

**Robert Stanley Gordon (1923-1995)**

*Photo courtesy  
of Jakki Gordon*

Among the most widely known of Canadian archivists, Robert S. Gordon, former Director of the Manuscript Division of the National Archives of Canada, died suddenly of a heart attack at Ottawa on 30 November 1995. For a whole generation of archivists who had begun and developed their careers under his leadership and influence, his death marks the passing of an era.

None of us knew Bob Gordon's full story. Some gained hints as to his past--his facility in languages or his knowledge of other countries. No one person heard his whole life story. His thumb was a daily reminder that there were reasons for his reticence to speak about certain experiences. Yet when we bring together the known clues, a picture of his early years emerges. He was born at Tokyo, Japan, on 18 April 1923. War curtailed his education in Europe, bringing new directions in his life. He passed from studies at the Lippstadt-Borghorst *hoch schule* to the Polish Resistance, then endured three and a half years in a prison camp. His ability to master languages (eventually to number six: Japanese, Russian, Polish, German, English, and French) aided his finding work with intelligence service of the British Army. At the end of 1948 he came to Canada and resumed his formal studies. Graduating with a BA (Honours in History) from McGill University in 1952, he found work in records management with the Algoma Steel Corporation at Sault, Ste. Marie. His career at the Public Archives of Canada (as it was then known) began in 1956.

Several years later, the Public Archives of Canada and the Archives Section of the Canadian Historical Association, on behalf of the profession and institutions across the country, decided to undertake the preparation and publication of a list of archival material in repositories across Canada. Soon named the *Union List of Manuscripts in Canadian Repositories* (or *ULM*), the project was sponsored by the Public Archives of Canada and aided by grants from the Humanities Research Council of Canada. Dr. W. Kaye Lamb, then Dominion Archivist, was the first director of the project,

and Bob Gordon became the first editor. They prepared the booklet entitled *The Union List of Manuscripts: a Guide for the Preparation of Returns*--which, though small and simple, merits recognition as a first step towards national guidelines for the description of archival material.

As editor of the *ULM*, Bob Gordon visited archival repositories across Canada to explain the project, request support, and compile many reports himself. Operating on a minimal budget, he travelled from St. John's to Victoria on this mission, usually driving his own car, and sometimes writing many entries himself. Visiting so many Canadian archives brought him acquaintance with the majority of his professional colleagues. Their collaborative work came to fruition in 1968 with publication of the first *Union List of Manuscripts in Canadian Repositories*. A revised and enlarged edition appeared in 1975, and four supplements followed over the next decade.

Another of Bob Gordon's many achievements came in mid-career. Archivists needed an inexpensive means of appraising donations so that donors could benefit from the tax laws; however few manuscript dealers were qualified to meet the requirements set by Revenue Canada. Bob's solution to the dilemma was to work with the Canadian Historical Association to establish a Document Appraisal Committee. From its first meeting in October 1971, this body grew into the National Archival Appraisal Board (familarly known as NAAB), a federally incorporated private organization serving institutions across the country that receive donations of archival material. NAAB is recognized by Revenue Canada and endorsed by the Canadian Cultural Property Export Review Board. Throughout the evolution from DAC to NAAB, and the early years of certification by the CCPERB (created in 1975), Bob Gordon served as a mentor to the archivists, book dealers, and historians who came together to assess the "fair market value" of our cultural heritage--and to the many Manuscript Division archivists who prepared reports for submission to the NAAB boards.

Rising up the administrative ladder, from working-level archivist Bob Gordon became a Section Head and, in 1965, Chief of the Manuscript Division. In his two decades as Chief, he saw the creation of a separate "Public Records Division" (in 1974) and enormous expansion in the Manuscript Division itself. The focus of acquisitions broadened: attention was given to social, economic, cultural, and multicultural records as well as the traditional areas of military, political, and religious records. The division's holdings grew not only in size but also in breadth, reflecting the widening interests of historians and the increasingly diverse clientele using archives. The concept of a "Systematic National Acquisitions Programme" was balanced with the development of the "Finding Aids on Microfiche" project and the Diffusion Programme to ensure the accessibility of key records on microfilm through the provincial archives across Canada. In this holistic approach to the division's responsibilities, acquisition activity was balanced with arrangement and description, microfilming for conservation and accessibility, the publication of finding aids (on paper or in microform), and, above all, ensuring that what we learned while providing reference services would inform both our acquisition and our description activities, guiding both the priorities and the nature of the work.

Bob Gordon also gave of his energies, time, and expertise to professional associations. From 1957 to 1979 he served as Treasurer of the Canadian Historical Association, striving always to ensure its financial stability. As a member of the

Manuscript Society, he brought its annual conference to Ottawa in 1978. His service to the Society of American Archivists was recognized by his nomination as a Fellow.

After retirement in 1989, he opened the Autograph Gallery, indulging in his life-long love of manuscripts. He was delighted to help any archivist with a question, especially one concerning the authenticity of documents or signatures, and took particular pleasure in serving as an appraiser of historical records.

RSG (as he signed himself, and as we often referred to him) represented the best of a time past, a time when one aspired to be called a “gentleman and a scholar.” He was a gentle man and a gentleman in that he respected others regardless of gender, race, or conviction, and did so with grace and courtesy. He prized learning and strove to foster an environment where archivists and researchers would mix freely, learning from one another in unravelling the secrets of the past.

Those of us fortunate enough to have worked in RSG’s Manuscript Division knew the excitement shared by all when a major new acquisition was announced. During his time, Bob took great delight in acquiring collections himself and assisting his staff to build the division’s holdings. His obvious enthusiasm for acquiring the stuff of history was appreciated by the research community; he was considered a friend and equal by many scholars.

To RSG, the Manuscript Division was the heart of the Archives. His pride in his division and those members of senior management who had started under his tutelage served to inspire his staff. While he loved to meet those who made history while acquiring their documents, he readily permitted junior archivists to have the same pleasure. In doing so, he won our respect and appreciation, for his belief in us and the faith that we shared in his quest to protect archives as part of our national heritage. Many of us, so sure that we knew best, might not have fully appreciated the freedom Bob gave us but would agree that RSG’s Manuscript Division was a great place to work and to learn.

Bob’s management style reflected the times through which he had lived and the managers he had known. While he listened to his staff and considered their views, he also had his own view, which he could capably defend. Not for him were the current bestsellers on management; instead, he focused on what he considered best for the Archives, his division, and his staff. Above all, he was motivated by a desire to serve Canada by protecting the sources of our history. He might not have been able to quote the latest management guru verbatim, but he could speak long and eloquently about Canada’s past and Manuscript Division’s holdings.

Bob Gordon displayed a fatherly concern for his staff. In the early days, he and his wife Jakki used to invite the entire Division to their home on the afternoon of Christmas Eve. This tradition unfortunately had to be discontinued when the Division became too large to fit into a private home, but many staff members still have very happy memories of Christmas Eve at the Gordons’s.

Bob Gordon was such an influential figure on the Canadian archival scene that it is hard to accept that he is not with us any more. We extend sincere condolences to his wife Jakki and children Stephanie, Drew, and Alexandra.

**Grace Hyam, Patricia Kennedy, and Ian McClymont**  
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