

Prescott Townsend (1894-1973): Bohemian Blueblood— A Different Kind of Pioneer

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Courtesy Boston Atheneum

Born in the Mauve Decade of Oscar Wilde's ascendancy, Prescott Townsend came of age in the roaring 1920s and lived to embrace hippies in the 1960s and Boston's Gay Liberation Front with its newspaper *Fag Rag* in the 1970s. During his nearly eighty years, Townsend participated in a multitude of progressive movements in the United States. He fostered an early counterculture in Boston and Provincetown, worked with the Kinsey Institute, produced his own "snowflake" theory of sexuality, established a Mattachine chapter, and later his own "demophile" group in Boston. After World War I and until his death, he called for the repeal of the Massachusetts antisodomy laws enacted by seventeenth-century Puritans. As of this

writing, Chapter 272, Section 34 of the General Laws of Massachusetts still prohibits "the abominable and detestable crime against nature, either with mankind or with a beast" and provides as punishment "imprisonment in the state prison for not more than twenty years."

Prescott maintained a deep self-regard for his biological bloodline. His family claimed direct descent from twenty-three passengers on the Mayflower. One of his revolutionary heroes was an ancestor, Roger Sherman, the only person to sign three significant American documents, the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, and the Constitution. Sherman, similar to Townsend, may not be much remembered today, but the grouchy second U.S. President John Adams described Sherman as "an old Puritan, as honest as an angel and as firm in the cause of American Inde-

pendence as Mount Atlas" (Cathcart manuscript). Like Townsend, Sherman also demonstrated a "personal awkwardness and rusticity of manner." Townsend himself claimed that Sherman was the only Founding Father "to be so inconsistent" as to sign all three foundation documents. Sherman, however, probably did not share his descendant's later sexual interest in his fellow males.

Born in Roxbury, Massachusetts, June 24, 1894, into a comfortable and conventional Yankee family, Prescott Townsend was the third son and fourth child of Kate (Wendell) and Edward Britton Townsend. He prepared at the Volkman School, entered Harvard College (as did his brothers), graduated with the class of 1918, and attended the Harvard Law School for one year. His third class report listed his membership in the Harvard Club of Boston and New York as well as the Masonic Order. Prescott regularly attended his class reunions and marched in Harvard's annual procession for graduating students and alumni; at his fiftieth reunion he carried the class stanchion. His family attended the very high Anglican Church of the Advent, at the foot of Boston's Beacon Hill, where Ralph Adams Cram, the fashionable Yankee architect, designed much of the interior, including a retablo for Prescott's mother. His own funeral, however, took place in the Unitarian Arlington Street Church, which hosted gay youth groups, antiwar rallies, and other causes dear to Prescott's heart.

Townsend early embraced "paths untrodden." He came through Harvard when manliness was the norm and when Bull Moose Theodore Roosevelt was a hero. If TR's Rough Riders inspired him, Prescott certainly deviated from TR's ideal of what that might constitute. Like Roosevelt he went west for adventure, and in the summer of 1914 worked in the logging and mining camps of Idaho and Montana. Here he came in contact with the free-wheeling Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, also popularly known as "Wobblies"), who were organizing unskilled and itinerant workers. Their anarchist politics left a strong imprint on the impressionable youth; he probably witnessed camp dances, where the men got along without women and lived outside the norms of traditional society. At the very least, the lumber camps and the IWW gave Townsend a view of the world far beyond Harvard in Yankee Boston. He himself reported in his papers that he always loved street boys and drifters and said that wherever he went he took them in and provided them with "love."

Another quite different summer trip into Mexico's backwaters opened him to other unconventional experiences. In the Rio Blanco Canyon, he was codiscoverer of some Toltec stone heads and had a new species of salamander named after him: *Salamandra oedipustownsendensis*. Townsend himself early on developed an interest in Freud and his theories; the naming of the salamander reflects this, and is not an incidental reference to his fa-

ther who had built a fortune in the coal business. Although his father died relatively young, he left the family in comfortable circumstances. Townsend's relationship with his father at best was "distant," but it was surely less tragic than that of Oedipus. He always remained on good terms with his mother. Her only advice to him when he announced his homosexuality was that he should be careful because not everyone would be as generous as she was in accepting his life choices.

The United States' entry into World War I in 1917 offered another interruption from the traditional Ivy League life, and Prescott's stint in the U.S. Navy helped wean him further from his Puritan past. In April 1917 he enrolled as chief boatswain's mate U.S. Naval Reserve Force, was appointed ensign September 18, and was assigned to the U.S.S. *Illinois* in the Atlantic fleet. After a short time at sea, he transferred to New Orleans and then attended the Texas A & M Naval Unit to learn the secret military codes. He was released from active duty January 25, 1919, shortly after the end of the war.

After desultorily pursuing law school for a year, he dropped out and later left for an eight-month stay in Paris. Although he may not have known Gertrude Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Robert McAlmon, André Gide, T. E. Lawrence, H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), or Ernest Hemingway as well as he later implied, he did absorb the postwar culture and values of Bohemian Paris and he carried these ideals back to Boston.

As a member of the Harvard Travelers Club, Prescott made several memorable trips, one into North Africa and another into Communist Russia. The free life of the Bedouins attracted him as it has so many gay men. One of Prescott's prized possession was a *djellabah* which he claimed Lawrence of Arabia had given to André Gide, who in turn gave it to him. Since the garment, along with many other prized manuscripts and mementos, was lost in one of his several disastrous fires, DNA tests can never be run to see whether either Gide or Lawrence once wore it. Nonetheless, the existence of the garment and Townsend's attachment to it (similar to that of Christians to their relics) demonstrates how highly he regarded the homosexuality of the Bedouins, his connection with Gide, and fantasies of Lawrence in the Arabian sands.

Prescott himself was unconventional, but far from revolutionary in sentiments. His travels in Algeria seem to have left him with little understanding of the problems of colonialism. He did undertake to have *The Perfumed Garden* retranslated into English, but that gesture would hardly shield him from today's antiorientalism critics. Likewise, his trip to Russia in 1962 with a "people to people" program "working for world peace" had its conventional touches. He proudly reported: "I traveled on the farms and in the cities, giving out my forty pounds of *Life*, *Look*, and Sears Catalogs"

(Harvard University *Class Reports*, 1962). Unlike many gay pioneers of his day, he never flirted with communism. Rather like W. Dorr Legg, whom he had met in 1953, Prescott almost always voted Republican. His personal friendship with Adlai Stevenson, who had a purported lavender streak, may have led him to break ranks and vote Democrat in 1952, but if so he returned in 1956 to Eisenhower and Nixon.

Although a political conservative on most issues, he was an intellectual and cultural radical. Townsend was a moving force in the bohemian underground both on Beacon Hill and in Cape Cod's Provincetown. He backed theater productions, experimented with new architecture, encouraged authors, and played an active part in the city's gay life. He had met expatriate novelist Eliot Paul in Paris, and they brought together an intellectual, artistic, and often sexual avant garde caliber of women and men in Boston. The back of Beacon Hill, where Prescott lived most of his adult life, approximated New York's Greenwich Village and in some ways even the Left Bank in Paris. Before, during, and after Prohibition, the bars on the back of the Hill catered to a miscellaneous crowd of sailors, transvestites, poets, prostitutes, and gay men. For a time during the 1920s, Townsend participated in a speakeasy, eatery, and theatrical establishment on Joy Street in what was formerly a stable, one of several buildings he owned on Beacon Hill. In November 1922, with his backing and collaboration, the Barn Theater opened, offering experimental theater with links to Paris, Provincetown, and Greenwich Village.

Lucius Beebe, in his book, *Boston and the Boston Legend* (1935), described Townsend in this period as wearing "a raccoon skin overcoat that was the envy of Cedar Street"; and that the "rangy" youth could easily "talk informatively on any given subject for the space it required his auditor to consume precisely a quart of gin." A great talker, Prescott spoke to classes at Harvard, gave talks on the radio, and expounded his theories at length in the local restaurants, meetings, bars, his own special soirees, and underground films. Other than interviews, however, he left little extended work, and the publications or organizations he founded did not outlast his life.

Townsend's "snowflake theory" of homosexuality provided an interesting mix of Freud, Kinsey, and other sexologists. He intended it to be simple and illuminating for those confused or uncertain about their sexuality; in his words, it was "Freud pared to the bone . . . designed to provide enlightenment and save thousands of dollars" in psychotherapy. He held that certain conditions of early life are nonreversible: "left-handedness, homophile libido, sexuality, fetishes, inherited super-ego, and main vocational drives." The individuals who had these conditions were each different as were snowflakes and the question was what to do about it. His answer, somewhat oversimplified, was, "Hit, Miss, Submit," and "Work, Love, Play." In short, be

yourself; and although he recognized that his work had some basis in academic research, he wanted others to follow through on such research and left money to the Harvard psychology department to be "used in connection with research and study of the homophile and also the study of sexual variants."

Townsend's greatest work (beyond his extraordinary personality and public agitation for gay causes) was in his architectural experiments, both on Beacon Hill and in Provincetown. He built five A-frame houses in Provincetown; had he patented his A-frame, he might have become better known. He also built his own absolutely unique house, the "Gangway" assembled from driftwood, plastic castoffs, and other detritus. Because of his open welcome to the homeless (and young gays) some believe that his house was torched deliberately. This was because shortly before the fire three of the selectmen of Provincetown had issued "An Appeal to All Decent People," complaining that "We are not getting the support we should in our effort to rid our town of these degenerates." The appeal concluded with a call: "Let us not permit our town to become a Sodom or Gomorrah" (*Cathcart manuscript*). Undaunted by the fire, Townsend soon rebuilt on the site with a more conventional and very expensive guest house.

He was ever conscious of being gay even in the 1920s; he had examined ways of repealing the state's "crime against nature" law. During World War II, he worked two years at the Fall River shipbuilding yard and while there had charges brought against him for an "abominable and detestable crime against nature." He did not hide his arrest and wrote in his Harvard class report: "I was thrown into jail for refusing to pay \$15.00 graft for an act that is not against the law in England nor in Illinois." According to legend, when the judge asked what he had to say for himself, he replied, "So what's wrong with a little cocksucking on the Hill?" Consequently, he served over a year's sentence in the Deer Island House of Correction before being released on the day that Germany surrendered in 1945.

Because of the dangers of arrest, blackmail, and imprisonment, detailed accounts of Prescott's sexual life are relatively sparse. During his time in the U.S. Navy he recalled *never having had any sexual relations*, although later he made up for lost time by inviting many sailors into his Beacon Hill quarters. Street boys and runaways *likewise always received a warm welcome* from him, both in Boston and in Provincetown. Fellatio seems to have been one of his favorite activities, and he was always generous to a degree with those who needed food, shelter, and money.

During the 1950s, he convened meetings every Sunday at his house at 75 Philips Street (also then operating as the Paul Revere Bookstore), which he called "the first social discussion of homosexuality in Boston." The circle

soon moved into a meeting room of the Parker House Hotel, more fashionably located next to King's Chapel and the old City Hall. One more formal member of the group (called "The Professor") did not like the informal atmosphere. "The purpose of the groups was for public education," he complained, "not for assignations, which is what they were trying to make it. Prescott was defending his creamy-meamy, bubble-headed, faggy types" (Mitzel, 1973).

The division between what in Boston has often been called the "Good Gays" and the "Bad Faggots" carried over into the Mattachine Society in 1957. Prescott organized the first chapter in Boston and he also attended meetings of ECHO, the East Coast Homophile Organization. As the Boston group grew with larger meetings, newsletters, and prominent speakers, the "Good Gays" soon voted Prescott out of leadership. Pushed aside, he then left to organize his own Boston Demophile Society. Although the Boston Mattachine Society soon collapsed, the Demophile Society managed to publish several newsletters, hold meetings, invite speakers, and organize outings for demonstrations and trips. The society continued more or less until Prescott's death, but one of his secretaries unfortunately used copies of the Boston Mattachine and the later Demophile newsletters for firewood. Later, Townsend's house caught fire, engulfing a vast treasure trove of early gay liberation records.

From the beginning, Townsend had always been something of a hippy and he went on to become a flower child in the 1960s. When groups of young teenagers began camping out in the Boston Common, Prescott himself joined them, gearing up his mimeograph machine to turn out flyers announcing "The Boston Common Be-In" for the Summer of 1967. This set the example for the Boston Gay Liberation Front "Be-In" in 1970 in which Townsend was involved. Townsend also became a star in underground filmmaker Andrew Meyer's 1966 *An Early Clue to the New Direction*. In it, Townsend propounds his snowflake theory of sexuality to "Joy Bang," a young star described as "a half Lolita-half Jane Fonda type." In the films Townsend explains that everyone is unique, like a snowflake, but that all sexual relations fit into hit, miss, or submit patterns. John Waters also captured some of Townsend's ideas in his works. His work inspired a number of young people to come out and be themselves. One of them, John Murray, after being in a Boston gay male liberation consciousness-raising group, went to live with Prescott at his final residence on Beacon's Hill's Garden Street until the elderly Yankee stopped eating and then stopped breathing on May 18, 1973. A large group showed up for his memorial to honor him and watched a screening of Meyer's *An Early Clue to the New Direction*.

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The Boston Atheneum contains letters from Prescott Townsend in Montana and Idaho to his mother and also letters from his World War I service. Each year he provided details of his life for his class reports at Harvard.

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Jeannette Howard Foster (1895-1981)

Virginia Elwood-Akers



Photo by Tee A. Corinne

In the early years of the twentieth century, a young and very innocent college junior named Jeannette Foster was on the student council at Rockford University in Illinois, when a meeting was called to discuss two young women who were to be judged in a "morals case." No details of the offense were given, beyond the fact that the two young women had locked themselves in their dormitory room together at every opportunity. Bewildered, Foster realized that the other students all seemed to know the nature of this serious offense and she was mortified by her ignorance. As soon as the meeting ended, Foster went to the library to search for answers. Having reached the conclusion that the embarrassment of

her fellow council members, and the use of the term "morals case," seemed to indicate that the offense had been sexual, she looked in Henry Havelock Ellis's *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, which she later said she had passed many times "without once having the impulse to look inside." There, in a chapter titled "Sexual Inversion in Women," in which Ellis discussed sexual relationships between women, Foster found her answer.

Perhaps Foster recognized herself in Ellis's study. She would later say that she had been attracted to women since she was a child. Perhaps, as a serious scholar, she was merely troubled by what was later described as "her lack of knowledge regarding female homosexuality." Whatever her reason, she began to compile a bibliography on the subject of what she called "sex variant" women. Foster selected the term "sex variant" because, as she said in her book, *Sex Variant Women in Literature*, it was neither rigid nor emotionally charged, and because its meaning was "no more than differing from a chosen standard" (Foster, 1985, "Introduction"). She defined the term to mean an *emotional* attraction between women, which is passionate and sex-