

# PLANTATION PRINTER'S PIE: GRANDMOTHER & THE MULTIGRAPH

*Phyllis Reeve*

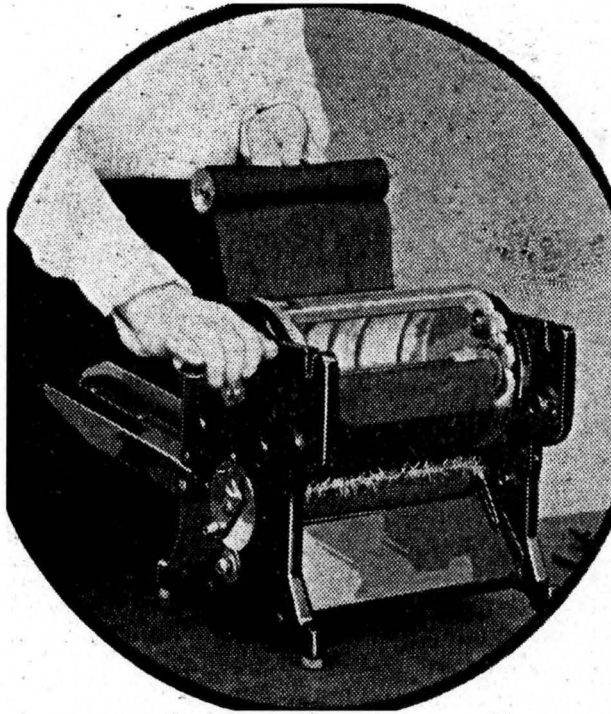
**B**Y THE TIME RICHENDA SAUNDERS SET OUT FOR AFRICA IN 1895, she had written several novels and launched her own London magazine, *IDEAS (in Fact, Fiction, Fashions, Functions & Fun)*. She intended now to visit her brother and to investigate journalistically the Great Zimbabwe Ruins. On shipboard she met Charles Parham, and romance, marriage, babies (including my father), the Matabele rebellion, the Boer War and various other interesting happenings forced her writing and publishing career onto a far back burner. But the burner remained always at the simmer. She wrote occasional verse and hundreds of long, beautifully composed letters. She edited her husband's geological reports and political polemics. And wherever on the veldt or in the world she went, she took a typewriter.

In Hokitika, New Zealand, during World War I, Richenda and her family had little money and many friends and relations deserving of tokens at Christmas and on other auspicious occasions. With the co-operation of Mr. Evans, local printer and newspaper editor, she put together little books of poetry entitled *Fernleaves* and *Faerie Salutations*, celebrating the botanical and scenic blessings of southwestern New Zealand. Her teenage daughters, Beatrice and Helena, illustrated the booklets with appropriate watercolours, painted directly on the page, or as separate miniatures to be tipped in.

The girls became fascinated with the printing process, busying themselves with types and galleys, and the choice of exactly the right weight and colour of stock for the covers. Mr. Evans and several friendly librarians and shopkeepers received their own presentation copies with delight, and encouraged Richenda to offer other copies for sale.

But in 1921 the family's relocation to a small Fijian plantation posed a formidable challenge to their home publishing venture. From the north-west corner of Vanua Levu they would need a two-day sea journey to reach a printshop. For two years they made do with watercolours and calligraphy on whatever paper came to hand to create folded cards for Christmas and other occasions. Then Charlie brought the Multigraph.

The restless eldest son of Richenda and Charles returned from Sydney, Australia, as he always returned from his journeys, full of enthusiasm and unconcerned with the financial aspect. His brother Wilfrid, my Dad, grumbled to his diary about keeping up the payments on the machine, but joined his sisters in mastering its operation.



The Multigraph was a table-top printer, no larger than Richenda's typewriter, though requiring additional space for traditional printing apparatus such as type, type cases, tools, clips and composing fork. I found a helpful description posted on the web in September 2002 by Roberta Lavadour of Mission Creek Press in Pendleton, Oregon, web

site [www.missioncreekpress.com](http://www.missioncreekpress.com). She was one of a small but devoted group engaged in creating broadsides to commemorate the centenary of the patenting of the Multigraph on March 10, 1903, by Harry C. Gammeter, a typewriter salesman. I am indebted to Ms. Lavadour for permission to quote from her little primer of the Multigraph.

"Its most basic model consists of a metal drum that has vertical channels running across it. Moveable type, very similar to regular lead type, but cut short with a large nick cut into both sides to form a foot, is slid into the channels and the lines are held in place by small metal clips. Originally the type was designed to match the typewriters on the market. Later fonts like Garamond, Bodoni and the usual popular typefaces were cast. Small fonts have a flat face, like regular type, but larger sizes and image cuts were cast with curved faces to conform to the drum.

"There are two inking options. You can wrap a huge ribbon like a typewriter ribbon but 8.5 inches wide — around the drum (over the top of the type form) or use the optional ink and form rollers with oil or rubber based ink.

"A rubber platen roller sits underneath the drum and paper is squeezed between them by cranking a side handle. The printed page can have a nice impression, just like type printed on a platen or flatbed press."

Although, alas, I do not have the Multigraph itself, I have three of the manuals which accompanied it: *Instructions for Operating the No. 59, No.60 and No.61* (I believe this one was a No. 60), *Revised Instructions*

*for the Use and Care of Ideal Rollers*, and the *Multigraph Manual of Printing*, which includes font specimens and discussions of points, ems, ens, rules, and the basic printer's arcana. The *Manual* advises: "The best way to familiarize yourself with the process of printing is to get permission from a friendly printer to go into his shop and watch a job go through from the rough copy to the finished product. In this way you will see for yourself the number of steps which must be taken and the processes the job must get through." The girls had done that back in Hokitika with Mr. Evans, and they were ready.

Over the next three years they printed a dozen or more titles, ranging in size from 3 by 4 inches and ten pages to 5 by 4 inches and 100 pages. Titles included a tiny collection of animal tales which my grandfather had written for the boys years before in South Africa, and two selections of Wilfrid's poems, but most were Richenda's poetic tributes to Fiji. Three books were more ambitious than the rest and more widely distributed.

*The Love Sonnets of the Senora Carilla das Flores*, claiming to be a translation from Spanish, even ventured out for review. Beneath the headline "Difficult Book-Printing," *The Dominion*, a New Zealand journal, enthused over this "beautiful little volume" and "dainty little collection," and commented on its printing: "Apart, however, from the literary merit of the production, the volume commends itself to all lovers of books for its unique qualities. It has not been printed in the ordinary acceptance of the term; it has been created and multiplied per medium of a duplicating device, and the blurred effect of the type caused by printing through a ribbon gives the book a very unusual appearance. In the absence of all the appliances which are called on in the production of the modern book, this little labour of love goes to show the possibilities of amateur book-production."

The largest book, *Plantation Printer's Pie; a Pot-pourri of Facts and Foods in Fiji*, gave readers the benefit of Richenda's trial and error learning as she tried to keep house on the island. Tropical recipes mingled with practical tips on coping with such challenges as fruit stains, taxi-drivers, dogs, wild pigs, and pianos, and all the topics were indexed. New editions emerged as her experience increased. Being her own printer as well as publisher enabled her to make corrections and changes with almost irresponsible ease. She indicated some revision, printing and edition numbers, but not all, and varied text and title according to her

purpose at the moment. On the dedication page of *Some Medicinal Plants of Vanua Levu*, Richenda Parham is identified as the author of *Running the Home in Fiji*, probably a less playful name for *Plantation Printer's Pie*.

*Some Medicinal Plants* heralded Richenda's emergence as an ethnobotanist. The Multigraph publication, "bound" with a strand of mauve wool, grew into a serious monograph, *Fiji Native Plants with their Medicinal and Other Uses*, published as Polynesian Society Memoir No. 16 in 1943.

After her husband's death in 1926, Richenda and her daughters spent most of their time in the city of Suva, within reach of newspapers and print shops, and made less and less use of the Multigraph.

Commercially too, the Multigraph languished. In the early days of direct mail, its products flattered people that they were receiving individually typed letters from large organisations. Roberta Lavadour explains: "How did these nifty little presses fall out of the awareness of printers? They were used by office workers, mainly for cranking out solicitation letters, so as soon as something faster and easier came along, they had no sentimental attachment to the Multigraph."

My aunts, however, did have some sentimental attachment to the nifty little press. They never discarded it, and they were always proud of their miniature books. I think of them, as I work on my island, at my personal computer, using a program which gives me access to all the fonts listed in *The Multigraph Manual of Printing*, with scanner, CD-writer (which I have not quite mastered), two printers, digital camera and photocopier close at hand. And I think of some of the chapbooks I have received as gifts in recent years — children's stories illustrated by the author, a set of verses in memory of a mutual friend, souvenirs of special events — and of a few I have made myself.

For a while, Richenda, Beatrice and Helena, who were so contemptuous of fashion that they wore long skirts all through the 1920s and 30s and into the 1940s, were on the cutting edge of desktop publishing technology. We have taken nearly eighty years to catch up with them.

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