The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Robert L. Dawson, professor, French and Italian, has filed with the secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

Sue Alexander Greninger, Secretary
The General Faculty

IN MEMORIAM
ROBERT L. DAWSON

Professor Bob Dawson was one of the most universally beloved, if decidedly eccentric, colleagues of the faculty of the Department of French and Italian for his 32 years of tenure at The University of Texas. He was considered outstanding in both his teaching and research and also noteworthy for the original nature of many of his service contributions to the department and University. He was one of the first in the humanities to discover the usefulness of computers, and he shared his knowledge with graduate students. In addition, he also offered an informal introduction to computer science to his colleagues, who mostly were completely baffled by the new development. This was back before PCs had become common and when one accessed the University's mainframe through terminals using UNIX and keyboard commands. One other example of Bob’s originality in service to the department was his development of mock interviews to prepare graduate students going on the job market for the grilling they were likely to encounter from potential employers. Bob delighted in trying to surprise students with unforeseen questions and the role-playing element of this theatrical game. Both these improvised initiatives proved quite popular and successful and as good examples of Bob’s unique creativity in approaching his academic work.

Bob’s passion as a bibliophile conjured up the appearance of a medieval monk, as he spent every available hour of the school year, outside his classroom and departmental commitments, in the Harry Ransom Research Center (HRC). The casual observer might well have taken him for one of Balzac’s rats de bibliothèque; but he was no mere bookworm and had both a mission and method in his pursuit. He admired the internationally-recognized riches of the French collection of the HRC, but they could not satiate his quest for yet undiscovered treasures in his field of 18th century France. As soon as classes were over at the end of the school year, and often at Spring Break or the Christmas holidays, he would head for Europe, not for a vacation, but to explore the limitless resources of the Bibliothèque Nationale of France or the British Library.

For Bob, merely poring over rare texts and acquiring knowledge with Rabelaisian fervor was not enough, to quench his voracious acquisitive instinct and need for possessing things beyond the confines of even those eminent institutions. He frequented the bouquinistes along the Seine and was assiduous in attendance at auction houses. He was, however, not looking for prized, handsomely-bound editions; instead, he was searching for unexpected and unrecognized rarities in areas that have long been ignored by scholars and are now illuminating important aspects of life and culture of the period. In that respect, he was omnivorous, acquiring diaries, letters, snippets, arcane documents, isolated pages of unpublished works, first editions of forgotten and ignored writers, and every kind of memorabilia.

He also acquired what he considered museum quality drawings, sketches, and oil paintings, with an emphasis on portraits of obscure and unidentified people of the period rather than the most celebrated artists. Though he was a dix-huitièmiste and wanted to concentrate on 18th century items, he could not resist buying an illuminated page from a medieval manuscript or a hand-written order signed by King Louis XIV. When acquired by Texas A&M University, his collection consisted of about 15,000 printed titles and some 5,000 manuscripts and required two large rented trucks and a mini-van to be transported to College Station. The Robert L. Dawson Collection was officially opened at the Cushing Memorial Library and Archives at Texas A&M on February 8, 2008, with an inaugural address by the eminent Harvard professor and leading authority on 18th century France, Professor Robert Darnton, an equally celebrated bibliophile. A richly-illustrated catalogue for the exhibit was...
entitled “The Temple of Taste.”

One might wonder how Bob had managed to assemble so monumental a trove on a meager professor’s salary? It was simple. He forewent almost everything else. His wardrobe had that Wal-Mart look (a colleague said that the only time he saw Bob in a suit and tie was when he was interviewed for a position here). Bob was happy to live in a simple cottage without air-conditioning, neglected his yard, drove an old Volkswagen beetle for many years before finally upgrading to a Scion, and seemingly denied himself every comfort. But not quite. For Bob was hospitable and outreaching. Often on Sunday evenings he would invite students and colleagues in for supper, drinks, and stimulating conversation. He was particularly mindful of the needs of graduate students, or older and retired colleagues, whom he often included.

Bob was very popular with his students in whom he took genuine interest. He urged them to take advantage of the immense resources of the University and communicated his love of books and knowledge by escorting his classes to the HRC and pointing out to them what unsuspected treasures lay there. His enthusiasm was infectious. He further reminded them of films, exhibits, and projects they could undertake. One aspect of Bob’s interests in students and concerns for them and others is exemplified by the comment of one of his undergraduate students:

And what affected me was his angst about humanity--homelessness, those who suffer from mental illnesses, the elderly not receiving proper care. I think that's why he made such a good literature professor--he HAD great concern for Flaubert’s characters, but more for the transients on ‘The Drag’ just across from campus. I knew he was genuinely interested in the way people feel--in how people are living. Perhaps college years are beyond our formative years, but it’s still a time of uncertainty and vulnerability. And having a professor who recognizes and talks about a sort of ’sadness’ in us all--whether we are fictional characters in his favorite French piece, or a student walking into his classroom--is extremely meaningful.

Bob taught at all levels of French language, literature, and culture. His graduate courses were often cross-listed with Comparative Literature. At the graduate level, he went beyond courses on the Enlightenment to do more specialized courses on women's issues, the libertine, and classes on individual authors. He developed an “Introduction to Graduate Studies” course in which he led his students into the depths of the Humanities Research Center to explore problems of research resources and specialized bibliography. He was chair of the departmental graduate studies committee for many years, as well as chair of the “library committee,” which handled liaison with the main library and suggestions for collection development.

His publications reflect his profound exploration of the back roads of literature and the book-publishing trade of the 18th century, starting with his dissertation about a little-known but most prolific writer, Baculard d’Arnaud. This produced his first book, Baculard d’Arnaud: Life and Prose Fiction, in 1976. His next two volumes reflect his interest in the nuts and bolts of research: International Directory of 18th-Century Studies/Annuaire international des dix-huitiémistes and Additions to the Bibliographies of French Prose Fiction: 1618-1806.

Bob’s later publications focus on the rapid evolution of books and the book trade at the end of the century. He published The French Booktrade and the “Permission Simple” of 1777: Copyright and the Public Domain in 1992 and Customs Confiscations and Banned Books in France During the Last Years of the Ancien Régime in 2006. Besides these books, he published many articles and shorter studies and was a most active lecturer, traveling to many colleges in the U.S., Canada, and Europe to share his vast erudition.

Bob Dawson was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1943 but grew up in Brazil. He often claimed his first language was Portuguese (he also spoke Italian). His early schooling was at the Escola Americana do Rio de Janeiro. He did his undergraduate studies at Trinity College in Connecticut, receiving a bachelor’s degree cum laude. He then went to Yale University, where he received his master’s and Ph.D. degrees, as well as many honors along the way. He taught at the University of Santa Clara in California and Rollins College in Florida before coming to The University of Texas in 1975.

Surviving Bob are sisters, Barbara Best and Virginia Griffin; nephews, Donald and James Best and Patrick Griffin; nieces, Colleen and Michelle Griffin; and special friend Nicholas Bacuez.
This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Hal Wylie (chair), James Stephens, and Daniela Bini.

Distributed to the dean of the College of Liberal Arts and the executive vice president and provost on August 13, 2008. Copies are available on request from the Office of the General Faculty, WMB 2.102, F9500. This resolution is posted under "Memorials" at: http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/.