

Portrait of a Philadelphia Collector

William McIntire Elkins (1882-1947)

by Ellen Shaffer

The Free Library of Philadelphia, 1956

In a recent letter to me a bibliophile remarked, “So little is known of Philadelphia collectors (they are not a breed to boast of their holdings).” To one like myself, reared in the traditions of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, the whole wonderful old city of Philadelphia seems under-publicized, as do its collectors who have so much and say so little.

This is a sketchily drawn portrait of one of the most modest of them all: a Philadelphian whom I have come to know through the recollections of those who did know him, and through his books of which I am now the happy custodian.

The first likeness of William McIntire Elkins I ever saw was the portrait by R. W. Vonnoh which today hangs in the Elkins Room at the Free Library. It shows him as a little boy of nine seated in his grandfather’s library, and in his hands is a familiar olive-green book with green edges—a volume of Henty. At that age he had discovered books, and he was already assembling a collection of his favorite author, George Alfred Henty, a collection which was later enjoyed by his own children and which is in the possession of his daughter today.

He had been born on September 3, 1882, into a family of traction magnates, and great wealth was his birthright. His boyhood home at Broad and Girard Avenues in Philadelphia was a vast mansion which is now the Majestic Hotel. Across the street lived his cousin, Harry Elkins Widener, three years younger than himself. The grandfathers of these two lads, P. A. B. Widener and William Lukens Elkins, were lifelong business associates and friends. They had built huge houses for their families across the street from each other, their children had grown up together, and George Widener had married Nellie Elkins.

The two cousins were congenial and had a common interest: books. “Their grandfathers had been aggressive and enterprising capitalists—the grandsons were to become quiet, reserved men who took pleasure in building up their collections and who had a limited circle of close friend.”

In his undergraduate days at Harvard most of young Elkins’s allowance went to booksellers. He once told a schoolmate that his idea of a truly enjoyable binge was to buy half a dozen chocolate éclairs, a few bottles of beer, provide himself with three or four novels (probably mystery stories), and thus fortified, he would read the night away.

In 1905 he was graduated from Harvard, and that same June he married the beautiful Miss Elizabeth Tuckerman of Ipswich, Massachusetts. A year later he was settled in his lifelong profession of investment banking (the choice was his father's rather than his own), and he had already found his way to the door of Dr. A. S. W. Rosenbach. He was buying more or less at random, as young collectors usually do—extra-illustrated books, color-plate books, and an occasional volume of Dickens, Thackeray, and Lever. His cousin, Harry Widener, was following a similar buying pattern. First editions of Stephen Phillips, Henry Arthur Jones, and Arthur Wing Pinero were also early enthusiasms of young Elkins, and he had a token collection of George Bernard Shaw. Both cousins enjoyed collecting Stevenson. Harry Widener, of course, continued in this interest and built up a great collection. William Elkins turned to other fields, but he used to say that he learned on Stevenson. This collection, although small, continued one rarity—a sketchbook of Stevenson's with pen-and-ink drawings, watercolors, and a few original poems. Perhaps it was about this time that Mr. Elkins also made the delightful little Kate Greenaway collection that his daughter has today.

The Restoration Theatre appealed to him, and he bought slender volumes of Dryden, Congreve, and Wycherley. He soon decided that that field was too diffuse, for already he felt the satisfaction that comes from collecting in a more limited range where one can achieve near-completion.

His first major collection was of Goldsmith, whose writings he enjoyed and admired. During this college years he had seen a play called *Oliver Goldsmith*. "It was the first time," he says, "that I had ever seen the actors mingle with the audience—Samuel Johnson, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Boswell, David Garrick, all sitting in a box and Oliver Goldsmith wandering up and down the aisle directing a rehearsal of *She Stoops to Conquer*." This memory captured his imagination, and no one has collected Goldsmith with more thoroughness. He acquired first editions, variants, and letters. His first edition of the *Vicar* was in contemporary calf, and it had belonged to Mrs. Horneck, mother of Mary Horneck, the *Jessamy Bride*. He had over fifty different editions of this title. He acquired the papers of John Newbery, which include Goldsmith's accounts with that publisher and show Goldsmith's painful experiences as a hack writer. There are even pitiful records of his indebtedness to his landlady for washing, mending, sassafras, and tea. Garrick's original manuscript of "An Extempore Epitaph" on Oliver Goldsmith which occasioned *Retaliation* is there, as is a collection of correspondence in which every member of that famous organization "The Club" is represented. *Thermodia Augustalis* had belonged to Horace Walpole. It is one of two known copies; the other is in the Widener Memorial Library at Harvard. One copy of the first edition of *The Citizen of the World* had belonged to Dickens; perhaps it was an unconscious indication of Mr. Elkins's next important collection.

In Austin Dobson's *Life of Goldsmith* (1888), there is a bibliography of Goldsmith by John P. Anderson. Mr. Elkins used this as a guide in the beginning and rapidly outgrew it. Since he knew its deficiencies, he felt the need for another bibliography. "I made a laborious study of all the items," says Mr. Elkins, "in the most elaborate bibliographical manner. I would hold one edition in my left hand and another in my right comparing them page by page and line by line, until I grew heartily sick of the whole bibliographical business. I had made extensive notes and brought them all

together in a manuscript which I supposed would have been as detailed a study of Goldsmith as existed up to that time.”

During the First World War Mr. Elkins had the notes with him in Washington (he was a lieutenant in the Naval Reserve), and in some inexplicable way, they were lost and never recovered. He had no heart to do the work over again, and eventually he hired Temple Scott to write a bio-bibliography of Goldsmith, an account of the Elkins collection which was published in 1928.

Since bibliographical technicalities had wearied him, he resolved to have more sheer enjoyment with his next collection, and he decided to make it a sentimental one.

The fact that he suddenly had an unparalleled opportunity to secure such a collection may have prompted the decision. Harry B. Smith, who in 1914 had issued the catalogue of his famed Sentimental Library, was obliged to sell it. Dr. Rosenbach was eager to buy it. Edwin Wolf II recalls that then as on later occasions, Mr. Elkins advanced money to Rosenbach. (One of these occasions was in the case of the Perry Library where, to insure an immediate return of part of the investment, Dr. Rosenbach had interested Joseph Widener in the Four Folios of Shakespeare in the Perry Collection, which he agreed to purchase for \$60,000. Years later his son and daughter, P. A. B. Widener II and Josephine Widener, presented these Folios to the Free Library in memory of their father.)

The Sentimental Library was a project after Mr. Elkins's own heart. He made the necessary loan to Dr. Rosenbach, who purchased the collection *en bloc*. As Edwin Wolf remembers it, Mr. Elkins was given, as his profit for lending this money, the three presentation Keats first editions which were in the collection. *Poems* in the original boards was inscribed by Keats to Richardson. *Endymion* in contemporary calf was a gift of the poet to his brother George, and *Lamia*, also in original boards, had a presentation inscription from Keats to J. H. Reynolds. For purchase Mr. Elkins singled out five other examples of what he called “literiana” (the word was his own and meant those delightful books which were not an actual part of his special collection; but which might well be in any collection of English literature.). They were Charles Lamb's worn copy of Drayton's works in which he had written over 1,700 lines, mostly from old ballads; Thackeray's sketchbook; the copy of *Vanity Fair* which the author had given the Marchioness of Normanby, and fine sets of *The Newcomes* and *The Virginians* in parts.

The real interest that Mr. Elkins had in the Sentimental Library, however, was in the Dickens holdings. He purchased forty-two books by Charles Dickens, all of them rare and twenty-four of them presentation copies. There were volumes given by Dickens to his aunt, to his sister, to his daughters, to such intimate friends as Thomas Talfourd (to whom he dedicated *Pickwick*), and to such celebrities as Victor Hugo.

The greatest rarity in the entire Sentimental Library was a presentation set of *Pickwick*, which has generally been conceded, except for manuscripts, to be the most notable single Dickens item in existence. The recipient was not a great literary figure or anyone of importance. She was a charming girl of seventeen; her name was Mary Hogarth, she was Charles Dickens's sister-in-law, and he

probably was more sincerely devoted to her than to anyone else in his entire life. She made her home with the Dickens family, and as each number of *Pickwick* appeared, it was inscribed to her. Shortly after Part XIV was issued, she died suddenly, and the author was so affected by her death that he was unable to continue with *Pickwick* for a time. The remaining parts he gave to her father, George Hogarth, who in turn presented them to one of Mary's Friends, a Miss Walker. The history of this set of *Pickwick* is a story in itself. The parts went out to India and then came back again. An alert bookseller who recognized them for what they were once saved them from the binder's knife. Their owner at that time wished to have them rebound so that the children could read them. Later another owner, William Wright, had them placed in the handsome green and black morocco slip case in which they rest today. William Wright was, I venture to say, a man of books in a far deeper, fuller sense than any member of the Bibliographical Society—he not only collected them, he also made them at the Paris race tracks where he was the leading bookmaker of the '80s. And did Mr. Elkins acquire this, the greatest prize of the Sentimental Library? You are absolutely right, he did, and his daughter still recalls the jubilation.

Other additions were made to the Dickens collection from time to time—the original sketches done by Hablot K. Browne for *Copperfield*, *Dombey*, and *Bleak House*; the copy of *Chuzzlewit* which Dickens gave to Hans Christian Andersen, and the broadside of *The Great International Walking-Match*. Dickens's memorabilia pleased Mr. Elkins. In his library he sat at a desk used by Dickens for years on whose surface the imprint of the author's signatures still shows faintly, and on the desk were Dickens's own postal scales, matchesafe, and twine holder.

The joy of acquiring a great treasure which everyone knows about is only exceeded by discovering one which no one has previously known about. Mr. Elkins experienced that pleasure, too. Around 1925, Mr. George J. C. Grasberger, a newspaperman and freelance bookseller, rummaged through a pile of odds and ends at Hekils's. He came across an unusual sketchbook called *Metamorphoses*. The pages were folded in such a way that, after one had admired a sketch as it first appeared, half the sheet could be lifted and an interesting combination formed with the sketch beneath. The elephant's head might be matched cleverly with the owl's body, or the giraffe's body might have the head of a swan. Mr. Grasberger intuitively knew what he had found; it was the little book of sketches which Thackeray made about 1853 for the children of his friend, Mr. William B. Read of Philadelphia, with whom he stayed during this first visit to America. Needless to say, another Philadelphian welcomed the little volume to his shelves, and his daughter again remembers his glee.

The last and greatest collection which Mr. Elkins formed was his favorite. Like many another collector he finally found Americana irresistible and, he even sold his magnificent collection of Stiegel glass to acquire Americana items. He kept few notes on the other collections, but his card file of Americana makes it possible to follow his progress. At the Turner and Munn sale held in New York in 1926 he found more books for this growing collection, and one must have rejoiced his heart—Cotton Mather's own copy of Manton's *Practical Commentary* of 1662 went to him for only \$8.00. Few pleasures are greater than getting such a bargain.

The Leconfield sale held at Sotheby's in London in 1928 brought on the market such treasures as are found only once in a lifetime. One-third of the entire amount realized by the sale—over £21,000—was paid by Dr. Rosenbach, who was buying for Mr. Elkins. The outstanding rarity of this sale was an unpublished manuscript, *A Trewe Relatyon of the Proceedinge and Occurrentes of Momente which have happened in Virginia*, written about 1625 by George Percy, soldier of fortune, enemy of Captain John Smith, and deputy governor of Virginia during the years 1609-1612. (The manuscript is still unpublished.) Another item which might cause an Americana collector sleepless nights was the manuscript map of the Northwest Passage drawn by Dr. John Dee for Sir Humphrey Gilbert about 1583, just before Sir Humphrey took off on his last and fatal voyage to Newfoundland. (The first Englishman to establish a colony in the New World, he was a half brother of Sir Walter Raleigh.) These two great Americana items and ten others of almost equal importance quietly crossed the Atlantic and found a place in Mr. Elkins's library.

Other sales turned up other books; the Leiter, Goelet, Jeffrey, and Breaker sales are notes in his card file. One of his most exciting acquisitions during the period was Bigges's *Summarie and True Discourse of Sir Francis Drake's West Indian Voyages* with the folding maps or city plans in a separate portfolio. The English text describing the four city plans is on a single sheet as originally printed and is unique in that state. More important, there is a sheet with the same text in French, and of this no other copy is known.

Eleven years after the Leconfield sale, came another opportunity. Mr. Elkins had evidently been using Herschel V. Jones's *Adventures in Americana* as one yardstick by which he measured his collection. He had acquired twenty-six titles in that list when in 1939 the Herschel V. Jones Library was offered for sale. Again Rosenbach was desirous of buying the entire collection, and again he secured from Mr. Elkins the necessary financial backing. Mr. Elkins, in return, of course, was able to choose certain books for his collection. He acquired a total of 142 titles, seventy-nine of which were among the rarities described in *Adventures in Americana*. Thirty-nine of the 142 were in the period of early voyages and discoveries. They included such books as the copy of the Columbus Letter from the Sir Thomas Phillipps collection and Job Hortop's *Travailes of an English man* (London, 1591), the first account of Mexico by an Englishman and one of three copies located by the *Short-Title Catalogue*. Nine Ptolemies were included in this section also. In the period of Early Settlements 1608-1783, Mr. Elkins added seventy-nine titles, forty-nine of which were in *Adventures in Americana*. There were thirteen Mathers among them. In the period from 1784-1926, he added twenty-four books, including the Hoe copy of Filson's *Discovery, Settlement and Present State of Kentuckee* (1784), with the map. The Jones books comprised one-third of Mr. Elkins's Americana holdings; the other two-thirds he acquired over a period of twenty years.

He was an exacting and discriminating collector. When one examines a book from his shelves it usually proves to be all that one could hope for and more. Benzoni's *Historia del Mondo Nuovo* (Venice, 1565) is a fine copy and it bears the neat signature of the cartographer, Ortelius, to whom it once belonged. Hubbard's *Narrative of the Troubles with the Indians* (1677) is in its original binding—the work of John Ratcliff, who came in 1663 to bind the Eliot Indian Bible and was the first

professional binder known to have practiced his trade in colonial America. (Mr. Elkins had the Eliot New Testament--George Livermore's copy.) The Hakluyt *Divers Voyages* (1582) has the rare Thorne map. The set of De Bry's *Voyages* is from the Holford library, collated and annotated by the Earl of Crawford, whose comment on the English edition Part I is that it is a very fine copy indeed, high praise from a restrained Scotchman, which applies to the set as a whole. When our Americana specialist, Howell Heaney, started checking the collection, he was heard to murmur, "Imagine being paid to look at books like these."

The total count of items in the Elkins collection of Americana is about 380, and three-quarters of them are before the year 1701. It is a small collection, but a highly selective one. There is also his collection of early American prints—his Reveres and his Doolittles—but that, at this time, is too long a story.

Book collecting was only one part of Mr. Elkins's busy life. A newspaper article described him as financier, clubman, welfare leader, trustee, and director of numerous organizations, senior member of an investment firm, and a member of the New York and Philadelphia stock exchanges. His pioneer work with the old Philadelphia Welfare Federation earned him the name of "Welfare Bill." As an efficient businessman he felt that individual campaigns by various charities duplicated effort, and he was one of the first to advocate the united charities drive now known as the Community Chest. Books were sandwiched into a busy day; he usually got up at 5:30 A.M., had coffee in the library, and worked with his collections until about eight.

Like most collectors, he sometimes entertained the thought of selling his books at auction. He was eager to see how well he had done—how much his judgments were justified. Like most collectors, however, he wanted to have an auction and, at the same time, have his books. He made various preparatory notes from time to time, but he never took serious steps in regard to an auction. It would be interesting to know if the auction of the library of his old friend A. Edward Newton influenced him in any way. After that sale at least one collector decided that he could never bear to have his books separated, and he gave them to an institution. Mr. Elkins may have come to feel the same way.

His book friendships were usually concentrated and of many years' standing. He and his cousin Harry Widener must have had happy times with their books before Harry Widener was lost on the *Titanic* at the age of 27. Probably about the time that Mr. Elkins became a customer of Dr. Rosenbach in 1906, he first met A. Edward Newton. Ellis Ames Ballard, the Kipling collector, was his friend, as was Morris Parrish, whose great Victorian collection is now at Princeton. The members of the Philobiblon Club were other associates in the joys of book collecting.

Much of his book buying was done through the two Philadelphia firms of Rosenbach and Sessler. From 1908 on he bought occasionally from Maggs Brothers, and B. F. Stevens, Quaritch, and Francis Edwards were other London firms with whom he did business. The names of Goodspeed, Harper, Heartman, and Henkels appear in his brief Americana records. He picked up various books at auction, usually through Philadelphia dealers.

He had not wished to be a banker; his daughter says he wanted to be an architect, and a newspaper article once mentioned that he would have liked to have been a publisher. The fact that he was devoted to literature, music, and art did not, however, keep him from being an exceedingly competent financier, and his tremendous knowledge of securities did not interfere with the warm-hearted, sentimental enthusiasm he had for his books. He was an independent collector. Booksellers and fellow collectors undoubtedly gave suggestions and advice, but he seems very definitely to have known where he was going.

Most collectors are fairly voluble, but Mr. Elkins usually let others express themselves. In a group he had the gift of drawing others out. Perhaps it was just as well. He was often one of a trio that included A. Edward Newton and Dr. Rosenbach, and it has been suggested that in such a group there was need for one good listener. Possibly the only time he ever made a public talk on books was one evening at the Free Library of Philadelphia, when he was reluctantly pressed into service because Dr. Rosenbach, the scheduled speaker, had become ill. He suffered agonies of nervousness beforehand, but he was an excellent extemporaneous speaker, and those who heard him that evening twelve years ago have never forgotten it.

He had, I believe, only one "book" to his credit: *Eddie Newton's Ride*, which he planned to issue in a very limited edition for himself and A. E. N. Mr. Newton, however, read the series of jingles at a meeting of the Book Table, and that organization got permission to publish it and sell it for the benefit of their Booksellers Benevolent Fund. Newton used to inform Mr. Elkins of the varying market prices of this little booklet, and they both were very pleased when it reached \$11.00.

Among his friends he is remembered as a peacemaker and one who fled from any discord. It was hard for him to be cross with anyone. The butler who was daily drunk on the job would be fired by the exasperated Mrs. Elkins. He would then pour protestations of sorrow and a willingness to reform into the ears of his good-natured employer, and Mrs. Elkins on coming down to breakfast next morning would find the penitent meekly going about his duties. A short time later the whole incident would be repeated.

When he traveled he was very much himself—an American and a Philadelphian. His daughter says that he used to like to stand and frankly admire the New York skyscrapers, instead of showing how much at home he was by feigning indifference to them. After all, he wasn't at home. In Europe he was an unaffected American. He never learned a foreign language. His daughter's French was fluent, but he disdained her help and insisted on addressing the French in plain, straightforward American. Somehow they always understood him. A favorite pastime abroad was to go into a shop and buy peppermints for the local children, who, naturally enough, followed him in droves.

He was a quiet, conservative person, a Republican and an Episcopalian. He enjoyed his great wealth, the houses he owned, the yacht in which he spent his leisure off the Maine coast, and the books which he was able to buy. His was not the hearty exuberance of the person who has suddenly come into wealth; he was born to it and he took it for granted. He could afford to be unpretentious. On one occasion when he was in New York an unexpected engagement necessitated evening clothes,

which he was obliged to rent. He found the suit comfortable and he liked it. Next day, instead of returning it, he bought it.

Lessing Rosenwald once remarked that Bill Elkins was the sweetest man he ever knew, and his lifelong friend and business partner, Caspar W. Morris, said that he was the kindest man in the world. A Edward Newton in a letter to Dr. Rosenbach once remarked the he was “as good as he was rich.”

After Mr. Elkins built his beautiful home, “Briar Hill,” at Whitemarsh, and life seemed unusually pleasant, he experienced a series of tragedies. Both his sons died suddenly, and after a period of invalidism, his wife also died. Mr. Elkins later married Lisa Norris Harrison. She was especially interested in modern art and enjoyed collecting the paintings of such artists as Pissarro, Matisse, Renoir, Degas, and Van Gogh, and so Mr. Elkins collected them with her and devoted less time to his books. He did, however, make one more notable addition to his library.

One noon he appeared at Sessler’s, as he so often did, and informed Mabel Zahn that he would like some of the watercolor paintings of Beatrix Potter, the creator of Peter Rabbit. A little investigation showed that chances of getting such material were few indeed; practically all of Miss Potter’s work was held by the Tate Gallery in London. Many months later, however, the good fortune that favors book collectors came to the rescue. The original manuscript of *The Tailor of Gloucester*, Beatrix Potter’s favorite of all her works, together with the first dainty illustrations she had painted for it, was to be sold at auction at Sotheby’s. The manuscript had been written for Freda, the daughter of Beatrix Potter’s dear friend and former governess. Freda, or some member of her family, had evidently been forced to part with this treasure. Miss Zahn notified Mr. Elkins, who was at this time very ill, and he sent her word that she was to buy it. When she asked for more specific instructions, she received the most dangerous and powerful weapon any dealer can bring into the auction rooms: an unlimited bid.

It had been estimated that the little manuscript would bring the equivalent of \$2,000. However, an unknown bidder gave sharp competition that day and only withdrew when the price had reached over £1,000. It was later learned that the unknown bidder represented the city of Gloucester. Could Mrs. William Heelis of Sawrey, the hearty old soul whom Beatrix Potter became, have lived to have known about this, she doubtless would have applauded. Mrs. Heelis had great enthusiasm for Americans.

When the manuscript was ready for delivery, Miss Zahn was delighted to learn that Mr. Elkins was having a good day. It was sent out to him, he thoroughly enjoyed looking it over, and presented it to Mrs. Elkins. That night an unexpected relapse brought on the end. It was June 5, 1947, and he was not yet sixty-five. The original manuscript of *The Tailor of Gloucester* had been his last purchase, and it was one worthy of him.

After his death, his heirs, who had been instructed to give such books, manuscripts, and prints as they might select to the Free Library of Philadelphia, of which he had been a trustee for sixteen years, chose to interpret the will liberally, and gave the entire magnificent collection. His daughter, Mrs. Goran Holmquist, with inspired generosity, suggested that the actual library room itself be given to house the books. The sixty-two-foot paneled library room and its furnishings were, therefore, removed from “Briar Hill” at Whitmarsh and set up again on the third floor of the Free Library of Philadelphia in the Rare Book Department, some ten miles from their original location.

Today the Elkins Room is one of the finest assets a public library ever had. Last year booklovers from twenty-nine states and thirty foreign countries visited it. A reception for visiting trustees was given during the American Library Association Conference of 1955, and one of Mr. Elkins’s old butlers, now employed by a local caterer, bustled about the familiar room serving refreshments. This is the sort of thing that happens in Philadelphia.

Mr. Elkins’s library is used and loved and appreciated. In the midst of a huge and busy public library, it is a core of peace and quiet. I believe everyone who goes into it feels more relaxed. Books of four centuries are there, and of all man’s achievements books are, perhaps, the greatest. A soldier who visited the Elkins Room the other day looked around wonderingly and said, “You know, this place rests you.”

Today the director of the library, Emerson Greenaway, and I stood talking in the Elkins Room. From his picture on the wall the little boy with the volume of Henty looked out solemnly at us and at the library which he had assembled as a mature man—the library where he loved to show books to those who enjoyed them. I asked, “Did you ever know Mr. Elkins?” He answered “No,” and added, wistfully, “But wouldn’t you have liked to?” I would have—very much indeed.

Ellen Shaffer served as Rare Book Librarian at the Free Library from 1954 to 1970.