

Heritage



The University of Toronto Library celebrates the
presentation of its seven millionth volume

General James Wolfe's copy of Thomas Gray's
An Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

October 4, 1988



A national treasure, representing a direct link with a critical turning point in Canada's history, Wolfe's copy of Gray's *Elegy* plays a unique role in our cultural heritage.

The Friends of the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library are presenting this book to the University of Toronto Library as the Library's seven millionth volume. The book was acquired with financial support from the federal Cultural Properties Review Board and some generous donations from individual "Friends". The gift of this very special book has significantly heightened the sense of accomplishment felt by all those who have supported the Library during its long and proud history.

The generosity of private collectors and donors has for many years been central to the growth of the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, which has become the largest and most diverse cultural resource of its kind in Canada. The "Friends" organization, founded in 1984, brings together those who are committed to strengthening the Library's outstanding collections to encouraging a greater awareness of the Library's resources.

Thomas Gray's poem, *An Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, a melancholy meditation on death, is one of the glories of English literature.

*The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
Awaits alike th' inevitable hour.
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.*

It was a great popular success when first published in 1751 and soon went into several editions. General James Wolfe was given a copy of the 1754 printing by his fiancée, Katherine Lowther, before setting sail for Canada in 1759. The title-page is inscribed by Wolfe "From K.L. Neptune at Sea" and the poem is annotated throughout in his hand. He took



the book with him on the voyage from Portsmouth, England, to Halifax, Nova Scotia, and found much in it to give him thought while preparing for the battle of the Plains of Abraham.

Wolfe had struggled with ill-health for several months before the battle, and in addition, his relations with his subordinate army commanders had seriously deteriorated. Apparently a man of a rather pessimistic disposition, Wolfe was by September even contemplating the likelihood that he might not take Quebec. The *Dictionary of National Biography* entry suggests that "he had a presentiment of his fate, which made him the night before [the battle] take a miniature of Miss Lowther from his breast, and hand it over to his old schoolfellow, Commander John Jervis (afterwards Lord St. Vincent), to be restored to her." It was perhaps these feelings that prompted him to recall the famous line, "The paths of glory lead but to the grave", as he went down river with a few colleagues in a small boat, and to comment "Gentlemen, I would rather have written that piece than take Quebec tomorrow."



During the battle, Wolfe apparently deliberately exposed himself to fire, perhaps even courting death. He disregarded an early wound in the wrist, and leading the attack as the British line moved forward, was struck again in the body, many accounts say by two bullets. The injury was fatal and he lived only a short time.



The Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library houses many rare books and special collections. It contains one of the great collections of Canadiana in the country, having assiduously collected for many years the books and documents which reveal the early history of Canada, particularly during the mid-eighteenth century, and complementary collections of eighteenth-century English history and literature.

The University of Toronto Library, of which the Fisher Library is a constituent part, was founded in the middle of the nineteenth century. The University's library system, consisting of some fifty separate units to comprise the largest library in Canada and one of the major research libraries in North America, is held in high renown throughout the academic world. Its collection of seven million volumes, noted for its breadth and depth, contains books in 121 languages. Through its North American and world-wide networks, the Library makes available to its users information on such diverse topics as Assyriology, cybernetics, history, medicine, music and nuclear science. This information is contained in such different media as books, papyrus, computer tapes and CD ROM.

Offering a broad range of services, including up-to-date on-line access to the whole collection, the University of Toronto Library serves not only the scholarly community but all sectors of a wider community — professionals, business people and the public. It is proud to act as custodian to this national treasure.

The Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, 120 St. George Street, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1A5, is located at the corner of Harbord Street and St. George. Wolfe's copy of Gray's *Elegy* will be on display in the Library, Monday through Friday, 9.00 — 5.00, starting October 5, 1988.

This publication was produced by the University of Toronto Library as a keepsake of the presentation of its seven millionth volume.