

Obituary

LEON ZOLBROD (1930–1991)

Leon Zolbrod, a pioneer scholar of traditional Japanese literature, passed away in Vancouver, Canada, on April 16, 1991, after a protracted and valiant battle with cancer of the bile duct. He was two-thirds of the way through his sixty-first year. Zolbrod first came into contact with Japan during service in the United States Army and later lived there on several occasions for about a decade as an English teacher, researcher, and educational administrator. In the latter capacity, he directed the Inter-university Center for Japanese-Language Study (sometimes incorrectly called the “Stanford Center”) in Yokohama from September 1989 to shortly before his death.

After public schooling in suburban Pittsburgh, where he grew up, followed by service in the United States Army, he studied as an undergraduate at the University of Washington. He then went on to Columbia where he received his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in Japanese literature under Donald Keene. He taught for a few years at the Universities of Indiana and Kansas and then for twenty-three years at the University of British Columbia, where he taught Japanese language and literature and also supervised graduate students.

Zolbrod hoped through his research to make the literature of Edo Japan accessible to Western readers. His first book was *Takizawa Bakin* (1967); he also edited and translated the *Ugetsu Monogatari* (1975). A few years later, Kodansha International published his *Haiku Painting* (Tokyo and New York, 1982). His final book was *The Universality of Nob: Sources, Performances, and Parameters of a Traditional Mode of Japanese Theatre: Essays and Texts from the Nitobe-Ohira Conference of Japanese Studies* (The Committee for the Nitobe-Ohira Memorial Conference on Japanese Studies, the University of British Columbia, 1990). A mammoth book-length study, tentatively entitled *Reluctant Genius: The Life and Work of Buson, a Japanese Master of Haiku and Painting*, remains unpublished. Zolbrod felt it required editorial tightening, and J. Thomas Rimer at the University of Pittsburgh is now arranging to prepare it for publication.

As his career progressed, Zolbrod also became an adept manager for performances by traveling theatrical groups and exhibitions of Japanese art. On different occasions, three Noh groups toured North America with his assistance and he facilitated a demonstration of Shakespeare adapted to the conventions of traditional Japanese theater. He also helped organize museum displays of traditional woodblock prints and calligraphy, and in the latter case co-edited the catalog for the exhibition, *Karma of the Brush: An Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese and Japanese Calligraphy* (1985). His enthusiastic support of the University of British Columbia led to donations to UBC from the Okamatsu Family Fund to assist in the training of students in the Japanese language and in the acquisition of a compendium of Japanese hand-made paper, which went to the university museum.

Friends and colleagues knew Leon as a man of great enthusiasms, including challenges to himself. As a graduate student, and long before bicycles developed to the point where they could be easily used for touring, he cycled from Seattle to

Vancouver, Canada, and back in about a week along the tortuous and hilly coastal road. Later, he furthered a childhood interest in tennis into a rigorous hobby, which he passed on to members of his family. Leon's perfectionism extended to food. He grew many of his own vegetables, and when his favorite bakery discontinued the heavy sour rye bread he enjoyed, he made it himself for the family.

Perhaps more than any of his other hobbies, his interest in the Noh chants marked the point where professional and recreational interests conjoined. Attendants at a lecture or party would rouse from their torpor when he utilized his excellent voice box and lungs to enliven proceedings by the spirited injection of an appropriate selection from the standard Noh repertoire.

Leon's final year demonstrated his loyalty and determination. Physicians diagnosed his disease in the early spring of 1989, six months after he had taken over as the director of the Inter-university Center. They urged an immediate short break for intensive chemotherapy, which they believed would cure him. Recognizing that he was the sole representative of North American universities at the Center, and that the students depended on him alone for direct contact with their academic environment at home, he selected instead a course of less intense chemotherapy that would enable him to continue at the Center uninterrupted. He resigned only when he could no longer give the Center the attention it deserved. Leon is survived by his widow, Fumiko, six children, one grandchild, and a brother. He also continues to live in the memories of many who share his love for Japanese literature and zest for life.

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