

**HAVE TO COST
THE LIVES OF OTHERS?**



THE INDEPENDENT

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Robert Harling: Typographer, designer, 'House & Garden' editor and author of riveting novels of 'old Fleet Street'

A month or so before the Second World War began in 1939, Robert Harling, not yet editor of House & Garden, met Ian Fleming, not yet synonymous with James Bond. The meeting was (as Harling found later) no accident.

Fleming, already engaged in naval intelligence, knew of Harling as the editor and writer of much of *Typography*, a revolutionary journal that set new standards for the design and display of printed matter. He soon found that Harling had other strings to his bow, as writer and designer of "News-Reel Maps" for the News Chronicle and as "demi-semi-resident art director" of Lord Delamere's up-and-coming advertising agency. Lunch led to a commission to redesign the Admiralty's weekly intelligence report, but then Harling and Fleming parted, not to meet again until 1941.

Harling, always a keen sailor, had volunteered for the Navy, and before he finished training, under the legendary Captain O.M. Watts, was at Dunkirk in charge of a whaler. Soon a Sub-Lieutenant, RNVR, he became navigator of a corvette, on convoy duty in the Western Approaches. This led in time to *The Steep Atlantick Stream*, his first piece of narrative writing, published in 1946, well before *The Cruel Sea*. But Fleming had not lost sight of him, and extracted him to come and work in ISTD (Inter-Services Topographical Division), where the knowledge Harling had built up researching maps for the News Chronicle was put to finding photographs of terrain in enemy hands. This ended with an adventurous air-trip round the world, collecting data.

From this Fleming summoned him to 30AU (30 Assault Unit), formed to operate in the front line to pick up enemy code-books, security documents and wireless equipment before they could be destroyed. Landing soon after D-Day, Harling pursued this task through fierce fighting round Cherbourg, and on into France. Cautious, eventually cordial relations with American forces brought a memorable meeting with General George Patton. A lightning dash across Germany to Magdeburg to round up German scientists, another to Norway to disarm German naval forces, brought Harling's war to an end.

Soon after joining 30AU Harling had met Phoebe Konstam at the Gargoyle Club, and they married in April 1945. War over, they set up house at an old house in Suffolk, and Harling returned to graphic design.

In between convoy duty and ISTD he had redesigned the ailing *Daily Sketch* for Lord Kemsley, who liked Harling's work but thought it too advanced. He now invited Harling to become typographical adviser to *The Sunday Times*, where Fleming had become Foreign News Manager. Besides this, Stephenson Blake, the long-established Sheffield typefounders, asked Harling to design new display types for them, and he produced *Chisel*, *Playbill*, *Keyboard*, *Tea Chest* and others in a now fashionable Victorian style. With his old friend James Shand, printer and sponsor of *Typography*, he launched a new journal, *Alphabet and Image* (1946-48), which later became *Image* (1949-52). And he was given a larger room in the Delamere advertising agency.

Harling was now on top of the world, a long way from an unpromising beginning. He had been born at Highbury, north London, in 1910. His parents both died when he was very young, and he was lucky to be brought up by a friend of his mother's, a nurse. She then married a dairyman and moved to Brighton. The way to his first school by open bus ran between fishing boats drawn up on the pebble beach and the Pavilion, always his favourite building. He played football, learned to sail and swam round the end of Brighton pier. Then

his "aunt" was widowed and returned to Islington, where Robert went to Owen's School (Stanley Morison, the great typographer of the previous generation, had been there before him). His earliest years were thus spent in two urban landscapes, both dating from about 1800, then and later his favourite architectural style.

His interest in lettering stemmed from a copy of Pears' Cyclopaedia given him on his 12th birthday. He was fascinated by the reproductions of assay marks for plate, fine examples of English vernacular lettering. His "uncle" enlarged them photographically, and he laboriously copied them. These letter-forms and contemporary gothic led him, disdaining the chance of Oxford, to the Central School of Arts and Crafts. Leaving, he briefly kept a bookshop in Lamb's Conduit Street. He then got a job as a trainee on the Daily Mail, and, he wrote, "left, quite untrained, a year later". Two six-month stints each at the two best printers in the country, Lund Humphries at Bradford (for whom he mounted an exhibition on Rudolf Koch in 1935) and the Kynoch Press at Birmingham, followed, "trying - not all that successfully - to learn more about the technical side of printing".

But he really needed no instruction. Ideas came to him as easily as work, and he dealt with both quickly and efficiently, after the war, as before. The happy partnership with James Shand and the Shenval Press continued. Besides The Sunday Times and Stephenson Blake, he was design consultant to The Financial Times and in 1947 redesigned Time and Tide for Lady Rhondda.

He had written two books before the war, The London Miscellany (1937) and Home: a vignette (1938), both drawing on his love of 19th-century architecture and design. During the war he wrote Amateur Sailor (1944), originally under the name "Nicholas Drew", reprinted under his own in 1952. He wrote Notes on the Wood-engravings of Eric Ravilious (1945), an early celebration of one of the greatest artistic losses of the war. He followed it with Edward Bawden (1950), published by Art and Technics, in which he also had a hand.

Fiction came next: The Paper Palace (1951), The Dark Saviour (1952), The Enormous Shadow (1955), a newspaper thriller, The Endless Colonnade (1958), with an Italian background, and then The Hollow Sunday (1967), The Athenian Widow (1974) and finally The Summer Portrait (1979). He wrote easily and well, with a good ear for dialogue. Fleming, too, had taken to thrillers. Their friendship had grown closer through the post-war years, and now Bond had arrived to take over his creator's life to an alarming extent. In 1957 Fleming was about to go to New York, when Harling suggested that he might sound out "Pat" Patcevitch, the head of Condé Nast, about the editorship of House & Garden. Fleming was astounded but did what he was asked, and the deal was done surprisingly quickly.

Soon Harling was into a new routine: four days at House & Garden, Friday and Saturday at The Sunday Times, where he was architectural correspondent as well as designer. He had rightly sensed that his interest had changed from letter-forms to images, from print to houses, inside and out. In 1953 he had moved to an 18th-century Gothic vicarage on the Kent-Sussex border, made more picturesque by the removal of a later top floor.

Now with a staff of 18 and three outstanding advisers, Elizabeth David on food, Loelia, Duchess of Westminster, to discover unknown houses, and Olive Sullivan on interior design, he revitalised House & Garden, with telling contrasts of ancient and modern, colour and simplicity. Besides the magazine, he launched a series of books on the same theme, starting in 1959 with House & Garden Interiors and Colour. Ten more books followed, the last the House & Garden Book of Romantic Rooms (1985); in 1980 with Miles Hadfield he published British Gardeners: a biographical dictionary.

If some of the fun of life went out with Fleming's death in 1964, Harling remained alert and active, still at The Sunday Times on Saturday evenings up to 1985. Nor did he forget the graphic arts. The Letter-forms and Type-designs of Eric Gill (1976) is the best assessment of Gill's work, made with the understanding of one who was also a master of lettering. He contributed his memories to The Wood-engravings of Tirzah Ravilious (1987).

The same eye that saw the merit of vernacular lettering was allied to a clear mind that saw how it could be deployed to meet modern needs, simply and economically. That was what Typography and Alphabet and Image epitomised, and it characterised his own work. He was generous in helping younger designers, influenced by the Harling style, many of whom he has outlived. If style has changed, the Harling message, clarity, simplicity, economy, has not.

Nicolas Barker

There are few finer portraits of "old Fleet Street" - that is the pre-Wapping, pre-Rupert Murdoch, pre-"new technology" Fleet Street seen now through something of a romantic haze by hacks and journos well into their senescence - than those painted by Robert Harling during the 1950s in a succession of riveting novels in which power, politics and suspense are the chief ingredients, writes Jack Adrian.

Michael Frayn's Towards the End of the Morning (1967) is often cited as the ultimate "old Fleet Street" novel,

yet Frayn's was an essentially comic view, and while funny (at times very funny indeed) it focused on a generally seedy, ineffectual and tiny sub-stratum (the "morgue"-keepers, or archivists) of a newspaper's large and pretty varied set of characters.

Harling's world lay four or five floors up, where lordly foreign correspondents breezed in from far-off climes, pipe-smoking subs gleefully sharpened nouns and slashed adjectives, columnists crafted sardonic pars, and editors schemed, while, one floor higher still, owners gazed greedily out of their picture-windows at the dome of St Paul's (to the west) or the ragged spires of the Law Courts (to the east).

Harling was to newspapers what the MP and novelist Maurice Edelman (writing at roughly the same time) was to politics. Both drew from their own experience to illuminate important but largely unchronicled worlds and both gained critical plaudits as well as a good measure of popular success. And both told terrific stories.

Harling's *The Paper Palace* concerns an investigative reporter set on the trail of a dead man by a malevolent editor. It is a tale of blackmail and clever revenge with a shocking dénouement. *The Dark Saviour* is set in the Caribbean where a journalist discovers that his paper's influential local correspondent is plotting a Communist coup. *The Enormous Shadow* is even more indebted to the intense Cold War atmosphere of the 1950s, as well as its author's useful background in wartime intelligence and a special D-Day assault unit, featuring the disappearance and pursuit of an MP and a scientist (clear echoes of Burgess and Maclean).

The Endless Colonnade eschews the newspaper world and is a chilling account of a physician on holiday in Italy pursued by killers. Two later novels were *The Athenian Widow* (to publish or not to publish a controversial exposé) and *The Summer Portrait* (an artist's life in Majorca, where Harling had a holiday home.)

His masterpiece (not too strong a word) was undoubtedly *The Hollow Sunday*, which, in its detailed and fascinating chronicling of the birth pangs of a "new technology" Sunday paper coupled with an investigation of a major political scandal involving an MP's wife, manages to be a superb thriller as well as a compelling study of vicious power-politics in both Westminster and Fleet Street.

Forgotten women novelists from previous generations have Virago and Persephone to save them from undeserved oblivion. Someone should do the same for the male of the species, such as Nigel Balchin, Maurice Edelman, Geoffrey Cotterell - and of course Robert Harling. Certainly both *The Paper Palace* and *The Hollow Sunday* deserve resurrection.

Nicolas Barker

Robert Henry Harling, typographer, graphic artist and designer, editor and novelist: born London 27 March 1910; married 1945 Phoebe Konstam (died 2006; two sons, one daughter); died Godstone, Surrey 1 July 2008.

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