

# A Printer's Angel

Don Black shares memories with LAUREN WILLIAMS of his four decades serving letterpress printers across Canada and around the world.

MY INTRODUCTION TO letterpress printing was as a timid library school student at the University of Toronto in 2013. I happened to pass by the Bibliography Room in the basement of Massey College, and was immediately drawn in by the sight of the iron presses and rows of gleaming wooden type cabinets. Nelson Adams, then College Printer at Massey (who passed away in 2019), imparted countless pearls of printing wisdom to me over the years, but an early piece of advice caught me by surprise. One of the excellent ways in which Adams would teach incoming volunteers about the operation of the presses was to ask us to oil the joints and to take apart various mechanisms, clean them, and reassemble them. When my turn first came to perform this task, Adams *strongly* cautioned me to not accidentally drop or lose any of the

small pieces, saying, “You can’t find replacement parts for these presses in a hardware store!”

The fact that the companies that had manufactured these presses had long gone out of business, and that tracking down spare parts for 19th-century machinery might be virtually impossible, hadn’t occurred to me until that moment. The realisation prompted me to ask Adams where modern letterpress printers could go to buy equipment, to which he promptly replied: “You go to Don Black.”

Despite hearing Black’s name mentioned at nearly every print shop and letterpress event that I came across over the next few years, I wouldn’t have the opportunity to visit his shop in person until 2018. My colleagues and I were in the process of setting up a print shop at McGill’s Rare Books and Special Collections



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*Don Black at his shop in May 2018.*

Library, which involved tracking down a slew of equipment: wooden furniture, spacing material, slug cutters, composing sticks, pica rulers, quoins—the list goes on and on. Without the existence of Black’s shop, this endeavour would have been impossible. Or, at best, it would have taken many years to hunt down these items, piecemeal, from retiring printers.

I suspect that most people can recall quite vividly their first visit to Don Black Linecasting Limited in Scarborough, a suburb of Toronto, standing in awe of the endless rows of stacked floor-to-ceiling type cabinets, all manner of equipment packed into every available inch of space, and presses scattered throughout. I imagine that many have also marvelled, as I did, at how Albert Kwon, the shop’s general manager, could navigate nimbly up and down ladders and through piles of lead, knowing exactly where everything was (not to mention his incredible patience with complicated orders). Standing in that space, I remember



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*Don and his son Craig.*

being flooded with the feeling that despite many reports to the contrary, the letterpress community in Canada was alive and thriving.

During that first visit, I also had the opportunity to meet and chat with Don Black. Upon hearing that I was visiting from Montreal, he immediately asked if I was a fan of the Canadiens hockey team. After talking hockey for a few minutes, I promised to look through the McGill archives for any Habs memorabilia, which I would scan and send him. In return, Black generously offered me the assortment of type ornaments that I was planning to purchase for free.

Now in his 80s, and on oxygen due to health issues, Black has retired from the daily operation of the shop. But he can still be found there most days, chatting with customers and, since announcing in October 2019 that his shop would be closing, planning the liquidation of his inventory. Black had planned for his son, Craig, to take over the business; they had worked together for years, during which time Craig had developed particular expertise in the restoration of older presses. But when Craig passed away in September 2019 after a battle with cancer, Black was left with no choice but to shut down.

When news broke of the shop’s closing, an outpouring of support, sadness, well-wishes, and anecdotes about Black and his business sprang forth from the printing community. As a relative newcomer to letterpress printing, I have found it fascinating and touching to learn about the integral role Black played in the establishment of so many of the printers and publishers whose work I admire. Having been in business for more than 40 years, Black witnessed the complete transformation of commercial printing in Canada, along with the peaks and valleys of the popularity of letterpress printing. I was fortunate to be able to interview Black recently about his life and business, beginning with his introduction to printing at the *Globe and Mail* newspaper in 1953.

“My uncle was an engineer at the *Globe*, and when I was about seven years old, he took my mom and I on a tour. Once I saw the composing room with all the machines, I said, ‘this is what I want to do,’” he told me. “So, I started there—you had to start as an office boy doing all the joe jobs. And once you showed them you were interested,

you were put on a list for an apprenticeship in different departments. So, when my turn came up, the supervisor said he was looking for a machinist apprentice . . . it was the ideal thing for me.”

Black worked at the *Globe and Mail* for 11 years, primarily on keeping the Linotype machines in working order. But in 1964, the printing departments at the three major Toronto-based newspapers went on strike to protest the automated tools that were beginning to threaten their livelihood.

“Computers were just coming in, you know, and the union wanted control over the computers that were used for typesetting and so on. And the company, they wanted the control. So it was a huge strike of the three Toronto papers. All went on strike the same day,” he recalled. “But they all put out a paper the next day, without us. So it was pretty well game-over as far as the union was concerned about ever settling the strike, because [the newspapers] were prepared. Some of the union people went back to work; I chose not to.”

Luckily, Black wasn’t out of work for long. While on the picket line outside of the *Globe and Mail*, he ran into an old friend who would occasionally buy spare parts from the head machinist at the *Globe*. “The head machinist would say to me, ‘now, you carry these parts for Bill.’ He only had one hand, and the other hand was just a hook. He was probably 65, maybe 70. So I would carry these parts for him and he would always give me 50 cents. Well, 50 cents for a kid back in the 1960s, that was something!”

This chance encounter led to Bill—who was in fact William McCartney, the founder of greeting card company Regal Greetings—offering Black a job. “They had six Linotype machines. And from September until Christmas, they were real busy with Christmas cards. So, I started to work for him,” Black said.

The job at Regal Greetings led to contracts servicing Linotype machines all over Toronto, until an opportunity came up to work at one of the city’s largest typesetting plants, Cooper & Beatty. “They had seven Linotype machines. When I started there, they were owned by the McLean Brothers in Montreal. It was really a great place to learn. They had some very good people who worked there who would share their

knowledge about type. I really took to that. And that helped a lot when I started my own business.”

In 1970, Canadian Linotype Ltd. decided to sell off their Linotype equipment in an effort to keep up with rapidly changing technology. Black recognised the opportunity to start his own business, and offered to purchase their entire stock. “When we first opened, we were selling to mostly small print shops . . . they might have a Linotype machine and a couple of presses, that type of thing. And we had some larger customers like McLean Hunter,” Black said.

Before long, the business expanded to include the buying and selling of older iron hand-presses. Considering the hundreds of presses that have made their way through the shop over the years, I asked Black if he had a favourite. “Craig and I bought a baby Reliance Press,” he said, “which is a knock-down of a large iron press, from a guy in Winnipeg years ago. There’s a picture of it on our website. I could have sold it numerous times, but Craig would say, ‘Don’t you ever sell my press!’”

After Craig passed away, and Black made the decision to shut down the business, the inevitable process of selling off their inventory had to begin. Before long, Black received a call about the Baby Reliance from a collector in California. “It was time it went to someone who would really appreciate it. He offered me a really good dollar for it, and it’s going to be shipped within the next few weeks. And so that was Craig’s favourite press.”

With such fond memories of different presses coming through the shop, I asked Black if he’d ever been interested in doing any printing himself. “No, no, no, no, no. That end of it never interested me. I was more interested in the presses as machines, and in all the different styles of type.”

Don Black Linecasting built up an impressive customer base over the four decades they had been in business. The shop shipped orders as far as Australia, and also acquired a lot of inventory from the U.S., thanks to a close friendship between Black and Cleveland-based equipment dealer Jack Boggs. I asked Black if any noteworthy customers stood out in his mind. “Well, I got to meet the richest man in Canada, David Thomson,” he said.

Thomson, who built much of his fortune through commercial real estate, and whose family



owns the Thomson Reuters media corporation, is also an avid collector of art, antiquarian books, and other antiques. Thomson had sent one of his employees to purchase a number of items from Black's shop, but upon hearing that Black keeps a personal collection of his favourite items in his basement, the employee asked if he could return on the weekend to see it. Black agreed, and the following Sunday morning, was shocked to find David Thomson himself knocking at his door. "So we went down into the basement. He would pull out a drawer with type and get all excited. I got to know him quite well and stayed in touch with him. He's quite an interesting person."

After noticing that Black was an avid fan of the Montreal Canadiens hockey team, Thomson even offered to send Black some team memorabilia. "I know David Molson," Thompson said. "I'm going to get you something that you're really going to like." The next week, an autographed jersey from Henri Richard (the younger brother of Maurice 'Rocket' Richard) and a letter from Molson arrived in the mail, saying, "We're glad that you're a Montreal fan and would like you to have this." "That was really something," Black said.

Since announcing that the shop would be closing its doors, Black said the phone hadn't stopped ringing. Printers from all over the world were rushing to put in last-minute orders, and to snap

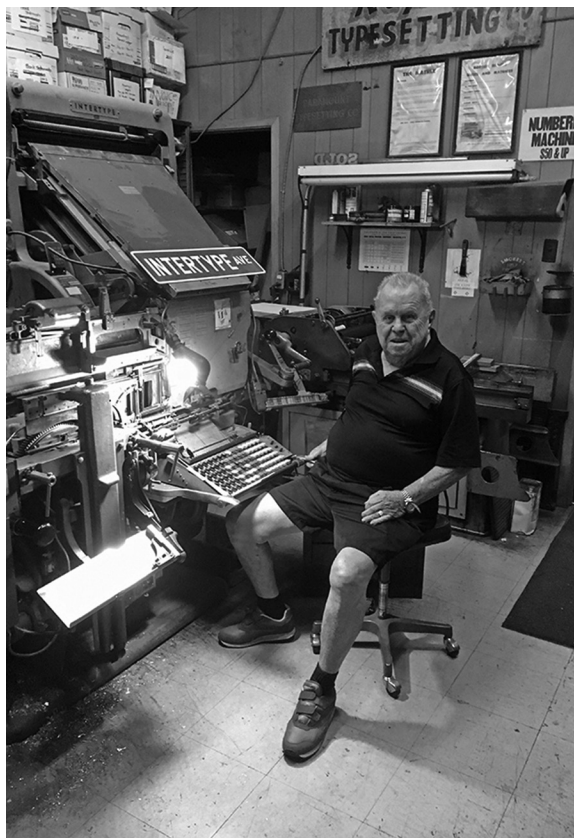
up the last of inventory not easily found anywhere else. Black would have liked to hold an open house to say goodbye to all of the people with whom he'd done business over the years, but the

COVID-19 pandemic foiled any such plans. Luckily, despite initial rumours to the contrary, Black said he managed to find good homes for most of the company's remaining presses and other equipment. Very little would be sent to the scrapyards.

While the closing of Don Black Linecasting was a loss felt deeply by the printing community, the longevity of the business and the overwhelming support it received suggest that this is not the end of an era, but a transitional phase. I asked Black if there would be enough of a market left for someone

else to open up their own shop, and to pick up where he left off. "Oh absolutely, if you can act fast and buy up equipment, there will always be a market for it," he said, adding "It's really been a lot of fun, and we've made a good living out of it. I wouldn't have wanted to do anything else."

~ Lauren Williams is curator of the Blacker Wood Natural History Collection at McGill's Rare Books & Special Collections Library, and is a member of the library's Book Arts Lab team. She has previously volunteered as a printing and bookbinding apprentice in the Bibliography Room at Massey College in Toronto.



*Don Black, in his 80s, at his shop.*