the earlier Evans and Shaw-Shoemaker, to digital format.

There were other collections too numerous to mention in full, including some Russian collections still stored in a red barn a few hundred feet off Main Street in Chester, Vermont, so that by 1980 Boni had over three million titles in Microprint²⁴—a long way from the Little Leather Library.

The following description of the Readex products is taken from the 1979–80 catalogue.

'Microprint print editions have been purchased in ever-increasing quantities by research libraries throughout the world since 1950. . . . Compared with roll microfilm and microfiche, Microprint costs show savings of 60% to 90%. Microprint comes to the library on paper card stock, 6x9 inches. Usually each card contains 100 pages reduced 12 to 18 diameters . . . Microprint occupies approximately 2% of the shelf space required for the original printed materials.

These reduced images have been ink printed on card stock via printing press. The product is not photographic—in fact, Microprint is the only form of micro-reproduction which is neither a film transparency nor an opaque photographic print. It is this fact which creates the remarkable economies in publication. Microprint is received by the purchaser in strong, plastic boxes in the shape and size of a royal octavo volume (6½ x 10), individually and clearly labeled as to contents. The boxes of Microprint are handled and shelved in the same manner as books.²⁵

24. *Readex Microprint Publications, 1979–1980* (New York: Readex Microprint, 1979), 48.

25. *Readex Microprint Publications, 1979–1980*, 2.

The Readex readers, the machines used to read the reduced-form Microprint pages, went through many developments and improvements as the number of collections increased year by year. One of the latest is the sleek Readex Universal Micro-viewer. Its predecessor model, the Readex Opaque Viewer Model 7, however, looks like some device one would have seen on Flash Gordon's spaceship.

During the years in which he was patiently developing his micro-printing process, Boni never completely abandoned traditional book publishing, though he sometimes introduced a characteristically innovative twist. He issued the British Museum catalogue in a compact edition, a reduction of the page by two diameters, which allowed the text, except that in extremely small font, to be read with the naked eye. He offered the technology to Oxford University Press (OUP) for the compact edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), and would have gained some not-insignificant royalties but for the fact that OUP decided, over Boni's objections, to make a deal with the Book-of-the-Month Club to offer the two-volume OED for only thirty-nine dollars, then fifteen dollars, and finally for nothing save the agreement to purchase a certain number of other books throughout the year. The original OUP price had been seventy-five dollars, so Boni to his great chagrin saw vastly reduced royalties, in fact reduced almost to nothing.

The late 1960s and 1970s at Readex, as the firm had become known, saw massive conversion of the Microprint masters to microfiche which, believe it or not, was a preferred, if not really new, technology.

Boni's own greatest personal publication is the classed bibliography entitled *Photographic Literature, an International Bibliographic Guide to General and Specialized Literature on Photographic Processes; Techniques; Theory; Chemistry; Physics; Apparatus; Materials and Applications; Industry; History; Biography; Aesthetics*. Containing over twelve thousand entries and references to almost one hundred further items, it was published in 1962 by Morgan and Morgan in association with R. R. Bowker, and reprinted in 1992.

The Readex firm's final hardcopy book issued under Boni's inspiration, *European Americana: A Chronological Guide to Works Printed in Europe Relating to the Americas, 1493-1750*, was published, or rather the first of its six volumes was published, in 1980. This was a joint undertaking between Readex and the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University. Boni's original plan had been to microfilm all of the texts listed in Joseph Sabin's bibliography, but after he was persuaded that such a venture was not possible,²⁶ he supported the composition and publication of this successor to Sabin that *European Americana* has become.

He retired in 1974, turning the Readex business enterprises largely over to his son William Boni, and moved to Florida. On July 31, 1981, at eighty-eight years of age, Albert Boni died in his home in Ormond Beach, Florida.

In conclusion, one must ask, 'What sort of man, then, was Albert Boni?' Physically, he was short and wiry, with large eyes and a penetrating gaze. He was a strong individualist, a brilliant publisher who published many of the most creative American and European writers of the first half of the twentieth century, an entrepreneur who developed a new technology and understood the optics, physics, and engineering principles underpinning it, a critic of the establishment, a Socialist for much of his life, a supporter of the American Humanist Society with the philosopher Thomas Dewey and other American intellectual luminaries, and a man who with committed determination sought to make great library collections accessible to the common man, the common reader—first through the modest Little Leather Library and finally in the huge, great Readex library collections.

I would like to end with one quotation that affirms Boni's character. In correspondence with Joseph S. Mertle, technical director of the International Photo Engravers Union and author of the

26. Thomas Adams. Personal communication with author, September 24, 2005.

standard work *Modern Photoengraving: A Practical Textbook*, Boni solicited Mertle's comments on his monumental bibliography of photography. Boni wrote, 'you need show no concern for my sensibilities in criticizing what I have done or contemplated doing. I am seriously concerned about one thing only and that is to make the index the best that can be achieved.'²⁷ That statement summarizes Boni's philosophy and how he wanted his life's work to be judged. This is the ethos he bequeathed to the Readex Corporation, now a division of NewsBank, inc.

27. Boni, Inc. Records. Box 1, Folder 7; Photography correspondence, 1943-45.

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