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"I am a Typographical Genius!"

An investigation into the work of
Robert William Lowry

A thesis
presented in fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of
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at
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Wellington,
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Patricia Ann Thomas
2000

"I am a Typographical Genius"

An investigation into the work of
Robert William Lowry

Abstract

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Robert William Lowry was a printer and typographer whose working life spanned the thirty-one years from his schoolboy printing days in 1929 until his death in 1963. He was not a tradesman, but a scholar/printer, a member of that group of men whose interest in the art compelled them to be ever vigilant in pursuit of a particular aesthetic of the printed page. He was known in his day for the excellence of his work, the tardiness of his delivery, the generosity of his spirit, and the capacity he had for alcohol. He was, in his time, surrounded by the myths which often shroud such men.

Lowry is a part of New Zealand design history and, as such, his work requires to be documented, the myths exploded, or at least, the shroud drawn back to reveal the genuine Lowry, typographer and printer, and the actual, rather than perceived, quality of his work. His contribution to the fostering of New Zealand literature is also an area which requires evaluation. Lowry lived in a time in our history when the struggle to get into print was an almost insurmountable one. Thus he becomes, in turn, a part of New Zealand publishing history.

Lowry was a man whose philosophies relied heavily on his own interpretation of the rules, displaying a 'looseness of attachment' to an aesthetic canon. It would only be fair to have used a methodological approach to this project which was equally loose. 'An investigation' was just that, a qualitative analysis approach based on the grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss¹ (1967) which allows for discovery and development, rather than one based on a central proposition which then must be proved, or disproved. Much of this study has relied on the typographical experience of the researcher, but primary sources were utilised to put the resulting analyses and evaluations into a contextual framework. These sources have included interviews, correspondence and the writings and reminiscences of people who lived and worked with the printer. Biographies, monographs and the like—secondary sources—have been approached warily and used mostly for background. Such, too, was the use to which the wealth of information concerning parallel events in other countries and the contemporary social and cultural arena of our own was put.

The study is presented in two parts. The first is essentially chronological and traces Lowry's life as printer and publisher. The second, is thematic. These strategies are used, in the first instance, to place the works into the context of their time and place, and, secondly, to observe particular genre in their own context, in addition to that of time and circumstance. This has allowed for observations of change and the charting of maturity in the man and his work.

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¹ GLASER, B and STRAUSS, A. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine, 1967.

A c k n o w l e d g m e n t s

When it began to look like this project
was going nowhere, Margaret Hayward pointed the way
down the path. Along the path stood Robin Lush who kept it
strewn with the sustenance needed to document a life,
rather than simply evaluate a body of work.

A constant companion on the journey
was Dame Janet Paul

To each, I offer my gratitude.

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