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Claymore

Jeremy Tankard

typography.net

Hair

ExtraLight Italic

bowl of Black a

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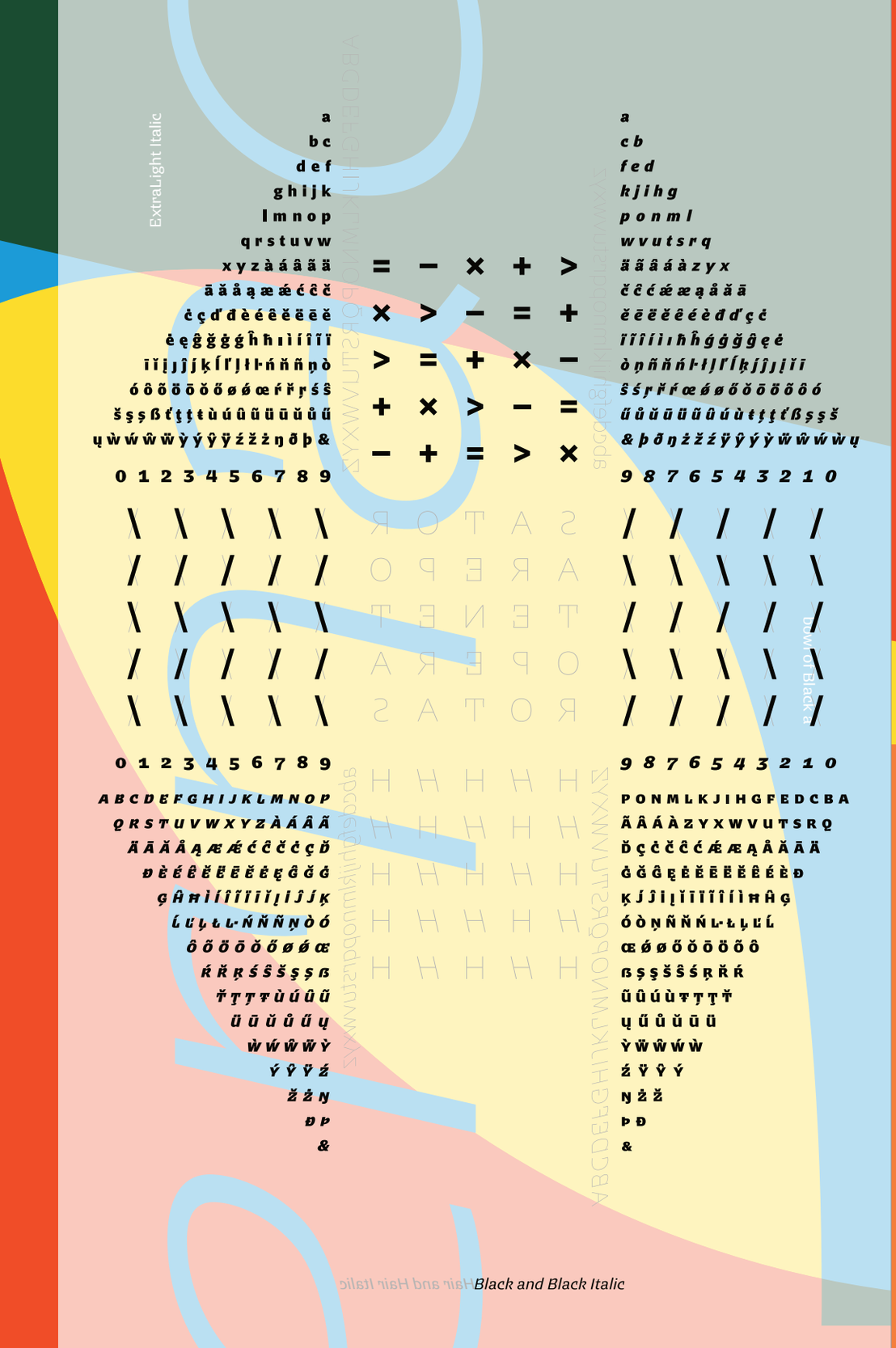
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Principles of Type

Over the years various arbitrary thoughts relating to type have popped into my head. I was concerned that these nebulous observations would evaporate and be lost, so they were gathered together and unceremoniously dumped in a folder titled 'Type Thoughts'. There aren't many and they range from a few lines to rambling incoherent passages. Intriguing subjects like Perfectibility in Type, or Essential and Non-Essential Form. Some dwell on material things such as rhythm, pattern, and structure; others are more abstract, aesthetic, or emotive and make suggestions toward seemingly unrelated subjects. More recently some of these ideas such as Visualising Harmony, Constructing Illusion, and Shape Manipulation were expanded on in a talk I gave to students, first in Porto and later at Coventry. Presenting this made me think of the possibility of using abstract concepts as part of the type design process. To construct a framework that provokes and challenges creative thinking – a set of criteria or guiding principles, if you will. I am powered by the feelings and emotions that type generates in me, but struggle with the lack of opportunity to manifest much of this in the typeface. Perhaps thinking about the design of type this way may help to develop ideas along new paths. On the whole type is bound by its requirement to function as a vehicle of communication. How it does this and its ability to do this varies considerably. Understanding function to be Functionalism, my

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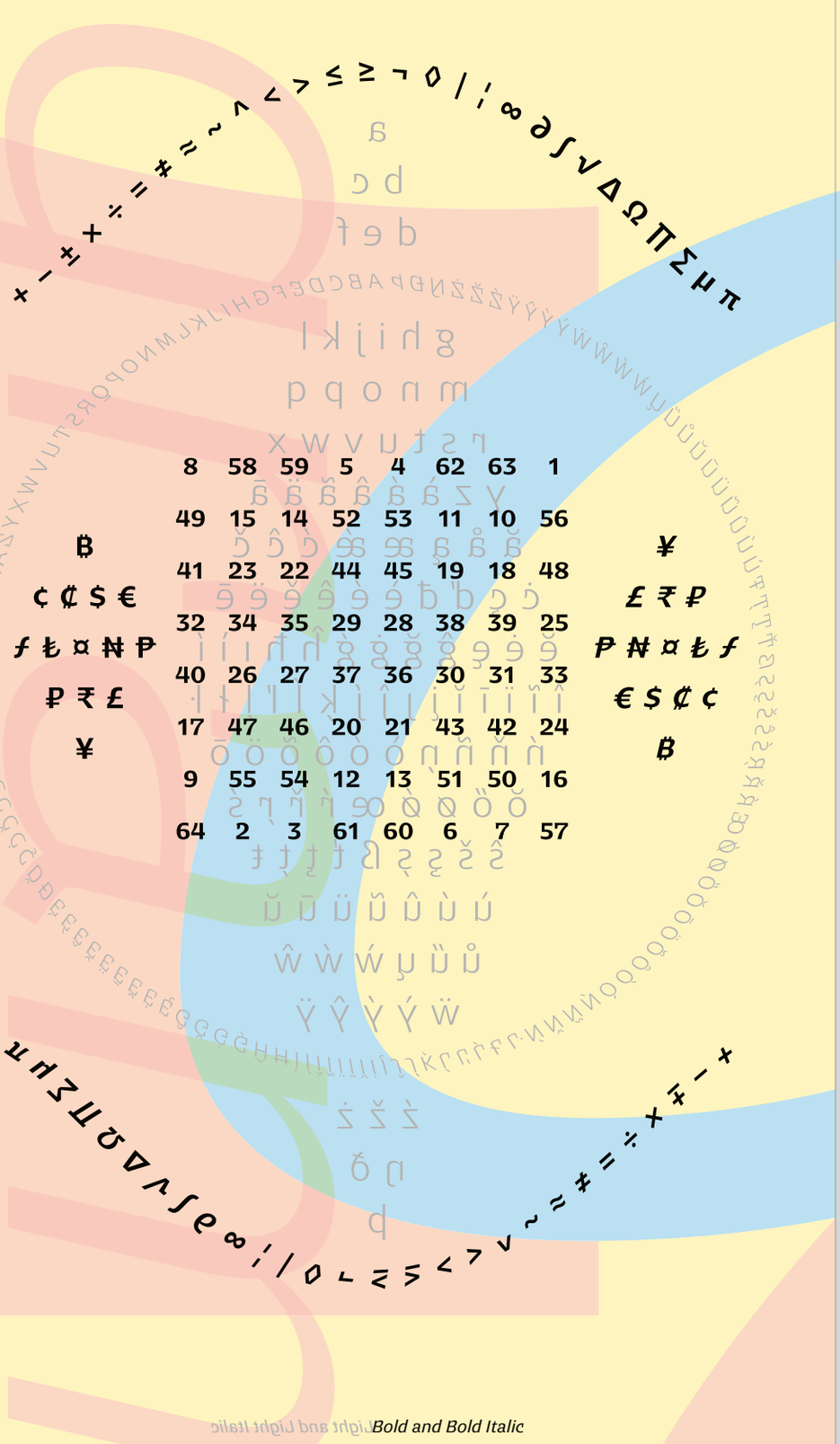

Bold and Bold Italic

Principles of Type

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computer tells me that Functionalism is: *the theory that the design of an object should be determined by its function rather than by aesthetic considerations, and that anything practically designed will be inherently beautiful.* This presents a dilemma. As a type designer I am concerned that a typeface functions to the best of its ability, but I am also driven by its potential to be highly aesthetic in its own right. I strongly believe that aesthetics have a vital role to play in any consideration of functionality. There seems to be endless debates over the purpose of both concepts; one is easier to justify than the other, one is perhaps easier to prove than the other. One is easier to resolve. One is perhaps objective and the other subjective.

In *The Sources of Modern Architecture and Design* Nikolaus Pevsner cites Functionalism as the first of his sources.[1] I have long been enamoured with Modernism and its ambition of bold design reaching forward; produced with conviction and integrity. Indeed, researching the cultural changes and thinking that resulted in Modernism is fascinating. The interesting thing about research is that you never know where you're going to end up. What surprises are lurking, waiting to be discovered to set you off on a new journey. Following the lineage of Modernism back I

1. Two books by Nikolaus Pevsner discuss the progress to Modernism. In *The Sources of Modern Architecture and Design* (1968) the first source he mentions is Functionalism. I can understand this having grown up with the mantra *form follows function*. However, I wasn't expecting to find the hero of Gothic Revival, A.W.N. Pugin, mentioned almost in the same breath. Pugin proposed two guiding principles for design; [1] *that there should be no features about a building which are not necessary for convenience, construction or propriety,* [2] *that all ornament should consist of the essential construction of the building*. An earlier book by Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design* (1949), has the subtitle 'from William Morris to Walter Gropius', and begins with a quote from John Ruskin: *Ornamentation is the principal part of architecture*. So, from the beginnings of two key books we have two (generally contrasting) concepts; Functionalism and Ornamentation. How these continue to be interpreted over time have guided the minds of many creators and ultimately the designs we have. Both books ground their stories in Gothic Revival and the Arts & Crafts. It was the art critic, John Ruskin who distilled the ideas of Gothic Revival and codified them in his books, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and *The Stones of Venice* (1851–3).

found myself confronted by John Ruskin. A name I was aware of, but not one I'd looked at much. It was Ruskin's writings that had a strong influence on William Morris; moulding his ideas to what eventually became the Arts & Crafts movement. As with Modernism, I am equally drawn to the mesmerising effects of Arts & Crafts; there is something natural and fitting, with an easy stillness, tranquility, and calmness. A rightness and fitness of purpose. So I dug deeper, wading through Ruskin's quite challenging writing to try and understand what he advocated and how Gothic Revival ideas made their way into Modernism. John Ruskin was a polymath and through his writings he emphasised the connections between nature, art, and society. In *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* Ruskin refers to seven moral principles to be used in judging architecture; which are sacrifice, truth, power, beauty, life, memory, and obedience. He came back to these principles later in volume two of *The Stones of Venice* where he represented them in a chapter titled The Nature of Gothic, as six *characteristic or moral elements* namely savageness, changefulness, naturalism, grotesqueness, rigidity, and redundance. On reading their descriptions, they appear to have little to do with how I generally, and visually, interpret *gothic*, though I was swayed. The way he presented his moral elements as a framework to judge the success of a piece of architecture was inspiring. I wondered if similar principles could feasibly be applied to the design of type. But instead of using them to judge a final design, use them to aid the design process. With the intention of sparking the imagination to make new connections and discover new opportunities.

In a conversation with type designer Matthew Carter in 2018, he mentioned that a type designer needs to *cultivate good judgement* as a prerequisite to designing a typeface. This seems simple enough. However, it is not without its problems; least of all – what governs our understanding of good judgement, who is to say what is good or what is bad; right or wrong, and can someone

else working on a typeface (perhaps at a later date) decide that their judgment is better. This aside, judgement presides over the whole process of type design. Every thought, question, design stage, single mark and en masse is subject to judgement. We each individually refine our decision-making senses through our own personal experiences, passions, and desires. Our experiences help to cultivate good judgement and a big part of this is acquiring tacit knowledge.[2] To support judgement I believe there are other key principles that contribute to the emergence of a typeface; *unity*, *integrity*, *vitality*, *majesty*, and *mystery*. Not every typeface needs to be, or can be, influenced by these principles. Indeed not every typeface requires consideration of these principles during its design. To paraphrase Ruskin in The Nature of Gothic: *the withdrawal of any one, or two, will not at once destroy the typeface, but the removal of a majority of them will*. The following explores each of the principles freely, and aims to create more questions than answers. Their virtues can blur, and each may rely on the consideration of the others, but considering them may be of benefit in the design thinking of a typeface.

Unity

with reference to visual cohesion

When the idle mind wanders, fingers often follow, tapping out a meaningless rhythm. Consider this meaningless rhythm and you'll realise that it is structured and creates a pattern; sometimes a drum role, sometimes a metronome. We naturally align with and fall into rhythms, they are numerous and vary greatly. When we walk or run we do so in measured steps, only broken when we stop, arrive, or perhaps stumble. Unconscious actions occur all the time and their rhythms are always broken at some point. As

2. *Tacit knowledge* is defined as the skills and understanding that a person has that can't be communicated easily through words. One absorbs tacit knowledge through practice and experience until it becomes instinctive. Read more at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tacit_knowledge.

with tapping out a tune or walking, a typeface requires rhythm which is vulnerable to being broken — more as a result of its chaotic collection of shapes. This doesn't mean that a typeface needs to be repetitive or monotonous in its construction. Monotony is not a good thing. Rather that rhythm is one of the controlling assets that makes a typeface work. Rhythm doesn't live in isolation. Collected rhythms create patterns. The ripples of sand seen on a beach flow with subtle variations; as the repetition of waves wash in with regular irregularity. Degrees of irregularity create surprise that adds colour and texture, all of which needs to be controlled and managed. If it's not managed it disrupts the rhythm of the typeface interrupting its flow, and no-one likes to be interrupted. Equal attention must be paid to every detail; from the core letters that carry the main idea, through to the supporting characters that quietly form part of the chorus. Just as in theatre, everything has a part to play; upfront or behind the scenes. And it's this *sum of the parts* approach that is important. A letter can be good on its own but it is nothing if it doesn't fit with the rest of the typeface, and a typeface is more than just letters. We can accept a certain degree of irregularity but it all needs to be kept in harmony and in unity.

Integrity

with reference to believable structure

The conceptual ideas which are visualised and established in a typeface need to be rendered and made natural to that typeface. Understanding a letter's perceived ideal will help direct its shaping. In a sequence of pictures, Adrian Frutiger[3] compared

3. This example is found in *Denken und Schaffen einer Typographie* by Adrian Frutiger. Here he compared the requirements of readability with the concept of beauty (or perhaps his idea of a correct proportion); in this case the face of Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa. If the proportions of the face are changed (the nose is stretched too long or made ridiculously short), then a caricature appears. The same can occur with letters. Each letter has its own ideal shape which, if radically altered can render the letter an abstract image, less able to function in continuous text. Eric Gill also looked at this in his book *An Essay on Typography*.

the effect of changing a letter's proportion to a similar change in the face of Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa. The point is obvious, if over simplistic. When something is unbalanced or out of sync we instinctively know, and perhaps regard it with suspicion. This doesn't mean that the same, previously ratified shape, should be endlessly and repeatedly used; doing so would have the knock on effect of reducing all the other letters to mediocrity.

There are many ways to draw a curve and many curves will do, but the trick is finding the right curve for the typeface design being created. Some years ago I was explaining to a friend how to make the curve of a letter better, and failing in the process (I now realise that this was tacit knowledge in action). The best I could say was that you have to keep going until the curve is *believable*, and that this alone involves lots of gesticulation, head twisting and habitual chin rubbing. Perhaps another way of looking at this is that a shape needs to be honest, effortless, and right. As a curve is constructed the designer needs to plot its path and have a vision of where it's going. A curve fails when its trajectory is thrown off course; bumps in the line are usually to blame. Quality of construction is paramount in creating a strong typeface, after all a building with poor foundations will soon crumble and fall. Design integrity is required.

Vitality

with reference to energised tension

Have you ever noticed how many variations of colour there are? We talk simplistically of a red, yellow, or blue colour. We can go a bit deeper and talk of crimson or maroon, lemon or gold, cyan or indigo. But generally the deeper we go the more indistinguishable our objective becomes; buried under adjectives. Take the colour green, in nature there are endless variations of green. The task of painting them is a near impossibility, so we approximate. As an art student I remember looking out across the countryside and thinking about the infinite number of greens. I contemplated that

a collection of similar greens seen separately are difficult to identify individually. But when seen side by side, their differences become apparent. Their inherent energies bounce off each other creating uniqueness and a shared family harmony. Musically this is perhaps found in the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt's tintinnabuli style.[4] Here, the energy which is built in the harmonies coils like a tightened spring. Within this stillness of sound hides immense variety and spirit. In a similar way this is how a typeface can excite. The tensions hidden within each letter work together to carry the eye along and keep the line alive. Avoid boring type. Even if you go for stillness of style you can imbue the shapes with energy and intrinsic spirit will set it apart.

Majesty

with reference to emotive experience

Of all the Principles it is Majesty that calls to the romantic. My father once told me of being a young lad atop Saddleworth Moor in the Peak District and *leaning on the wind*. An experience like this creates powerful images and a wide range of feelings, all of which remain with you. We are both trapped and set free by our emotions; controlled by memories and desires.

In the opening sequence of Claude Debussy's La Mer we can hear the vision of the sea from the first light of sunrise, to the swelling motion blown by the wind. Music is adept at controlling our feelings. Be it classical, folk, rock, jazz – any emotive response relies on our memories, experiences, and desires to connect with the music and elate us. Put words with sound and the illusion is complete; heightened only by images. Similarly we can't enter a huge architectural space and experience it with awe, without having first experienced the awe of a wide open landscape and its relationship with the sky, or the expanse of mountains, or the depths of valleys – and felt our place within it. From the moment we are born we start to gather experiences.

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4. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tintinnabuli.

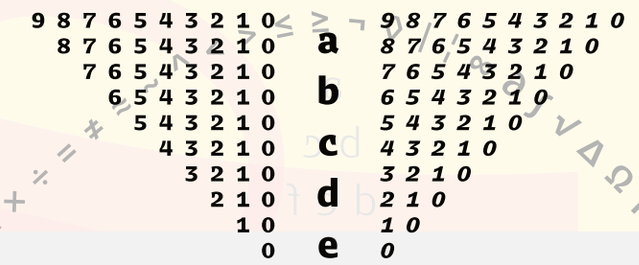
Initially these are personal, then, as we interact with other people, they become shared experiences. A common language of empathy. How can a typeface draw on this library of experiences and create awe? Can a typeface trigger a memory? Can it cause an adrenaline rush? Wouldn't it be good if it could!

Mystery

with reference to the future dream

One thing that keeps me going above all others is the blind belief that there has to be more. There has to be other Ways of Seeing. Art education instilled in me a strong desire to challenge and play with ideas; to push them and see how far they could be taken. To some a typeface simply performs its task, there's nothing wrong with this, as long as it does so to the best of its ability. But to others it's an opportunity to reflect our current world and possibly unfold new ideas for tomorrow. How can arbitrary ideas influence a typeface design? Can a typeface capture the imagination? Can it have charisma? Stanley Morison famously said: *Type design moves at the pace of the most conservative reader. The good type-designer therefore realises that, for a new fount to be successful, it has to be so good that only very few recognise its novelty.*[5] It's fair to say that the world is now a very different place to the one that Stanley Morison experienced, and that it increasingly has little time for a conservative reader. Yet, in the race toward the *new* it is perhaps wise to pause, stop in our tracks, and contemplate the mystery of **what if**.

5. This quote is taken from the 'First Principles of Typography', by Stanley Morison. The text was an attempt at a rationale of book typography specifically. The whole text first appeared in number 7 of *The Fleuron* (1930). Although it shows its age and some comments are highly opinionated, truths can be found reading between the lines. It's worth noting that Morison published this two years after Jan Tschichold published his revolutionary text *Die Neue Typographie,* and one year after László Moholy-Nagy's exhibition *Neue Typographie*. Both of which can be seen as collecting together the developing ideas that challenged traditional typographic design. In this light, Morison's text can be seen as a retaliatory response to this wave of new ideas, perhaps in an attempt not to upset the status quo.



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Printed in the United Kingdom by KMS Litho Ltd
Published by Jeremy Tankard Typography Ltd, Cambridge, 2021

ISBN 978-0-9547736-3-2

Set in Claymore

Typeface and specimen designed by Jeremy Tankard
typography.net
studiotype.com