

Blue-eyed Mistress of the Keys

Peter McLaren

C'est parce qu'Irma Wright, grand-tante de l'auteur, tapait 116 mots à la minute, qu'elle est devenue célèbre. À cette époque où l'on s'intéressait beaucoup plus aux Marathons de danse et aux compétitions de dactylographie qu'à l'élévation de la pensée, Ms Wright a contribué à sa façon au féminisme. Dans son esprit, le travail de secrétaire n'était qu'un tremplin pour atteindre à une position plus élevée.

My father was generally indifferent to the Women's Movement. But he sometimes surprised me by bragging to friends that my Great Aunt, Irma Wright, was one of Canada's first feminists. I was extremely proud of Aunt Irma, although I always knew that she was no Nellie McClung or Agnes Mcphail. Today I would prefer that Aunt Irma had been on the picket lines at the Hamilton textile strike of 1929 or organizing Local 72 of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union in 1931, rather than sitting behind a carved oak desk as a Royal Typewriter celebrity executive.

Yet Irma Wright was far from uncommitted to improving the status of women in the workplace. Her professional drive, coupled with her uncanny talent at the keyboard, enabled her to question the dominant ideology governing women, an ideology which was, and to a great

extent still is, hostile to women seeking and achieving positions of responsibility in business and commerce.

While Irma Wright may have been one of a few token executives in a man's world, she did manage to contribute to feminism through the many lectures and workshops she gave for aspiring office workers. She continually put forward the idea that secretarial work could be used as a stepping-stone to executive positions in business. If, in 1982, it is now clearer that the typing pool is a dead-end for most women and seldom, if ever, the key to the Board Room, this awareness does not take away from her efforts in the Thirties to improve the image of secretarial work.

But ultimately Irma Wright's public role was that of a performer, a woman with the ability to draw an audience. The world of the Thirties was, after all, more concerned with dance marathons, flag-pole sitting and typing competitions than with consciousness-raising. Few people would turn out to hear someone speak on the image of women in business but they would come in droves, press corps included, to see the woman with the fastest fingers in the world. . . .

THE YEAR: 1928. The place: a civic arena in Sacramento, California. Twenty top-ranked male and

female competitors from two continents are gathered for the world championship. As they quietly take their positions on the stage, a hush falls over the standing-room-only audience.

One of the youngest contestants is Irma Wright, an attractive 28-year-old from Toronto. Nervously, she rubs the tips of her fingers with her 'good luck' cotton handkerchief. She has trained 540 hours for this moment, but, as always, she is worried; in training she has lost three pounds from sheer nervous tension. She feels a rush of adrenalin as the announcer calls her name, and she prays she will not lose her concentration, not even for an instant.

The competitors sit in three rows facing their oiled and polished machines, bodies erect and poised, elbows at sides, fingers gingerly touching the keys. Finally the signal is given, and they loose themselves with a fury.

Thirty minutes later, Irma Wright, diamond medalist and five times Canadian professional champion, has become the Amateur Typewriting Champion of the World, her speed: 116 words per minute. From this night on, she will be known internationally as 'Canada's typing tornado,' 'Queen of Dominion typists' and 'the blue-eyed mistress of the keys.' After the contest Irma Wright soaks her swollen fingers in a bucket of ice and leans back in her chair with a sigh. 'It's all in the



Photo: Alexandra Studio, Toronto

rhythm,' she says to the reporters.

Irma Wright was born in Hamilton in 1900. In 1913 her father, Charles, who had moved his family to Toronto the previous year for business reasons, died after a long bout with the bottle, and Irma enrolled in a business course at Toronto's Wellesley Public School. When she plunked out her first word on the typewriter, she had a strange feeling that, for her, typing would become more than just an acquired skill. 'There was something eerie, almost supernatural about my first session at the typewriter,' she recalled years later. 'I can't really define the feeling, but I knew instantly that somehow the typewriter was going to play a major part in my life.'

Even in her early teens, Wright stood over six feet, often ridiculed by her classmates because of her height and awkward gait. But, while only an average student, she quickly excelled at the keyboard. Fewer than six months after she started to type, she won a silver medal at an annual Toronto business show. Her instructors were at a loss to explain her victory, since only 35 minutes of the school day were given over to typing. Already there was something phenomenal about this girl who had just turned fourteen.

Ten years later, Wright's name flashed across the typing firmament when she won both the Canadian Open and the Quebec Bilingual crowns of 1924. She owed much of her success to Fred Jarrett, manager of the United Typewriter Company's educational department and holder of the Canadian Professional Championship for fifteen years. She had joined United two years earlier as an understudy to Jarrett, who took a special interest in her extraordinary prowess.

Typing soon became Wright's entire world. Relatives remember that whenever she came to visit, she brought her typewriter along. 'When she babysat me as a boy,' one great-nephew recalls, 'she would enthrall me with stories of strange, faraway places she had visited giving typing demonstrations. Later in the evening, when I was safely tucked in bed, she would go into the den. The next sound would be the steady,

metallic beat of the keys. Aunt Irma was practising. It would go on for hours.'

By now, Irma Wright had blossomed into an attractive woman with a flair for clothes. Sporting a marcel hairstyle and with the latest New York fashions draped on her tall, slender frame, she became the public ideal of a secretary: attractive, intelligent, well-mannered and an expert at typing. Her pastel suits became her trademark. 'Never refer to pastel as a *colour*,' she would chide her friends. 'Pastel is a *tint*.'

In 1925, and in each of the four subsequent years, when winning the Canadian Professional Typing Championship, she shattered all existing records. The fastest speed she ever officially attained, in a measured one-minute test, was 157 words. This was in the hard, slow days of manual machines, when electronic keyboards belonged to the realm of science fiction.

Everyone, it seemed, tried to capitalize on Wright's success. She turned down dozens of offers from advertisers who wanted her to promote their products. The exception was Lux; this one she accepted because she did use Lux and felt it would not be dishonest to promote the product.

After her world win in 1928, a life-long dream of Wright's was fulfilled when she was invited to visit the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios in Hollywood. She could hardly believe being whisked away in a sleek limousine to meet screen idols Norma Shearer and Johnny Mack Brown. She wrote to her family that Norma Shearer was 'charm itself, so beautiful too, very small, about up to my shoulder, I would say. She got such a kick out of everything, and you would imagine those people to be bored stiff all the time.'

Soon Wright was travelling the continent giving demonstrations of her lightning sprints on the keys. Boosting her demonstrations with a genuine show-business flair, she electrified audiences by typing blindfolded and wearing gloves and with a silk handkerchief over the keyboard, at the astonishing rate of 126 error-free words per minute.

But life on the demonstration cir-

cuit was not always roses. Wright wrote to her family: 'We arrived Saturday morning, tired and travel strained and I thought: Now here is a chance to get to a hotel and have a bath. But no — more pictures to be taken and that meant a delay of another two hours. Such is fame. In the evening I went up to see myself in moving pictures. I got a kick out of that, but I looked rather sad because my hair had just been washed and I could not get a marcel any place in Sacramento before three that day and the pictures were taken at one.'

Wright avoided strenuous sports in order to protect her hands. But she trained like an athlete, a certain diet, so many hours typing a day, lots of sleep, and, above all, quiet nerves. 'Those nerves are the typist's greatest worry,' she said. 'One can freeze to the fingertips and be unable to move a key. That is where training of the mind counts.' As for training of the fingers, Wright typed the entire text of *Gone with the Wind* over and over again.

Wright always took along her own favorite typewriter (an Underwood) and a custom-made table and chair. During one contest she was inexplicably thrown off her rhythm. It turned out that her chair had not been assembled properly and was a quarter-inch too short.

Not only did she possess uncanny mechanical skills when it came to typing; she developed an almost psychic ability as well. She knew how fast others were typing by merely *listening*. She could even tell *what* they were typing. During serious competition, though, she had to suppress this talent because it interfered with her own concentration.

By the time she retired from competition in 1936, Irma Wright had achieved her goal of 100 million words or 500 million strokes. She estimated that she had trained no fewer than 540 hours for each of the twelve major contests in her career and had typed an average 6,500 words per hour. That made 42,120,000 words in training alone.

Once retired from contests, Wright became head of the speed department for United Typewriter

and later director of education for Royal Typewriter Co. Ltd. She was also a guest instructor at various business and commercial colleges throughout the country. On a typical day, she would take her position at the front of a room full of junior-business boys and girls.

'Sit up straight,' she would begin, 'feet flat, wrists relaxed. Correct posture and relaxation are the keys to good speed work.' When the students were ready, she would write a number of odd combinations on the blackboard: fif, juj, aba, szs, d3d, k8k, and so on. Then she would crank up a record player. 'Now,' she would say, to the strains of the *Star-Spangled Banner*, 'please keep in rhythm, no matter what speed it is.' In later years, she would sometimes surprise and delight the class by putting on an Elvis Presley record.

At the end of a lesson, she often gave a demonstration. Her show-business flair never left her and the new electric typewriters made possible one of her most thrilling feats: since she did not have to raise her hand to shift the carriage, Wright would ask a volunteer to place a glass of water on top of each of her hands; then she would speed type without making an error or spilling a drop.

Irma Wright was billed by the nation's press as 'Canada's top secretary,' but she was not content to remain in that role. A forceful woman, she kept her maiden name after marriage when it was unfashionable to do so and encouraged secretaries to seek executive positions. On tours she would tell young women training to become secretaries not to reply to advertisements for a 'Girl Friday' or an 'Office Wife.' She would recall how she had refused to make coffee for her bosses when she was a budding secretary. She once told a male audience that the average typist spends as much energy during the day as a man digging ditches. And, in fact, tests at the National Business School in Chicago in 1933 proved that a speed typist works harder than a coal miner.

Like many coal miners and ditch-diggers, Irma Wright died young, at 59.

Breaking Through
Kem Murch Erna Van Daele

moderato

She's the keeper of the
fire. She's the mother of machines. She's the
builder of our shelter, and the
til- - ler of our dreams!
She's the captain of her travels,
she's a worker on the crew. In her
hands a new to-morrow: She's a
wo-man - , breaking through -
- , breaking through - !

© "Breaking Through" Theme Song
Composed and conducted by Erna Van Daele
Lyrics by Kem Murch
Sung by Colleen McIlroy
Produced by Music for Media

For more information on the new film *Breaking Through*,
see page 84 of this issue.

COMMUNIQUE'ELLES

FEMINIST MAGAZINE PUBLISHED MONTHLY

FREE IN QUEBEC

\$12/YEAR ELSEWHERE

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