

CARL DAIR, 1912-1967

On the evening of September 27th, 1967, Carl Dair was in New York where he delivered the Paul A. Bennett Memorial Lecture, "Typographic Design and the New Technology" in the Heritage of the Graphic Arts Series. The following day he died of a heart attack on his return journey to Toronto. If ever there was a person aware of the meaning and significance of heritage and who was especially qualified to talk about the past and the future in graphic arts, it was Carl Dair.

The year 1967 was marked by two great events in Canadian typographic history and in the life of Carl Dair. The first was the completion of his new typeface "Cartier," the first text-type designed in Canada, on which he had begun work in Holland some ten years earlier. The second was the publication by the University of Toronto Press of the completely revised version of his book *Design with Type*. On both these undertakings Carl had worked with his characteristic determination and thoroughness. To see the completion of these two works—the typeface and the book—was his personal dedication. He knew he had little time left.

In Canada we have had few type designers. Lack of public interest and lack of financial support have tended to discourage the whole study of bibliography, particularly in such fields as typography. Only the dedicated have persevered, and Carl Dair, typographer, was one of the few. Those interested in the many aspects of bibliography, particularly in this country, will come to recognize the greatness of this man if they have not already done so. Certainly his fellow typographers at home and around the world honoured him with medals, by seeking his advice as consultant, and by appointing him a member of many international juries for exhibitions of typography and book design.

It is revealing to follow even in brief outline the chronology of this remarkable man. The account of his wide and varied experience, beginning in Welland, Ontario and ranging throughout Canada, and later to France, Germany, Italy, Jamaica and the United States, does

much to display the many sides of Carl Dair's talent as typographer, designer, lecturer, scholar and writer.

Carl Dair was born on February 14, 1912 in Welland, where he received his early education at the Central Public School and Welland High School. At the age of ten he became a carrier boy for the *Welland-Port Colborne Evening Tribune*, where he met the late Louis Blake Duff, publisher and bibliophile, who did much to shape Dair's later career. He never forgot his debt to Louis Blake Duff as the dedication of *Design with Type* records:

“To the memory of Louis Blake Duff a bibliophile of great knowledge and fine taste who nurtured my interest in typography at an early age & never turned his head away from me except when I was swiping type from the hell box of his printing office in Welland, Ontario.”

In 1930 Carl Dair sold advertising and worked as the layout man for the *Stratford Beacon-Herald*. During the depression years from 1932 until the beginning of World War II Carl Dair saw the inside of many printing establishments throughout the country, making a living, almost, one might say, in the great tradition of printing since the fifteenth century, as an itinerant printer. Those were years of hard work when jobs were few, when union hours were non-existent, and when a compositor-pressman was paid for what he produced. There was little time for thought about design, for the work which was to occupy his time in the 1950s and 1960s.

In 1940 Carl Dair moved to Montreal and for the next seven years gained valuable experience at a variety of jobs. He worked in printing and engraving houses, and was for a time art director for a department store. In 1945 he joined the National Film Board as Typographical Director of its Graphics Division. Two years later he returned to private design work when he joined with Henry Eveleigh to found the Eveleigh-Dair Studios in Montreal. During these years, until 1951, he also lectured in typography at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts.

In 1951 Carl Dair moved to Toronto where he devoted himself mainly to free-lance work, except for a brief time when he was Art Director of Design Workshop, Limited. From 1951 it is possible to see his wide experience and talent coming to fruition in an impressive range of typographical accomplishments. He made his living as a free-lance designer but he also lectured and undertook many special

commissions. With these commissions came awards, fellowships, and honours, particularly from fellow artists who recognized his great talent and experience. This knowledge he never hesitated to share with a rare humility and generosity with fellow designers and with young beginning students of typography at the Ontario College of Art, where he lectured for three years. Carl Dair's humanity, his generous nature, his restless energy were immediately evident, for instance, when he lectured. I shall never forget hearing him speak to members of the first class of York University students at Falconer Hall in 1960: "Now take the letter A . . ." he began, and soon the alphabet was no longer something one took for granted, but a vibrant, living thing, capable of infinite beauty and arrangement, and the blackboard behind him became a veritable mural in black and white, executed on the spot by a master artist and craftsman.

One of the artistic highlights of his year in 1956 was an invitation to contribute to *Liber Librorum*, a folio of typographical solutions to Bible setting sponsored by The Royal Library, Stockholm, to mark the 500th anniversary of the completion of the Gutenberg Bible. Also in 1956 Carl was awarded a Fellowship by the Royal Society of Canada to enable him to spend a year in Europe, and particularly in Holland, where he studied type design and punch-cutting at the famous Joh. Enschedé en Zonen Type Foundry in Haarlem. This was a happy year for Carl and Edith Dair and it was here that he commenced work on his design of a new Canadian typeface.

The nineteen-sixties were typically busy ones for Carl Dair. He continued his free-lance work, exhibited, and won awards in typographic design shows in Canada and abroad. In 1962, for example, he was spokesman for The International Center for the Typographic Arts, Inc. (ICTA) at the "Rendezvous de Lurs," an international annual meeting of graphic communicators at Lurs-en-Provence, France. The new Medal of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts was awarded to him in 1963 for "distinguished achievement in the arts." In the same year he was made an Honorary Fellow of the Society of Typographic Designers of Canada.

It was also in 1963 that Carl and Edith Dair decided to move to Jamaica where Carl accepted a teaching position at the Jamaica School of Arts and Crafts in Kingston. With a bare minimum of equipment his students produced work of outstanding originality and promise. The warm climate was to Carl's liking but after two years he felt he must return to Toronto. During this period he accepted invitations to serve on such juries as the International Jury of Typomundus 20

(1964), and *The International Jury*, International Book Design, Leipzig, 1965.

It was before and after his interlude in Jamaica that Carl Dair made it possible for Massey College to acquire for its Bibliography Room his 1870 Improved Albion press, together with many of his working tools and other printing equipment, including those instruments used while he was studying punch-cutting in Holland. Also acquired was his collection of incunabula leaves representing printers and places of printing in Europe during the years 1468 to 1500.

In 1967 Carl Dair completed the revision of his book *Design with Type*, which was published on January 21st by the University of Toronto Press. In that first month of Canada's Centennial year there was also published the *First Proof of Cartier Roman and Italic: the First Canadian Type for Text Composition*. This was Carl Dair's great work. The first proof was printed in book form in a limited edition of 250 copies by Cape & Company Limited, Toronto.

Here are Carl Dair's "Notes on the Design of the Type" as they appeared in the *First Proof*:

"In designing this face, I had no desire to unnecessarily add to the already ample variety of fine types, nor to seek novelty for its own sake. However, I did feel that certain recent technological changes in typesetting involve a design response.

To note these changes & some of their obvious implications for type design:

1/ The development of photo-typesetting now means that the old form determinants of punch or pattern, matrix & mould, have yielded to a direct relationship between the hand of the designer & the lens of the camera without *any* mechanical intervention. New kinetic forms are therefore possible, with pages as vital as the manuscript page.

2/ Since the combination of typesetting on film and printing by photo-offset eliminates the contact of inked metal type with paper, the designer is freed from concern with small counters or fine joins of strokes filling with ink, or undue wear on corners or serifs. Only legibility & good proportion need concern the designer.

3/ The use of the standard typewriter keyboard on the newest typesetting equipment offers both advantages & disadvantages. Fewer characters are available, & all characters must be designed to fit into a unit system. On the other hand, the ability to back-space

one unit at a time permits a range of ligatures & sensitive spacing that is impractical on type-casting machines.

William Morris once said that “Letters should be designed by artists, not engineers.” Lest it seem that I have been overly concerned with designing to exploit the new typesetting technology, let me say that there has been one underlying design objective in the development of Cartier since its inception over ten years ago.

It has long been a theory of mine that the strengthening of the base line of each letter would contribute to the appearance & legibility of text, a theory derived from a study of certain letters used by Anton Miscomini in a page printed in 1482. In Cartier, it is put to the test; time alone will be the infallible judge of whether the conception & the effort has validity.”

Beatrice Warde’s comment about “Cartier” is typical of the many salutary tributes paid to this new typeface:

“It has the serenity and freshness, the dignity and practicality, of the true spirit of Canada.”

These words from one of the world’s leading type consultants also describe Carl Dair.

On one occasion a few weeks before his untimely death, Carl Dair expressed to me his feeling that some of the younger designers and typographers thought of him as being “old hat.” This opinion seemed incredible to me in the light of all he had accomplished, and in view of the many things he planned to do. No one was more alive to experimentation, to new ideas, to living the creative life. I tried to make this clear to him as best I could. What I wish I had been able to say was that artists have it in them to outwit age, as their work outwits death; the longer they live, the younger they dare to become in their art. This observation was made about the late great *New Yorker* cartoonist, Peter Arno, whose sure lines provoked many a laugh. “Cartier” is living on after Carl Dair. His other works, his great examples to other artists, his way of life (which included many a laugh) will go on living too.¹

DOUGLAS LOCHHEAD

1. For much factual material I am indebted to Evelyn Bayefsky’s admirable bio-bibliography, “Carl Dair” which appeared as a supplement in the *Ontario Library Review*, volume 52, number 1, March 1968. [8] p.