

Genius in the Basement

Jim Rimmer remembers the entrepreneurial highs and lows of GERALD GIAMPA, a veteran printer and typographer whose influence was widely felt. Giampa died in Vancouver on June 24.

By Jim Rimmer



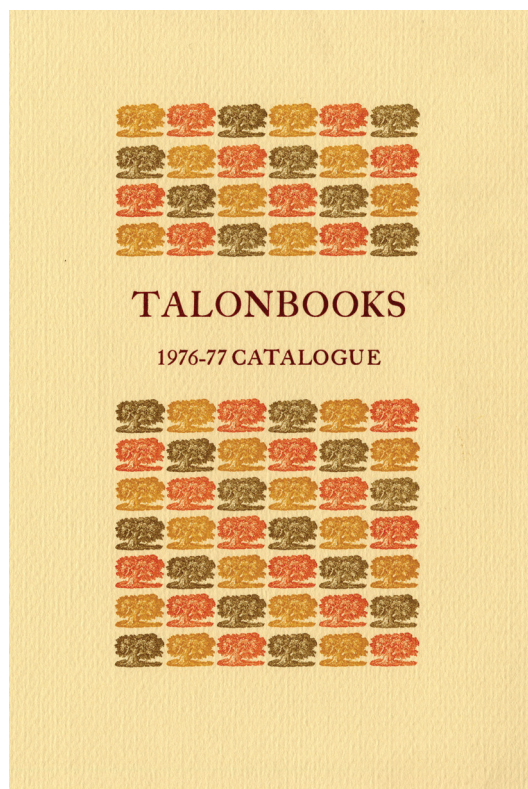
IT IS DIFFICULT to write about Gerald Giampa and remain objective; difficult because there were many sides to the man. Talent, genius, generosity, petulance, spite, jealousy, self-indulgence and, of course, his great love of the craft were all things that defined him. He and I had many stormy times in our long friendship. My non-printing friends asked me from time to time what attracted me to him as a friend. I could never give an answer that made sense.

So honesty is the only way to approach these words. He drank always, at times was heavily hooked on hard drugs, and was an unrepentant carouser. He was, into the bargain, the finest printer and typographer I have ever or possibly ever will meet.

At the time I met him I had lost a lot of my interest in printing, concerning myself completely with my day job: that of freelancing as a designer, illustrator and lettering artist. The year was 1976.

~ 323 IN CAMBIE STREET

I had been walking up Cambia Street heading south toward Victory Square. Glancing down the stairs that ran parallel to the sidewalk, I spotted several small cards taped to the inside of the



windows. At a glance they were beautiful, even at three yards away. I scooted down the stairs and studied them. I can't recall what the subject matter was, but they were of gorgeous design and printed letterpress using Granjon ornaments. As I ogled them two men inside spotted me and were obviously chuckling and discussing me. I tapped on the window. The bearded one waved me in. I introduced myself as a one-time printer and current designer. He introduced himself as a printer of classic works and, jabbing a thumb at his companion,

introduced him as "Martin."

I noticed that one of the printed pieces bore his shop's name "Cobblestone Press" and the address: 323 IN CAMBIE STREET. I came to know that the 18th-century handling of the address (in) was something that appealed to his love of antiquity, and in the bargain confounded Americans and irritated the Post Office.

He asked me some probing questions: Had I ever heard of American Type Founders? Did I know of the famous Benton Engraver? Did I know of the Barth Caster? Did I know of Stephenson Blake and the pivotal casters?

I passed with flying colours and in turn asked him if he was familiar with the Monotype group



of casting machines. He spluttered (for he had a pronounced stammer all the years that I knew him), “My G-G-God, yes! That’s the one casting machine I might be able get for my shop!”

I answered: “Before you do anything rash, come out to my house and I’ll run mine for you.”

“What? What? You have one?!”

“Sure. Come out tonight, and you can see it run.”

Quite soon after this conversation Gerald found his way to my house, and we spent the evening playing with the machine. I recall he held the newly cast letter in his hand and rolled it back and forth, marvelling at the clean, sharp cast that had been made before his very eyes. He was like a man who had just discovered King Solomon’s mines.

About ten days after our first meeting I thought of him and decided I might drop by for a few minutes and say hello. I tapped on his door. He looked up from the stone with a blank, unsmiling stare. It struck me as odd that he would look less than friendly. I signalled “Was it alright to come in?” He nodded. This was to be my first introduction to Giampa’s legendary moodiness. I tried to strike up a conversation, but there was no reciprocation. This was the first time I experienced the closed-rank, back-turned manner that he could adopt. There were to be many over the next 30-plus years. This one, at least, was fairly easy to understand. As I later learned, he felt like a jilted lover, missing out on my own equipment buy.

He asked one question: “When you got your caster from Roy Shilvock, did you also get the Caslon matrices?” I told him that I did. His eyes seemed to smoulder in their sockets. I realized I was not dealing with the average person and excused myself. I didn’t know at the time that Caslon was his favourite of types, and I should

have sensed this because it was on every piece that he showed me. I had done something unforgivable: a mere graphic designer had dared to zip in front of him and scoop the matrices of his life. What the hell right did I have to own them? Once I came to understand his sense of justice, I had to agree with the sentiment.

No more than a day or so later there was a tapping at my studio door. To my great surprise it was Gerald. There he stood, smiling from ear to ear, and stammering: “G-g-gee, gee, can I talk to you for a minute?” I ushered him in. He sat down and right away noticed a half a bottle of red wine that was left over from the studio Christmas party some months before. He kept glancing at it while trying to start a conversation. I said, “Look, don’t be offended, because that wine is probably awful by now, but would you like a glass?”

“Sh-Sh-sure!”

I poured him a glass and one for myself, and it WAS awful, but he said nothing but sipped it up, even seeming not to mind the terrible taste. Not wanting to offend him, I slipped my glass aside when his gaze was diverted. He started in to talk: “I think I could learn some things from you about the Monotype. Would you be available to teach me? I can pay you.” I waved off the money part and said I’d love to introduce him to the system, providing he would get a caster. There was a Monotype Display Caster for sale by the *Jewish Western Bulletin*. He wrote down the details. By noon the next day he had bought it.

He got up to leave, stopped at the door and said, “I might have seemed a little off the other day when you dropped by. I was disappointed that I missed out on the Caslon matrices.” I replied, “But they were sold to me more than a year ago, well before I ever heard of you.”

“I know,” he replied, “but I have always wanted

988-8314

The motif on the cover is composite of 3 small patterns repeated & arranged; find the irregularity?



ERALD GIAMPA, begs leave to inform you of his services. In addition to fine book work we continue to offer the subtle in typographical consultation & Corporate Identity. Our clientele are men of business so it would be redundant for us to lecture on the merits of a well-planned advertising campaign; there is one before you. If you are satisfied with your present market-growth-rate we apologize for the waste of your time: we deal exclusively with those who want to do better. We, sir, are not the run of the mill machete salesmen. 🎨🎨🎨

to have that Caslon on a machine so I could make an unlimited amount of type.”

I did the one thing that sealed our new friendship: “Well, then,” I said, “you’d better have them. I’ll drop them off to you tomorrow.”

“What? What? How can you do that?”

“You’re mad about them. I can live without them. Just buy me another series from Roy and we’ll call it even.”

Gerald had a funny little jig to his gait when he was in a buoyant mood. He fairly skipped across the floor and down the long flight of steps and out the door onto Cordova Street. No more than three minutes had passed and my phone rang. It was Gerald. He had covered the two blocks from my door to his and had to phone to ask if I was serious about our matrix trade!

~ WHAT MAKES THE MAN

Gerald made no secret of the fact that as a youngster he was a real problem child. He had a terrible temper, was prone to uncontrollable tantrums and was just generally incorrigible. These were his words regarding himself as a youngster.

He claimed to have taken an interest in printing at a very early age, starting as many children did with a John Bull printing set. His story was that he would copy passages out of books by Zane Grey, painstakingly stamping them with the little rubber type that made up the little printing set.

At one point he made the acquaintance of a Swiss-born printer whose name was Nick, who at the time operated a small letterpress printing shop in North Vancouver. I am not sure what the time frame was, but shortly after becoming infatuated with the trappings of a real print shop, Gerald managed to get his hands on a small platen press and, according to him, after acquiring some type and tools, managed to rent a small retail shop

on Upper Lonsdale in North Vancouver, and his first print shop was born. He claimed to be only 14 years of age at the time; hard to imagine, to be sure, but then you had to know Mr. Giampa.

I cannot recall the circumstances, but somehow he became interested in politics at this same time, and somehow infiltrated the campaign backrooms of John Diefenbaker’s coterie of workers. I never believed this story, until one day Gerald actually dragged out a few photos of what was obviously him, standing with “Dief.” He really was something: no more than early teens, all dressed up in a suit wearing an ascot and a beret and smoking a pipe! I guess you would say he was a “geek,” or at the very least a highly unusual young teen.

I have long believed that the things we do and the things we love all go into making us what we are. This was very true of Gerald. There were certain things in his life that were his touchstones, his reason for being: the printing craft, the memory of his dear “Granny”; the few pieces of Arts and Crafts furniture that she left to him; the music of Bob Dylan; wooden boats of any kind, but particularly cruisers; the printing of John Henry Nash, the Grabhorn Brothers, Lawton Kennedy and F.W. Goudy (odd that if those four men were put together in the same room it would have been an ugly scene, for there were deep rifts between them); red wine (and it didn’t have to be expensive or even good); books, particularly related to printing. He had a good collection of John Henry Nash books and several Grabhorn productions as well.

He loved the ladies and was an embarrassing flirt. It mattered little if the lady was single, married or affianced. He went after them. I never thought of him as a handsome man (or perhaps not being one myself I don’t rate an opinion), but



he always made some headway with the fair sex, or at least never got slapped in my presence. There was no doubt about it: he was a charmer.

~ ROAD TRIPS

Gerald and I made several road trips together. A memorable one was on the occasion that he was being paid for a printing bill in an exchange for a car. It was a 1960 Mercedes Benz, one of the early “finny” types that were built for the North American taste. The car was located in Prince George, a rough and ready logging and cattle town in the Northern Cariboo. He was off alone and was petrified. I asked if he’d like some company and he jumped at the offer.

Another trip was one where I rented a five-ton box truck and we drove to Whidbey Island to pick up some casting machines we had bought.

We got there with no trouble, and loaded with some small difficulty, but I couldn’t convince him to stop loading all the “freebies” that were laying around for the taking. We eventually drove off. When I stopped at the station in the village to get some gas, the attendant said: “Man, you’re really badly overloaded. I can tell by the way your headlights are lighting up the hillside there. You’d better keep clear of the Highway Patrol.”

We started off. The trip was less than 100 miles, and I crossed the border at the truck crossing. Taking a different turn, I figured on coming north through Fort Langley and up Glover Road. Gerald had no idea where we were going and was convinced I had got us lost. He had had a tiring day and was pretty badly frayed. He whined and screamed, nearly panting with fright and exasperation. I assured him we were on the right path. He continued to babble hysterically. I looked over. There were tears of rage in the corners of his eyes. (He once told me that being Italian he was prone to fits of emotion.) “You stupid bastard!” he screamed. Just at that point we came to the junction plainly marked TO VANCOUVER, and you could see the ski lift lights on Grouse Mountain.

“Oh!” he said quietly. “Th-th-th-that’s okay then.”

~ THE MONSTER SHOP ON PENDER STREET

In about 1982 Cobblestone Press changed its address to 1340 East Pender Street and its name

to Northland Letterpress. I had left my Gastown studio space about a year before this, and it was coincidence that Gerald landed again two blocks from my workplace. His new shop was gargantuan. He moved from a basement of 800 square feet to this manufacturing space of nearly 4,000 square feet! The space was necessary to accommodate his growing collection of casters and presses and the name change to confound bill collectors. I think the latter was not so much a joke. So he then operated under the new name of Northland Letterpress.


I think that he had done his better personal work at the little basement shop on Cambie, although he did carry on for a few years producing fine press pieces. However, to cover the hefty rent, he turned more and more to commercial jobbing work. As a result I think much of it was uninspired, done just to keep the lights on. After some few years it became evident that he was tiring of the hustle and bustle of commercial deadlines, something that he was never very attuned to.

Gerald drank more and dabbled in heroin even more heavily than he had in past years. He made no secret of his fondness for cocaine. He had siege after siege of badly swollen ankles. He was ordered to stop drinking and did so several times, but after a few weeks he would resume, and in the first few hours his lower legs were like pumpkins. When this became known to me I felt very badly for him. He had started on a downward path that I think contributed to his untimely death.

Gerald was never really the hippy that everyone thought him to be. He was, under the whole-earth cotton clothes, a businessman who liked money and was ever on the trail to find it. By the mid-1980s, hearing about the need for more typefaces to run on the computer, he cut a deal with a loan shark friend and raised enough money to attend the yearly Seybold Conference in the U.S. He came back with little jets of smoke issuing from the corners of his eyes. His excitement at what he had learned was alarming. He said that he thought many of the people involved in making fonts, both originals and revivals of historic and traditional typefaces, were sadly inexperienced and that their work showed it.

For the next few months he did a lot of studying and reading, and finally came up with





the solution: the Mac, not the PC, would be the industry leader. One studio in Vancouver had got in one of the new Amiga machines and the youngsters in the studio loved it. It looked for a time that this would be the favourite box, but soon the Mac took over. Gerald acquired one, and then another. He travelled to Germany, bought the URW IKARUS software and took a short course of schooling in its use. He came back ready to make a font. His first effort was Goudy's Hadriano, chiefly because it was essentially a display face, and more importantly because it had no lower case, making the character set much smaller and easier to complete. Even so, with the help of a seriously alcoholic lifelong friend he worked on it for more than six months and got no more than 25 percent of the way into the outlines on the Mac IKARUS.

The new company, named Giampa Textware, operated on investor money. I was urged to get in, but having no cash to gamble with, I opted to make free drawings of type outlines my sole investment in the company. The first sets I gave them were of my newly cut metal type: Albertan. I then added other fonts to the family: small caps, italic, and several display variants. Later on I made a whole new text version in a light weight for letterpress use.

On top of that I did many revival works for the company. The bulk of these were additional characters for digital designs which Gerald was having done from the very large Lanston Monotype Library that he had recently purchased. This collection was made up of hundreds of thousands of steel punches, many millions of punched bronze matrices, and the punching, justifying, optical devices that went into producing matrices for the most sophisticated metal composition machine in the history of printing.

But far and away the most important part of the purchase was the many tons of large-format brass and copper "patterns" of each letter and symbol that went into a Monotype typeface. Since these were in some case seven inches in height and were in relief, they could be simply placed on a Vandercook proofing press and pulls taken onto newsprint. Once dry they went straight onto the Aristo Tablet of the IK system and were input by hand as was the formerly mentioned Hadriano.

Even with this great asset of large ready-made

and completely accurate historic fonts, the output of Giampa Textware was painfully slow. Many bad letters came out of the back room because of the lack of type knowledge of those working on the Macs.

Gerald had no interest in that part of the process and occupied himself with being a "tycoon," travelling the world and meeting important people involved in computer type production. He met and instantly got into a nasty row with the directors of British Monotype, the sister company of his Lanston purchase. They promptly threatened him with a lawsuit for making use of the name "Monotype." Probably if he had not been so arrogant in his tycoon role he might have been able to work out some arrangement with them, but that was not his style. He clinched the animosity by telling one of the Monotype people he was dealing with that he would rather speak to the "organ-grinder, not the monkey"! The meetings ended with loud voices amid the potted palms of a stylish London hotel restaurant.

Giampa Textware lasted in that form for no more than two years. Gerald scooped the assets of the company, which by then were not solely his, because others had invested in it. However, he used the wedge of being owed two years' rent by Giampa Textware, owed to Northland Letterpress, his new printing company. None of the investors were made aware of the outstanding rent, so he was uncontested in his seizure of the company and its intellectual properties.

So was born the short-lived Lanston Type Company. In less than four years, this new company was all but dead; the production of font had ceased. Sales were almost nil in a flooded font market, and before long, Gerald was making plans to pull up stakes and move with his wife, a toddler and 70 tons of heavy equipment and brass patterns to Prince Edward Island!

~ FURTHER EAST STILL

P.E.I. was not kind to Gerald. He was hospitalized for a mental condition; his relationship of more than 25 years with Mary Jane collapsed; and a storm surge damaged much of the Lanston Monotype material, sold off for attractive scrap metal prices. What assets remained—equipment, Lanston materials, papers and books—were



auctioned off, the proceeds split, and Gerald and Mary Jane went their separate ways. He soon met a Finnish woman, married her with little forethought and moved to Finland, where he operated the remnants of the Lanston venture.

He remained in Finland for no more than about 18 months, suddenly reappearing in Vancouver without any announcement in what was apparently an attempt to hide from his new wife. She somehow knew of me and called, looking for her lost groom. I told her what I knew, which was nothing. I never did hear how it all turned out.

Gerald seemed to go from bad to worse in his first months in Vancouver. He had no money, was drinking heavily and would crash with whoever could put him up for a night or two. For the first time since I knew him he seemed to have no circle of friends or support group to prop him up. Then he sought out an old lady friend, and his fortunes changed. Lynn had been his friend and even a printing client for many years, and the two of them soon became a couple, Gerald living with her and even working in the Gastown store.

I have to admit in the last three or four years of Gerald's time back home in Vancouver I had seen very little of him. We were not on the outs, just not in close contact. We were still speaking, but it was done (as it always was) on his terms. He asked me the occasional small favour, a small drawing or some such thing, and I always obliged. But he seemed less spirited. His mood was generally flat when we spoke. He visited me once a couple of years ago, and I showed him my type engraving equipment and the latest type I was working on. He was quiet but enthusiastic. There was, however, none of the smoke-coming-out-of-the-corner-of-the-eyes response of the old Gerald.

I heard from Lynn of his illness, that he was in St. Paul's Hospital and was at long last conscious. Because of his contagious condition, he was in a private room and had a phone. She said he would like to hear from me. I called him immediately. We spoke briefly. He was not well, and at the time my own speech was hampered by a medical condition. But he was overjoyed to hear from me. I was relieved to hear him sounding so well and hoped that the dark projections for his chances were wrong. I called again the next afternoon. "Jeez!" he exclaimed. "It's great to hear from you.

This is one of the best things that has happened to me in here!" I mentioned my own medical condition to him, and he said, "Yes, I know of it, and I'm concerned." This from a man who was terribly ill, hanging by a thread, less than 48 hours away from his own end. I remembered why we had been friends.

I put to him the idea that in the fall, when the two of us were feeling better, we should take a driving trip up to the Cariboo country to visit the printer Alex Widen of Clinton, B.C. I thought he was going to fall out of bed with excitement. "God! What a great idea. Now I can live through all this crap, having that to look forward to."

It was obvious that he liked the idea of the trip. Our road trips together had always been memorable if not completely fun.

I missed the next day's phone call to him, and before I could get around to calling, a call came to the house from Lynn. Gerald had died of a massive stroke.

It shouldn't have surprised me that he died at the age of 59. He had been "dying" ever since I first met him from either his heart or his liver.

The last time I spoke to him we were discussing our health conditions, and he remarked, "It's okay, we're too ugly to die." I answered: "Well, YOU are!" We both chuckled at my cleverness. That was the last time I spoke with him.

He was an aggravating bugger: a complete stew of genius, vindictiveness, sweetness, spite and charm. I am safe in the assertion that there will never be another like him ... certainly not in that mix.

I still get a flat feeling each time he comes to mind and I realize that he's gone. The craft he loved will always exist, carried on by people who are attracted by its humanity. Perhaps some will be inspired by the work he left behind. He would love to know it.

So, here's to you, Gerald, old friend. You were fun to know, and I owe you much.

~ Jim Rimmer is a type designer and the proprietor of Pie Tree Press in New Westminster, B.C. Images courtesy of SFU Library, Special Collections and Rare Books.