

# A Mensch in Our Midst

*A new national award recognizing significant contributions to the book arts in Canada is named in honour of Robert R. Reid.*

More than 125 people assembled in Vancouver last November for the annual Yosef Wosk-Simon Fraser University-Alcuin Society Lecture, celebrating the work and career of typographer, designer, printer and private press publisher Robert R. Reid. The evening followed Reid's 80th birthday by just a few days and was a testament not only to his past achievements but also to his continued activities in the field. We reproduce on the following pages extracts from friends and colleagues who spoke that night, plus Yosef Wosk's affectionate and insightful tribute, which preceded the presentation of the first Robert R. Reid Award for contributions to the arts of the books in Canada.

## TAKAO TANABE

*Now an internationally renowned painter, Tanabe learned the craft of printing, and the art of design from Robert Reid during the early years of his career. In 1958 they collaborated on the limited edition Gold. Tanabe continued to build a reputation for innovative typographic design with his Periwinkle Press up to 1964, when he devoted himself entirely to painting and teaching.*

"Back in 1952 I came back to Vancouver for the first time in ten years. I had lunch with Joe Plaskett. He said, 'I'm having an exhibition, and I have the name of a printer. I want to have an announcement printed.' So after lunch we walked down to West Pender Street and looked in the window of this long, old building with printing presses marching down through the room, and I said to Joe, 'This guy's a big shot, it's going to be expensive.' So we went in and said to the fellow, 'Mr. Reid?' And he said, 'No, no, you want that fellow in the back.' [Reid rented space at the back of this shop for \$25 per month.] And there was Bob. He had one automatic press, and a smaller press, and type cases around. I have to tell you that both Joe and I were very impressed with this fellow because he had on a beautiful striped dress shirt, a beautifully tied tie, a sports jacket, polished shoes. He dressed like that all the time! Running the press he'd take his jacket off and roll up his sleeves that was it!

"Joe handed him the copy and said he needed an announcement printed. This is 1952. I'm a naive kid from Winnipeg. Bob took the copy, went to a cabinet, took out some type—I didn't know it was type, it was just bits of metal—and he put it into a small tray and said, 'Just hang on, Joe, you can proofread this



and I'll design something for you once we get the copy right.' So he inked up this thing, put in a piece of paper, pedalled the press, and by God, it's magic, there it said in type, 'You are invited to...'

"I was flabbergasted. I couldn't get over it. I'd never thought about how things got printed. We left, but on the way out I said to Bob, 'I don't have a job. Do you mind if I come down and watch you do this magic stuff?' Of course, he said, 'Fine.'

"I guess I went down there three or four days the following week, and I was hooked. I had to learn how to do this. So I tentatively asked him if I could come and help him, learn to set some type and so on, and it was great. I had a lovely time. He taught me a whole new vocabulary—pica, font, stick, frame, all these things. Wonderful stuff.

"Over the years my respect for Bob grows constantly. Here he is, he comes back from his great adventures in Montreal, New York and New Haven, and the first thing he tells me is he's printing more books! More books! I have an interest in books, but mostly just to read them these days. I have to say, I wish I had that kind of enthusiasm for my painting life. Carry on, Bob, and I know you will."

*Photos by Jason Vanderbill.*

“Your life is people. It’s what you do, but it always involves people and how they work with you...”



#### ROBERT REID

“I’ve said in my memoirs that I’ve never met a printer I didn’t like. They were always wonderful people. And over the years I’ve always wondered why, and I finally figured it out. A letterpress printer is dealing in reality. He can’t fake it, he can’t be phoney, it’s for real. When you’re setting a line of type you get it right or the line doesn’t lock up. If you’re making ready on the press, you do it right. You’re dealing with reality, and when you’re dealing with reality you become a real person yourself because you can’t pretend. Especially when you’re locking up a form, with the quoins and the chase, when you pick it up, if everything isn’t perfect, it’ll all fall out! It’s attention to detail, patience—it seems to make for character in people. I’ve never met a printer I didn’t like. But that’s a letterpress printer; I’m not talking about other printers!”

*Attendees at Reidfest received a special keepsake pamphlet (8vo, 44 pp, sewn in colored wraps) featuring a series of stunning black and white portrait photographs (sample at left) of Robert Reid, taken by Yukiko Onley. The book also included extracts from his multi-volume memoirs. Reid and Onley currently are collaborating on a book reproducing a series of deeply personal illustrated letters from her former husband, the artist Toni Onley.*

“It’s enough having fifteen minutes of celebrity without having a permanent record of it...”

#### PETER McNALLY

*Peter McNally is a professor in the McGill School of Information Studies. In the early 1970s, as the first librarian of the Lande Collection of Canadiana, McNally made daily use of the collection’s monumental bibliography that Reid had designed and overseen production of in 1965.*

“Robert came to Montreal in 1963 to work at the newly established McGill University Press. His job was to be designer and production manager, and I think this title proved to

be extremely important from McGill’s perspective. He was meant to be more than just a book designer. In his own words, he was to become a book maker.

“In the annals of Canadian printing history and book design, by any standard he is among that small handful of outstanding leaders in the field. I would even go further and say that during the 1960s and ’70s, he was undoubtedly Canada’s leading book designer.”

## Meeting a Remarkable Man

By Yosef Wosk

Reidfest—the evening last November devoted to celebrating the work, career and life of Robert Reid—made me think of meeting a remarkable man, a man of letters and heart, of critical eye and demanding standards; a man who knows hot metal and warm wood, textured papers, marbled mixing, ten thousand fonts and an ocean of inks. Robert Reid is certainly one of the most versatile and prolific print designers anyone has ever met, an authentic pioneer who has produced everything from limited edition masterpieces to evanescent ephemerae as well as keepsake broadsides, captivating advertisements, an abundance of newspapers, multiple journals, and a million packaged books for major publishers. With one foot firmly stationed in the classical mechanics of the printing arts, he has also excelled in the modern era of digital design and, you can be assured, on his desk right now are the workings of the next-to-be-published dream.



Here is a man who collects widely, shares forever, teaches always, and creates with the insatiable mind of Genesis. He drinks and smokes and loves the company of friends; his presence is gentle and soul deeply comforting.

We are indeed fortunate to have this most unique man in our midst, someone who, in Japan, would be recognized as a Living National Treasure. Perhaps that is what we are doing with Reidfest: recognizing Bob, in spite of his genuine humility, so that we, too, may be inspired to do our best and most dedicated work for time-out-of-mind. He has touched on eternity and she has blessed him in return.

Bob Reid, as we all know, is not just an artist of the book, but also an artist of a man. Over the past number of years, Bob compiled a beautiful multi-volume limited edition memoir and catalogue raisonné of his work entitled *Printing: A Lifelong Addiction*. “Addiction” is a strong word and could be a troubling one were it not that this predisposition was a vision to beauty, to texture, to form and design.

It was printing and the book arts that first attracted me to Robert, but I soon learned to appreciate his other lifelong addictions (at least the ones that can be spoken about in public): his passion for golf; his numerous and varied collecting interests—especially ephemera—that he, ironically, has immortalized through his many publications; his love of jazz, cars and model trains; his dedication to culture; a faith in humanity that ebbs and flows with tomorrow’s headlines but that is deeply rooted in his sense of social justice; his enjoyment of

good conversation, devotion to family and loyalty to friends. I saw in Robert Reid someone who was genuine and enthusiastic, curious, kind and caring; someone who was always reading and sharing ideas; an original thinker, a true lifelong learner.

His kindness as a friend or neighbour, as a husband, a lover, father and brother, is felt by all who have encountered him in the various chapters of his long and prolific life. Do not imagine, however, that it has always been an easy life: tragedy was no stranger to his door. And yet, here is a man among men, a mensch in our midst, whose generosity of spirit and always-enthusiastic creative genius is obvious to anyone who stands in his humble presence for even a short time.

Bob was only nine years old when, at Christmastime, he found his first printing press—tin with rubber type—in the toy department of the Hudson’s Bay Company. His life and art evolved through the early years in Abbotsford, B.C.; the various Vancouver iterations included the Basement Private Press, the Graphos Press, typographic advisor to the editorial committee at the University of British Columbia, teaching at the Vancouver School of Art, and then the very productive years at his private press in Burnaby. These were followed by the classic Montreal years as in-house designer for McGill University Press and the subsequent quarter-century New York and New Haven experiences, before returning home to Vancouver in 1998.

And now Bob stands here in the presence of his friends, family and peers, in the witness of master printers and “gently mad” bibliophiles, those whose passion embraces “the noble craft of printing,” those who know, like the mystics, that every word can create a world if only properly expressed in the great chain of being: spirit to breath, mind to matter, ink to paper.

Robert Reid was born with a gift that he then cultivated like a diligent gardener. Granted as he was a glimpse of the heart of heaven, his art came to reflect universal archetypes in the cradle of a page. May he, our friend and mentor, be blessed to continue this most favourable obsession for many healthy years to come.

*This version of Dr. Wosk’s remarks presented at Reidfest has been slightly revised for publication. Dr. Wosk is the director of Interdisciplinary Programs in Continuing Studies and an associate member of the Department of Humanities (adjunct professor) at Simon Fraser University, where he has developed seminal programs such as the Philosophers’ Café and the Academy of Independent Scholars. He is also a long-standing and valued patron of the Alcuin Society and book arts in general.*



# *The Alcuin Society*

*in recognition of your outstanding contributions  
to the arts of the book in Canada*

**THE ROBERT R. REID AWARD**

*is presented to*

**Robert R. Reid**

*The first Robert R. Reid Award for contributions to the arts of the book in Canada, presented to its namesake in recognition of his outstanding contribution to book design in Canada and the world, and in recognition of his contribution to the fine press book in British Columbia and Canada. The award also marks the first appearance of the Alcuin Society's new coat of arms.*



A highlight of the evening was the surprise appearance of Robert Reid's longtime partner Terry Berger, who flew in from New York for the event.

**ERIC SWANICK**

Head of Special Collections and Rare Books, and gifts librarian for the W.A.C. Bennett Library at Simon Fraser University, Swanick was also the primary organizer of Reidfest.

"Robert visited my house recently. He entered the room containing my modest book collection. We did the introductory tour, during which he professed little interest in my Middle East travel collection, little interest in my American politics collection, some interest in my Alden Nowlan collection, but he was more than a little interested in my typographic periodicals and my modest private press collection.

"A routine developed as we worked our way across the shelves, examining the various volumes. Reid would hold a book, perhaps establishing some relationship, and then turn to the title page and analyze the layout, the use of type, perhaps illustration. Then he moved on to the text block, which involved further examinations of the type in relation to the text, illustration, how they all worked together, whether they fit the text. And, of course, the binding. His examination of the books as physical objects was a complete analysis. The time passed all too quickly. I was reminded of a line Robert wrote in 1960: 'The well-making of books is not merely a matter of money. It is a matter of intellect and social change.'



**GARY MCILROY**

In 2005 Robert Reid published a collection of extracts from the diaries of Franz Kafka (1910–13), accompanied by reproductions of 28 colour drawings by McIlroy. The book (72 pp., square octavo, printed digitally, limited to 45 copies signed by the artist and printer, and cased in natural linen) quickly went out of print.

"This evening has been talking about Bob over the past 50 years. I'd like to talk about Bob now. The way I got to know Bob is very typical of him now. My wife met him at the art gallery. They struck up a conversation, and the next thing I know she's invited him to our apartment. And this guy is really an interesting character. He's charming, he's lively. I had just started to draw. Bob looks at some of my drawings on the walls and says, 'This is really great stuff!' I'm thinking, *Who is this guy? What's he know about it?* I'd just started to draw! And he says, 'No, that's really great stuff. Can you draw more of those?'

So I did, and then he tells me they're wonderful. And again I think, *Who is this guy? I've never had an art lesson!* I was planning on taking art lessons at Emily Carr and he tells me, 'Don't waste your time.' Then he tells me he'd always wanted to do a book about Kafka and have it illustrated, and that my drawings would be perfect. I'm thinking, *My God, he wants me to illustrate Kafka?! This guy's crazy!* But he's got all this enthusiasm and so I figure I'll play along with him, and I did, and he finished the book. When I saw how he made those drawings of mine match Kafka's writing so well, I realized this guy is really something. I owe Bob a lot, for his enthusiasm, his encouragement, and that's just the way he lives. You need to know Bob in the present, not the past."



Photos by Jason Vanderbill.



### CHARLIE MAYRS

*A student of Robert Reid's at the Vancouver School of Art in the late 1950s, Mayrs went on to a career in advertising. Now retired, his interest in printing has been revived and he has issued two limited edition books featuring his art. In the fall of 2007 he collaborated with Reid to issue a collection of his artwork from his years studying and teaching at VSA, digitally reproduced as a limited edition book.*

“One of Bob’s greatest attributes was his ability to let you know with a single look, or a very short comment, whether your work met his high standards. I remember my first attempt at letterpress printing. I did a linocut of a decorative candlestick. It was for a Christmas card that I was printing on a little hand press that I had at home. Being very proud of the results, I took it to Bob at the school. Bob

peered over his glasses and ran his fingers over the Christmas card to feel the depth of the impression, then turned to me and said in a very quiet voice, ‘Nice try, Charlie.’

“Bob taught all of us how to look differently at graphic arts. He taught us how to respect the beautiful art of letterpress printing. He showed us how to choose the best papers for printing wood and linocuts and blind embossing and gold foil stamping. And he made us understand the true beauty of type and letterforms. But best of all, Bob taught us how to use white space. A single word or phrase or symbol in the middle of a magnificent paper stock was as powerful as anything we students could imagine!

“And now, 50 years later, while working with Bob this past month in designing my latest book, he has only confirmed what I have always known: that Bob Reid is very, very cool, and that Bob was cool long before the word was invented. So to Bob, on behalf of myself and all the other students who were lucky enough to have him as their teacher, mentor and friend, I say ‘Thank you so much.’ ”

### ROLLIN MILROY

*Under his imprint Heavenly Monkey, Milroy has published three titles in collaboration with Robert Reid since 2001.*

“It was actually through collecting Robert Reid’s initial five private press books that I first came to know Bob. And the books eventually led me to introducing myself to the man himself, at a time when I was first attempting to follow in his footsteps as a printer and private press publisher. That was seven years ago, and whatever successes I’ve had since then—whatever talents I’ve managed to muster and apply—are in no small part thanks to the influence Bob and his work have had on me.

“About ten years ago I started learning how to print and bind books. I was also collecting a lot of contemporary limited editions, what are often called fine press books. One day during my early and ugly efforts to learn letterpress printing, Don Stewart of MacLeod’s Books showed me a book he thought I might want. It was Bob Reid’s first book, *The Fraser Mines Vindicated*. It’s as pure an example of traditional private press publishing as you can hope to see. The typography was restrained, and the printing was beautiful. I remember

thinking at the time, *If this guy could make a book this good on his first try, what hope did I ever have?* Luckily for me I persisted, and rather than discouraging my efforts, *The Fraser Mines* became an inspiration.

“One of the greatest things about Bob is his enthusiasm for all things related to printing and books. And the enthusiasm extends to anyone wanting to try their talents in the field of publishing. He is always available to anyone wanting his help. He certainly has his own opinions and tastes, but these don’t interfere with his enthusiasm and encouragement toward others, especially beginners. I can see how he would have been an inspiring teacher. I am extremely fortunate to have been influenced by Robert Reid, in person and through his books, especially early in my career. He’s been the greatest friend and mentor I could hope for.”

*A DVD of the entire Reidfest evening—similar to the one prepared for 2006’s (Jim) Rimmerfest is currently being edited and will be available within the next few months. Check the next issue of Amphora for details. A web site dedicated to Robert Reid’s career can be found at [www.robertreidprinting.ca](http://www.robertreidprinting.ca).*