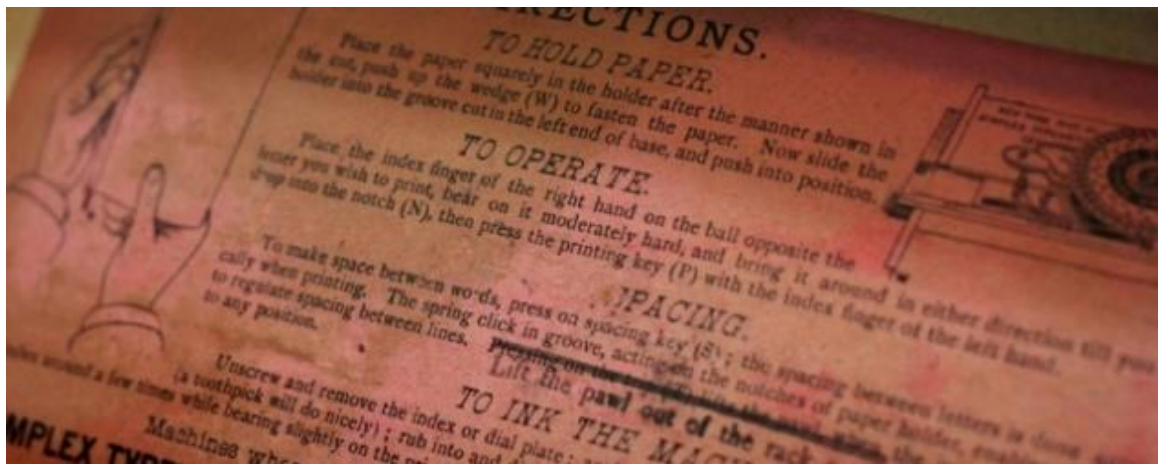


Keys to the Kingdom: The Early Typewriters Exhibit at IFoA

By books

Published: October 28, 2010



(Words and images by Brendan Adam Zwelling.)

Despite their crucial role in the creative process for generations of authors from Wodehouse to Kerouac, typewriters have not received a lot of press. Perhaps it's understandable, as they were among the most unglamorous of tools, half of a marriage of convenience with writing and representing fussy obligation where The Beatles' Rickenbacker guitars projected artistic cool.

However, the Harborfront Centre's *Early Typewriters: Gateway to the Information Age* exhibit, curated by collector Martin Howard and presented as part of the International Festival of Authors, approaches the typewriter from a different angle. These aren't the dull pastel boxes of 1970s newsrooms, nor the quaintly-clacketing generic hallmarks of 20th century literary greats and bedroom obsessives. Instead, visitors can see artifacts from the pioneering days of consumer typewriters (roughly 1880 to 1900)—baroque word forges with the character and faded luster of classic automobiles.



Take for example the *Bar-Lock 4*, a two-tone Victorian gothic machine with a dominating copper typeshield. If the MacBook adopted its aesthetic, Starbucks would have an entirely different atmosphere. The *Oliver 2* is a cross between a cathedral and a Triumph motorcycle engine, and must have made anyone using it think twice about what they were writing. For sheer physical presence though, nothing tops the *Hammond 1*—an oak and ebony bulwark of wordsmithery designed like a prose altar, which oddly echoes the totally unrelated Hammond Organ.



Less-intimidating are the *National*, a compact machine from Philadelphia with bristling letter-keys that appear as though they're competing with one another to be pressed, and the aluminum *Blickensderfer 6*, a portable model with a skeletal appearance which looks ideal for any turn-of-the-century correspondent. The nickel-plated *Odell 2* seems as incomprehensible as it is attractive.



Visitors to the exhibit can try out a circa-1900 *Underwood 5* model (and read the often-poetic streams of consciousness typed out by others), admire the limousine smoothness of *The Chicago* with its proto-art deco styling, and wonder how they would cope with the *Sun 1*, which only types in capitals (perfect for those angry letters to the editor about the adoption of the gold standard), or the *Mignon 2*, which resembles a sewing machine. It's a statement on the mechanics of expression which writers have come to rely on, and a reminder of the process behind carrying our ideas out into the world by pounding them onto paper.
