

Part I: The Unknown Writing Machine

by Don Sutherland

That relatively few books on the history of typewriters exist, and that such few as there are are laden with misinformation, is perfectly understandable. Abundant supplies of accurate information do not get produced about subjects for which people have disdain; and disdain is not merely a common attitude toward the typewriter, it is its legacy.

The man generally credited with having invented the typewriter did not want to invent it. He was browbeaten into continued development by his backers, and, once he got it done, he utterly repudiated it.

The man who first manufactured the invention did not want to manufacture it. He was talked into the proposition by his associates. When his company—one of the most modern and best known of the age—finally went bankrupt, his involvement with the typewriter was one reason why.

Once the typewriter was marketed the public did not want to buy it. Partly because the gizmo was not very good, and partly because few people could figure out what purpose a writing machine might serve, the typewriter's sales stayed just above dormant for its first decade.

When it finally did catch on, it was not because the typewriter's sterling intrinsic qualities were finally appreciated. The new but widespread usage of in-office telegraphs, telephones, tickertapes, and dictating machines made the writing machine merely a necessary component of an overall technological business system. Once that happened, the typewriter appeared in such huge quantities that it was almost invisible in its ubiquity. First unneeded and unwanted, it finally became so commonplace a utility, so mundane, so mere a necessity, that it fell into the background with all things that are taken for granted.

Even today the educated feminist takes offense when the prospective employer asks if she can type. The typewriter provided the first vehicle of widespread white-collar employment for women, thereby setting the stage for suffrage and "liberation," but the modern woman conforming to the conventions of her time views the typewriter as naught but a demeaning source of stereotyping. By regarding the typewriter in this light she may have discovered a new context in which to express disdain for the gizmo, but otherwise she is doing nothing more than carrying the tradition surrounding the typewriter since its inception 105 years ago.

But even stray dogs find homes, and so over the years the typewriter was embraced by some who thought it valuable, others who actually *liked* it. Certainly typewriter manufacturers have not been bashful about proclaiming its role in changing communication, business manners, and the social order itself. Several museums have acknowledged the writing machine as an intriguing, elegant, and even ingenious representative of the mechanical age. And, of course, there have always been the few private collectors. They have seen in typewriters not dull and droning appliances, but fascinatingly conceived and brilliantly executed devices that possess all the appeal of their mechanical near-cousins, precision clocks and watches.

And so the narrative of the typewriter's genesis and progress did get recorded. But under the circumstances, accuracy of information was anything but guaranteed. The manufacturers were among the primary sources of information, which they were only too delighted to disseminate just as long as it somehow made their own line the "first" or the "biggest" or the "best;" nowadays such efforts are less called "lying" than they are "revisionist history."

Independent researchers and historians did what they could by way of a sincere effort. But with a who-cares attitude emanating from their backers and publishers, they couldn't get *everything* straight in a field that has had some 300 manufacturers producing thousands of different models over a century's time. The problems of museum curators were compounded by the fact that, along with typewriters, they were likely to be responsible for everything mechanical from toy banks to fullsize locomotives, so they, too, did what they could, which was to believe what they were told. As time passed, weeds of misinformation began growing, partly because of what vested interests were using as fertilizer; but also, generations of eyewitnesses died out, files of records got destroyed, manufacturing firms went out of business. Original research became increasingly difficult, and all that was left were the recountings of the last guy. His mistakes got picked up by the next guy.

The typewriter's story is indeed a complex and varied one, fascinating in its own right and in relation to other things: a microcosmic embodiment of the entire mechanical age; an archetype of the growth of Big Capitalism; a demonstration of the relationship between technology and society, with special emphasis upon the attempt—often successful—to make the human adapt to the mechanism. In all its facets and sub-themes, the typewriter's tale is much more than can be even suggested in anything short of a fullsize book. Yet outlines can be sketched and inferences can be made of the typewriter as a function of sociological development and mechanical evolution, and as a collectable today.

Perhaps the most effective way to tell the typewriter's tale in shorthand form is to debate some of the illusions of history that are debatable and to debunk some that are false. This permits the use of preconceived notions about the field—both published and unpublished in the public fancy—as springboards that permit condensation of the facts. Also, it should make this article somewhat more useful to those who have read (or would like to read) previous histories of the subject, in that it alerts them to some of the more egregious misinformation that will befoul their grasp of the field.

Although there are others, five books have circulated most widely to provide such information and misinformation on the subject as there is. The one that could be considered intended for the popular market is Bruce Bliven Jr.'s "The Wonderful Writing Machine" published in 1954 by Random House with, one gathers from the bias of

the text, considerable reinforcement from the Royal typewriter company; the book is charmingly written, its emphasis being more toward the sociological side of the subject than the technical. "A Condensed History of the Writing Machine" was originally published in 1923 as a trade commemoration of the semi-centennial of the typewriter; reprints have circulated widely, the work's major emphasis being the corporate developments of the industry, and, secondarily, non-technical descriptions of most of the machines produced up to 1923. "The History and Development of Typewriters" and "The Carl P. Dietz Collection of Typewriters" are catalogs of the vast typewriter collections of the London Science Museum and the Milwaukee Public Museum respectively, attempting to infer history through examples in the splendid collections. Finally, and most recently, is "The Writing Machine" by Michael Adler, published in England in 1974; it takes the shotgun approach to its subject, at times being straight factual, at others being interpretive, sometimes technical and sometimes anecdotal, and always with the critical view of an author who is both a devoted collector and a serious scholar of his subject.

All but the Adler book now are apparently out of print, although libraries have copies of all or most. Of the bunch, the Adler book is by far the most expensive, and also by far the most accurate and authoritative; the Milwaukee book, while ambitious, handsomely produced, and useful for its abundance of illustrations, takes grand prize both for the number of errors it contains and for the ghastly inexcusability of most of them.

There are, as mentioned, other books, but these are the ones that get around the most. There is also an abundance of typewriter manufacturers' sales promo handouts, most of them notable for the thickness with which they slice the baloney. Not one of the books on the subject is free of error—indeed, by now not every error can be identified—but certain errors or misconceptions are more bothersome than others. What will follow here, then, is a headline stating the debatable point, followed by the debate. Historical chronology is not an objective in the structure of this article, although, by the time the reader has gotten through this piece, he will have the chronological information in his head and should be able to reshuffle the sequence, if he so desires, into the order in which things came to pass.

ALL TYPEWRITERS ARE ALIKE

After an introduction discussing the books on the subject, it may seem illogical to open the debates with a point that has never actually been *stated* in any work. Yet, save for the Adler book, no publication has come straight out and said it in so many words: contrary to popular belief, the writing machine was made in more fundamentally different forms than any other mechanical contrivance, bar none.

This is both the most surprising and delightful aspect of the subject. For indeed after 1920 all

typewriters toward unif Two or thre witness to identical pa relegated to great-grand ization, a sw typewriters

Consider the paper typewriters crescent-sh the front 90-degree a is in line v system is c is now, it i variations i used rou typewriters century.

During system cal the typeb horizontall full circle front. Bur typewriter printing b bottom of you had w its hinges

Improb may seem 19th-centu dozen bran them pro biggest s typebar v generally Sholes & manufact Premier— as late as single as perhaps a good typi

Notwit which up many typ might lik reposition alternativ users son

Typeba printing, ward, dov lay hori vertically typewrit bottom. swung, a direction mechanic though i

Nearly writing Curious! the even was mar whose t standing operator first sho typewrit went, an appear Ideal ty least tw frontstr the ne oblique short-li followe under th been ma the sam with ab Why