

**Nicolete Gray: a personal view of her contribution
to the study of letterforms**

Michael Twyman

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Typography papers 3 was edited, designed, prepared for press,
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Nicolette Gray: a personal view of her contribution to the study of letterforms



Figure 1. Nicolette Gray as an Oxford undergraduate, Bamberg, 1931.

Of all those who have written about letterforms, there is surely no-one whose repertoire was quite so extensive as Nicolette Gray's. She spanned the centuries with consummate ease from ancient times to the twentieth century, returning repeatedly to the periods with which she seemed to have the greatest affinity, the Middle Ages and the nineteenth century. That is an achievement in itself, but when coupled with her wide range of interests within the field it is remarkable: architectural lettering, inscriptions on tombs, manuscripts, cursive writing, arabic letterforms, type design, specialist education in letterforms, the teaching of handwriting, and the work of artists in lettering all attracted her attention. And in addition she put some of her ideas into practice as an inscriptional letterer and through her own handwriting. This article considers some of her longstanding enthusiasms and beliefs in order to shed some light on the nature of her contribution to the study of letterforms. Her role as a promoter of modern art in the 1930s, and particularly modern abstract art, is discussed here in a second paper by Frances Spalding.

Though this is not a biographical study, some brief discussion of Nicolette Gray's life is needed if we are to begin to understand the different strands of her involvement with letterforms.¹ She was born on 20 July 1911 at Stevenage. Her father, Laurence Binyon, was Head of Oriental Prints, Drawings, and Paintings at the British Museum for most of his working life, and a year before his retirement was appointed Head of Prints and Drawings. He is perhaps better known, however, as a poet, translator, and writer on art. Artefacts, history, and the arts were therefore in her blood, and from a relatively early age she was fortunate enough to meet, through her family, leading figures from the artistic and literary worlds of the inter-war years. She was clearly a very bright child: she was awarded a scholarship to St Paul's School in London and in 1929 won a further scholarship to Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford (figure 1). There she read History, specializing in the medieval period, and – even more significantly – was accepted into the Roman Catholic Church.

Her involvement with the history of letterforms began when, on leaving Oxford, she took up a scholarship at the British School at Rome and began to work on early medieval inscriptions. In 1933, soon after returning from Rome, she married Basil Gray, who was just beginning his lifetime career at the British Museum, initially in her father's

1. See in particular the obituaries in the *Guardian*, 'Artist's life in letters', by Richard Hollis, 10 June 1997, and the *Independent*, 'Nicolette Gray', by Nicolas

Barker, 13 June 1997; and a short autobiographical article, 'Lettering became my subject', Lady Margaret Hall, *The Brown Book*, December 1987, pp. 7–10.



Figure 2. Cutting an inscription in the garden of the family home, Greenwich, in the second half of the 1950s.

department. Their five children were born between 1934 and 1943, and it was in this period that she began her career as a writer. As family responsibilities lessened she learned to cut letters and, from the mid-1950s undertook the occasional lettering commission (figures 2–4). She also began to play a more active role publicly: from 1964 to 1981 she taught at the Central School in London, and from 1966 to 1968 acted as the first External Examiner, along with Herbert Spencer, for the emerging course in Typography & Graphic Communication at The University of Reading.² From the late 1960s she became involved in the work of the Study Group on Letterforms of the Working Party on Typographic Teaching and, in the 1970s, with the Association Typographique Internationale (ATypI).

The work Nicolete Gray undertook while in Rome in the early 1930s was not published until 1948, when it appeared in the *Papers of the British School at Rome* as ‘Paleography of Latin Inscriptions in the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries in Italy’.³ The period she spent in Rome at this stage must also have introduced her to late Roman cursive writing and very early Christian inscriptions, especially the stylistically unprecedented work of Filocalus, the letterer of Pope Damasus I (366–384). Filocalus became a longstanding interest of hers and this led to an article about him in the *Papers of the British School at Rome* in 1956, which placed his work in a broader context of the history of lettering than had been done before.⁴

2. Both Nicolete Gray and Herbert Spencer played a key role in the establishment of this course at a time when there was considerable opposition to the idea of such a specialism. The course they examined was part of a degree course that was designated ‘Fine Art’, but in 1968 an independent BA Hons course was introduced with the title ‘Typography & Graphic Communication’.

3. Vol. XVI (ns vol. III), 1948, pp. 38–167. This volume was published in honour of Evelyn Jamison, who had tutored her at Oxford and had been responsible for the choice of her research subject in Rome (Gray, ‘Lettering became my subject’, p. 8).

4. ‘The Filocalian letter’, vol. XXIV (ns vol. XI), 1956, pp. 5–13.

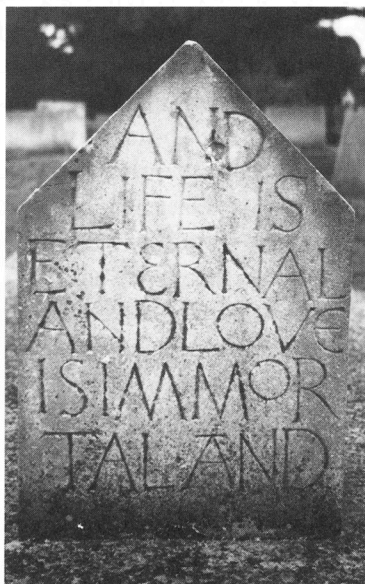


Figure 3. Inscriptional lettering from the tomb of George Cary in Finchley Cemetery, designed and cut by Nicolete Gray in 1954.



Figure 4. Putting the finishing touches to her large, wooden inscription panel in the Reading Room of the Nuffield Library of the Shakespeare Centre, Stratford-on-Avon, 1964.

Her first involvement with historical writing came in the mid-1930s when Basil Gray, who was then an Assistant Keeper in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum, was working on a general history of the pictorial print in England. This was published as *The English print* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1937). It was concerned with both independent prints and book illustrations and has stood the test of time remarkably well – particularly in relation to the nineteenth century, which was handled with uncharacteristic enthusiasm for the time. Nicolette Gray contributed substantially to the book. There is no formal acknowledgement of her role, and I remember that she told me about it with a twinkle in her eye. Clearly, she recalled the work she did with Basil Gray in the formative years of their relationship with great affection and was happy to allow him full credit. His gratitude was expressed in the following enigmatic dedication: ‘To my Wife/But for whom this book would not have been started,/And without whom it would not have been finished.’ Some light is shed on this dedication by letters from Nicolette to Basil Gray (in the family’s possession), which reveal that she wrote – at the very least – Chapter VII, the best part of Chapter IX, and Chapter XI. Further evidence for the extent and significance of her involvement with the book comes from a copy (also in the family’s possession), inscribed for Helen Sutherland in Basil Gray’s hand: ‘For Helen with the authors’ love N & BG’.

This process of familiarization with the graphic art of the nineteenth century – and these were the parts that she helped with most – was a preparation for her ground-breaking book *XIXth century ornamented*

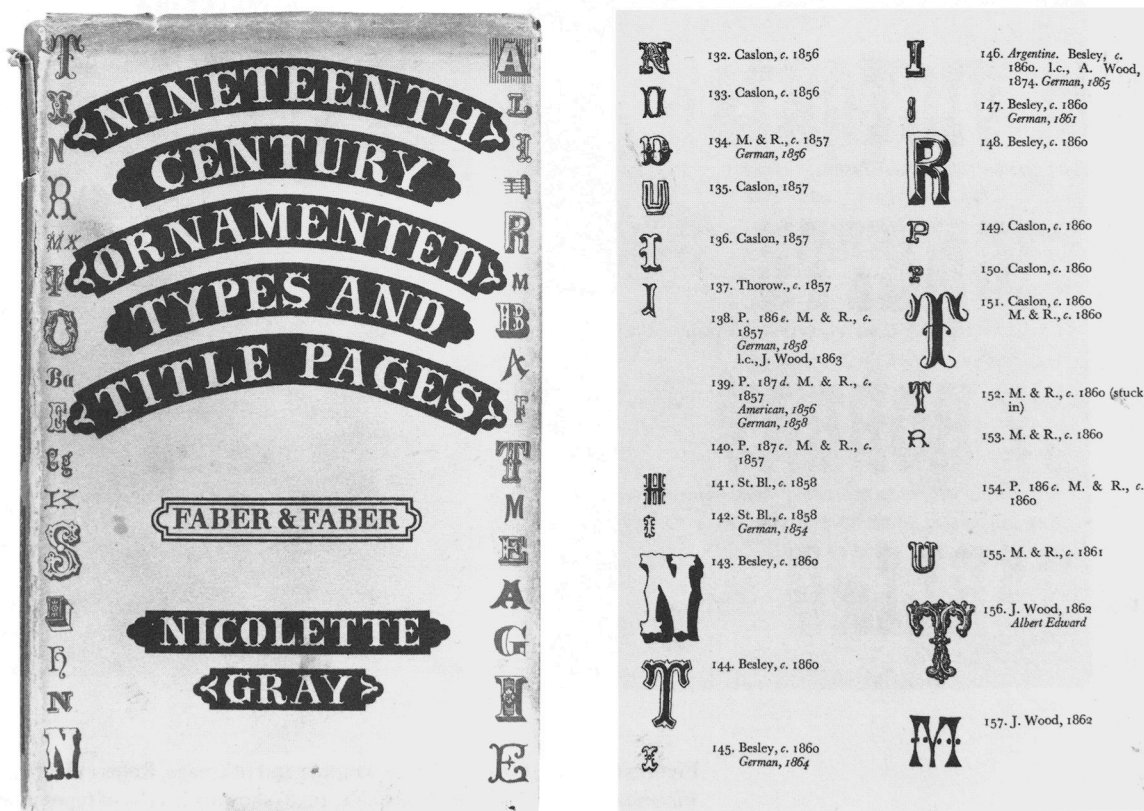
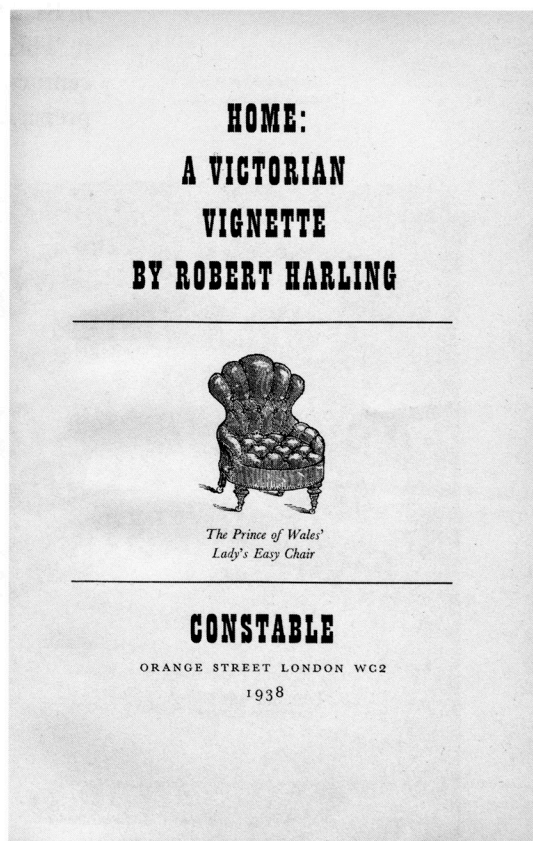
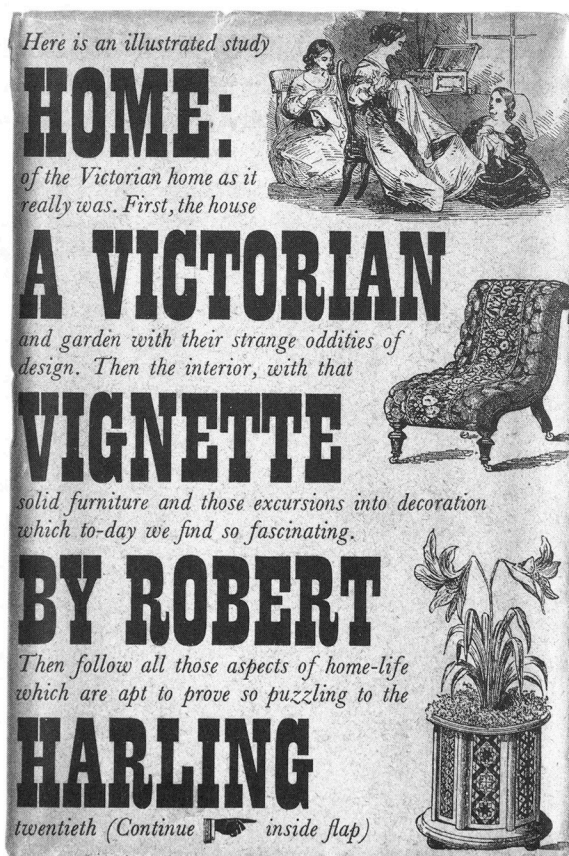


Figure 5. Front wrapper and page of drawings, *XIXth century ornamented types and title pages* (London: Faber & Faber, 1938).

5. See, for example, F. A. Horn, 'Old types with a new significance', *Penrose's Annual*, vol. XXXVI, 1934, pp. 17–22; the series of Shell Guides edited by John Betjeman; the journal *Typography* (1936–39) edited by Robert Harling; and Harling's book *Home: a Victorian vignette* (London: Constable, 1938).

types and title pages, which was published by Faber & Faber in 1938 (figure 5), a year after *The English print*, and when she was still in her twenties. The link between *The English print* and her work on types is at its most obvious when she dealt with ornamented title-pages, many of which were engraved on wood or lithographed and therefore belong as much to the domains of illustration and printmaking as they do to letterforms. Nineteenth-century display types had already attracted the attention of, among others, John Betjeman and John Piper, and were being revived by the typographer Robert Harling on a broader front (figures 6 & 7).⁵ Nicolette Gray was therefore not alone in appreciating such types, but she was the first to make a serious study of them. She recognized their visual richness and turned to them with the enthusiasm of a recent convert. Her main concern, as stated in the Preface to the book, was to document the types themselves; though she also aimed to draw attention to their diversity and relate them to general movements in the art and architecture of the period. She was happy to declare her missionary role, and was punctilious in relating it to a more general revival of interest in nineteenth-century display types:

... I have also tried to interpret what I think is the essential nature of these type faces, so that they may have a meaning to those who



Figures 6 (left) & 7 (right). Front wrapper and title page, Robert Harling, *Home: a Victorian vignette* (London: Constable, 1938) showing his use of types based on nineteenth-century forms.

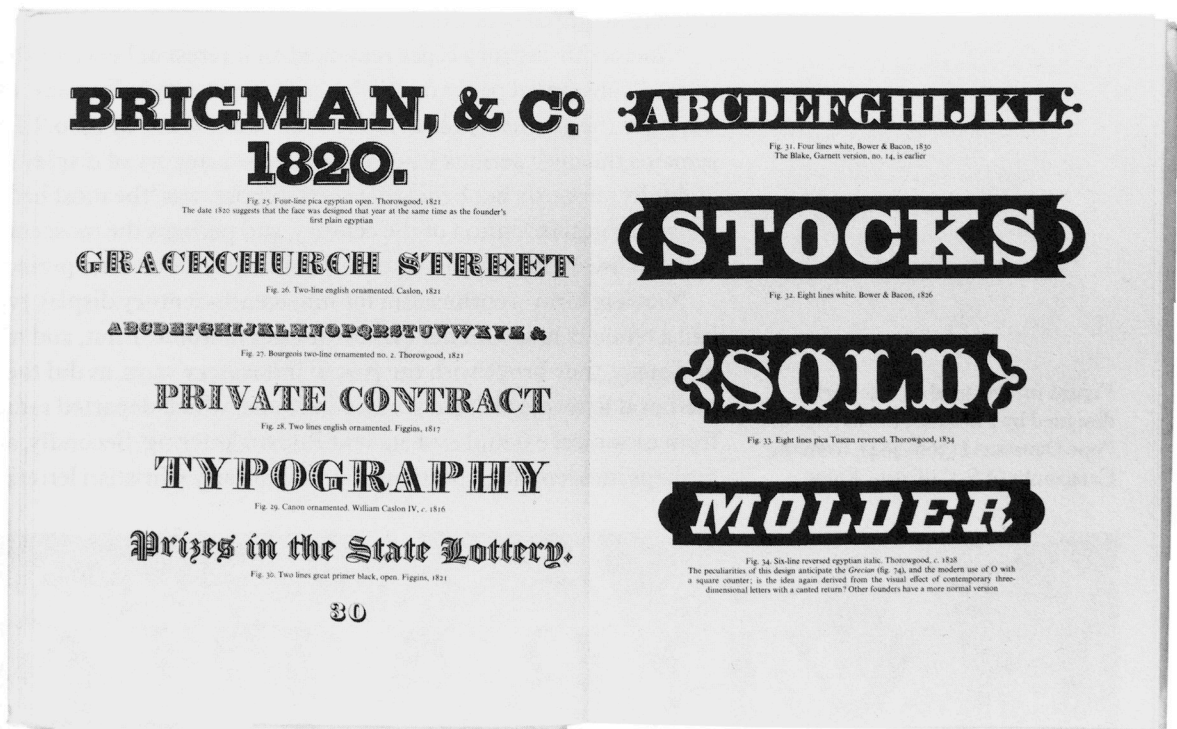
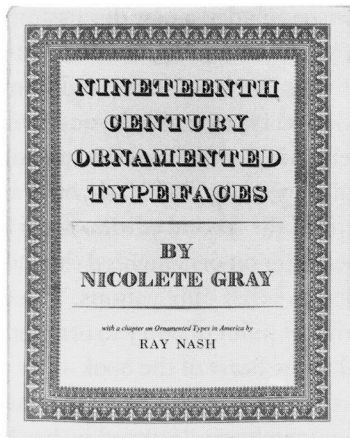
6. N. Gray, *XIXth century ornamented types and title pages* (London: Faber & Faber, 1938), p. 7. The extent to which she was out of step with the typographic orthodoxy of the day can be seen by reading Harry Carter's forthright review of her book in *Signature*, 10, November 1938, pp. 50–52.

7. Gray, *XIXth century ornamented types*, p. 7.

have never consciously noticed letter forms. The revival of ornamental letters in the last few years in all our advertising, printing, and print-making suggests that subconsciously at least we are growing susceptible to the power of suggestion and expression in letters.⁶

Her lively and engaging style of writing was backed up by delightful, but rather free, tracings she made of the types from specimens in the St Bride Printing Library. They have a charm that compensates for their inaccuracies and capture her enthusiasm for her subject quite as much as her writing. They also point to a relationship between theory and practice which was to colour all her work in lettering. Overall, the book reveals aspects of Nicolette Gray's interest in letterforms that run through most of her publications: first, an ability to go beyond the accepted canons of the day and apply her own critical judgement and analytical powers to whatever interested her; secondly, a concern with what she referred to as 'the power of suggestion and expression in letters'.⁷ There is no contradiction in the fact that she was promoting modern art, and specifically modern abstract art, at much the same time that she was immersing herself in the display types of the previous century. Both interests stemmed from the same questioning attitude of mind.

XIXth century ornamented types and title pages was reprinted in 1951 and later thoroughly revised by her for a second edition; this was published by Faber & Faber in 1976 with a slightly changed title: *Nineteenth century ornamented typefaces* (figures 8 & 9). The first five chapters of the new edition remained virtually unchanged, and updates arising from new work in the field were made by means of



Figures 8 (above) & 9 (bottom). Front wrapper and double spread, *Nineteenth century ornamented typefaces* (London: Faber & Faber, 1976).

8. N. Gray, *Nineteenth century ornamented typefaces* (Faber & Faber, 1976), p. 1.

9. No. 15, pp. 1–35.

10. Gray, *Nineteenth century ornamented typefaces*, p. 23 (pp. 28–29 in first edition).

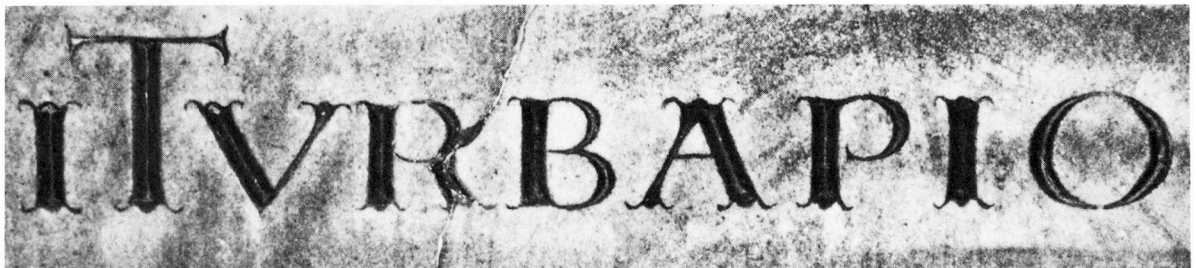
footnotes. It says something for the original text that a substantial part of it – pioneering though it was at the time – could stand without major revision almost forty years on. She noted in her Preface that if she were starting afresh the book would have been written differently; but she still held firmly to her original thesis ‘that nineteenth-century ornamented type design and jobbing printing are one of the folk arts of early industrial society, and reflect aspects of its culture in a way which is historically illuminating...’⁸

In many ways, however, the second edition was a new book. The inclusion of photographically produced illustrations along with the text strengthened her arguments considerably, and the addition of sections on individual type foundry and an extensive chronological chart of same-size photographic reproductions increased its value as a work of reference. What is more, the chart of types grew from 212 to 452 items. The second edition also included a new discussion of the Latin-Runic family of types which, she argued, blurred distinctions between categories of letterforms (such as Gothic and Roman). Other new chapters were added: one on typographic layout, which includes an analysis of the ‘Aesthetic Movement’ and the specifically English ‘Leicester Free Style’, and another, by Ray Nash, on American ornamented types. The revised title of the second edition takes into account the disappearance of the chapter on ornamented title pages, which by then had been superseded by other publications. The dropping of this topic, probably her original point of entry to ornamented types, was an acknowledgement that the heart of the book – her pioneering work on display types – had come of age. The large quarto format and style of the second edition, which was designed by her long-standing friend Berthold Wolpe, reflects the authority Nicolette Gray’s text had acquired over the decades.

Nineteenth-century types remained an interest of hers and she wrote a substantial paper on ‘Slab-serif type design in England 1815–1845’ for the *Journal of the Printing Historical Society* in 1980.⁹ This remains the most serious study of any single category of display face and fully supports her belief that the Egyptian was ‘the most brilliant typographical invention of the century, and perhaps the most complete and concise expression of the dominant culture of its brief period...’¹⁰

Nicolette Gray’s enthusiasm for nineteenth-century display types had a tenuous link with her earliest studies in Rome. First, and most obviously, they broke with the past in innovative ways, as did the medieval lettering she had studied in Rome, which departed radically from canonical examples of ancient Roman lettering. Secondly, and perhaps incidentally, a particular strand of early Christian lettering

Figure 10. Detail of an inscription designed by Filocalus, the letterer of Pope Damasus I (366–384), from the Catacombs of S. Callixtus, Rome.



11. N. Gray, 'Lettering: Tuscan', *Architectural Review*, October 1954, p. 259; 'The Filocalian letter', p. 13; *Lettering on buildings* (London: The Architectural Press, 1960), pp. 48–49.

12. N. Gray, *A history of lettering* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1986), p. 164.

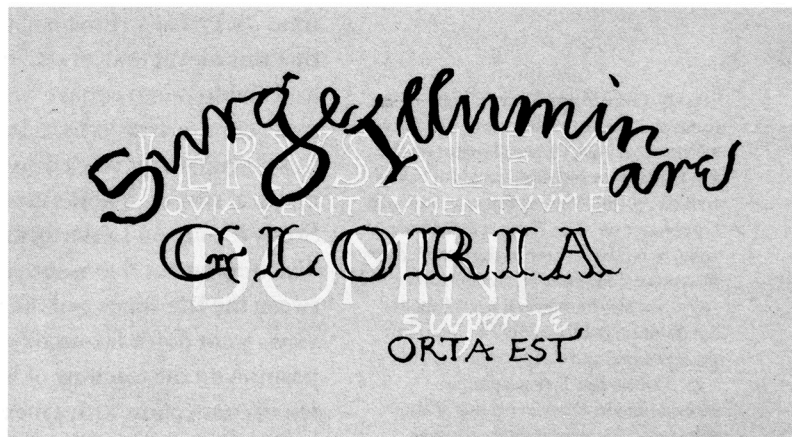
13. The tombstone of Cardinal Heenan (died 1975) and an inscription commemorating the visit of Pope John Paul II in May 1982. In a note about the inscriptions she designed for Westminster Cathedral ('Letterer emeritus', *The Friends of Westminster Cathedral Newsletter*, Spring 1987, pp. 1–2), Nicolete Gray wrote that she carved the tombstone for Cardinal Heenan herself, but that the inlaying was done by Messrs Whitehead.

that appealed to her, the self-consciously non-pagan letterforms devised by Filocalus in the fourth century (figure 10), were similar from a formal point of view to the category of decorative nineteenth-century type known as Tuscan. Both have a strong contrast between thicks and thins and bi- or tri-furcated serifs; what is more, the Filocalian letter, though undecorated, has a certain decorative flavour. It is unlikely that there was a historical link between the two, since the inscriptions of Filocalus in the catacombs and elsewhere around Rome were not made public until the second half of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the similarities are there, and Nicolete Gray remarked on them in some of her early writings.¹¹ Later her position changed somewhat, and in her last book she wrote about Tuscans as letterforms 'with curled terminations, not serious and magnificent like the letters of Filocalus... but jolly, with curls to every limb, and sometimes in mid-stem as well'.¹² Her fondness for the Filocalian letter was so great that she undertook experiments in cutting similar letters on stone herself. Initially this seems to have been done as a means of discovering about its shapes and the problems associated with cutting them, but she later used letters based on the Filocalian model in two of the three inscriptions she designed for Westminster Cathedral.¹³ She also used a much freer version of it on one of her Christmas cards (figure 11).

One of the experiences Nicolete Gray took away from the period she spent in Rome was an understanding of late Roman cursive writing. Little could she have realized when she was in Rome that this experience was to have a profound effect on her work on handwriting decades later. It was characteristic of her lateral thinking that when she became interested in twentieth-century handwriting, and specifically teaching children to write, her mind turned back nearly 2000 years in terms of history and some decades in her own life.

It is not clear what it was that inspired her to take an interest in handwriting in the 1960s, but she was quick to see a link between the writing tools of the day (biros, felt tip and roller ball pens) and what she diagnosed as the deficiencies in the writing of both children and adults. She believed that handwriting had degenerated to such an extent that it could no longer be relied upon to be done either quickly or legibly. Her approach to the problem was essentially pragmatic, though (typically) she also argued for teaching methods that allowed

Figure 11. Christmas card designed by Nicolete Gray in the 1960s using letterforms for the word 'Gloria' inspired by those of Filocalus.



for individuality and personal expression. These two positions were not as contradictory as one might imagine: she would almost certainly have argued that writing should be enjoyable and that, if it was, children would take an interest in making it both legible and beautiful (a word she was not ashamed to use even in relation to handwriting).

She believed that one of the reasons why writing with a monoline tool, such as a biro, was often illegible was that writers allowed the tool to take over, with the result that ends of words became formless squiggles. She saw a link between the tools used in the second half of the twentieth century and the cursive writing of the late Roman period, which, typically, was done with a stylus on wax-coated tablets. She argued that both kinds of tool produced monoline marks and could be made to move with equal facility in any direction. This made them very different from the main writing tools used in the West over the previous thousand years or so: the broad-edged pen and the flexible pen. Writers moved these tools so that they took the line of least resistance, which was certainly not backwards or upwards. The monoline nature of the writing tools of recent years led her to look again at late Roman cursive writing to see what lessons could be learned from it. Her solution was to promote anticlockwise movements and so slow down the forward impetus of writing and reduce the tendency for the shapes of letters to become formless.

In the 1970s her interest in the teaching of handwriting turned into a campaign. Her main target was the model that was used in most British schools for introducing children to letterforms: print script. She wrote several articles about the teaching of writing which were published in *The Times* and *Times Educational Supplement*,¹⁴ and lobbied pen makers for their support (in the case of Berol with some success). She recognized that she needed the help of teachers, partly to give her feedback, but also because she was aware that she did not know enough about the practicalities of classroom teaching. For a time the educationist Prue Wallis Myers worked alongside her,¹⁵ but eventually there was a parting of the ways based on differences of opinion that could not be resolved.

Nicolette Gray's criticism of print script lay mainly in the fact that it was based on shapes resembling those of sanserif types, rather than movement, and that these shapes did not lead on to writing that was cursive. Her argument – which was shared by other letterers at the time – was that writing had to be done quickly for it to survive, and that this meant that any writing scheme worthy of the name should lead children into cursive writing, either directly, or indirectly by having some cursive aspects to it. In her view – and again she was not alone in this – print script was a disaster in this respect, since it had almost geometrical shapes. These views were discussed at several meetings of the Study Group on Letterforms of the Working Party on Typographic Teaching and at the Association Typographique Internationale between the late 1960s and the early 1980s, and for the most part her views went down favourably in such quarters. She summarized her position on the teaching of handwriting in a letter to Sue Walker, written in connection with a meeting of the Study Group on Letterforms at The University of Reading in 1984:

14. N. Gray, 'Away from the signs of the times and back to a fair script', *The Times*, 2 December 1977 ('Special report on the art, techniques and implements of handwriting', p. iii); 'Moving finger writes: pen types move on', *The Times*, 3 December 1980, p. 15; 'Laying down the letter', *Times Educational Supplement*, 19 September 1977. She also had several letters about handwriting published in *The Times* in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

15. Association Typographique Internationale, *Summary report of the second working seminar on the teaching of letterforms* (Reading, 1976).

16. Dated 27 August 1984. Two of Nicolette Gray's children are left-handed, and in a footnote to this letter she wrote: 'Did I say that I w^d be interested in a workshop group? I think that w^d be most important. It would be nice to have one on left-handedness.'

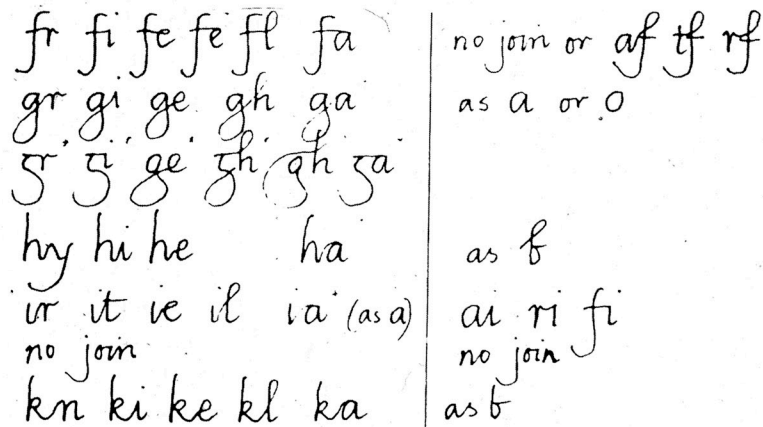
17. Revealed in conversation with the author.

About myself – I have been interested [in handwriting] since I was a child, through my father who was a friend of Robert Bridges (who is given far too little credit for the handwriting revival). Recently, that is in the last ten years or so – I have been interested in what seems to me the urgent problem, that of finding a model & a ductus based on the qualities of the ball-point pen, instead of teaching one based on sans serif type design. I have written various articles (for the *Times*, *Visible Language* etc), given talks to teachers, ILEA etc & at meetings (such as ATypI, Italic hand [writing] Society etc) and drafted a manual for teachers with cards for children to work from. I am interested also in working out a style for left-handers.¹⁶

Though there was considerable agreement with Nicolette Gray among letterers about the dangers of print script (which she referred to in her letter as writing based on 'sans serif' type design), there were differences of opinion about alternatives to it. At the Working Seminar of the Association Typographique Internationale held in The University of Reading in 1976 there was a friendly, but nonetheless fiercely argued, debate between Nicolette Gray and the italic handwriting camp, represented on this occasion mainly by Berthold Wolpe. It was an issue that was not likely to be resolved. In this debate Nicolette Gray was cast in the role of the dissenter, intent on breaking with the traditions of hundreds of years; but almost half a century earlier she was also out of step with the times in the opposite direction when, as an Oxford undergraduate, she took to writing her lecture notes with the most traditional of writing tools, the quill.¹⁷ The two approaches add up to the same things: an almost impish reluctance to conform and an intellectual need to question the orthodoxies of the day.

Over a long period Nicolette Gray worked on an approach to the teaching of handwriting based on the ideas discussed above, and these ideas were turned into the writing scheme for children which she referred to in the letter quoted above. The scheme introduced writing not in terms of shapes, but as movement; it encouraged the use of the tools of the day (biros, etc.), but with built-in checks so that the tool did not take over; and it proposed that common combinations of letters should be taught as digraphs (figure 12). She believed that her approach would lead to legible, but fast, writing and at the same time

Figure 12. Examples of digraphs from Nicolette Gray's pilot scheme for the teaching of handwriting.



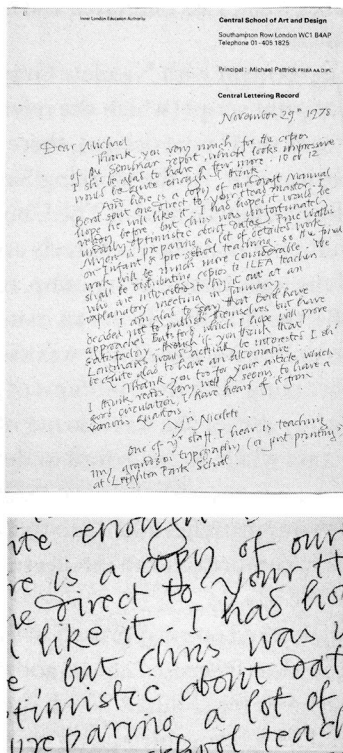


Figure 13. A letter from Nicolette Gray to the author (29 November 1978), with a detail from it, showing her characteristic upward-sloping writing.

allow for individuality. The scheme was published in pilot form in the late 1970s, but had only limited circulation. In many ways it made explicit some of the features she had found to work in her own handwriting. Sadly, it was not well received by the educational world, despite the fact that many of the devices for joining letters she proposed had a pedigree going back centuries, almost regardless of the period in which they were produced and the prevailing style of the writing. One such feature is the treatment of the small 'd', with its strong anticlockwise loop at the top which brings the pen down to begin the formation of the following letter.

The problem for most of those who came to Nicolette Gray's handwriting scheme afresh, without listening to her arguments, was that it did not seem to lead to neat and tidy writing. This criticism could also be levelled at her own handwriting, which often showed lines sloping upwards towards the right and a left-hand margin getting larger as she worked down the page (figure 13). These were the characteristics that critics of her scheme and of her own handwriting noticed before anything else, not the fact that – regardless of how quickly she wrote – the forms of her letters retained their identity and could be recognized out of context. But though her approach to the teaching of writing seems to have been rejected by the educational world, aspects of her thinking on this subject survive. Print script has been abandoned by some educational publishers and substantially modified by others so that it is easier for children to move on to cursive writing at a later stage. Some of the arguments she advanced have therefore been accepted, even though the practical consequences of her campaign may not be evident and her handwriting scheme, as far as I am aware, is not in use.

I suggested at the outset of this article that Nicolette Gray had a particular fondness for the Middle Ages and the nineteenth century. This does not mean that she ignored other periods. On the contrary, some of her projects required that she cast her net very widely indeed. But when she did so she usually revealed her longstanding interests. One such project was what came to be called the Central Lettering Record, which began as a joint project between the Central School of Art and Design in London and the Department of Typography & Graphic Communication at The University of Reading to build up a photographic record of letterforms. Nicolette Gray worked with Nicholas Biddulph at the Central School, and Gillian Riley was initially the key figure at Reading. Both collections continue, though the one at the Central has a higher profile, partly because of Nicolette Gray's involvement with it. More significantly, however, the two collections reflect different interests: at Reading there is an emphasis on ancient Roman and Renaissance inscriptions, whereas a particular strength of the Central Lettering Record is the Middle Ages.

The Central Lettering Record provided the basis for an exhibition that Nicolette Gray organized with Nicholas Biddulph for the Association Typographique Internationale in 1981. It was first shown in Paris and then went on tour. It was this exhibition that led her to write a general history of letterforms, which was eventually published as *A history of lettering: creative experiment and lettering identity* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1986). These three projects – the Central Lettering Record, the ATyPl

- 18. Gray, *History of lettering*, p. 9.
- 19. Gray, 'Lettering became my subject', p. 8.
- 20. N. Gray, 'Sans serif and other experimental inscribed lettering of the early Renaissance', *Motif*, 5, Autumn 1960, pp. 66–76.

exhibition, and *A history of lettering* – confirm her fondness for the lettering of the Middle Ages. This is evident from the emphasis she put on this period and the enthusiasm with which she wrote about it. Six of the fourteen chapters in *A history of lettering* are devoted to the period and cover early Christian inscriptions through to late medieval manuscripts. This concern for the Middle Ages was entirely in keeping with her faith on the one hand and her fascination for the unorthodox and the neglected on the other; both had a powerful influence on her scholarship.

A history of lettering stands almost alone as a general history of the subject; that is, as a history of lettering rather than writing. In her Introduction to the book she distinguishes between the two in the following words:

Lettering is a sub-division of writing. I should define it as writing in which the visual form, that is the letters and the way in which these are shaped and combined, has a formality and an importance over and above bare legibility. It can therefore be an art.¹⁸

It is an ambitious book in many respects, but by no stretch of the imagination can it be said to paint a balanced picture in the sense that it pays equal attention to what have conventionally been seen as historically important periods. The book's subtitle (... *creative experiment and letter identity*) indicates where its author's interests lay. The most original parts of the book are the chapters on medieval lettering; they build on her early research in Rome and are full of fascinating and original insights. In addition, she produced her own hand-drawn tables of medieval letters – much as she had done earlier when writing about nineteenth-century types and Christian epigraphy – to document stylistic points (figure 14).

Nicolette Gray's acceptance into the Roman Catholic Church while at Oxford has already been referred to, though she had shown an interest in the Catholic faith before then. In an autobiographical article, 'Lettering became my subject', which she contributed to her college magazine in 1987, she wrote that her reception into the Roman Catholic Church 'was the most important thing that has happened in my life, which has coloured and conditioned everything that has happened since'.¹⁹ It is understandable, therefore, that she showed a predisposition to those periods in which religious faith found expression in letterforms, and that she might have been rather less interested in other periods. She once revealed to me in the context of a discussion we were having on ancient Roman inscriptions that she felt ill at ease in the Roman Forum: a site that conjured up 2000 years of romantically flavoured history for me clearly had very different associations for her, and principally ones of persecution. This may account in part for the relatively little attention she paid to ancient Roman inscriptions and may also have helped to sharpen her comments about them.

The comparative neglect of the Renaissance in her broad perspective of lettering is rather more surprising. Her book *A history of lettering* had a rather rocky ride with its publishers and what was published contains a little more about the Renaissance contribution to lettering than she had originally intended. She told me at this stage that it was not a period that interested her a great deal. Nevertheless, many years earlier she had written an article in *Motif* with the title 'Sans serif and other experimental inscribed lettering of the early Renaissance'.²⁰

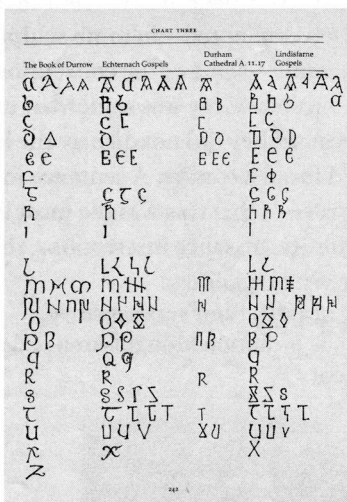


Figure 12. Part of a chart drawn by Nicolette Gray showing variation across letterforms in selected medieval manuscripts, from *A history of lettering* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1986).

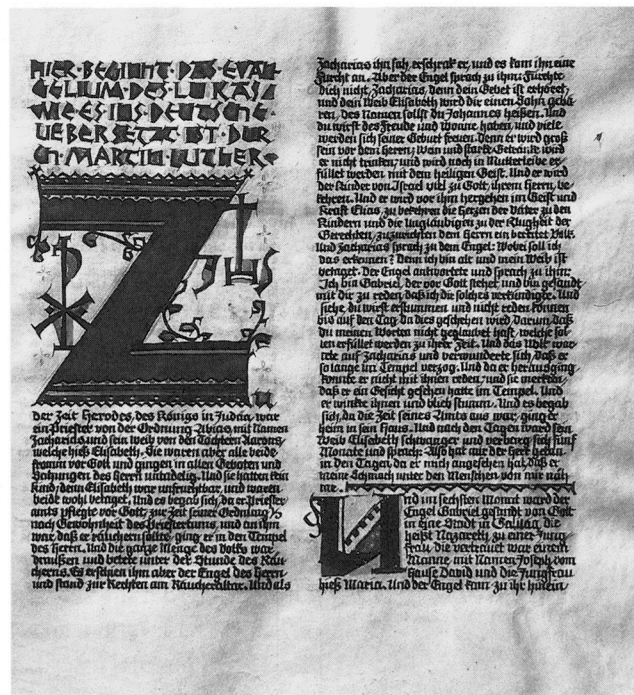
21. Gray, 'Sans serif', p. 76.

Characteristically, however, as her title indicates, she chose to draw attention to the oddities of the period: letterforms that were either pure sanserifs or had splayed terminals and therefore had some of the qualities of sanserifs. The theme of this article was the evolution of inscriptions in the Quattrocento, and this had led me to assume that she had a general interest in the lettering of this period. It came as a surprise to learn that this was not the case, at least in later life. She may well have had an interest in Renaissance lettering early on, which then faded as she became more involved with the expressive potential of letterforms.

The title of Nicolette Gray's *Motif* article on early Renaissance inscriptions provides yet another example of her search for the unorthodox in letterforms; in this case the lettering in question was unorthodox for its period, though the orthodoxy of later times. It cannot be argued that she showed a coolness towards the more orthodox forms of Renaissance lettering because they were pagan, since most of the finest examples of the kind were commissioned for Christian purposes and many are still to be found in Christian contexts. Most Renaissance inscriptions were just as Christian in their purpose as medieval inscriptions, but it could be argued that they are not overtly Christian. Not only do many of their letterforms derive from ancient models, but the inscriptions themselves adopted – in tomb sculpture and on facades of buildings, for example – some of the conventions of pagan Rome. Above all, however, Nicolette Gray was somewhat cool about Renaissance inscriptions because they did not display the innovation and freedom that she looked for in lettering. A sentence in the last paragraph of her *Motif* article reveals that this was the most likely reason for her lack of enthusiasm for Renaissance inscriptions, though she clearly appreciated their other visual qualities:

The Renaissance letter is very beautiful and very sensitive, but one cannot but regret that its evolution brought to an end a fascinating period of experiment.²¹

Figure 15. Rudolf Koch, double spread from a gospel book written throughout by him in a gothic (textura) hand in 1921. Offenbach, Klingenspor Museum.



The Christian strand in Nicolette Gray's published work about lettering was both strong and enduring. It began with her study of medieval inscriptions in Rome and her enthusiasm for the Filocalian letter, which continued to fascinate her throughout her life and found an outlet in her practical inscriptional work for Westminster Cathedral. It was also evident in the twentieth-century letterers that interested her most: Rudolf Koch and David Jones. 'It is not irrelevant', she wrote, 'that to both men words and letters are the historic medium of the Christian message.'²² She told me once in a rather casual way that she regarded Koch as the greatest practitioner of lettering in the twentieth century. And, though she did not write at length about him, she referred to him in passing in many of her publications. Koch's calligraphic books and broadsheets epitomized an approach that she was sympathetic to, because it blurred distinctions between lettering and art. She greatly admired his expressive calligraphy and wrote in *A history of lettering* that 'He proved that the Gothic was still a medium for creative lettering...'²³ In particular, Koch's biblical and other Christian texts revealed for her 'an expression of his deepest feeling' (figure 13).²⁴

She also wrote two books about the Roman Catholic artist David Jones, whom she had known for many years: one about his paintings, which was published in 1989, and another, *The painted inscriptions of David Jones*, which was published in 1981. The latter built on earlier work published in *Signature* (1949) and *Motif* (1961).²⁵ Again we see an interest in work that linked religious experience, Christian texts, and a free interpretation of letterforms (though not all Jones's inscriptions were of Christian texts). David Jones's lettering was less innovative and varied than Koch's mature work of this kind, and his letterforms relate more obviously to traditional ones, both classical and medieval. Nevertheless, they are far removed from the formal and lifeless models published in twentieth-century books on lettering that Nicolette Gray found so depressing. She described David Jones's painted inscriptions as standing 'midway between poetry and painting',²⁶ and held that he was not aiming to be expressive in his lettering and was 'very much more interested in movement than in anything else'.²⁷

Nicolette Gray's interest in the role of lettering in a religious context became a topical matter at the time of the opening of the new Coventry Cathedral building in 1962. One of the most conspicuous features of its interior is a series of large inscriptions running down the nave which were designed and cut by Ralph Beyer. They were inspired by early Christian inscriptions, particularly those in the catacombs, and perhaps more generally by the work of Rudolf Koch. Ralph Beyer's father, Oskar Beyer, had written about both these subjects and this commission to produce a series of inscriptions provided his son with an opportunity to approach lettering in a similar way in a Christian context, but on an altogether more ambitious scale. Inevitably, a high-profile commission that explored the expressive potential of letterforms on such a scale came under fire. Nicolette Gray wrote in *Typographica* to defend Ralph Beyer for so courageously opening up a field of lettering;²⁸ she pointed to the contrast between his inscriptions and 'the terrible half-roman half-Gothic lettering on the east wall of the ruins, or the drab

22. N. Gray, 'David Jones and the art of lettering', *Motif*, 7, Summer 1961, p. 80.

23. See Gray, *History of lettering*, p. 205.

24. Gray, *History of lettering*, p. 205.

25. N. Gray, 'David Jones', *Signature*, 8 (ns), 1949, pp. 46–56; 'David Jones and the art of lettering', *Motif*, 7, 1961, pp. 69–80.

26. N. Gray, *The painted inscriptions of David Jones* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1981), p. 7.

27. Gray, *Painted inscriptions*, p. 12.

28. N. Gray, *Typographica*, 6, December 1962, pp. 33–41.

29. Gray, *Typographica*, p. 36.

30. *Architectural Review*, November 1953, pp. 295–301; April 1954, pp. 269–271; June 1954, pp. 387–391; August 1954, pp. 119–120; October 1954, pp. 259–261. The first of these articles carried the heading ‘Theory of Classical’; the second, ‘Lettering’; and later ones, the names of particular categories of letter: ‘Egyptians’, ‘Ionic’, ‘Tuscan’. As a direct result of these articles the *Architectural Review* was given a robust typographic overhaul.

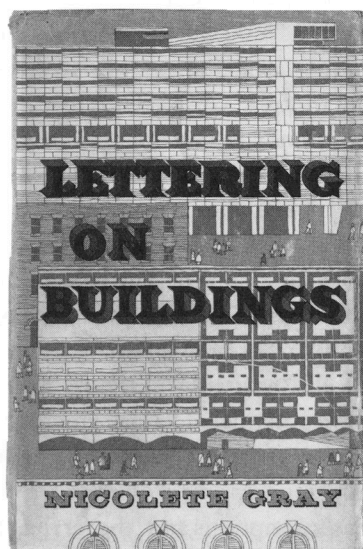
31. Recalled by James Mosley, who attended the series as a newly appointed Assistant Librarian at the Library.

32. Gray, *Lettering on buildings*, p. 9.

33. Gray, *Lettering on buildings*, p. 9.

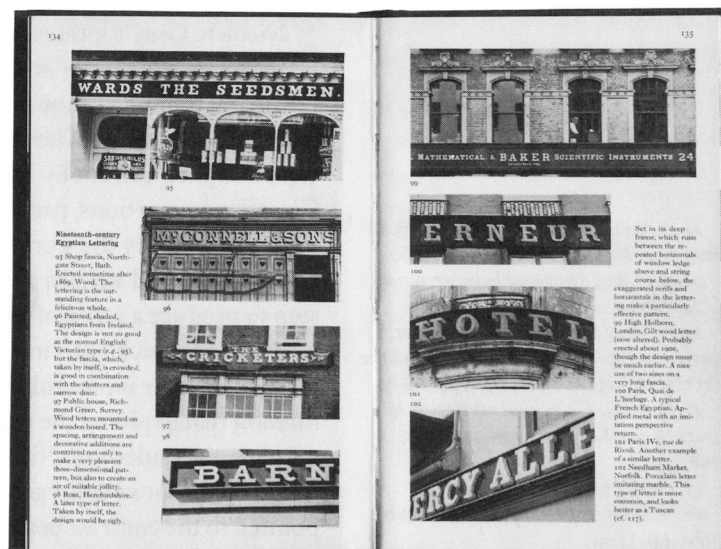
34. Gray, *Lettering on buildings*, p. 13.

Figures 16 (left) & 17 (right). Front wrapper and double spread, *Lettering on buildings* (London: Architectural Press, 1960).



ubiquitous romans that we know so well...’²⁹ All the same, she had reservations – which she expressed in a characteristically forthright way – about some of his letterforms and the arrangement of the texts on the slabs. Her criticism – informed as it was by her knowledge of early Christian inscriptions and the work of Koch and Jones – revealed an acute sensibility to the nature of the texts and their Christian context, and had as much to do with questions of appropriateness as with formal issues and aesthetics.

Nicolette Gray’s most significant contribution to letterforms after her study of nineteenth-century display types was to open up the subject of architectural lettering. Her interest in the field was given a focus in 1953 when Nikolaus Pevsner invited her to contribute a series of articles on the subject to the *Architectural Review*.³⁰ Later, she gave a series of talks on the subject in the St Bride Library to a paltry audience that included the regular and somewhat daunting presence of Stanley Morison on the front row.³¹ Eventually her thoughts on it were crystallized in an unassuming but highly original book, *Lettering on buildings*, which was published by the Architectural Press in 1960 (figure 16). The book’s purpose, she states in the Preface, was ‘to discover the specific principles’ that apply to architectural lettering and particularly ‘its relationship to architecture itself’.³² She aimed ‘to create a new approach to the subject, to get away from doctrinaire ideas’;³³ in particular, she rejected the notion that ideas derived from other applications of lettering, such as printing, should be applied unthinkingly to architectural lettering. She raised issues about lettering in the environment from ancient Roman times to the mid-twentieth century, using what was for the time an astonishing array of small photographs, many of which had already appeared in her articles for the *Architectural Review*. Medieval lettering does not figure strongly in the book, presumably because gothic forms do not seem to lend themselves to large-scale inscriptional work (though Filocalus finds a place in it on the grounds that his inscriptions were on an architectural scale).



The book begins with a powerful positional statement about the adoption of absolute standards in lettering that derived from the early second-century inscription at the base of Trajan's Column in Rome which had led, she wrote, 'to the introduction of an almost uniform letter for every sort of use'.³⁴ She went on to explain that:

The picture [of Roman lettering] which emerges is very different from that usually given by general books on lettering of a uniform type of uniform excellence. In fact the Romans produced more careless and formless inscriptions than any other people. They also produced a greater variety.³⁵

To generations brought up on the Trajan canon this was heresy. Only a few years before I first read this book I had taken a three-hour practical examination to produce a given text in what was called the 'Roman letter'! And mine were not the only eyes opened by this innocent-looking book.

Following the publication of *Lettering on buildings*, Nicolette Gray was supported by the Arts Council to travel in Europe and have further photographs made of lettering in the environment. These photographs were combined with others to form an Arts Council travelling exhibition with the same title as her book. This toured the country for several years from November 1963, and some of the photographs were reproduced, 'king-size' as she described them, in *Motif* in 1967.³⁶ As a result of this exposure many designers, and others concerned with letterforms, began to document the urban scene in terms of its lettering and to think more broadly about letterforms. Her work on lettering on buildings also provided the inspiration for the photographic collections at the Central School and at The University of Reading. The impact on letterers and historians of lettering is evident from the work of, for example, Harold Bartram, James Mosley, and James Sutton, though it seems to have had less impact on architects. I recall that Nicolette Gray was associated with a meeting held on the premises of the Royal Institute of British Architects to consider the issue of architectural lettering.³⁷ There was no formal agenda; the purpose of the meeting was simply to bring typographers, letterers, and architects together in the hope that they would find a common interest in architectural lettering. At some stage in the meeting – sensing that it was somewhat unbalanced in its representation of these professions – someone asked how many architects were present. One person stood up. To a large extent the study of architectural lettering, though in part initiated by an architectural historian, has remained firmly within the field of the graphic arts. And its association with Nicolette Gray is still as strong as it was forty years after her book on the subject was published.

One aspect of her involvement with architectural lettering that became increasingly important to her personally was the lettering of the Arabic world, and especially the formalized, decorative, letterforms of Kufic. She was able to take advantage of her husband's many trips abroad, first on behalf of the British Museum when he was Keeper of Oriental Antiquities (and, just before retirement, Acting Director), and later for other bodies. She was tremendously excited by the applications of lettering she saw in the Middle East, partly because they provided justification for some of the ideas she was pur-

35. Gray, *Lettering on buildings*, p. 14.

36. 'Lettering on buildings', *Motif*, 13, [1967], pp. 17–47. This article, which consists mainly of photographs taken by Belinda Purbridge, includes a brief introductory text in which Nicolette Gray explains the circumstances of the exhibition and her reasons for selecting some photographs for publication rather than others. She refers to the exhibition itself as a 'propaganda exhibition' (p. 19).

37. I have been unable to date this meeting or trace others who were there, though I believe that it was in the mid-1960s.

38. Confirmation of this view, expressed to me in conversation, can be found in N. Gray, *Lettering as drawing: contour and silhouette* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 1.

39. I must have asked her at some stage why she settled on the single 't' form; this was the answer she gave me (though I know that other explanations have been given). She used the single 't' form from time to time in letters as far back as 1929. It appeared much later in her publications: in her article 'David Jones' in *Signature*, (8 [ns], 1949), she was still using the earlier form of spelling, but from the series of articles in the *Architectural Review* (1953–54), the spelling is Nicolette. She seems to have been unaware of the bibliographical contortions undertaken by the numerous writers who cite her publications.



Figure 18. Making a point at the Working Seminar of the Association Typographique Internationale, Reading, 1976.

Picture acknowledgements: Faber & Faber for figures 5, 8, & 9; Klingspor Museum, Offenbach-am-Main for figure 15.

suing in her teaching of the practice of lettering at the Central School at the time. She explored many of these ideas in 1970 in two paperback books for Oxford University Press: *Lettering as drawing: the moving line* and *Lettering as drawing: contour and silhouette*. The letterforms of the Arabic world made much greater use of both movement and figure/ground ambiguities than the conventional forms of the Latin alphabet; she was delighted by their formal qualities and found them useful in relation to her teaching because they supported her general hypothesis that lettering should be explored for its artistic potential.

With the passing of time it can be seen that Nicolette Gray's apparently diverse interests in letterforms make sense as a whole. The common strands they reveal are a fascination with the unorthodox and for working in relatively untrodden areas, a concern for the visual and particularly the expressive potential of lettering, and a bias towards lettering which had a Christian dimension. These interests led her to study medieval Christian lettering, with its great variety and often irrationality of forms; the formal qualities of Arabic lettering, particularly its sense of movement and figure/ground ambiguities; the inventiveness of nineteenth-century display types; a new approach to teaching handwriting to children; and lettering as a form of art (which she explored in theory and practice, and through her teaching). Conversely, she tended to ignore or play down those contributions to letterforms that reflected or re-inforced constraint and orthodoxy: the inscriptional lettering of ancient Rome with its overtones of authority; the strait-jacket of Renaissance theorists who proposed geometrical principles for constructing letters; Edward Johnston's teaching, which she felt had a stifling effect at the Central School even in the 1960s;³⁸ and use of the broad pen as a basis for teaching handwriting, which she believed had practical drawbacks and limited personal expression. All this adds up to an approach to the study of letterforms of a free spirit with a keen analytical mind, absolute confidence in her own visual judgements, intellectual courage, and profoundly held religious beliefs.

It may not be possible to explain why anyone should have an abiding passion for letterforms, but if anyone had such a passion it was Nicolette Gray. Her daughter Sophy remembers that her mother came down to breakfast one day and told her that she had been dreaming about letters. Her visual recall of them was certainly remarkable. As a young woman touring Europe on her own she saw inscriptions which she was somehow able to conjure up in her mind's eye half a century later. Recording lettering was at the top of her agenda wherever she went, and she travelled extremely widely. Many is the time I thought I had discovered a fascinating inscription in some small provincial museum abroad, only to discover that she had spotted it decades before. And who else would have bothered to settle on the spelling of their name – in her case from Nicolette to Nicolette – simply because they did not like the look of a certain combination of letters?³⁹