

# Slipping Through Time

LAURA WALZ explores the life and work of the legendary and peripatetic printer WIL HUDSON.

WIL HUDSON WORKED as a typographer and letterpress printer in Vancouver for just over a decade. He has become something of a legend among aficionados of fine printing, yet few people knew him well, and information about his life and work is scattered and incomplete. Wil devoted his working life to his craft, but knew all too well that he laboured in the wrong century. All around him, the industry staggered under a tsunami of change, but Wil remained steadfast in his dedication and perseverance, scorning technological advances. His work stands as some of the best to have been produced in Canada.

Geoffrey Spencer founded the Alcuin Society in 1965 to keep Wil fed and housed, since he was disinclined to spend much energy on domestic matters. Wil loved to shock with his unconventional behaviour and made a show of his eccentricities. He could be scathing in his estimation of people, yet he was kind and accommodating to those fortunate enough to be his friend.

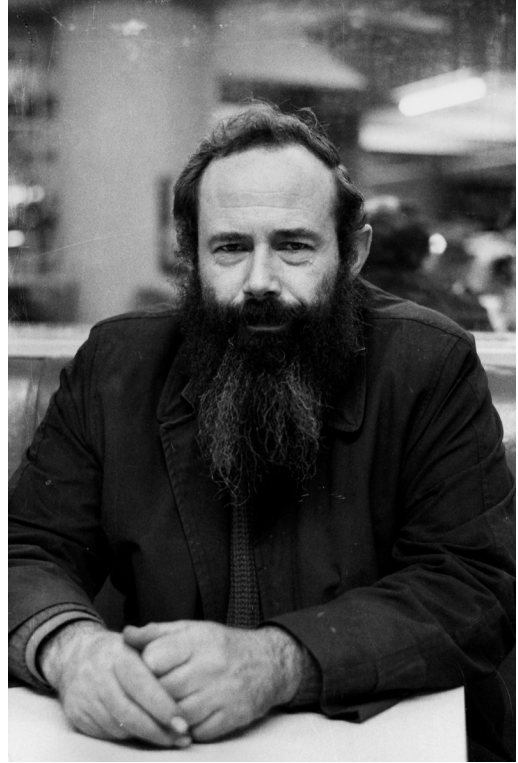
His reading was wide and eclectic; he kept informed of current events and honed his opinions carefully. His brilliance wasn't limited to intellectual pursuits; he kept his equipment working by manufacturing parts on a lathe. He delighted in elaborate jokes, was quick to spot absurdity and entertained himself with long, complex model train set-ups.

Wil chose to live alone, preferably in his shop, and thought it best to leave romantic relationships to others, but he unselfconsciously lavished affection on his cats, his constant companions, to whom he gave august literary names such as Erasmus, Arrighi, Tagliente, Godot, Chuzzlewit, Heffalump, Ambrose, Ocmar and Griffio.

## TRAINS & MATINEES:

### A MILWAUKEE BOYHOOD

Wil was born on September 19, 1928, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. His father, Wilbert S.



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*Wil Hudson in April 1971.  
(Harold H. Johnston photo)*

Hudson, spent his life in the motion picture business, first as a projectionist and later installing and repairing theatre projection and sound equipment in Wisconsin and Upper Michigan for the National Theater Supply Company of Milwaukee. Wil Sr. married Hattie Licht, a 22-year-old telegraph operator, in 1927. Wil Jr. was their only child.

As a youth, Wil Sr. wanted to work for the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad, called the Milwaukee Road, but his health prevented that. He retained a love of railroads, however, an interest he passed on to his son. Together they travelled by train around Wisconsin

and Upper Michigan, on the Milwaukee Road and the Chicago & North Western.

Wil retained a particular fondness for the Milwaukee Road. Among his most cherished memories were trips taken on the original passenger train, the first of the *Hiawatha* fleet, of 1935. An uncle, a cabinetmaker, worked on the interiors of the train's coaches, and Wil's father took him all through the train, including the cab. Years later, he came across a photo of the *Hiawatha* exhibition train at the old Milwaukee Road depot behind engine No. 2. He was thrilled to see the photo and remembered being there the day the photo was taken.

In the mid-1930s, Wil's father worked in the Times Cinema in Milwaukee, known as the world's first Trans-Lux theatre, because the projection booth was behind a translucent screen, instead of above and behind the seats. Wil Sr. installed the projection and sound systems and continued to work there as the first projectionist for a year or so after the theatre opened. Wil Jr. spent many hours in the theatre while it was being built and after it opened, watching Saturday matinees through the little porthole in the booth.

#### SAN FRANCISCO & VANCOUVER

Wil's father died at the age of 44 following a coronary thrombosis. Wil was 13 and moved with his mother to San Francisco, where he attended high school. He learned letterpress printing and typography, but rather than putting these skills to work as a printer, he went on to study naval architecture and worked for a naval architect. Yet his interest in printing and typography grew; by the time he left San Francisco for Vancouver in 1962, he had acquired two printing presses and type.

Wil established a printing business in North Vancouver under a grocery store on the southwest corner of Upper Levels Highway and Lonsdale Avenue. He made arrangements to have his equipment shipped to Canada on a freighter. He called his operation Grouse Mountain Press and published some work under that imprint, as well as doing commercial job printing.

It was there that a young Gerald Giampa discovered him and the world of typography and fine printing. Giampa, who later founded Cobblestone

Press, considered Wil to be his mentor and the most important influence of his life, noting that he taught him with "deliberate care and kindness."

Wil moved his operation to Denman Street in Vancouver, where he set up in the back of a second-hand bookshop. He displayed some of his wares in the corner of the store window, work that caught the eye of Geoffrey Spencer as he walked by one day in late 1964. Spencer went into the store to investigate and met Wil, who showed him some of his work. One of the items was a booklet of Bertholt Brecht's poem "To Posterity," another a broadsheet with the famous passage from Ecclesiastes, "To everything there is a season."

Spencer thought Wil was "a swan among ducklings," and his work and talent impressed Spencer to such an extent that he called together a group of friends to create the Alcuin Society. "Wil at the time was the closest I'd got to the fugitive qualities of the private press movement, the faint whiff of William Morris," Spencer wrote in an article published in the *Arts & Crafts News* in the fall of 1988. "I found myself worrying about what was to happen to him, as he combined a hippie's disdain for material trappings with the continual necessity of eating."

#### SETTING BOOKS, MOVING ON

Soon after this meeting, Wil moved his equipment to 323 Cambie Street. By that time, he had a contract to design, set by hand and print 500 copies of a book for the Vancouver Public Library, *James Douglas in California, 1841*, a project that, according to Spencer, "strained him to the limit."

The first large project for the official printer of the Alcuin Society was another book, by Captain Horton Rhys, *A Theatrical Trip for a Wager*, with an introduction by Robertson Davies. Spencer wrote that Wil was "turning out the book with just enough Kennerley type to set four pages at a time, at which point he would have to break up the form and distribute the type." Nevertheless, Wil, along with Nick Schwabe, another Vancouver designer and fine printer, printed 500 copies of the 280-page book, which was published in September 1966.

Basil Stuart-Stubbs, University of British Columbia librarian from 1964 to 1981 and first head of the university library's Special



*Hudson at his Cambie Street printing studio. (Harold H. Johnston photos)*

Collections division, was among the founding members of the Alcuin Society. He gave Wil a number of commissions for special projects, both for the library and for himself.

One of the most outstanding works Wil produced for the library was Eric Gill, *Foreword to a Treatise upon the Craft of Wood Engraving* (1967). The publication included a page entitled “Grouse Mountain in Wintertime,” the last impression taken from an original wood engraving by George Kuthan, a Canadian artist born in Bohemia in 1916 who died in North Vancouver in 1966. The page was Wil’s tribute to Kuthan, who had been his friend.

The move to Cambie Street brought Wil into contact with a group of artists living and working in the area, including the sculptor Keith Shields and his wife, Betty, who became lifelong friends; Frits Jacobsen, an illustrator; Charles Butler, a wood sculptor; and Bill Shoebotham, a primitive artist.

Harold Johnston, a photographer, was also part of the group and took many photographs documenting the time. As well as photographing members of the group, Harold, along with his

wife Frances, hosted many a social gathering in their Burnaby home. It was during this period that Wil grew a beard, but not before Keith sculpted a bust of him, depicting a clean-shaven man who appeared to be very much a part of his era.

Wil produced another book for the Alcuin Society, *The Substance of a Journal During a Residence at the Red River Colony, British North America, in the Years 1820–1823* (1967), along with a number of broadsides, pamphlets and other ephemera. While Wil was setting the type for a third book, a heated dispute arose between him and the Society, an argument that was never resolved.

In 1972, Wil boarded a train for the east, leaving his type and presses behind in a studio, with Keith looking after it all for over two years. In Toronto Wil made contacts with publishers, exploring what type of work might be available and making inquiries about obtaining a Canada Council grant. He wrote long letters to Keith and Betty, telling them about the people he’d met and how he spent his days. While the letters provide detailed information about Wil’s life in Toronto, they also document the

remarkable help Keith gave Wil in looking after his printing equipment and taking care of other matters for him during this transitory period.

#### A SPELL IN THE NORTH

Through the connections he made in Toronto, Wil was offered a month-long position teaching hand-set typography and printing at the West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative Ltd. in Cape Dorset, home to a renowned community of carvers and printmakers. As he was running out of money and options, he didn't hesitate. Just a few weeks before he turned 44, Wil boarded a Boeing 737 and landed at Frobisher Bay in the Northwest Territories, where he waited four days until the weather cleared for the flight to Cape Dorset. "I'll be glad to get to Dorset and get my hands on some type again," he wrote to Keith and Betty. "Very, very strange world! Typography in the Arctic? Unbelievable."

The letters, which Keith and Betty's son, Brendan, saved, give a vivid account of the Arctic and the co-op. "It is fascinating to watch the large flat Bavarian stones being dressed, drawn upon by old Eskimos who croon to themselves while they work among benches interspersed with many sculptures," Wil wrote shortly after arriving. The storeroom where all the carvings were deposited before shipment to the capitals of the world, he wrote,

simply took my breath away. It was a dark, glimmering catacomb filled with soapstone and ivory carvings, some white limestone, of innumerable descriptions, impossible to walk through without stumbling over a masterpiece. Some carvings are up to 30 inches or perhaps three feet in height, representing every conceivable configuration of ancient Eskimo legends and tales.

Wil's first stint at the co-op ended after two months. He left Cape Dorset in early November with mixed feelings. "The place grows on you after a while. There is no apparent reason for this. The far north is barren, inhospitable country devoid of any specific interest for most of the year. And yet there is this spell."

He unhappily spent the winter and the



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*Cape Dorset. (Wil Hudson photo)*

summer of 1973 back in Toronto. In January, the government paid him to study new printing technologies at George Brown College, but he soon lost interest in the course. He missed his type and presses, his cats and his friends. "Not having a shop is upsetting and it's been a bad year in all," he wrote to Keith. "The new printing methods are horribly depressing and distasteful and I do hope I will never have to have anything to do with them."

By the end of September, he was back in Cape Dorset and in March 1974, he was asked to settle there permanently, to carry on with his teaching as well as his own work. The arrangement suited him. He designed a printshop addition to the lithography studio. His type and presses, a 12 by 18-inch Little Giant and 10 by 15-inch Chandler & Price platen, made the long journey by the annual summer supply freighter in 1974, along with a small machine shop that he used to make parts to keep the presses running.

"Lightering all this onto an arctic beach from the ship, riding about a mile off, was a harrowing experience I never, under any circumstances, wish to repeat," he wrote. He named the whole operation Kingait Press. As well as teaching, setting type and printing, he created drawings for type for an Inuktitut syllabic, an alphabet of 69 characters that was manufactured in Toronto.

The "first little piece of bookwork" from the Kingait Press was *The Inuit World: An Annotated Block Print Illustrating Wildlife, Weapons, Tools, and Objects of Everyday Life, with Names in English and Inuktitut Languages* (1977). It featured a lino-block engraving by the artist Kanangia, with descriptions of each object, written by the artists

and the composers. Wil described the evolution of the project in a letter he wrote to *Fine Print*. "It was not initially conceived as a book at all and we cannot claim that it was 'designed.' Rather it was coped with as we went along." In the same issue, a reviewer called the book a "technically and aesthetically superb piece of printing."

Wil continued to design and print broadsides and pamphlets while in Cape Dorset. Two of the finest are "The God Abandons Antony," a poem by C.P. Cavafy, translated by G. Valassopoulo, and "Po: Madly Singing in the Mountains," a poem by Poi Chu-I, translated by Arthur Waley. Along with his "To Posterity," these artful publications, which were not commissioned, are among the best of his work: classical, bold, elegant. Wil shared the feelings they express, of exile, separation and isolation, and the publications are his personal statements, his own mad singing.

#### SETTLING BACK IN B.C.

In 1979 Wil parted ways with the co-op and travelled to England to study at the Monotype Corporation. He bought a Monotype caster and had it shipped to Powell River, where his old friend Keith Shields was now living. Wil set up his last shop in a small room in the back of a hotel in the middle of town. His two presses and type from Baffin Island joined the Monotype caster. He managed to scrape by with small jobs, including letterheads, business cards, greeting cards, wedding invitations, art gallery brochures. He had not severed ties with Basil Stuart-Stubbs, who would sometimes give him commissions. At night Wil unfolded a bedroll next to the Little Giant, with his cats for company.

While in Powell River, Wil began a search to discover what had happened to his father's ashes. Amazingly, he found they had been at a mausoleum in Milwaukee for 48 years. He arranged to have them shipped to him. When he retired and moved from Powell River in 1991, he left behind his type and presses, but took his father's ashes with him.

Wil went first to Nelson and stayed with Brendan Shields for a short while. Eventually he settled in Creston, where he lived in a renovated garage, with a plastic lawn chair and boxes for furniture and cats for company.

He started to build a model steamship and made good friends with people who, at first, didn't know anything about his legendary life as a fine printer and typographer.

He lived in Creston longer than anywhere else in his life. He said it was "big sky country," and it must have reminded him of the landscapes from his childhood. He died on January 11, 2014, after a series of strokes. His friends combined his father's ashes with his own and spread them in the forest along Summit Creek, as Wil had requested.

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~ Laura Walz is former editor of the *Powell River Peak*. She lives in Powell River, B.C.



#### For more information

William Ritchie, studio manager at Kinngait Studios (the additional *n* was added post-Wil), began a search in 2013 to discover more about Wil. Ritchie has documented his discoveries at [www.williamritchie.com](http://www.williamritchie.com). Wil's letters to Keith and Betty Shields are now posted on the site, along with photographs, e-mail correspondence (including from some of Wil's friends in Creston), and descriptions and pictures of some of Wil's work.

Sean Johnston, Harold Johnston's son, has posted many of his father's photographs of Wil and his friends, as well as photos Wil took in Cape Dorset, on Flickr, [www.flickr.com/photos/hhjohnston/albums/72157603575682661](http://www.flickr.com/photos/hhjohnston/albums/72157603575682661).

A description of Wil's work held in Rare Books and Special Collections at the University of British Columbia Library is available at [www.memorybc.ca/wil-hudson-fonds](http://www.memorybc.ca/wil-hudson-fonds).

Special Collections and Rare Books at Simon Fraser University Library has some of Wil's papers, which were organized and donated by Dianne Grant, his friend from Creston.