A Tribute to Donna Norell
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Donna Marion Norell holds the distinction of being the first person awarded a Ph.D. in French at the University of Manitoba, in 1970. The following year, in 1971, she began her long career in our department as a lecturer, an appointment that was renewed until 1976, when she obtained a probationary appointment as Assistant Professor. Donna was granted tenure in 1979, and was promoted to Associate Professor two years later, in 1981.

While a faculty member of the University of Manitoba, Donna was also a member of St. Paul’s College: having served on several committees for the College, Donna’s service was recognized when she was awarded the Cecil Ryan Rector’s Award in 1988 for her contribution and commitment to the life of the College. (On a personal note, I had the good fortune to teach a course at St. Paul’s during my first year at U of M over 20 years ago. I will always have fond memories of that year, thanks in large part to Donna and her colleagues who had created a warm, collegial atmosphere for newcomers such as myself; simply by inviting us for coffee after our classes they made our transition to life in Winnipeg that much easier.)

Donna Norell’s record of achievement includes several outreach activities: for instance, she regularly volunteered as a judge in numerous academic competitions in Winnipeg high schools. (It’s worth noting that before joining the department as a faculty member, Donna obtained her certification as a piano teacher from the Royal Conservatory of Music of Toronto.) Donna also served for many years on the editorial board of MOSAIC (the interdisciplinary journal for the study of literature based at U of M). It comes as no surprise that Donna served as President of the recently defunct Linguistic Circle of Manitoba and North Dakota, or the LCMND, as part of a long tradition of departmental members before and after her who served as Executive officers of that venerable institution).

Donna Norell’s main area of research expertise was 20th century French literature, and especially Colette (moviegoers may recall the popular 2009 film adaptation of Colette’s novel Chéri, starring Michelle Pfeiffer). Her published work includes articles on Colette in L’Esprit créateur and the Journal of Women’s Studies in Literature. However, her research interests have been wide-reaching: one might be surprised to learn, for example, that Donna once published a thoroughly researched and meticulously detailed history of women’s restrooms in rural Manitoba for Manitoba History. More recently, post-retirement, continuing her affiliation with the Department as a Senior Scholar, she published a book with the medievalist historian Lawrence Desmond about a controversial catholic missionary, entitled The Case for Fr. Charles Dominic French (1775-1851).

However, without a doubt, Donna Norell’s greatest contribution to scholarship is her book entitled Colette: An Annotated Primary and Secondary Bibliography, published in 1992. In a subsequent book published in 2005, Colette and the Conquest of Self, Laurel Cummins wrote that Donna Norell’s bibliography constitutes “an invaluable aid to anyone wishing to explore the area of Colette’s reception yet further”. Cummins added that Donna’s article “Colette and the Burden of a Legend” is “an excellent, extensively researched overview of the reception of Colette’s work from the early years of her career until recent decades”. Another critic, Bob Ivey of Memphis State

1 The LCMND later changed its name to the Languages and Cultures Circle of Manitoba and North Dakota. Unfortunately, the name change couldn’t save it. A complete and detailed history of the LCMND is available at http://www.umanitoba.ca/outreach/lcmnd/.
University, commented that “[e]very academic library with contemporary French literature courses in the curriculum should have [Donna Norell’s] book”. In fact, it’s hard to imagine any Humanities Library in North America that should not include this invaluable tool for Colette specialists. The Department of French, Spanish and Italian, and indeed the University of Manitoba, can take pride in the fact that such a dedicated scholar was the first Ph.D in French studies granted in Manitoba history.