

Obituary



William Henry Cooper, 1935–2009

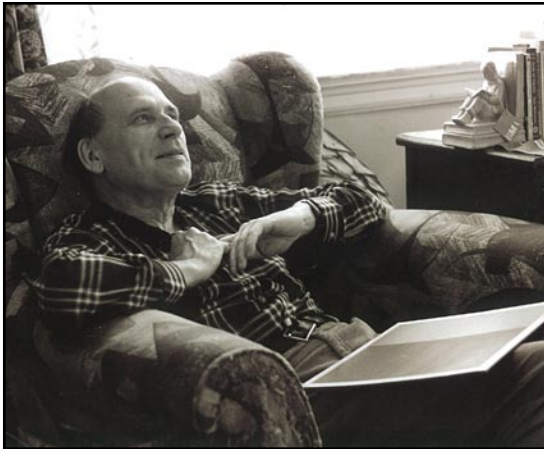


Image courtesy of John S. Gray

I first met Bill Cooper when I joined the Archives of Ontario in October 1969. My boss had asked me to help Bill move some Department of Agriculture Hollinger boxes in the basement at 14 Queen's Park Crescent – the home of the Archives housed in the Sigmund Samuel building in Toronto. Soon after, Bill invited me to see the movie *Casablanca* showing at

a Bloor Street West cinema. It was always Bill's style to do something different for dinner. We went to a Greek restaurant upstairs on the second floor of a building – I can't remember where. It had an "open" kitchen. You pointed to the selections and the cook filled your plate. The food was wonderful. Somehow that dinner set the mood for Sidney Greenstreet and the streets of Casablanca.

My association with Bill soon made me aware of a man who possessed an enormous intellect. His collecting passions were legendary: books on Canadian constitutional history, American political biographies, biographies of composers, reference works on Hollywood actors from the silent era to the Film Noir period, books on art and later architecture... the list went on and on. He also possessed a gift for language, launching into soliloquies that

would have you reaching for your dictionary.

Bill moved into his one-bedroom apartment in the early 1970s. It was a large apartment. It needed to be! He filled it with records and books, and valuable stereo equipment to play his records including many 78's. To furnish his apartment he had bought some beautiful furniture including a stunning Yew wood partnership desk from the Art Shoppe on Yonge Street. Unfortunately, it soon became buried under the fast-accumulating books and records. Bill loved listening to the music of the Romantic composers of the nineteenth century. He possessed a fine collection of early red label records. His favourite interpreters of that music were the famous pianists: Godowsky, Rubinstein, and Schnabel. He also loved opera and had been to the Bayreuth Festival.

His other love was New York City. He had visited "Gotham" many times to attend piano and opera recitals at both the Metropolitan Opera and Carnegie Hall. Over many dinners at the Mount Pleasant Lunch, he shared with me his encyclopedic knowledge of the many New York stores and restaurants he had visited. It was from him that I first heard of the legendary Strand Bookstore on Broadway where he had obtained many treasures and Sherry-Lehmann where he bought his wine. Needless to say, my book and restaurant hunting were successful because of Bill's teaching. I learned to love, not fear, the sidewalks of New York.

Bill was born in Detroit, Michigan and his family later moved to St. Catharines, Ontario. He was educated at McMaster University in Hamilton. He studied law for two years after he graduated but gave it up to pursue an MA in History. His dissertation was on Sam Hughes but his work schedule and hobbies prevented him from ever finishing his thesis.

As an archivist, Bill worked first for the Public Archives of Canada in Ottawa, then for a brief time in the Public Archives of Nova Scotia. However, he wanted to be in Toronto, and so the Archives of Ontario became his professional home from 1966 until his retirement. His work as an archivist was legendary. He took over the newspaper collection and spent countless hours – with help from his colleague John Gadsby – in preparing newspaper files for microfilming. This involved typing the Tables of Contents and often tediously mending individual pages with scotch tape to make the newspapers ready for filming. Then, the microfilm had to be checked to make sure that no page was missing. Local historians can be grateful to Bill for the excellent collection of local newspapers on microfilm in the Archives' Reading Room.

But it was the donation of the fabulous Horwood Collection of Architectural Drawings that propelled Bill to fame. He was asked to catalogue this vast collection, thus establishing the Architectural Drawings Collection that is today one of the glories of the Archives of Ontario. In order to prepare himself for this task, he started to collect and study books on architecture, which somehow found a place in his apartment along with the other treasures.

He was in fact the reference archivist that researchers went to for help using the Architectural Drawings Collection. These drawings were often large and cumbersome. Bill patiently got them out, took orders for copies, and put them back afterwards. Many books on the history of Canadian architecture show the benefit of his devotion to helping the researchers. As with everything, he excelled at what he did.

Bill's life lives on in the legacy of his work and in the people he inspired. He was in many ways "an archivist's archivist."

Leon S. Warmski
Archives of Ontario, Retired Archivist