

After Richard Saltonstall Greenough, *William Hickling Prescott*, 1844. H. 29 5/16 in. x W. 15 3/8 in. (74.5 x 45.7 cm). Plaster, Gift of Mrs. Moses B. Lockwood, 1865.

This magisterial portrait of the American historian, William Hickling Prescott (1796-1859), portrays a Victorian man of letters in the toga of a Roman senator. Though not one of the original set of ten plaster busts donated to the Athenaeum by James Phalen in 1840, it complements this group while expanding its circle to include an American writer. This bust is a plaster copy of the original, sculpted by Richard Saltonstall Greenough, which the Boston Athenaeum has in its permanent collection.

Greenough has sculpted William Hickling Prescott resembling the busts of the Roman elite; a traditional Roman toga gracefully drapes over his shoulders while his head turns to the right as he gazes out into the distance. Prescott's face is represented as relaxed and softened, perhaps reflecting his charming and charismatic personality, which his close friend and biographer, George Ticknor, writes about in his book *Life of William H. Prescott*.<sup>1</sup> Though Prescott suffered from failing eyesight due to an incident at Harvard University, where he studied Greek and Latin, Greenough does not allude to this. Unlike the James Phalen bust of Homer within the Athenaeum's collection – whose filmy eyes emphasize Homer's blindness – Greenough's rendering of Prescott does not emphasize his handicap. However, perhaps the most distinguishable characteristic of Greenough's bust of Prescott is the juxtaposition of Prescott's Victorian sideburns against his classical features, such as his toga. As a zealot of Greek and Latin classical texts, this bust remains true to Prescott's own academic interests yet his sideburns emphasize the style of the Victorian period – a period which, too, enjoyed a revival in neoclassical ideals.

Best known for his three-volume opus, *History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1843) and subsequent two-volume *History of the Conquest of Peru* (1847), Prescott earned his reputation as one of North America's most prominent Hispanists despite debilitating health setbacks. Born to a prosperous, Salem, Massachusetts family, Prescott received three years of rigorous instruction in a preparatory school headed by the Jesuit John Gardiner.<sup>2</sup> It was Gardiner who ignited Prescott's love for classical learning and ancient history, particularly through Latin and Greek texts.<sup>3</sup> In 1811, Prescott entered Harvard, where he excelled in history but had serious difficulties with basic mathematics and geometry, and in his later life, the prospect of appraising the mathematical achievements of the aboriginal Mexicans almost prevented him from completing his work.<sup>4</sup>

Towards the end of his junior year at Harvard, Prescott suffered serious health setbacks that disrupted his studies. A crust of "large, hard bread" was thrown during a "rude frolicking" in the student commons and struck Prescott directly in the retina, blinding him in his left eye; the

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<sup>1</sup> George Ticknor. *Life of William H. Prescott*. (New York, Merrill and Baker, 1864), p. 34

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 36

<sup>3</sup> *Id*

<sup>4</sup> *Id*

weakness of his other eye, caused by infection, prevented him from reading easily.<sup>5</sup> Throughout his life, Prescott's vision fluctuated to total blindness, and he often resorted to the use of a *noctograph*, a writing grid with parallel wires that guided a stylus over a chemically treated surface.<sup>6</sup> Substantial portions of all his books and correspondence were composed on this device.<sup>7</sup>

Following his graduation from Harvard in 1814, he convalesced at his grandfather's home in the Azores and then, encouraged by a brief healing of his eyes, toured Europe.<sup>8</sup> After his return to Boston, he embarked upon serious historical studies, shunning his father's career in business or law because both occupations demanded more stamina than his health and eyesight could endure.<sup>9</sup> Eventually, with the eyes of a loving wife – Susan Amory – and those of other devoted friends and family, Prescott was able to embark on a literary career.<sup>10</sup>

Prescott's primary legacy rests with his monumental *History of the Conquest of Mexico* and his *History of the Conquest of Peru*.<sup>11</sup> Working with a personal library of 5,000 books and the help of such overseas associates as Pascual de Gayangos, the Spanish aide who discovered manuscripts and rare books for him, Prescott made far-reaching use of original sources.<sup>12</sup> Prescott's historical work the first comprehensive attempt, in English, to document the conquest of indigenous civilizations of the Americas, and his books remain as hallmarks in historical documentation. Sometimes disparaged as the work of a "gentlemen-amateur," his writing belongs to an era, and a class, that placed as much emphasis on the literary character of historical writing as it did upon the works' scholarly merits.<sup>13</sup>

Among the Boston elite of his day, Prescott was a prominent member of the Boston Athenaeum (located down the street from his own house on Beacon Street).<sup>14</sup> In March 1844, a year after the wildly successful publication of *History of the Conquest of Mexico*, Prescott commissioned a bust of himself sculpted from Richard Saltonstall Greenough (American, 1819 - 1904), one of Boston's leading neoclassical sculptors in the mid-nineteenth century, and brother of the even better known neoclassical sculptor, Horatio Greenough (1805-1852).<sup>15</sup> It was his creation of Prescott's bust that gained Richard Saltonstall Greenough notable recognition as a classical sculptor. Soon after he made the bust of Prescott, Greenough was thenceforward busy on private

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 45

<sup>6</sup> *Id*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 47

<sup>8</sup> *Id*

<sup>9</sup> *Id*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 49

<sup>11</sup> *Id*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 75

<sup>13</sup> Amanda Stonley. *History of Boston: William H. Prescott*. (Boston Archives, Boston, MA, Sept. 2011,).

<sup>14</sup> Ticknor, p. 15

<sup>15</sup> "William Hickling Prescott". *Boston Athenaeum Collections: Painting and Sculpture*. [www.bostonathenaeum.org](http://www.bostonathenaeum.org). accessed 7 April, 2016.

commissions, and then traveled to Rome to perfect “ideal sculpture”.<sup>16</sup> Prescott immediately donated his bust to the Boston Athenaeum, and it was the first work by Richard Greenough to be exhibited there.<sup>17</sup> Greenough’s original portrays Prescott in a neoclassical style that recalls Prescott’s early love for classical literature, if not his fame for documenting the civilization of the Aztecs and Incas. Nearly fifty when this work was created, Prescott appears at the height of his maturity and literary prowess. The same year Greenough sculpted Prescott’s portrait, Prescott was also painted by artist, Joseph Alexander Ames.<sup>18</sup> By 1850, Prescott’s bust appeared in Harper’s New Monthly Magazine.<sup>19</sup> Due to the success of his historical works, Prescott rose in fame, and his bust became a symbol of his, again, literary prowess and academic accomplishments.

It is likely that the Prescott’s plaster bust at the Providence Athenaeum is a replica cast in the same medium as Greenough’s work, rather than another original by the artist. Mrs. Moses B. Lockwood donated the plaster bust to the Providence Athenaeum in 1865,<sup>20</sup> more than two decades after the original had been created, yet at a moment when the contemporary conquest of Mexico by France occupied the minds of many Americans (the so-called “French Intervention” in Mexico would last from 1862 until the year after the bust’s donation). The donor’s husband, Moses B. Lockwood, was listed as a member at the Athenaeum appears to have been involved with the Quaker literary journal, *The Friend*.<sup>21</sup> However, there are multiple names listed as Mr. Moses B. Lockwood, who are alive in Providence between 1844-1870, including the President of the Mechanics Bank.

The report for the 1865 Annual Meeting of the Providence Athenaeum explains that with the donation of *William Hickling Prescott* from Mrs. Lockwood, the Athenaeum was hoping to move “forward for larger space,”<sup>22</sup> since “more and better room, no doubt, would accelerate accommodation of art objects”.<sup>23</sup> This increased space for art works attests to the Athenaeum’s desire for expansion on all fronts at this time, accumulating works of art and widening its collection of books from the English book market, at “very reasonable prices”.<sup>24</sup> By 1856, the Athenaeum’s librarian J. Dunham Hedge, issued a breakdown of all books that circulated the year prior in 1855.<sup>25</sup> Half of the volumes were novels, while the second largest group was history and biography.<sup>26</sup> Prescott was among the Athenaeum’s most read authors, with his histories of

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<sup>16</sup> “Richard S. Greenough Dead: American Sculptor Dies in Rome at Age Eighty-Eight”. *The New York Times, Obituaries*. (New York Times, April 24, 1904).

<sup>17</sup> *Id*

<sup>18</sup> Gardiner, C. Harvey. *William Hickling Prescott*. (Texas University Press, Austin, Texas, 1969), p. 123

<sup>19</sup> “William H. Prescott”. *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. (New York, United States: Harper & Brothers), p. 138. [www.wikimediacommons.com](http://www.wikimediacommons.com). Accessed 20 April, 2016

<sup>20</sup> *Report made to the Providence Athenaeum at the thirteenth annual meeting*. (Sept. 25, 1865).

<sup>21</sup> [Rhode Island Historical Society]

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*. p. 8

<sup>23</sup> *Id*

<sup>24</sup> *Id*

<sup>25</sup> Jane Lancaster. *Inquire Within* (The Providence Athenaeum, 2003) p. 99

<sup>26</sup> *Id*

the conquest of Mexico and of Peru.<sup>27</sup> Because Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Mexico* was considered "...extensive and wildly popular"<sup>28</sup> and because the histories were the second largest group read at the library, it is possible that the Athenaeum purchased the books in the 1850s; though it is unknown exactly when the library purchased Prescott's histories. As the Athenaeum strove to keep historical literature at the forefront of its collections - instead of fiction novels, which were on the rise in popularity amongst the young – the library likely acquired Prescott's histories for this very reason, as well.

That Prescott's histories continue to be popular with scholars after more than a century and a half after their appearance, is a testament to their vitality and readability. Though contemporary historians have revised his view of the sixteenth-century Spanish empire, Prescott's work is still considered to be accurate. The Athenaeum admired Prescott – around the time of his publications, the library was dealing with the "rowdiness" of younger patrons, who were more interested in the "facile pleasures of perception" rather than "in the laborious investigations of truth".<sup>29</sup> Perhaps the Athenaeum acquired Prescott's popular histories as an attempt to instill a passion for "investigations of truth" for the young patrons, who were growing too fond of fiction novels.<sup>30</sup> Prescott, because of the obstacles of his health, perhaps became an academic role model in order to mold the character and to instill academic discipline to the library's younger patrons.

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### Notes for Prof. Evans

- I couldn't find when a Mr. Lockwood died – so I'm not sure if his wife gave to the Athenaeum when she was a widow
- Prescott's conquest histories were the very popular at the Athenaeum by 1855 (found this in *Inquire Within*). I'm not sure exactly the date they acquired them, but because they were super popular soon after their publications, I'm assuming they acquired them fairly shortly after the histories were published. But maybe they were purchased around the 1850s, since the records in *Inquire Within* say that by 1855, the histories were the most popular histories read at the library.
- I cut out some information about Prescott's life – functioned too much as filler info.

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<sup>27</sup> *Id*

<sup>28</sup> Samuel Austin Allibone. *Dictionary of English Literature and British and American Authors*. Vol II. (Philadelphia, J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1878) p. 1608

<sup>29</sup> Lancaster, p. 92

<sup>30</sup> *Id*