

Library bears witness to city's struggles



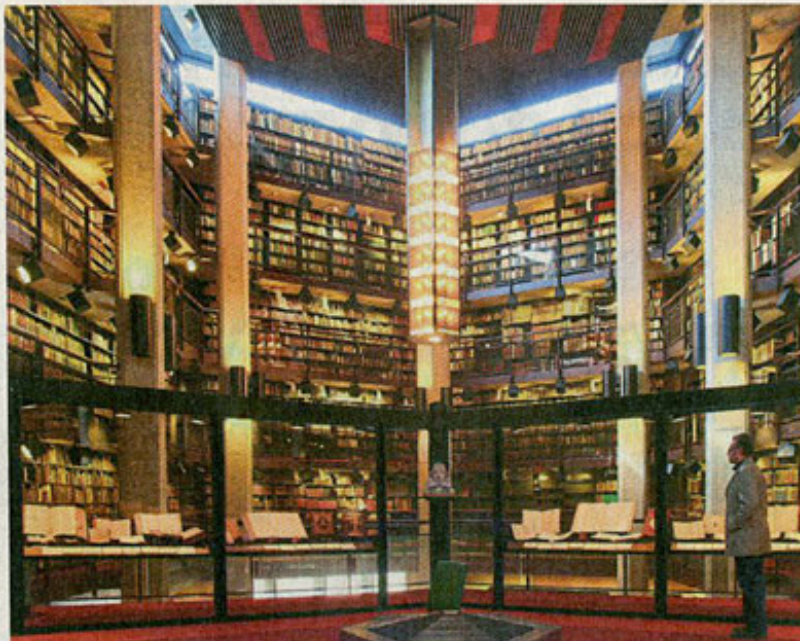
**SHAWN
MICALLEF**
OPINION

Robarts Library stands at the corner of St. George and Harbord streets in the middle of the University of Toronto. It's either shaped like a turkey or peacock, depending on your affection for brutalist architecture and affinity to particular kinds of fowl. A city landmark, it's known to most people as the flagship university library. But there's something quite special in the "head" of that big bird: the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library.

There are rare books inside, of course, but it's also an archive with a vast assortment of collections that reach into many unexpected places including a lot of Toronto history and politics, all kept safe by those concrete walls in what is one of the most stunning rooms in the country. It's a place I've often thought about during this rather momentous, change-marking Toronto election. More on that in a minute.

Some examples of the Fisher collections include a history of science and medicine that has the Banting and Best papers related to the discovery of insulin. There is an AIDS collection of books and pamphlets from the 1980s to 1990s, a Caribbean literature collection, artists' books and a cookbook collection. Margaret Atwood's papers are stored here, including her handwritten "Handmaid's Tale" first draft, and there's even what might be the world's tallest free-standing book, more than a metre high, about the CN Tower.

Back in 2015 I wrote about Lumiere Press, an independent publisher that hand-makes photography books, the only fine press in the



The Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto is an archive of the city's political and cultural history that helps put our current struggles for change into perspective, Shawn Micallef writes.

THOMAS FISHER
RARE BOOK
LIBRARY

world dedicated to photography, says founder and publisher Michael Torosian. Operating in Toronto since 1986, Torosian has just published a new, limited-edition book survey of his career, "Lumiere Press: Printer Savant & Other Stories" that will be launched at the Fisher this Thursday. It includes Torosian's interviews with famed photographers like Gordon Parks and Edward Burtynsky and details how Lumiere projects came together.

Recently, dozens of boxes of the Lumiere archive made their way into the Fisher, adding another considerable piece of Toronto cultural history to its collection, making it, like everything else in the archive, publicly accessible to everyone.

Despite writing about Toronto for 20 years, I came to know the Fisher late, when I started taking my U of T civics students to visit the library

on archival field trips to see some of its Toronto collection. Full disclosure, I am a sessional instructor at U of T, but when I take my students there, I'm also a student again, learning about the city.

For instance, the Fisher librarians show us pamphlets and ephemera related to Toronto's long and robust temperance movement. One pamphlet warns of "Ontario's Blight: Beer Rooms for Women and Girls." Another worries about "Liquid Lyrics" and there's even a coupon book from when the Ontario Liquor Board rationed out how much customers were allowed to purchase.

While some of it is amusing, it's also helped me understand how deeply rooted the temperance sensibility was and is in Ontario and why it's been so difficult for many of Toronto's leaders to loosen up on having a drink in parks: there's a lot of cultural momentum and bias

to overcome.

This year the protest part of Pride was front and centre, but the Fisher archive is filled with decades of LGBTQ struggle in Toronto and Canada. The collection includes the copy of "The Joy of Gay Sex" that was seized and banned by Canada Customs in 1985 when Glad Day bookstore, still operating on Church Street, imported it from the U.S. It cost the shop \$16,000 to defend the book, and in 1987 the court "freed" it.

Beyond this very political artifact, the Fisher has a robust collection of perhaps the country's most well-known LGBTQ magazine, *The Body Politic*, but also many lesser-known ones, including the *Cross Dressers Club* published in the early 1990s, *Rites for Lesbian and Gay Liberation* from the 1980s and a series of *Tab Confidential* tabloids from the 1950s that both helped Toronto gay folk find each other, but also salaciously outed people during a hostile era.

The Fisher has copies of the *Velvet Fist: Women's Liberation Newspaper* from the 1970s and the *Toronto Women's Yellow Pages* that listed resources for women in the days long before the internet made this easy. There's information sheets put out by the "Institute for Indian Studies" at Rochdale College, the countercultural experiment in education that existed on U of T's periphery in the late 1960s and early 1970s. A copy of *Black Liberation News* from 1969 has a story headlined, "Cops Harass Blacks at Alexandra Park."

On and on it goes — this is just a tiny sample. Each visit I learn new bits of this city's absolutely not boring history that both overwhelms in its volume, but also puts current struggles for change into perspective: it's always been a fight for much of Toronto's population to feel at home here.

TWITTER: @SHAWNMICALLEF