

Opening address
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By Gregory O'Brien

A SHORT HISTORY OF TYPOGRAPHY or
THE TYPOGRAPHY IN MY LIFE

in 1,308 words, laid out before me in 14pt Times New Roman, of four pages (approximately 7 minutes duration)

My first real job was as a reporter on the daily newspaper, the *Northland Times*, in Dargaville, Northland. 1979. The paper went to press every afternoon at about 2.30. The proofing was non-existent and, daily, I would scan the first papers off the press for mistakes too horrendous or libellous to let pass. More often than I care to recall, I would be sent running from my desk to the linotype room, where two heavily-tattooed compositors worked at their hot lead machines. I would get them to shoot out a line of corrected type to replace the offending one. The lead would be piping hot and I had to juggle it from hand to hand or nurse it in crumpled paper as I rushed out the back door and across to the printery. The press would be stopped, the chase removed, the screws loosened, the replacement line dropped hopefully into the right place and then production resumed.

The typeface was Times Roman--an appropriate face for the *Northland Times*, the newspaper for which it was specifically designed--in my dreams. (As many of you know, Times was, in fact, designed by Stanley Morison in 1931 for the English, as opposed to the Dargaville, *Times*.)

My office at the newspaper had an internal window which opened onto the typesetters' workroom so, as well as a rich

array of swear words, I was constantly on the receiving end of heavy, toxic lead fumes. A health inspector once visited and I remember him refusing point blank to go into my office, let alone into the machine-room itself. He was last seen fleeing in the direction of Whangarei; sometime later I imagine the Health Department must have written a letter to the *Times* management, but nothing was ever done to improve the situation.

After a year and a half of that, I myself fled, southwards to Auckland—although I returned to visit the *Northland Times* office in the mid-1980s. On that occasion I was surprised to find the old press and the hot lead machinery had gone. The newspaper was now being produced using what struck me as an absolutely futuristic technology: that of cut and paste, hot wax roller, scalpel and set-square. The brave new ultra-modern era of paste-up had arrived.

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There was, however, an even earlier encounter with lettering and typography which was at least as important for me. While at journalism school, aged 17, I encountered the very wordy paintings of Colin McCahon at the Auckland Art Gallery, on show at the same time as a major exhibition by the Californian Ed Ruscha. The expressionist handwriting of McCahon contrasted dramatically with Ruscha's commercial process lettering, his ironic yet affectionate sampling of modern American type-culture. I loved both McCahon and Ruscha--and, with those two poles in mind, I strode confidently forward into the world of art and language.

Typography and the fine arts have often kept close company. There's a much retold tale of how the 17 year old Colin McCahon took early inspiration from the handlettering on the window of a tobacconist. (In the past couple of years, McCahon's painterly handwriting has been made into an actual typeface, seen lately on bottles of Charlie's real lemonade.) There is an ebb and flow, both ways, between type-design and art—and long may this continue.

In an ideal world, to coincide with this seminar, in my role as curator at City Gallery Wellington, I would have reconvened past exhibitions such as HOTERE—OUT THE BLACK WINDOW, ROSALIE GASCOIGNE—PLAIN AIR and COLIN MCCAHERN—A QUESTION OF FAITH. All of those exhibitions were grand meditations on different kinds of lettering, on the expressive potential of the alphabet--the shapes of letters, with their arabesques and columns, their visual rhythms. Hotere, Gascoigne and McCahon are all handlers of language, although in a manner slightly different from the young journalist juggling the slug of hot type.

Poetry, too, has always been very close to the typographer's art, concerned as it is with the arrangement of words on a page. In late 19th century Paris, Stephane Mallarme and other writers were getting aesthetic replenishment looking at billboards, signage and newspaper headlines—as were the visual artists of the time. While prose writers are largely confined to the rectangle of the folio; for poets, as for typographers, a page is a field of possibility—it can be imbued with visual prosody, nuance, balance and movement.

We arrive at the conclusion, then, that we're all in adjoining rooms—type designers, poets, artists—all of us are handlers, in our various, overlapping ways, of type. Again I'm reminded of the *Northland Times* office, only in this case the toxic lead fumes that permeated all of our respective offices have been replaced by a breath of shared, inspirational wind.

TypeSHED11 offers an intriguing glimpse of the breadth and utter unpredictability of type in the contemporary world. I get the sense, reading the programme, that typography has its evangelists, its mystics, its theorists and philosophers, its hard men, its cult figures, its lyricists, its epic-poets, its subversives, its hangers on and maybe even its groupies.

One of the great outcomes of a seminar like TypeSHED11 will be the flow-on effect--I am sure the revelations and

discussions will ripple on and outwards, moving through the world of book and magazine publishing, the art world and into the wider culture... Good typography is worth discussing and debating as indeed it is worth fighting for. I'm reminded of the English printer-artist, Eric Gill and his belief that the typeset page was the scene of an ongoing battle—on one side moral goodness and civilisation, on the other the barbarism of bad design--which he equated with bad thinking and bad living.

We don't need Gill to tell us that typography is extraordinarily pervasive and influential. The alphabet shapes our thinking. And, if you hold with that, then the people who shape the alphabet are involved in human consciousness at a fundamental level.

I will conclude with two pleas:

Firstly: A plea for legibility in the body-type of books and out in the world generally. If under-designing or doggedly sticking with existent designs was once a national characteristic, more recently over-design has become the great villain. The 1990s were the heyday of unreadable type—fonts were too faint, too small, too groovy for their own good. Not that type always has to be legible—in certain contexts (some of which will be discussed at TypeSHED11), typography manages, like poetry, to be obscure and articulate at the same time.

A plea for legibility then *most* of the time. And for those suffering too many options, too many drop-down menus, too much digital trickery, I would prescribe a periodic return to letterpress and woodblock printing to clear the head, and revitalise the creative faculties.

The second plea I make concerns my own surname, O'Brien. This plea is on behalf of the apostrophe so often left out by copywriters and overlooked by designers, particularly in the digital sphere. This might be a small detail, but what I love about typography is that it is an art of

the small detail, the minute adjustment. Keep the apostrophe in mind, this flicker of typographical possibility, this highest flying of devices in the typesetter's cabinet. This precious thing which might quite possibly be a pearl earring, a flag flapping in the wind, or a small bird flying.

Finally, I commend Catherine and Simone, organisers of TypeSHED11, for their devotion, their industry and their intelligence. How lucky are those handlers of hot and cold type who are here for the next few days ...

Gregory O'Brien