

Fred Landon (1880-1969): Journalist, Librarian, Historian and Scholar in African Canadian History

By Dr. Fred Armstrong

Introduction

At an Ontario Historical Society-sponsored conference on the Bicentennial of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, it seems appropriate to review the work of Fred Landon for our members, as he was both one of Canada's first writers on Black history and president of the Ontario Historical Society (OHS) in 1926-28. To do this, I will first look at his career and then, his publications.

Career

Born in 1880, Landon grew up in London, Ontario, where, in about 1898, he first worked in the wholesale dry goods business. Then in 1901 – rather surprisingly, but possibly because he needed to raise funds for university – he joined the Northern Navigation Company of Sarnia and became a Great Lakes' sailor.

His two-year nautical career was brief, but very influential for his future writing and interests, because he developed a life-long love of our "Inland Seas." Also, although social history was pretty well ignored by the writers of the day, with their concentration on political and constitutional issues, his writing concentrated on social conditions.

When asked to give a paper like this, years after the events, the question that frequently runs through one's head is, 'Why did I not ask him how he was influenced?' However, I would think that working with a wide variety of people on the boats, as well as visiting the differing Great Lakes cities and mingling with their peoples, must have developed his interest in working people, their outlook and living conditions.



Fred Landon. Courtesy: Hilary Bates Neary

In 1903, Landon enrolled at the University of Western Ontario, receiving his B.A. in 1906, but obviously with a desire to continue his studies.

Next, for a decade he worked for the *London Free Press*, where his varied assignments would have sharpened his writing abilities. He was stationed mostly in London, but with two stints at Ottawa.

During these years he married. His first wife, Lena Rowntree, died in 1912, and, in 1914, he married Margaret Smith, who outlived him. There were three children.

Family life probably dictated a more settled career, and in 1916, he accepted the offer to become head of the London Public Library. His monument there is the excellent collection of local research material which he began and today forms the London Room.

Landon must also have been thinking about an academic career, for he simultaneously worked on his M.A. in History, which he completed in 1919. He also taught Canada's first American History course, entitled, "The Constitutional and Diplomatic History of the United States."

As well as being a journalist and an academic, Landon was something of an entrepreneur, which I think is necessary in order to really build up a first class library. Western's university library then only possessed 5,000 volumes. In 1918, however, he persuaded John Davis Barnett, a wealthy Stratford collector, to give the University of Western Ontario his 40,000 book library – which was especially rich in history and literature. As well, there was a huge pamphlet collection. The physical task of housing this munificent gift in a small institution without a library building must have been immense.

With so many contributions, it is hardly surprising that when funds became available in 1923, he was appointed the university's first full-time librarian, while also continuing to teach history courses. For over two decades, he oversaw a vast development of the collections, and the erection of the first library building in 1934. He also began what is today the Regional Collection of Southwestern Ontario material.

In 1946, Fred Landon was appointed to the newly-created office of university vice-president, the librarianship passing to his assistant, Professor James J. Talman, who enthusiastically carried on his work.

Landon retired in 1950, receiving honorary doctorates from Western and McMaster University.

Such, briefly, is the outline of Fred Landon's scholarly career. However, it must be noted that his activities extended into many other fields – for example, his administrative work with the OHS and many other societies.

As a teacher, Dr. Landon was noted for the clarity of his lectures and his willingness to devote his time to helping his students. When I first came to Western in 1963, I found him equally ready to discuss historical problems with a new lecturer. Even in his late eighties, he continued writing and his remarkable memory was most impressive.

The last time I visited him, shortly before his death in 1969, he was reading a new CHA¹ article related to Charles H. Hyman, London's colourful MP at the beginning of the 20th century. He recalled that, when he was in Ottawa as a journalist, Hyman – once Canada's tennis champion – had turned the lawns of his Public Works ministry into tennis courts for civil servants. (He also remembered Hyman's son, who had died in 1892.)

Writings

As noted, Landon thoroughly enjoyed researching and writing. In 1970 Hilary Bates Neary, when preparing the bibliography of his work for *Ontario History*, found 242 items, including reviews. It was, of course, impossible for her to seek out the *London Free Press* newspaper articles which he wrote for a decade, or later historical columns. Altogether, he must have produced well over 300 publications.

To categorize his academic writings, some, naturally, were concerned with library issues, or political/constitutional history. His writing, however, as noted, was particularly directed to the study of social history, often with an emphasis on the lives of the oppressed. As he expressed it in the title of one of his articles, he concentrated on the life of the "common man."

First, looking at monographs, his most substantial work, written in 1928 with Jesse E. Middleton, was a five-volume *The Province of Ontario; a history, 1615-1927*.² His particular interest in Canadian-American relations can be seen in his 1941 *Western Ontario and the American Frontier*.³ In the maritime field, he wrote a history of *Lake Huron* in 1944.⁴ *An Exile from Canada to Van Dieman's Land*, published in 1960, recounts the problems of a prisoner exiled to Tasmania after the 1837 Rebellions.⁵

¹ Canadian Historical Association

² Jesse Edgar Middleton and Fred Landon, *The Province of Ontario; a history, 1615-1927*, Toronto: Dominion Pub. Co., 1927, Volumes 1-5.

³ This book was originally published in 1941 by Ryerson Press, for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Division of Economics and History. It was republished in 1967 in Toronto by McClelland and Stewart.

⁴ Fred Landon, *Lake Huron*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1944; republished in 1972 by Russell & Russell, New York.

⁵ Fred Landon, *An Exile from Canada to Van Diemen's Land: being the story of Elijah Woodman, transported overseas for participation in the Upper Canada troubles of 1837-38*, Toronto: Longmans, Green, 1960.

In regard to his articles, two groups of publications particularly stand out: the already-mentioned nautical category and Black history. From 1943 to 1969, he devoted forty publications to the Great Lakes and their shipping. Also, when the journal, *Inland Seas*, was established in 1945, he became a frequent contributor and a lifelong member of the editorial board.

His largest group of articles, however, was the no-less-than-54 publications which Bates gathered under the category of “the Negro in Canada, Colonization, Settlement, Abolition Movements and the Underground Railway.” These appeared from 1918 to 1960, many of them in the *Journal of Negro History*.

Those wishing to consult the complete Hilary Bates’ bibliography can find it in *Ontario History*, Volume LXII, No. 1, March 1970, on pages 5-16.

Thus, in conclusion of this brief overview of Landon’s career, I would just add that through his scholarship this Society has a long connection with Black history, which we celebrate today in this conference.

Fred Armstrong obtained his M.A. from the University of Toronto in 1949 and his PhD in 1965. His thesis looked at Toronto after its 1834 incorporation and was supervised by Professor J. M. S. Careless. After briefly teaching at Toronto, he joined the History Department at the University of Western Ontario, retiring in 1991. His specializations, both in writing and teaching, were pre-Confederation Ontario and urban history. He has written histories of Toronto and London, Ontario, and many Ontario History articles.