

# Tribute to a Singular Type

*Jim Rimmer was born into the printing trade but, through hard work and creative genius, he put his own unique stamp on the world of letterforms.*

By Rollin Milroy



*Photo by Ryan Mah.*

IN THE DAYS FOLLOWING JIM RIMMER'S death on January 8, 2010, many of the people who posted tributes and commentaries online focused on his influence as a designer of types, both metal and digital. And understandably so: Jim was prolific, and even in the weeks immediately before his death, he was telling correspondents about a new family of types he was starting to work on. But type is just part of this creative, generous and ingenious man's legacy.

Jim was born into printing. His grandfather worked at J.W. Boyd & Sons, a Vancouver printer and publisher; his mother worked there as a binder when she was young; and after grade ten, Jim was presented with a choice, as long as he made the right decision: stay in school or leave school and start a six-year type compositor apprenticeship at Boyd's. Jim was not as

enthusiastic as his father and grandfather perhaps expected; he harboured aspirations of pursuing formal art training. Looking back 40 years later, however, he had no regrets about his choice.

"My fated collision with printing has been quite plainly one of the greatest blessings in a charmed life. I cannot think what direction life would have taken had my father and g.f. not interceded in my desire to attend formal art classes. I can't place a value on what six years of apprenticeship training gave me, particularly the typefounding portion of it" (*Leaves from the Pie Tree*, p. 22).

In the final year of that apprenticeship Jim reconnected with a friend from elementary school, Alberta Robitaille. Jim must have courted and married Alberta with an alacrity that might have surprised some who knew him only in

his later years. Thus, when his apprenticeship ended in 1956 and a permanent position was not forthcoming, Jim and Alberta struck out together. (In what cannot have been a coincidence, that was also the year Jim got his first press.)

For more than a decade, during which time two sons and a daughter appeared, Jim worked as a journeyman compositor for newspapers in B.C.'s Interior and Lower Mainland. It was while working in the job-printing arm of the *New Westminster Columbian* that Jim developed "a design sense and heightened lettering skills," as he

was constantly called on to develop advertisement layouts for clients. This led him into the world of graphic design, but it was several years before he realized the disparity between what he was paid as an employee and what his work was billed at. Once the veil was lifted, he determined to be his own boss, and in 1972 he went into business for himself.

There were diversions during this time, ones which undoubtedly paid less well than graphic design but probably better fed Jim's soul. He started Pie Tree Press in 1974 (named for an apple tree in his backyard) and in the early 1980s was commissioned to print a number of limited edition broadsides, chapbooks and one book for Vancouver's Colophon Books. In 1980 he designed and cut his first typeface, Juliana Old Style. This means he not only designed the type, but also created the matrices—the moulds—for casting each letter as a piece of metal printing type.

During this period he also became involved with Gerald Giampa and the Lanston Type Company, and he was instrumental in the first digitization of several classic types. (For an account of this in Jim's own words, see *Amphora* 152.) In the years that followed, he designed, cut and cast eight more metal types, and designed at least twice that number as digital fonts.

Jim "retired" in 1998, devoting himself full

time to the activities for which the large studio he added to the back of his Victorian house was equipped: designing and cutting new types, casting, printing and binding. He published four books under his Pie Tree Press & Type Foundry imprint, all featuring his unique multicolour linocut illustrations. Although Jim probably considered his last book, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, to be his magnum opus, *Leaves from the Pie Tree* (2007) is the one that best captures Jim's life and work. As an autobiography it can be maddening due to its sometimes scattered structure

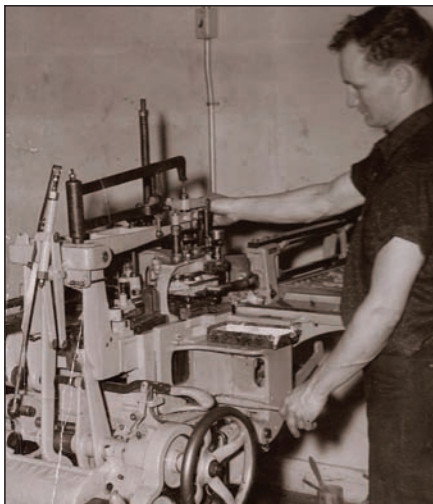
and the omission of dates and other details, but as a record of the range of Jim's creativity, from designing types through printing and binding, it ranks as one of the most distinctive private press books published in recent years.

The illness that ultimately claimed Jim developed only in the last year of his life. While undergoing cancer treatments he completed binding his edition of *Tom Sawyer* and was able to enjoy the warmth and enthusiasm with which it was greeted. During what must have been difficult months,

he reported his progress to a correspondent, saying "It makes me feel good to do this project." Just a few weeks before his death, the energy and spirit that characterized his life remained undiluted: "I am quite sure I will get it all cut and cast, but I don't know if I have enough steam to print something—certainly not *Treasure Island*. I am tinkering with a small text that I would like to print with it. Maybe I could call on a few of my friends to finish off the printing?"

As the contributions from just a few of his friends here attest, there would be no shortage of volunteers for such a project.

~ Rollin Milroy's *Heavenly Monkey* imprint published a number of books printed from types cut and cast by Jim Rimmer over the past decade.



"The author operating the Monotype Type & Rule Caster which he rebuilt for the Williams Lake Tribune [c. 1957]. The machine and the hair have vanished." [Jim's quote for this image as included in *Leaves from the Pie Tree*.]