2015

Typography "In & Of" Ireland

Mary Ann Bolger
Technological University Dublin, maryann.bolger@tudublin.ie

Follow this and additional works at: https://arrow.tudublin.ie/aaschadpcon
Part of the Book and Paper Commons, and the Graphic Design Commons

Recommended Citation

This Conference Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Fine Arts at ARROW@TU Dublin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Conference Papers by an authorized administrator of ARROW@TU Dublin. For more information, please contact yvonne.desmond@tudublin.ie, arrow.admin@tudublin.ie, brian.widdis@tudublin.ie.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 License
Typography "In & Of" Ireland.

by Mary Ann Bolger

Prepress draft catalogue essay for “In & Of”, an exhibition of contemporary typeface design in and of Ireland accompanying the Face Forward International Typography Conference held in the Dublin Institute of Technology December 11-12, 2015. Exhibition entries selected and curated by Simon Sweeney and Sean Mongey.

In &Of

“Irish typeface design” is a very slippery description. Does it mean typefaces made in Ireland? Or made by Irish people? Or for use in Ireland? Or in the Irish character? In short, In & Of argues, it’s all of these things, and more. This exhibition sets out to explore contemporary Irish typeface design in as open and broad a way as possible: hence typeface design “in” and “of” Ireland.

Irish graphic design has always had a strong international dimension belying the size of the country. There is a long history of émigré designers (primarily from Britain, Scandinavia and the Netherlands) coming to work in Irish advertising and design agencies. The British typographic designer Peter Wildbur introduced Irish editorial design to the wonders of International Modernism in the 1950s, while Richard Eckersley and the Dutch-trained Damian Harrington energised the graphic output of Kilkenny Design Workshops in the 1970s. There is also a well-established tradition of Irish designers studying abroad--not always by choice--in London, the Hague and further afield. This international back-and-forth continues to inflect professional typeface design both in, and of, Ireland. Recent émigrés include New Yorker Max Phillips, whose Signal Type is the first dedicated, Irish-based commercial type foundry, while Dubliner Aoife Mooney travelled in the opposite direction, training in Reading before moving to work professionally in New York and later Ohio.

The professional practice of typeface design in Ireland is beginning to find its feet, although many of the typefaces developed in Ireland are projects undertaken by enthusiastic graphic designers, rather than full-time typeface designers. This exhibition brings together the work of established and emerging
typeface design practitioners as well as projects by passionate amateurs and students. In 2012, Typography Ireland began to run type-design workshops to foster and support the interest in typeface design among Irish designers and design students. Out of these workshops an informal support group for typographic aficionados, Type Club, emerged. Many of the projects presented in this exhibition have been encouraged and critiqued at Type Club meetings and a few show the influence of workshops by Crafting Type, Jo de Baerdemaeker and, particularly, TypeTogether.

A note on typeface design In & Of

While Ireland has produced a number of excellent typographers, very few typefaces have been designed in the country. Those that were produced here in the past tended to be attempts to accommodate the printing of the Irish language, either through the production of an aesthetically pleasing version of the ‘Irish character’ or through an attempt to find a compromise between Irish and roman forms. The distinctive Gaelic alphabet, derived, like roman, from the semi-uncial hand of the Roman Empire, was used from the ninth century onwards for writing in Irish. Its history as a typographic form is well charted in Dermot McGuinne’s _Irish Type Design: a history of printing types in the Irish character_ (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1992).

When the typographically-inclined consider Ireland, their first thought is probably of the great Insular manuscripts, like the Books of Kells and Durrow. Certainly Ireland has a proud calligraphic heritage which has inspired typographic interpretations down through the centuries, from George Petrie’s uncials in the mid nineteenth-century to Colm Ó Lochlainn’s Colum Cille, designed for Monotype in the early 1930s. Other designers attempted to find a ‘compromise’ between Irish orthography and readily available roman typefaces: for example, Liam Miller, founder of the Dolmen Press, worked in the 1960s with William Britain of the _Leinster Leader_ newspaper to create an Irish version of Times New Roman. Despite its clear practical application, factors of production meant that this face had only one outing. Miller also collaborated with the letter-carver Michael Biggs on a ‘Gaelic alphabet’ in 1960. This was one of the more
beautiful typographic interpretations of the Irish character, but like the vast majority of twentieth century Irish typefaces it never went into production. When the Gaelic alphabet was ‘decommissioned’ in favour of roman in the mid-1960s, any inclination manufacturers might have had to develop new faces disappeared.

Recently, however, designers have begun to utilise the possibilities of digital typeface design to reinterpret this rich heritage. Michael Everson has been working on digital revivals of Gaelic typefaces for many years, while a new generation of designers are creatively reimagining the cultural legacy, unencumbered by the ‘cultural cringe’ that the Gaelic form induced in their modernist-schooled predecessors. These range from those with just the subtlest suggestion of a Gaelic flavour (such as Nib by Tom Foley and Tain by Rob O’Reilly) to full-on uncial display faces (Cian McKenna’s Campana or Naoise Ó Conchubhair’s Michael Biggs-inspired Insular). They also include experiments with the Irish character such as Mike Duggan’s Eire, a geometric sans serif Gaelic, with a hint of the art deco letterform so popular in Irish public lettering in the early years of the State, or John-Daniel Harrington’s Martello, a pared-back, Gaelic-inflected twenty-first century sans serif.

But typeface design in and of Ireland encompasses much more than modern reworkings of the manuscript heritage or the Gaelic alphabet. When Typography Ireland started in 2005, it seemed to be generally assumed that ‘Irish typeface design’ could mean only design of typefaces in the Irish character, and was dismissed as irrelevant or anachronistic. In fact, the majority of typeface designs being developed in Ireland are capable of international application. Some of them, like Bob Gray’s, started life as custom fonts for specific identity design projects. Others, such as Niall McCormack’s, are informed by a different kind of heritage: twentieth-century popular culture, while others pay homage to uni-case, mono-linear, Modernism. Techno-inspired whimsy animates display faces by Niall O’Shea, while the ghost of Wim Crouwel hovers over more than one modular example included here. The work of Type Group (based at Conor & David design studio) shows a confident approach to creating distinctive display
faces with lots of personality. Bill, the typeface designed by Bobby Tanham as part of the identity for the National College of Art and Design (NCAD), was developed from another ephemeral source: stencils used for lettering on the packing crates of Power’s distillery, the former occupants of NCAD’s campus.

In & Of provides a snapshot of an emerging but vibrant discipline that can’t be defined purely in terms of a simplistic idea of national identity.

**Inspiration In & Of**

It would be foolish in any account of typeface design In & Of Ireland to ignore the excellent local resources available to the typographic enthusiast. These include the wonderful National Print Museum at Beggar’s Bush, Dublin 4 which not only houses an extensive collection of printing presses, wood and metal type, typographic literature and ephemera but also hosts exhibitions and talks on printing related themes. Another letterpress treasure trove is the Distillers Press at NCAD in Thomas Street, Dublin 2. Archbishop Marsh’s Library, which opened in 1701, is a perfectly preserved eighteenth century public library beside St Patrick’s Cathedral, Dublin 2. It has a wealth of incunabula, including books produced by Alcuin and Wynkyn de Worde as well as early books in Irish. The Delmas bindary is located in the library’s basement. Another beautiful but less well-known collection is the Edward Worth Library in Dr Steevens’ Hospital, Dublin 8. It contains fine examples of sixteenth-century typography and is also considered to have the best collection of early modern book bindings in Ireland. Trinity College Dublin is world famous as the home of the Book of Kells, but its Early Printed Books collection is also well worth arranging to visit. In addition to its impressive holdings of books of Irish interest, the National Library of Ireland on Kildare Street, Dublin 2 has a marvellous collection of printed ephemera. Finally, no trip to Ireland would be complete without a visit to the Chester Beatty Library, in Dublin Castle. This houses an outstanding collection of Islamic manuscripts, Chinese, Japanese, Indian and other art. Early papyri, including some of the earliest texts of the Bible and other early Christian manuscripts, western prints and printed books complete what is one of the richest collections of its kind in the world.
If all that sounds like too much slogging around the city, then there is plenty of inspiration available at the click of a mouse. To give just three examples: Typography Ireland’s website (http://typography.ie), lists current events of typographic interest as well as providing other resources; the 100 Archive (www.100archive.com) is a living archive which maps the past present and future of Irish graphic design; Irish Design 2015 (www.irishdesign2015.ie) is a year-long programme exploring, promoting and celebrating Irish Design in just about every form.

Mary Ann Bolger, Dublin Institute of Technology, December 2015.