

Donald Jackson (1919-1987)



by James P. Ronda

In the past few days the title of one of Don's essays has come to my mind again and again. "What I Did for Love" was his banquet address to the Western History Association in 1981. That talk was vintage Jackson graceful, witty, and gently learned. And as always he asked the right question: What did Donald Jackson do for love? The first answer seems as close as the library shelf. Don's long, fruitful career as an historian of the American West was and remains the visible sign of that love. The titles of his books are landmarks in our understanding of this nation's western heritage. The *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, the *Journals of Zebulon Montgomery Pike*, the *Expeditions of John Charles Fremont*, and the first four volumes of the new George Washington Papers - these remind us of Donald Jackson, the consummate documentary editor. Donald once described himself as a restorer of the works of others. His mission, his passion was to peel away years of abuse and neglect to reveal masterpieces from our past. He did that restoring with a painstaking attention to detail and an abiding respect for the integrity of the past. And in the process, Don revitalized the study of early western exploration. Don gave us the faces of our western past bright with the glow of adventure and discovery. But he did more than polish and explain the words of others. In wonderful books like *Thomas Jefferson and the Stony Mountains*, *Valley Men*, and *Voyages of the Steamboat Yellow Stone*, Don illuminated fragments of the West forgotten in the abyss of time. His most recent book, *Among the Sleeping Giants*, published just a few weeks ago by his beloved University of Illinois Press, is yet another testimony to that lifelong love affair with the West.

But what Donald Jackson did for love was more personal, more enduring than words in print. The man in Jim Needham's sensitive portrait was and is more than a list of books, essays, and honors. What Don did for love was to give us himself - those lasting values that he exemplified by his life and in his work. If the books of Don's own self could have titles, they might read: Dedication, Friendship, Enthusiasm, and Unfailing Courage. There was dedication. Don had a rock solid commitment to learning and the life of the mind. And there was dedication to institutions like Iowa State University, the University of Iowa, the University of Illinois Press,

the University of Virginia, the Association for Documentary Editing, the Western History Association, and the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation. There was friendship - the friendship that has brought us all here. Don gave his friendship unstintingly, openly, gladly, without reservation. He spent his life shepherding us, nurturing us, teaching us. He invited us into his spacious mind and called us friends. There was enthusiasm. Don believed that life was enriched by enthusiasms, avocations, hobbies. He delighted in the history of printing, the beauty of microscopic crystals, the textures of exotic woods, the stories behind ancient coins, and the subtle images of photography. And there was the ocean. There was always something faintly nautical about Don. Like so many of Iowa's landlocked sons, Don loved the sea. After his brother Robert died on the Arizona at Pearl Harbor, Don enlisted in the Navy, became an intelligence officer, and served at Bougainville in the South Pacific. He never lost a farm boy's fascination for blue water and salt spray. Those passions, those enthusiasms brightened his life and he was eager to share them with us. And finally, there was unflinching courage. We discover ourselves in the face of adversity. The last ten years of Don's life proved a catalogue of anguish. How he and Cathie and their sons Robert and Mark confronted those trials is a lesson in courage - that special grace under fire. Don studied his illness as he had studied his cherished explorers. He mastered its chemical complexities as he had mastered the most crooked and faded handwriting. He fought fear with knowledge. In that terrible struggle between panic and courage Don was the victor. Those ten years of pain were a decade of remarkable creativity. He wrote four books in that time, books that quickened our minds and gave him hope for each day. And in all of this, Don filled the lives of his friends with good cheer, sound advice, and great warmth.

These are the things Donald Jackson did for love. How shall we return that love? Don would have us prize those values he prized. He would send us out to plow straight furrows, to revel in good food, to delight in sweet music, to wonder in painting, to attend to truth and liberty, to care for words, and to feed the fires of friendship. We are all bound together now by ties of grief and loss. Don would respect those feelings but now he would want us to move slowly from mourning to celebrating. What he did for love is what he would want us to do for love. He would want us to celebrate good words and good lives and good friends.

Let me conclude with something Don shared with me not long ago. More than fifty years ago this spring, Dean Jackson's boy Donald got off the plow, sat under a tree, and imagined what he might become. Butcher, novelist, taxidermist, county agent, journalist - all that and more drifted through his mind. The dreams that touched on words and writing came true. Those dreams molded his life. The dreams he shared with us will forever shape ours. Because Donald Jackson passed our way we are a little stronger, a little brighter, a little braver. Rest easy, sailor. This is safe harbor. This is the home port.

The preceding eulogy was delivered at Donald Jackson's funeral in Glenwood, Iowa on December 14, 1987.

Donald Jackson was born in Glenwood, Iowa June 10, 1919. He received his undergraduate degree from Iowa State University in 1942. He served as an intelligence officer in the U.S. Navy, serving in the South Pacific 1943-46.

In 1948 he received his Ph.D. from the University of Iowa. In that same year, he became editor of the University of Illinois Press, a position he held until 1968. For the next ten years he served as editor of the "Papers of George Washington" at the University of Virginia.

In 1978, Don retired to Colorado Springs where he remained until his death December 9, 1987.

Don received the Foundation's Award of Meritorious Achievement in 1974, as well as a number of other awards and honors from scholarly institutions. An article for WPO titled "Donald Jackson: An Appreciation" is forthcoming. Tributes to Don will be published in the May issue of *WPO*.

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(Jackson served as a Director of the Foundation, 1975-1981.)

*Prepared by Bob Gatten, 2011*