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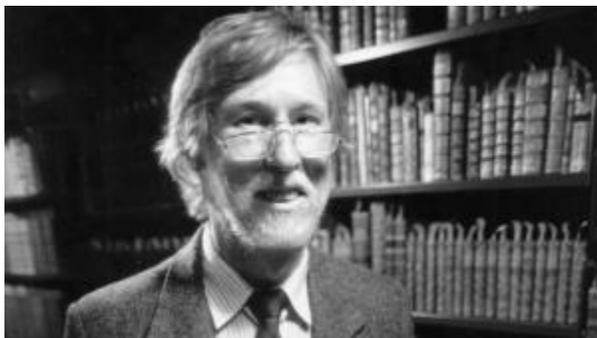
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He built UofT's vast rare book collection

Sandra Martin

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Knowing he was dying, Richard Landon spent his last sentient hours sitting on the couch by the window doing what he loved best: finding treasures in antiquarian catalogues for the rare books collection of the University of Toronto.

“He acted as though the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Room was his private collection. That’s how he bought things and how he went after people for their papers,” said bookseller David Mason. “That’s a sentimental way of saying he cared about the library as much as he cared about anything.”

There were about 40,000 volumes in the Rare Books and Special Collections division of the University of Toronto Libraries when Landon arrived as a shaggy-haired, bespectacled and skinny cataloguer in 1967. Forty-five years later, the collections had expanded to 700,000 volumes, and 3,000 linear metres of manuscript holdings, including the private papers of writers such as Margaret Atwood, Robertson Davies, Leonard Cohen and Derek Walcott.

Even in his younger years, Landon had the appearance of a man who had been up far too late the night before, doing things that were probably best forgotten. His sartorial style was ramshackle, but his conversation was discursive and replete with fascinating tales of his exploits as a collector of literary

treasures. He loved to smoke and drink, especially at the same time, although he rarely had a drink before noon. His capacity, which was prodigious, was exceeded only by the strength of his friendship with colleagues, competitors, collectors, patrons, researchers and booksellers.

On the personal front, he was uncommonly successful with women, even to the surprise of his own mother. He was married twice and had a long-time relationship with British antiquarian bookseller Glynis Barnes. His soulmate, however, both romantically and intellectually, was Marie Korey, the rare books librarian he met at a conference in Ann Arbor, Mich., in 1976 and married in 1990. They shared a passion for books and a mutual appreciation that extended to completing each other's sentences.

Landon, who died on Oct. 5, never worked anywhere else but the U of T, although he travelled frequently to conferences and book fairs and had appointments as a visiting lecturer at universities in the U.S. At the U of T, he also taught in the Faculty of Information Studies and the Department of English, training generations of bibliographic librarians and contributing widely to scholarship on the history of the book and bibliography.

His home base was the Thomas Fisher, a separate tower in the brutalist-style John P. Robarts Library on the St. George campus – indeed some librarians referred to it affectionately as “the house that Richard built.”

The library was named after Thomas Fisher, an early settler from Yorkshire, in recognition of the significant donations made by his two great-grandsons when the library opened in 1973. At the Fisher, Landon published exhibition catalogues, established The Friends of Thomas Fisher in 1984, launched its newsletter, *The Halcyon*, in 1988, and made the library a haven for scholars and researchers.

Social historian Natalie Zemon Davis (*The Return of Martin Guerre* and *Trickster Travels* among many other works) ranks the Fisher just below international superstar collections, such as the richly endowed Houghton at Harvard and the ancient Bodleian at Oxford – not bad considering there wasn't even an official rare books room at the U of T until 1957. When Davis and her husband, mathematician Chandler Davis, arrived here as political refugees from the McCarthy era, American friends feared she wouldn't find the resources to continue her research. But she did, becoming “an habitu  ” of the Fisher's precursor, a room on an upper floor of what is now the Gerstein Science Information Centre on the main campus of the university.

She remembers a very young Landon who “certainly didn't look like a regular” librarian – he may have had a ponytail – bringing “a vibrancy,” and “a worldly young style” to that room. He “carried that spirit” over to the “beautiful” Fisher.

Landon “was a busy man,” she said, “but his presence filled the room even when he was in his own office,” as did his “imaginative enthusiasm” for developing the rare book collections, and his outreach to people who were interested in books and manuscripts.”

Davis “loves the library,” because of the books both as *content* and as physical *objects* that form a direct link between her, the researcher, and the original author. When she won the prestigious Holberg International Memorial Prize in 2010, she gave a sizable donation to the library that had given her a scholarly sanctuary 50 years earlier.

Mason also met Landon when he first arrived in Toronto. “He was a rarity – a librarian who went into bookstores,” said the bookseller, who considers most librarians to be minders rather than book lovers and collectors. Mason, a man not given to superlatives, insists that Landon “was easily the greatest librarian this country has ever had.”

He was also “the most aggressive” person in this country in ferreting out and acquiring manuscript collections and private papers, Mason said. One of Landon's prime drinking buddies, he was often the appraiser of those collections. Never “once in 45 years did I do anything to compromise his position and never once did he do

anything to compromise mine,” Mason said. He never forgot that Landon’s “integrity demanded loyalty to the university.”

Conversely, if Mason produced an appraisal that wasn’t acceptable to Landon or the donor, Landon would say nothing and quietly get a second one.

“I always thought of him as the very best sort of horse trader,” said literary critic Ted Chamberlin, the author of *Horse: How the Horse Has Shaped Civilizations*, among several other titles. Chamberlin, who shared a love of the Okanagan with Landon, was the liaison with poet Derek Walcott in the successful negotiations for the Nobel Laureate’s papers for the Fisher.

Chamberlin’s horse-trading analogy came from watching Landon making his rounds among the stalls at antiquarian book fairs. Good horse traders are trusted – they have to be or they won’t last long in the business – and they have a quick eye for a good horse, even if the animal doesn’t look like much at first glance, said Chamberlin. Landon was like that. He was invariably recognized as “somebody who knew his business and whose word was good.”

Landon’s “genius for friendship” meshed seamlessly with his professional book collecting activities – everything and everybody was of interest. “He had an instinct for a good book based on his accumulated knowledge and experience,” Chamberlin said. “And like a good horse trader, he knew you didn’t own the book, you were only its custodian for a time, with an obligation to pass it along.”

Writer Alberto Manguel turned to Landon for help when he was researching *The History of Reading* in the mid-1990s. “He was enormously generous in reading it and making comments,” said Manguel. “I thought because I like to read that would be enough and, of course, I found out that in every single area the extent of my ignorance was amazing.”

Landon read the manuscript, made suggestions for the bibliography and corrected errors. But that wasn’t the end of their relationship. About a dozen years ago, Landon and Korey visited Manguel in France, persuaded the writer to donate his papers to the Fisher, gave him tips on pruning and enhancing his own book collection and shared anecdotes about the hunt. “His knowledge was so vast and so generous,” said Manguel, unlike the “nasty, squirrelling” attitude of so many collectors.

Landon’s affection for books didn’t discriminate between the ones he collected for himself and those he acquired for the Fisher, the intellectual honey pot of the university. They will be physically one and the same when Landon’s own collection is donated to the Fisher.

Recalling the custom that after a beekeeper dies, somebody walks through the hives to tell the bees of their keeper’s demise, Manguel said: “I hope somebody walks through the Fisher library and tells the books that Richard is no longer there. When I am next in Toronto, I will certainly try to do that.”

Richard Gerald Landon was born on a small family farm outside Armstrong in the North Okanagan in the interior of British Columbia on Dec. 27, 1942. His father, Gerald, was an “Old MacDonald” style farmer who used horses to haul wagons and other machinery, while his mother Selina Margaret, known as Peggy, (née Adair) was a school teacher. As small children, Landon and his younger sister Robin spent their days surrounded by barnyard animals and their evenings gathered around their mother as she read them classics such as *The Wind in the Willows* and the *Just So Stories*.

Beginning with elementary school, the Landons, like other farm kids, climbed aboard the school bus for the drive into Armstrong. By high school they were both active in the 4-H Clubs. Each of them, in turn, won a prized spot on the annual 4-H trip to the Royal Agricultural Fair in Toronto with an excursion to the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa. That’s where, some people say, Landon nearly swooned and found his

vocation when he spied the lavish bindings in the Library of Parliament.

Perhaps. The prosaic reality is that he enrolled in agricultural science as an undergraduate at the University of British Columbia. One year was enough to convince him that there was too much math and science in a farming degree, so he switched to theatre, English literature and classics, graduating in 1965.

Two years later, he had qualified as a librarian and headed east to Toronto with his first wife, Ann Scott, and a job as a cataloguer in the rare books library at the University of Toronto. He later acquired a master's degree from Leeds University in bibliography and textual criticism.

The library changed dramatically over the next half century and so did Landon, who became inaugural head and then director of the Thomas Fisher in 1988. The institution and the man never became unstuck from each other, and will continue to be associated long after Landon's premature death from metastasized lung cancer.

Richard Landon leaves his wife, Marie Korey, and his sister, Robin Petersen, and her family. A memorial service is planned for Nov. 15, at 5:15 p.m. in Knox College Chapel, 59 St. George St., at the University of Toronto.

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