

OWEN J. ROBERTS AND THE AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

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On April 26 of 1952 the American Philosophical Society elected Owen J. Roberts as its president. He was the twenty-fourth of a distinguished line of scholars and men of affairs, beginning with Benjamin Franklin, to be elected to the office. In many ways it was a fitting tribute to a native son of Philadelphia by a Society which has had its home in historic Philadelphia for more than two hundred years. More particularly, however, it reflected the search by the Society for the continuance of constructive leadership.

In 1743 Franklin issued his famous *Proposal*:

That One Society be formed of Virtuosi or ingenious Men residing in the several Colonies, to be called *The American Philosophical Society*, who are to maintain a constant Correspondence.

That *Philadelphia* being the City nearest the Centre of the Continent-Colonies, . . . and having the Advantage of a good growing Library, be the Centre of the Society. . . .

That a Correspondence already begun by some intended Members, shall be kept up by this Society with the ROYAL SOCIETY of *London*, and with the DUBLIN SOCIETY. . . .

Benjamin Franklin, the Writer of this Proposal, offers himself to serve the Society as their Secretary, 'till they shall be provided with one more capable.

The proposal was sent to a selected group of men and about a year later Franklin wrote, "The Society so far as relates to Philadelphia, is actually formed, and has had several Meetings to mutual Satisfaction." But travel and means of communication were very diffi-

† Formerly Secretary, Vice-President, and now Chairman of the Committee on Library and Librarian of the American Philosophical Society; Professor Emeritus of European History and Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, University of Pennsylvania—friend and associate of Owen Roberts at the turn of the century in the old University Faculty Club on the corner of 36th and Locust Streets. The Society's regrets that plans for a portrait of President Roberts were not realized before his last illness recalls to the writer an unappreciated proposal for a portrait by the then neglected Philadelphia artist, Thomas Eakins, about 1902, in connection with an exhibition of his works, which several of us had arranged at the club. A portrait by Thomas C. Eakins of Owen J. Roberts, Instructor, University of Pennsylvania Law School, would have been accorded an honored place at the 200th Anniversary of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

cult. Interest in the Society languished, Franklin himself becoming more engrossed in public affairs and his experiments on electricity. No Minutes of the meetings have been found, and little is known of the early years of its history. In 1769, however, it united with another Society to form "The American Philosophical Society, held at Philadelphia for promoting useful Knowledge," and became a factor in the intellectual and cultural life of the time. Incorporated under the laws of Pennsylvania during the Revolution, it was given a site on Independence Square by the Assembly in order to erect a hall for its meetings and the accommodation of its library and cabinets. Philosophical Hall was completed in 1789, the second of the buildings to be erected on Philadelphia's historic square. Despite occasional vicissitudes it has remained the home of the Society to the present day. Franklin was annually chosen as president of the Society from 1769 till his death, when David Rittenhouse succeeded to the office. He was followed by Thomas Jefferson, who took an active interest in its affairs during all the eighteen years of his presidency.

When Justice Roberts was elected president, he was by no means a stranger to the Society and its history. As a student at the University of Pennsylvania Law School, when it was still holding classes on Independence Square, he had become familiar with the Philosophical Society and the atmosphere of historic Philadelphia. It was only natural, therefore, that he surprised even the veterans among the Society's members with his ready understanding of its traditions and objectives. Moreover, since he had retired from active professional duties, including his recent deanship of the Law School of the University, he had the time and leisure to devote himself wholeheartedly to the business of the Society. These things, combined with his rare capacity as presiding officer, his wisdom and tact in committee and executive sessions, and his urbanity in the social functions of the Society soon aligned his presidency with the best traditions of the office.

His administration was unfortunately too brief to attain the full measure of promise that lay ahead. Nevertheless, several of the large projects which the Society was developing were so effectively forwarded by his energy and guidance that a full measure of success was finally assured.

The first had arisen out of the need for a new library building to house and service the Society's steadily growing collections of manuscripts, books and memorabilia. Happily the Society's intimate association with the Independence Hall Association, and the development and conservation of historic Philadelphia, spearheaded by another

alumnus of the University and member of the Society, Judge Edwin O. Lewis, opened the opportunity to implement the proposal that the Society reconstruct the fine old Georgian building, designed by William Thornton for the Philadelphia Library Company, on the old site directly across Fifth Street from Philosophical Hall. As a result of prolonged negotiations, the text of an agreement was finally drawn up by the Committee on Library, whose meetings like those of other standing committees President Roberts always attended. After its approval by the Director of the National Park Service and the Secretary of the Interior, it was passed by both houses of Congress and signed by the President of the United States in July 1952.¹

The pertinent section reads:

"The Secretary of the Interior is authorized to permit the American Philosophical Society, a nonprofit corporation, without cost to the United States, to construct, operate and maintain in the park a building to be located on approximately the original site of historic Library Hall to house the library of the American Philosophical Society and any additions to said library, such permission to be granted the society pursuant to a lease, contract, or authorization without charge, on such terms and conditions as may be approved by the Secretary and accepted by the society, and for such length of time as the society shall continue to use the said building for the housing, display, and use of a library and scientific and historical collections:

Provided, That the plans for the construction of the building and any additions thereto shall be approved by the Secretary of the Interior."

As soon as the Drexel Building, which now occupies the site, is demolished, ground will be broken for what the Justice liked to call "Our Benjamin Franklin Library."

In this instance the Justice's knowledge of official Washington and the legal problems involved was of especial service to the Society in its negotiations. On the other hand, he characteristically referred all legal problems to the Society's counsel.

The second project brought to a head during his presidency was the partnership with Yale University in the much heralded new and comprehensive edition of the writings of the founder. Officially known as "The Papers of Benjamin Franklin," it is off to a good start on the basis of a gentleman's agreement between the two institutions. Speaking in the Society's Hall on January 16, 1954, on the occasion of the first public announcement of the project, President Roberts said: "The publication of the Papers of Benjamin Franklin

1. H.R. 6544, 82d Cong., 2d Sess. (1952).

will enable our people to understand his ideas and what our country should be . . . and at no time will this be more appropriate than today."

Quite as much as the plans for the new library building, this project is the consummation of a persistent policy on the part of the Society in recent decades.

It was a great disappointment to President Roberts that his illness prevented his attendance at the annual meeting in April, 1955, to report in detail on these and other activities of the Society. His interest in its affairs continued to the end, inviting conferences in which his perception of the problems of the new library and the plans for the Society's celebration of the 250th anniversary of Franklin's birth was as keen and constructive as always. The steel had lost none of its edge.

Briefly and simply, in words charged with deep emotion, the Society in executive session unanimously adopted the following resolution by a standing vote:

On May 17 of this year, less than a month after its last Annual Meeting, the American Philosophical Society suffered a most grievous loss in the death of its President, the Honorable Owen J. Roberts, elected one of our members in 1934 and chosen to be our President in 1952. His term of office was only too brief but in that short period of time he won the loyal devotion and affection of all our members, and nobly carried on the great tradition of his predecessors;

And now, the American Philosophical Society assembled in its Autumn General Meeting on November 11, 1955, gives this expression to its sorrow and its profound sense of loss, as well as to its gratitude for the wise and experienced leader who presided over it with such distinction and friendly consideration, and extends to Mrs. Roberts and her daughter, Elizabeth Roberts Hamilton, its assurance of sincerest sympathy.