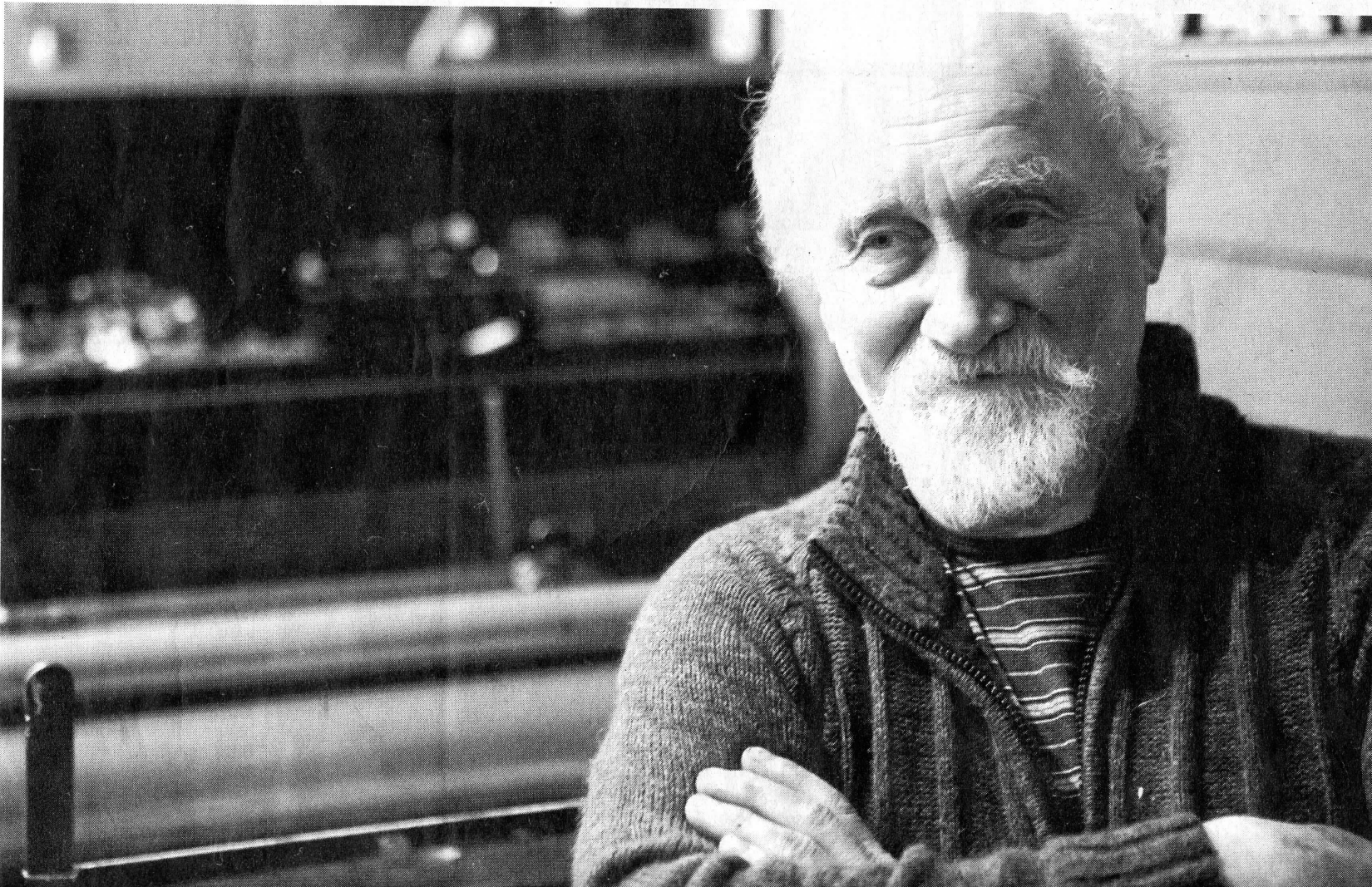


Obituaries

JIM RIMMER, 75 » PRINTER, ILLUSTRATOR, GRAPHIC DESIGNER, TYPOGRAPHER

As the world changed around him, British Columbian stayed loyal to the dying art of hand-crafted print; in a digital age, his shop still smelled of ink and machine grease

A font of knowledge



In an age when anyone with a personal computer is a designer and printer, apprenticeships lasting no longer than the time it takes to boot up, Jim Rimmer kept alive arts dating back to Gutenberg.

He designed and carved by hand his own typefaces, cast molten lead into letters, operated clanging machines. He did so from a printing workshop behind his home in New Westminster, outside Vancouver.

The room smelled of ink and machine grease. On sunny days, light shone through stained-glass windows to illuminate monstrous, cast-iron contraptions once hailed, as is now the laptop computer, as marvels of technology.

The clunking, whirring machinery produced the most magnificent broadsides and books, including his autobiography and an illustrated edi-



Jim Rimmer, seen in his workshop behind his home in New Westminster, B.C., produced illustrated books, carved his own typefaces and cast molten lead with vintage equipment. To the left is a typeface he designed and carved into a stone in his garden.

RYAN MAH

tion of Tom Sawyer for which he also produced colour illustrations.

These were produced in editions so limited as to make each volume a hand-crafted wonder.

He was a printer, illustrator, graphic designer, and typographer, as well as a metal and digital type designer.

It was once said about Rimmer, who died on Jan. 8 at the age of 75, that "fine art is not above him, commercial art is not below him." Another fan called him "a jazz musician with inky fingers."

In retirement, he was hailed for his craftsmanship. The W.A.C. Bennett Library at Simon Fraser University, which maintains a Jim Rimmer Collection, held a night called Rimmerfest in his honour four years ago.

In 2007, the Society of Graphic Designers of Canada named him a fellow, the group's highest honour.

Rimmer was little known by the general public, though the logos he designed were part of the visual diet of everyday life.

He inherited from his father, a stove repairman, a mechanical aptitude that would help him years later when he needed to rebuild vintage machines.

His father also showed talent as a drawer, though he drew only for his own amusement and that of his son. His mother had worked at her family's commercial printing house, so knew how to rebind books. She did so during the harsh years of the Depression with gingham, the only material at hand.

Young Jim was a poor student, which he would later attribute to undiagnosed dyslexia. At the time, he was dismissed as stupid. Not for him were the disciplines of reading, writing and arithmetic.

He cared only for art class, otherwise doodling in the margins of textbooks a phantasmagoria of Wild West scenes over which floated zepelins.

Poor grades led to the parental decision that he should become an apprentice compositor at his grandfather's firm, J.W. Boyd Printers and Publishers. The young man balked, though he agreed to talk the matter over.

"I arrived at the Duke Street house and found grandfather in the backyard, hoeing potatoes," Rimmer recalled in his autobiography. "He propped the hoe in the crotch of the plum tree.

"In the cool green of his garden, he tamped his old briar, took a draw and started in his gentle voice: 'I hear you want to go back to school. ... You have a fine opportunity to have a trade. Printing is an old and respected craft. There is art in printing. You are artistic; you will have a chance to use it.

"At one time printers were the only people aside from nobility who were allowed to carry a sword.' He took a pause to relight his gurgling pipe, and midst the perfume of the rhubarb and loganberries he continued: 'And if yer don't take the job I'll kick yer little arse all the way up Duke Street!'"

Young Jim earned \$15 per week. Thus began a career lasting nearly six decades in pursuit of the mastery of fine typography.

When the apprenticeship ended, he found work as a Linotype and Monotype operator at daily and weekly newspapers.

At the Williams Lake Tribune in B.C.'s Cariboo, his drawings caught the eye of the publisher, who asked for a weekly cartoon for which he paid the munificent sum of \$5.

Rimmer returned to Vancouver, working in the composing shop of newspapers. Realizing the letterpress trade was shrinking, he determined to become a graphic designer, attending night classes at the Vancouver School of Art (now the Emily Carr University of Art + Design). His newfound skills gained him a position with the Columbian, the daily newspaper in New Westminster, where he worked for seven years.

The attraction of an independent exploration of the typographical arts led him to launch a freelance career. He opened a shop in Vancouver's historic Gastown district, using the front window to display his work for the edification of the neighbourhood winos.

He worked for advertising agencies and design studios, designing logos for Canadian Pacific Airlines and BC Hydro, among other clients.

One of his most widely distributed images was created for the Vancouver-based band Heart. The band's name in a thick, flowing script is immediately evocative of its mid-1970s era and is often cited in lists of top rock-band logos. The sisters Ann and Nancy Wilson revived the logo after reuniting as Heart eight years ago.

He began designing typefaces in 1981, naming his creations after friends and family – Nephi Mediaeval (for his father, John Nephi Rimmer); Duensing Titling (for friend Paul Duensing); Juliana Old Style (for a daughter), and Albertan (for his wife, Alberta). He also designed a calligraphic face named Fellowship (for the American Typecasting Fellowship) and another known as Hannibal Oldstyle (after the birthplace of Mark Twain, a favourite author).

In 1998, he began producing

a digital library of typefaces, including some of his own design as well as revivals of other faces.

He produced more than 200 digital fonts, which are sold through the P22 Type Foundry of Buffalo. He was a typographer who used 19th-century equipment even as he prepared typefaces for use on 21st-century computers.

His home shop was called the Pie Tree Press & Type Foundry, after an "ancient snagly old tree in our backyard, from which a couple of old sister ladies who used to live next door to us would bake apple pies."

His delight in a fine pun, as well as a self-deprecating sense of humour, was on display in a broadside produced in 1988 titled, *Appleogia, Being an Allucidation [sic] of the Press, Its Name, Its Printer, and His Steadfast Lack of Direction*.

The press produced broadsides of poetry by Al Purdy, Irving Layton, and Dorothy Livesay. A proposed chapbook by Allen Ginsberg fell through because of the poet's endless demands.

He spent many years on the creation of his autobiography, producing just 50 copies of *Leaves from the Pie Tree: Memories from the Composing Room Floor*.

A beautiful example of the printer's art, a copy is currently for sale at Wessel & Lieberman Booksellers in Seattle for \$800 (U.S.)

The first machine he acquired was a side-lever platen press, long abandoned and covered with years of dust. The vendor asked \$25 and it is said Rimmer paid him \$30. It was the first in what became a remarkable assemblage including Linotype machines, a Monotype caster, a pantograph etcher, a Kelly cylinder, two Potter proofing presses, and a

large Colts Armory press. An eager accumulator of machines orphaned by the technological advances of the 1960s, he described his collection as "ten tons of impedimenta."

He tinkered with these mechanical beasts, his expertise readily shared with the handful of other printers dedicated to the venerable craft. He also inspired a younger generation as a design and typography teacher at community colleges throughout the Lower Mainland.

His knowledge and amiability made him a central figure in the letterpress community.

Rimmer's works were evident in everyday life even though few recognized the creator. He produced bookmarks and ink blotters, book covers and broadsides. His linocut illustration of an isolated cabin in snowy woods decorates tins and packets of hot chocolate sold by Murchie's Tea and Coffee Ltd.

Not long ago, Simon Fraser University called on the semi-retired printer to design a new logo based on the suburban university's three-letter initials. He began sketching with pen and paper, before digitizing his work on a tablet computer.

"I began with a typeface developed 50 years ago called Optima, but I completely changed it in every possible way except that the original flavour is there," he told a university publication.

"The proportions, the width of the letters to their height are different. Things like the placement of the cross stroke in the F are different. Even the shape of the F – the top and the bottom – is different."

The final logo "has more of an organic look to it, not mechanical."

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