



**Cecily van Gend**

When I started high school, way back in the days of the rinderpest, we were offered three options at the all-girls school I attended: those of us considered to be 'university material' could take the Academic Course, with Latin and Maths; those who fancied an office job later could take the Commercial Course, with Shorthand and Typing; those who wanted to be nothing more than good wives and mothers took the somewhat mis-

named Modern Course, where they were taught Domestic Science and Needlework. I rather fancied the idea of learning to cook, and was always fascinated watching the way typists' fingers flew over the keyboard to produce, as if by magic, those perfectly printed letters. There was never any doubt, however, that I would take anything but the Academic Course. As my mother pointed out, 'You can pick up all the other stuff later'.

And so it came to pass. I never really regretted the decision: although I learnt barely enough maths to gain a university entrance, the Latin has stayed with me all my life. It gave me an understanding of the way languages are structured, and how they work, and it came in handy when I tried to acquire a smattering of Italian, French and Spanish.

Later, I did manage to 'pick up the other stuff'. Sheer greed, trial and error and the avid perusal of cookbooks ensured that I became quite a passable cook. During a very boring spell as librarian to a firm of engineers, I taught myself to touch type. There was very little to do, except compile a weekly list of periodical articles of interest to the various partners, which I laboriously typed out on an old electric typewriter, with the help of a manual showing me the finger positions.

This gave me considerable practice, as I typed and re-typed it each week until I had produced a reasonably error-free list. This skill was acquired through sheer boredom - at the time I never dreamt it would prove to be so useful.

Typewriters have been around since the early 1800s, but mass production only began in 1877, when a gun manufacturer called Remington produced a machine designed by Christopher Sholes of Milwaukee. Since then, it has pretty much revolutionised not only the commercial world, but the lives of everyone involved with the written word, which is really pretty much everyone.

Sam Goldwyn is said to have remarked, wonderingly, on contemplating a volume of Shakespeare's Complete Works: 'And to think he wrote it all with a feather.' Quill- or even pen-wielding authors were quick to catch on to the new, mechanical means of word production. Mark Twain was the first writer to produce a book composed on a typewriter - hardly surprising given his early career as a typesetter for a printworks.

Henry James was also quick to perceive the possibilities of this new invention, as we learn in Michiel Heyns's delightful novel, **The typewriter's tale**. James did not operate the typewriter himself,

however; but employed a young woman to do the job for him. He referred to her as 'the typewriter', apparently regarding her as a mere extension of the machine: '... transmitting through efficient fingers, the emanations of a writer celebrated for his sympathetic recording of just such disregarded lives as hers. Mr James himself had never shown any apprehension of this quiet enough irony: however, preternaturally attuned his sensibilities were to the muffled chord of despair as sounded in the elliptical intercourse of his characters, in her he took for granted, apparently, a prompt attention and a cheerful readiness to assist merely mechanically at the slow processes of his deliberations and contemplations.'

Throughout the twentieth century, typewriters were almost universally the means by which authors transmitted their thoughts to the page - with some exceptions, of course: Bruce Chatwin, for example, is reputed to have written in longhand in a Moleskin notebook. But by and large the image of the cynical author, pounding away at a battered old Remington, cigarette dangling from the lips, is almost a cliché. Anthony Burgess, in fact, titled his volume of memoirs **Homage to QWERTYUIOP**.

With the advent of the word processor, most writers made the transition to electronic communication quite smoothly. Again there are exceptions: the self-styled technomoron, Robertson Davies, clings stubbornly to his electric typewriter, claiming that word processors have made the production of the written word too easy, stifling creativity in the process. But on the whole, the transition was an easy one, given that the keyboard remained unchanged. The familiar Qwertyuiop arrangement has carried over into the technological age, not necessarily because of its efficiency, but rather, I think, because everyone has got so used to it, and typing has become automatic, a reflex which we do not have to think about.

This familiar keyboard arrangement had a very practical origin. In early typewriters, print was formed by striking a key, which raised an arm or type bar with a character on the end. These bars were arranged in a circle, and if two adjacent keys were struck in quick succession, their bars would meet in the middle and jam. This happened so often with the early keyboards, where the letters were arranged alphabetically, that Sholes redesigned it, coming up with the qwerty arrangement, intended to scatter the letters so that the most frequently-used characters were far apart - a deliberately unergonomic design.

Later, others designed more efficient keyboards, but somehow these never really caught on, perhaps because of the influence of the powerful gunmaker, Remington. One of these was designed by a distant cousin of the composer, Antonin Dvorak. The Dvorak keyboard groups the most commonly-used letters on the 'home' row, where the typist's fingers rest. During World War II, this keyboard was successfully used by the typists of the United States Navy, and is said to have increased speed by 74% and accuracy by 68%. Despite its obvious superiority, however, it did not catch on, and its inventor died a disillusioned man, complaining bitterly that he was 'tired of trying to do something for the human race. They simply do not want to change.'



Since the invention of golf balls, daisy wheels, and especially, the PC and computer printers, the original reason for the arrangement fell away, but somehow qwerty persisted, simply because it had become established. Everyone who used a typewriter was accustomed to the position of the letters - typing had become an automatic reflex.

With the advent of the PC more people than ever are tapping away at keyboards all over the world. Manually-written documents are practically a thing of the past: the 'written' word is now largely produced by PCs and printers, and letters are becoming almost obsolete as people communicate by e-mail.

This has given rise to a new problem: the unergonomic qwerty arrangement is said to contribute to the increase of repetitive strain

injury - caused by repetitive motion of the fingers. It seems, however, that help is not far away, and we are poised for another major technological innovation. The keyboard is about to be replaced altogether with speech recognition software, or personally-customised input devices. Personally, I will miss good old qwerty: it has become so ingrained in my thought patterns that when I see a word, I no longer spell out letters in my head. Instead, I feel an instinctive response in the relevant fingers, and mentally go through the motions of typing out the word. I am not sure that there can ever be as close a relationship between my voice and a machine as between my fingers and the keyboard.