



Writing Beyond Writing

Lessons from Endangered Alphabets

Tim Brookes



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This book was written on the ancestral lands of the Abenaki people, to whom I express my gratitude and respect.

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Table of Contents

The Past

1. Genesis.....	1
2. Creation Myths.....	9
3. Evolution Myths.....	21
Interlude: The Impossible E.....	37

The Present

4. Linguistic Rights, Human Rights.....	41
5. Writing as Art.....	51
6. A Spiritual Act.....	67
7. Enthusiasts and Troublemakers.....	79
8. Alphabets of the Spirits.....	95
9. Magic.....	103
Interlude: On the Other Hand.....	115

The Future

10. Flash Gordon Was Wrong.....	121
11. A Manual Art.....	125
12. The Gnab Gib.....	133
Interlude: Alphabet Games.....	147

Coda: Drawing into Vision the Conceptions of the Mind.....	151
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Appendices

Designers.....	157
Acknowledgements.....	161

Index.....	165
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Computational Linguistics
 Discourse Analysis
 Eye-tracking
 Field work
 First Language Acquisition
 Historical Socio-linguistics
 Morphology
 Neurolinguistics
 Phonetics
 Phonology

Pragmatics
 Prosodic Annotation
 Prosody
 Psycholinguistics
 Semantics
 Sociolinguistics
 Speech Processing
 Syntax
 Transformational Grammar

— and (my favorites):

Deep Learning
 Topics in Sluicing.

I had little or no idea what many of these topics involved, any more than I had a clear idea of some of the basic terminology of linguistics: phoneme, morpheme, lexeme?

Yet while I regularly felt humbled or even humiliated by how little I knew, I started to notice that nobody, nowhere, seemed to be offering courses in the aspects of language that were interesting me more and more:

Writing as art, art as writing
 Forbidden scripts
 Writing as a sacred act
 Upper and lower cases: necessary or unnecessary?
 How does an oral culture acquire writing?
 Writing materials, substrates, and surfaces
 Scribes and scribal traditions
 The mechanics of handwriting and the formation of letters
 Post-colonial script reform
 The impact of printing on script formation and diversity
 Non-phonetic meaning systems
 Shamanic symbol systems
 The rise of punctuation
 Secret writing systems
 The physics of writing

Here and there, anthropologists had investigated individual written languages, their forms, and their cultures of origin, but nobody seemed to be addressing in the urgent, more global questions: how and why do traditional scripts, often after centuries of use, disappear, and what effect does that have on the people who had used them? Could the erosion be

slowed, or even reversed? Was anyone trying to do for scripts what the language revitalization folks were doing for spoken languages? If not, why not? And most importantly, was there anything one aging writer-turned-woodworker, with no linguistics training and zero influence in the corridors of power, could do?

This strange void in the study of writing made me wonder what had happened to the awe that Carlyle expressed in the mid-nineteenth century — or Abraham Lincoln, writing around the same time: “The written word may be man’s greatest invention. It allows us to converse with the dead, the absent, and the unborn.” After three decades in the writing profession, I had heard plenty of people speak of individual writers and their work with respect, but I’d never heard anyone speak of *writing itself* like that. Why not?

I found myself asking a question that I had never expected to ask after a lifetime of making my living as a writer, and of teaching writing: what is writing?



Trawling through online dictionaries and encyclopedias in search of writing was a strange, vertiginous experience. Definitions varied, of course, but none of them seemed to catch at the fascination I felt, and in a broader sense, none seemed to grasp the profound sense of value expressed in the world’s writing-creation narratives.

Some definitions, in fact, seemed to display a distaste for, even an aversion to, their subject. (I’m not citing the sources of these quotes: I have no desire to dump on anyone, especially hard-working linguists.)

“Writing is a means of using abstract visible symbols to represent the sounds of speech.”

Was that it? Was that all? I could see how that definition might seem to make sense historically, as humans began speaking a long time before they began writing, but my travels among endangered alphabets had shown over and over again that writing clearly represents more than merely the sounds of speech. If that were the case, then when a script is driven out of use, to be replaced by some other script, those ancestral written characters would surely be meaningless and useless.

On the contrary: take Ogham or Ogam, the still-only-partly-deciphered script used to write Irish roughly between 1300 and 1600 years ago. Here’s how it is described on the website of the Heritage Council of Ireland. Having pointed out that Ogham was written on stone before anyone in Ireland starting using vellum manuscripts, the Council continues:

“Ogham is highly unusual among world writing systems. It consists solely of parallel lines in groups of 1-5, their value depending on their position relative to a stemline. Unlike later inscriptions in the Latin script, which were carved on the face of the stone, ogham inscriptions were usually carved vertically along the natural angle or edge of the stone, which served as a natural stemline. Ogham generally reads upwards, starting at the bottom left-hand side of one of the faces, across the top and down the right-hand side (up-top-down), depending on

the length of the inscription... The manner in which the script wraps around the edge of the stone makes it a uniquely three-dimensional script.”

“Highly unusual,” “uniquely three-dimensional” — *This is ours, the text implies, and beyond that, this is something unique to us. Not simply a bygone medium of communication but part of our history, our architecture, our art. It’s also part of our mystery, this enigmatic form, something long lost — not just the writing but our own pure, essential identity as Irish, before Christianity, before the bloody English.*

Ogham is by no means an exception. The Glagolitic script, despite having been replaced hundreds of years ago throughout its eastern European homelands by Cyrillic, still holds sufficient fascination that the sculptor Janeš Želimir created a series of giant Glagolitic letters along the road between Roč and Hum in Croatia, an alphabet walk. The Soyombo script, never widespread in its native Mongolia and now barely used at all, is nevertheless represented in the center of the country’s official seal. For these and other cultures, their traditional script is of such profound importance they still use it *even if they can no longer read it.*

I tried another definition.

“Writing systems are not themselves human languages; they are means of rendering a language into a form that can be reconstructed by other humans separated by time and/or space.”

What a cold, disdainful definition! It says nothing about the fact that letters are shaped by the learned movements of the human fingers, wrist, and arm; nothing about the fact that writing is arguably the most human of all technologies, or that people have been put to death for creating a new script specifically for their people’s language. Nothing about the fact that in some cultures writing is so important their alphabet forms a central part of their spiritual practices.

Both definitions seemed to argue a subtext: writing is less important than spoken language, and needs to be kept in its subordinate place.

The most insidious definition, though, concerned (or rather concerns, as this is still a widely-held view) the “evolution” of writing. Here’s an encyclopedia entry:

“Writing has been invented independently in the Near East, China and Mesoamerica. The cuneiform script created in Mesopotamia, or present-day Iraq, around 3200BC, was first. It’s also the only writing system which can be traced back to its earliest prehistoric origin. The antecedent of the cuneiform script was a system of counting and recording goods with clay tokens. The evolution of writing from tokens to pictography, syllabary and alphabet illustrates the development of information processing to deal with larger amounts of data in ever-greater abstraction.”

And: “The Mesopotamian cuneiform script can be traced furthest back into prehistory to an eight millennium BC counting system using clay tokens of multiple shapes. The development from tokens to scripts reveals that writing emerged from counting and accounting.”

Everything about this authoritative-sounding account made me uneasy, particularly the use of the word “evolution.” Many of the most beautiful scripts in the world are syllabic, and the few surviving pictographic scripts are among the most fascinating. What, and who, is to say that these writing systems are unevolved, and will presumably remain so until they

update their scripts as alphabets, or abandon them altogether in favor of the Latin alphabet? If ever I had come across a definition driven by convenience and self-importance, this was surely one.

It also struck me as condescending and obnoxious. When I decided to make, in observance of International Mother Language Day, a carving of the phrase “mother tongue” in all the traditional scripts of Indonesia, my Javanese contact sent me twenty. I roughed them out on a fine piece of cherry and sent them back to him for approval. He somewhat apologetically rearranged them into geographical and linguistic groupings and sent them back.



“Mother tongue” in traditional scripts of Indonesia, carved for International Mother Language Day. Carving by the author. Photo by Tom Way.

In other words, not only did he know more than twenty different scripts, but he was able to discuss this operation with me in what was probably his third language and *even his Photoshop skills were better than mine.*

So where did this idea of evolution, and the consequent superiority of the Latin alphabet, come from?



It's not a new idea. Here is Edmund Fry, conjecturing 200 years ago in his book *Pantographia; Containing Accurate Copies of All the Known Alphabets of the World; Together with an English Explanation of the Peculiar Force or Power of Each Letter* (London, 1799):

"[W]e shall... entertain the sentiment, that languages must have preceded, by many centuries, any attempt to depict the ideas of them, or to denote the sounds by permanently visible marks. It is only in a highly-cultivated state of society that written languages can be necessary. The first attempts to depict thought, would undoubtedly be rude and imperfect representations of visible objects; such as were found among the Mexicans on the discovery of America.

"A *lion* might be sketched to import fierceness or valour; an *ox*, to denote strength; a *stag*, swiftness; and a *hare* to intimate timidity, etc."

This sounds plausible, but it's actually a fascinating kind of reverse ignorance. Let's take the example of a papyrus painting I was given by an Egyptian friend. I know next to nothing about Egyptian hieroglyphics, so what I see at the heart of the painting are three figures, possibly a pharaoh and two attendants. Above and below are what I take to be accompanying or explanatory text, which consists of a combination of what seem to be visual images (human figure, bird, cup) and non-representational abstract lines and shapes (horizontal lines, vertical lines, circles, half-circles).

How easy it must have been to see something like this, be baffled by the small abstract shapes and so assume they must be meaningless, recognize only the human figures and the birds, assume that the best the Egyptians could manage was "imperfect representations of visible objects," and conclude "They can't write, they can only draw, and they must have been intellectually inferior."

"The next step in this process," Fry cheerfully trots on, on the basis of no knowledge whatsoever, "would naturally extend to the inventing and appropriating of a few arbitrary characters for representing abstract and other ideas."

The word "naturally" is fascinating here. The invention of ideographs would actually be an extraordinary intellectual leap, and not at all natural – but Fry can't give it any credit because his main aim is to show that our distant ancestors were primitives practicing picture-writing, and the real leap of genius was yet to come.

"But neither the picture nor the hieroglyphic, nor the method of denoting ideas by arbitrary characters... could ever have arrived at such perfection, as to answer all the purposes of communication. The grand desideratum then would be, to fabricate characters to represent simple sounds, and to reduce these characters to so small a number as to be easily learned and preserved in the memory."

The grand desideratum he has in mind, of course, is the Latin alphabet. This belief in the evolution of writing is appealing because it reinforces the belief that Fry, and others of his ilk, are also more evolved. Each becomes evidence of the other.

Over the next sixty or seventy years, this general belief that writing was a characteristic that distinguished "civilized" nations from "savages," became more refined and more focused on language. Edward Burnett Tylor argued that as a culture evolved, its writing system evolved.

Tylor, an Englishman regarded as the father of cultural anthropology, proposed in *Researches into the Early History of Mankind and the Development of Civilization* (1865) that writing progressed from “ideograms” through to “verbal,” “syllabic” and finally “alphabetic” glyphs, each step denoting the intellectual and social progress of that society toward, presumably, an Anglo-Victorian ideal. By this logic, any culture that used graphic symbol systems, dismissed as “picture-writing,” was both primitive and childish.

The same general idea was expressed in popular form in “How the Alphabet Was Made,” one of the *Just So Stories* by Rudyard Kipling, Nobel Prize-winner and master storyteller of the British Empire, which relates how a family of cave people invented the Latin alphabet: “And after thousands and thousands and thousands of years and after Hieroglyphics and Demotics and Nilotics and Cryptics and Cufics and Runics... the fine old easy, understandable Alphabet... got back into its proper shape again...”

So many things are wrong with that sentence. The words “old” and “again” imply the Latin alphabet predated Egyptian hieroglyphics, which is anything but the truth. The word “easy” is misleading, as runes, for example, are easier to inscribe than Latin letters, and as for “understandable,” any pictographic system is easier to comprehend at a glance than an abstract symbol system that needs to be learned. And of course all these assumptions come together in the word “proper,” which smugly asserts that the alphabet of the British Empire is naturally the right script, and everyone else’s scripts are inferior.

Let’s just pause for two paragraphs and clarify what the word “evolution” actually means.

In a biological sense, evolution involves constant small changes that may or may not be suited to their environment. The more the change is suited to its environment, the more likely the organism is to survive and thrive. Fungi are no more and no less evolved than humans. They are better at growing on dead trees than we are; we are better at team sports than they are. Writing evolves in this sense all the time. Using bamboo or the leaves of the lontar palm makes perfect sense in Indonesia and the Philippines, given that both are readily available and will retain a written or incised letter. Tattoos, which have often been scorned as a sign of a primitive culture, make excellent use of available materials, given that everyone has skin.

Our mistake comes when we use the term “evolution” to mean “improvement,” which is self-serving codswallop. We even use the phrase “more evolved,” suggesting that evolution means improvement toward superiority. By this token, we congratulate ourselves on being more evolved than fungi because they do not have parliamentary democracy or sonic toothbrushes. And when it comes to writing, we blithely use this false sense of evolution as a circular argument of self-justification: if an alphabet is the most evolved form of writing and we in Europe and North America use an alphabet (it is astonishing how many writers, even today, say “*the* alphabet” as if there were only one), then we are the most evolved people. There’s an element of colonialism, even racism, in this paradigm of linguistic evolution.

This argument was used as recently as the twentieth century to support the absurd claim that the Chinese script, not being a true alphabet composed of abstract symbols, is incapable of being used to express abstract thought. This came as news to the Chinese — after all,

Confucius was writing roughly 2,500 years ago, when writing as we know it was virtually nonexistent in northern Europe and Britons were still painting themselves blue with woad.

There certainly have been instances when an abugida or a syllabary has been replaced by an alphabet, but these are driven by natural selection in a very different sense.

When the government of the new nation of Indonesia decided to abandon its twenty-some-odd traditional scripts, most of them abugidas, in favor of the Latin alphabet, that was not evolution. That was political expediency.

When the government of the Republic of Mongolia stopped using their script, an alphabet that in some respects operates as a syllabary, and started using the Cyrillic alphabet in 1946 because they were under the Russian thumb, that was not evolution. That was cultural tyranny.

Perhaps the most insidious subtext of the evolution fallacy is that it implies that non-alphabetic forms of writing, such as the abjads, abugidas and syllabaries used in much of South Asia and Southeast Asia, can, do, and should die out from natural linguistic causes, and their place should be taken by the One True Alphabet, the Latin. By this logic, endangered scripts are nothing to be concerned about: they have offered themselves in the marketplace of ideas, and in the end their customers simply went elsewhere.

This is nonsense. No script has ever been abandoned because a culture said “Our syllabary/abjad/abugida is less than ideal for our language — let’s start using the Latin alphabet instead.” If anything, the opposite is true: Latin and other colonial scripts have been introduced or imposed even though they don’t fit entirely with the phonetic needs of the language, and in some cases (as we’ll see) indigenous syllabaries or abugidas have been created to replace them.

Writing systems spread with the spread of armies, or religions, or successful commercial ventures (both of which may themselves be supported by armies). Local writing systems may well serve their language communities perfectly well until a more powerful culture arrives, making its own writing system the official linguistic currency. If a colonized culture decides to use the script of the colonizers instead of its own, then, it’s not because of the linguistic deficiencies of its script. It’s because of the deficiencies of its military.

History is not only written by the winners — *it is written in the alphabet of the winners*. The Latin alphabet has come to dominate the world not because it is more evolved, but because at crucial moments in history it had more lawyers, guns and/or money than someone else.

Moreover, what we have seen in the West is not an evolution — that is, a steady improvement in design — but a *narrowing*.

Our writing has changed, yes, and it is changing rapidly, but not necessarily for the better. It has become more and more aligned with a certain set of values — speed, uniformity, visual clarity — but in the process it has become less aligned to some of its other values: expressiveness, individuality, grace.

Evolution, in the self-serving sense, implies a vertical movement. I suggest instead a horizontal paradigm. Writing systems tend to exist along a continuum. At one end, we see scripts that are more local, culturally rich, graphic, familiar, idiosyncratic, scriptural, body-centric, manual, expressive; at the other end, we see scripts that are more universal, abstract, efficient, consistent, simplified, mechanical, digitizable.

Individual scripts may move along that continuum, but *that does not mean they are more evolved or superior*. With every gain comes loss.

Moreover, you can't separate the script from its context. Scripts are subject to economic, political, military and religious forces on their culture and its individuals. *They may be forced into extinction, but they do not die out*.

Most importantly, in exporting our alphabet to the rest of the world, we are also exporting its inherent assumptions, the increasing narrowness it implies about writing, which in itself becomes a kind of cultural and linguistic imperialism that further adds to the narrowing. Much of the rest of this book will be devoted, in fact, to qualities I have found in the endangered alphabets that our writing has lost, many of which therefore lie beyond our definition of writing.

For example: The symbol I use throughout the book as a spacer is Javanese. It's called a *madyapada*, and it is used to divide the cantos of a poem. The traditional Javanese and Balinese scripts even have forms of *punctuation* that are beyond anything we use; they address relationships between writer and reader we don't even imagine.

The more I work on the Alphabets, the more I feel the need to broaden our understanding of writing by showing other people's. Not only because our version limits our thinking (and writing), but because we are in the process of driving other forms of writing, and other views of what writing is and can be, out of existence—which, if it happens, we justify in the name of evolution.

The barbarians are at the gate, and they are us.



It was only when I sat down to write this chapter that I realized how deeply ingrained this view of evolution has been in my education, my life, even the way I was taught writing, and taught to think about writing.

The “evolution” fallacy assumes that the evolution of writing is a metaphor for, or even a mechanism for, the evolution of civilization, and vice versa. It also implies that both processes display a kind of intellectual and emotional maturing, from childishness to adulthood. We even sometimes use the phrase “a more evolved person” to mean someone emotionally, morally or spiritually superior. In fact, as I myself moved from childhood to adulthood in England in the second half of the twentieth century, I watched it play out.

Like most British children, I started my education in primary school, which had much of the familiar landscape of early education: drawings and posters on the walls, lots of running around in the playground, no school uniform, kids calling each other by our given names. We were taught writing, of course, and our favorite form of writing, as of reading, was stories. We were encouraged to be expressive, imaginative; we were encouraged to be at the heart of our own work.

The start of my secondary education, at the Worcester Royal Grammar School for Boys in September 1964, was a shock. Before term started, my family was mailed instructions concerning the purchase and wearing of the school uniform, which had subtle variations for each year, visible manifestations of our evolution from children to adults: by the third year, we would be allowed to graduate from shorts to long trousers; by the sixth year we could wear the school blazer, as if we were about to attend a garden party at the local manor. A disturbingly thick little booklet of school rules made it very clear that walking on the grass or running anywhere would be punished.

On day one, a stern teacher in an academic gown addressed us by our family names, mispronouncing any non-traditionally-English names without apology, as if it were the child's fault. (Steve Hrynczak was told, over and over, how un-English, strange and inconvenient he was.)

As I said in Chapter One, our first lesson consisted of being shown how to wrap our textbooks in brown paper, and how and where to write the book's title and our own names, in capitals, underlined, on the new paper cover. A day or two later we discovered that our history teacher, the school's chaplain, would administer tests every week, and if we got more than one question wrong, he would beat us with a tennis shoe.

What became clear very quickly, even if we could not have articulated it, was that the main goal of our education was to make us shed our childhood and behave like adults, just as our uniform was intended to make us look like (uniform) adults.

Writing was a vital part of this enforced growing-up. Writing stories, apparently a childish activity, was left behind — I would not write another story for a decade — in favor of writing analytical essays, taking comprehension tests, writing précis, and studying literature. Likewise, drawing was viewed with suspicion. My geography, biology and math teachers taught (and graded with great severity) the importance of being able to execute clean and clear maps, architect-quality drawings of bodily organs and systems, and geometrical diagrams that excluded any degree of subjectivity or self-expression.

The higher we moved up through our schooling, the more rigorous, disciplined, and impersonal one was expected to be. One was told to use passive verbs in lab reports, and to exclude any reference to ourselves, our actions, our thinking. A significant portion of English class was devoted to learning how to present arguments that were actually the opposite of what we believed. We were taught, through sarcasm and asides, to avoid colloquialisms, contractions, regional and ethnic vocabulary and phrasing, and accents. Intellectual maturity and sophistication were defined by, and demonstrated in, the ability to separate oneself from one's distinctive and personal identity. Each year we spent at school we were expected to "encode larger amounts of data" in our writing, in ever greater abstraction.

Two decades later, when computers arrived on the university campus where I was teaching, the same attitude was enforced through the mandate that all papers should be submitted in Times New Roman. The equation between mature, abstract thought and the abstract symbols of the Latin alphabet survives to this day.

Yet, led by the Alan Websters of the world, a revolution was taking place. The first home computers were anything but invitations to creativity (what can you expect from a company called International Business Machines?), allowing only the ugliest dot-matrix and then

monospaced Courier fonts with almost no non-English characters. Soon enough, though, it became clear that we wanted writing to be more than Times New Roman. As soon as bundles of fonts became part of the standard PC package, we started using them as a form of self-expression.

Kids, in particular, pushed the limit. I have a *New Yorker* cartoon from the early 2000s, set in an elementary school classroom — a fairly formal classroom, with the kids neatly dressed and the desks in rows. The kids are looking up at the front of the classroom, where a teacher is standing next to a boy of about nine. The boy is holding a sheaf of paper, and the teacher is looking down at him in a certain degree of bewilderment. The boy is saying to the class, “Before I read you my book report, I would like to discuss my font choice.”

Given the chance to add new dimensions to their expressiveness — fonts, colors — our kids led the way, not having been through the same education in evolution as we had.

Roughly a decade later, when we all started buying smartphones for our children and teenagers, the dam burst. As soon as emojis became available, we started using them as a way to convey various kinds of immediate, emotional *éclat* that would be far more laborious to put into words, and would take far longer.

Pictures and diagrams encode data, too, and we were well aware which form of symbolic representation worked best for which purpose. We wanted writing to be more, to do more, and to consist of more than merely abstract symbols that represented the sounds of speech. The centuries-old division between the verbal and the graphic was starting to heal. The prohibition against being emotional and personal was losing ground.

In 2015, Oxford Dictionaries named the tears-of-laughter emoji the Word of the Year.

The old order was, of course, horrified by this expansion of the nature of writing, still believing in the old equation between the pictorial and the childish. In 2020 a far-right commentator, Matt Walsh, tweeted “Every day I see more grown adult men use emojis. There is no excuse for this. Emojis are for children and women.”



I want to return to that encyclopedia definition of writing, because it embodies two more extremely disturbing beliefs or assumptions.

“The evolution of writing from tokens to pictography, syllabary and alphabet illustrates the development of information processing to deal with larger amounts of data in ever-greater abstraction.”

Implicit in this paradigm is another very Western idea, a less obvious villain than colonial thinking but in many ways equivalent: it assumes that our collective goal is to leave the past behind, to grow out of it in a continuous process of modernization and improvement. Yet one of the great virtues of writing, as Lincoln said, is to connect us with the past — in form, as well as content. As we'll see time and again in Indigenous and minority cultures, not just documents and manuscripts but the script itself is a reminder of heritage, identity, the right to exist in the face of threat from and erosion by more powerful neighbors.

This reflexive abandonment of the past is, in fact, an imperialist notion, because we, the powerful, are likely to be privileged by the new technologies and processes we invent and introduce.

The other disturbing assumption, presented as fact (but, as we'll see throughout the book, merely a local and subjective perspective), is embedded in the language of the quotation: information-processing, data, abstraction. Yes, it's a computing metaphor, and it seems to argue that as writing evolves it atomizes, paring down to smaller and smaller units, becoming more and more digital, so as to streamline the work of information processing done by our devices.

This is a mistake of epic proportions, a disaster in the offing. Writing is fundamentally not digital, and to strip it down to its minimal, abstract elements is also to strip away its history, its geography, its relationship with both writer and reader.

Let me be clear: this is not a mistake the human race is making, nor is it the inevitable outcome of progress. It's a mistake we users of the Latin alphabet are making, and luckily there are still enough other scripts left in the world to show us our mistake. There are scripts more elegant than the Latin alphabet, more user-friendly, more accurate, easier to learn, more deeply embedded in their visual culture, spiritually richer, more calligraphic, more like art, more like dance, more multi-dimensional, more important to their user community.

Not one of them, from what I can find out, is driven by the desire to deal with larger amounts of data in ever-greater abstraction.



While I was trying to discover where the “evolution” fallacy came from, I was also wondering about what seemed to have been a parallel event — the fall from grace that writing seemed to have suffered since Carlyle’s rapturous exclamation and Lincoln’s dignified admiration.

It was a bizarre paradox. On one hand, the Latin alphabet was being lauded in all my reading as the most advanced, most civilized form of writing in the world. On the other, writing almost entirely vanished as a subject of serious study. Certainly, very few linguists from, say, the mid-twentieth century onwards effused about the art of writing as “the most miraculous of all things man has devised.”

The answer, it seemed, was that as the nineteenth century evolved, so to speak, into the twentieth, the study of language was redefined as the study of *spoken* language.

At the turn of the century, the highly influential Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure noted dismissively: “A language and its written form constitute two separate systems of signs. The sole reason for the existence of the latter is to represent the former. The object of study in linguistics is not the combination of the written word and the spoken word; it is the latter alone which constitutes this object.”

Spoken and written words, he said, relate to each other like face and photograph: the latter merely represents the former.

The father of American language studies, Leonard Bloomfield (1887–1949), one of the founding members of the Linguistic Society of America, agreed, believing that “Writing is not language, but merely a way of recording language by means of visible marks.”

To be fair, early linguists were reacting against an established belief that the only aspects of language worth studying were the summits of its written expression — namely, the works of poetry and philosophy, almost exclusively in the Judaeo-Christian and Greco-Roman traditions that formed the bedrocks of Western thought. By contrast, common speech was vulgar and worthless. Language was not as important as what one did with it.

And the linguists’ preference for spoken language must have seemed all the more justified in the light of the overt racism, even well into the twentieth century, that underlay the arguments of those who saw writing as an art.

“[N]ational development in the matter of writing has been most unequal,” wrote William A. Mason, author of *A History of the Art of Writing*, in 1928. “Some nations for one cause or another — racial backwardness, isolation, servitude or other unhappy causes contributing to it — never to this day have evolved any system of written record... Without the art of writing man would still be a savage as benighted as the unlettered heathen who still inhabit Darkest Africa... Letters, or a knowledge of them, always throughout the ages have been the magic charm that ever has dispelled the gloom of ignorance and superstition; the lodestar that has guided men upward to the higher intellectual and spiritual life.”

In this light, the new discipline of linguistics was revolutionary. Spoken language was much more democratic, more inclusive, and more universal than literature, and to make it the object of serious study was a radical notion.

As linguistics in general grew and flourished as a discipline through the middle of the twentieth century, especially in the Anglo-American academic world, writing became more explicitly excluded.

Ignace Gelb’s hugely influential book *A Study of Writing* (1952) declared that the only worthwhile study of writing was typology — the analysis of the structural and formal elements of writing systems and how these evolved historically from a logographic to an alphabetic form. This fallacy became academic doctrine, and Gelb dismissed any other avenue of the study of writing practices.

Little wonder, then, that so many of the world’s minority scripts should be allowed to disappear without study or concern. As recently as the nineties, Steven Pinker could claim “[W]riting is clearly an optional accessory; the real engine of verbal communication is the spoken language we acquired as children.”

This war between the linguists and the literature specialists, fought almost exclusively in academia, would rage on for decades and would turn out to be the reason why I, quite unwitting, was able to leave England and move to America.

I visited the U.S. for the first time in 1973, hitchhiking, as one did, from coast to coast and back again. In love with a girl from Des Moines, Iowa, I applied for teaching jobs at colleges and universities in states I had hitched through.

I was still an undergrad, mind you, and, not surprisingly, all my applications were ignored or turned down flat — except one. The University of Vermont offered me a full-time instructor's position, which I jumped at, agog at my luck.

It was only when I arrived in Burlington and the semester began that I understood the backstory. The English department was in the middle of a savage, blood-on-the-carpet battle between the old guard, the literature specialists, and the young Turks, the linguistics scholars, for whom literature was merely language manifest in text form, to be examined from a variety of theoretical viewpoints.

It just so happened that my Oxford degree was officially called “the Degree in English Literature and Language.” The chair, in addition to seeing in my application someone young who could be asked to teach four courses a semester (many of them at eight in the morning) saw someone who would be neutral in this terrible conflict.

The result worked out for me, but not for him: he became the first of a series of chairs to be chewed up by the war between (to oversimplify) speaking and writing.

When I look at this intellectual landscape now, it seems to me there's a gaping hole where the joyful study of writing should be, burned away by the acid of this century-old conflict.



Let's cycle back to the beginning of this bogus chain of evolution and examine its very basis — namely, that pictograms, ideograms, or other forms of graphic writing are fundamentally primitive.

In fact, just as I was writing this book, word came through the wires of a dramatic illustration of how poorly we have judged ancient “primitive” writing forms, how massively we have underestimated them.

An article in the *New Scientist* reported that a recurring series of 32 geometric symbols discovered on cave walls and Ice Age objects across Europe (previously overlooked or ignored as researchers stared at and tried to interpret the purpose of the astonishing paintings of bison, bear, and so on) might be a “proto-writing system,” as much as 30,000 years old.

The researchers evidently carried out some extraordinarily thorough and perceptive research — which discovered that our ancestors, too, were carrying out some extraordinarily thorough and perceptive research.

“By using the birth cycles of equivalent animals today as a reference point, the researchers were able to work out that the number of marks associated with Ice Age animals were a record, by lunar month, of when they were mating. [The researchers] previously hypothesized that the [Y-like] sign stood for “giving birth” and the work of the team was able to confirm this theory.



Megaloceros image from Lascaux. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

“Their work showed that the sequences record mating and birthing seasons and found a ‘statistically significant’ correlation between the numbers of marks, the position of the ‘Y’ sign and the months in which modern animals mate and birth respectively.”

This astonishing intellectual endeavor (and let’s say it again, 30,000 years ago) refutes, once and for all, the “evolution” fallacy that depicts human history as a steady march from the primitive to the sophisticated, and that our own 2023 ideas, being modern, are therefore right. It also hints at another possible origin of what we call writing — namely as an outgrowth of calendrical or statistical notation.

We saw the walls of the Chauvet and Lascaux caves through the lenses of our assumptions and our ignorance. We interpreted the images we recognized (in this case, the animals) as drawings, we ignored what we did not understand (the notations), and concluded Stone Age people used pictures because they were too primitive to understand writing. It never occurred to anyone, I imagine, that both the “art” and the “writing” might be parts of a coherent expression that might be what we’d call a diagram, or, given the magical power of visual images in many cultures, something else entirely.

In a way, this one piece of research illustrates what the Endangered Alphabets Project is all about – namely, asking people to revisit their own assumptions in the light of long-overlooked and habitually-dismissed evidence from out-of-the-way places.



So where does that leave the definition of writing? In the absence of a better and more inclusive term, let me leave you with a metaphor.

When the COVID pandemic struck, and I started doing talks by Zoom from my condo, I asked Patricia Julien, a friend and professor of music at the University of Vermont, to compose some introductory music. I told her I wanted it to have a flavor of the Javanese gamelan orchestra – in fact, I wanted it to have an island feel in general, as many endangered alphabets are island scripts, and Indonesia is especially rich in this respect.

She did a wonderful job, as you can hear on most of the videos on our YouTube channel, and our Patreon videos. Lapping waves, gentle gong sounds, musical flourishes that might be the cries of unfamiliar birds. It's perfect.

At the start of the twentieth century, though, to Western ears it would have sounded bizarre and alien. Back then, sound effects were included almost exclusively for comic effect, especially with the advent of cartoons; and the gamelan would have been much too far off the map.

Over the past hundred years, though, our definition of music has, thank goodness, expanded. The cries of "It's not music!" that greeted rock'n'roll are now historical documents, signs of a shell cracking as a larger music emerged. Since then, we have ventured beyond the narrow confines of Western instrumentation, Western rhythms and Western scales to embrace world musics, synthesized musics, electronic musics, sampled musics. I can't imagine anyone today questioning Patricia's panoramic montage of sounds.

Our understanding of writing, it appears, is not yet so evolved.

INTERLUDE

The Impossible E



When I'm giving talks about the Alphabets, especially if I'm speaking to a class, I often call for a volunteer and, when someone puts a hand up, I hold out a marker and ask, "Will you come up here and draw a capital E?"

They come up to the whiteboard, a little warily, sensing a trick, and do it.

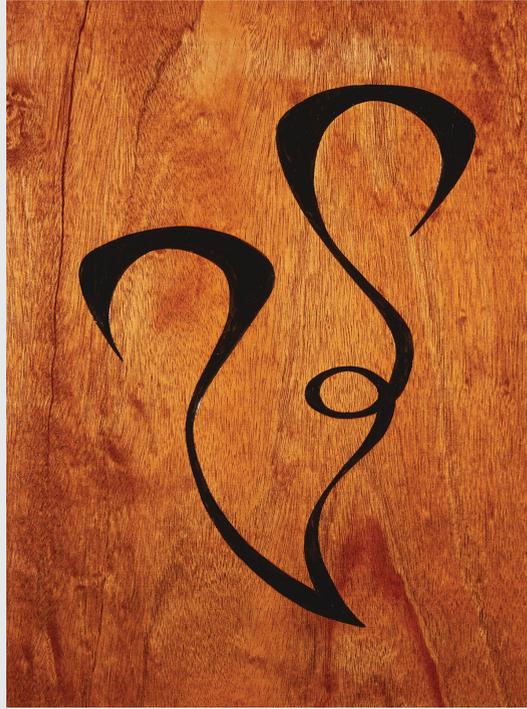
I say, "That's great, but the three horizontals are not quite parallel. Could you just fix that?"

When they've erased the lines and drawn them again much more carefully, I say, "Well, actually this one's a bit longer than the other one..."

So they correct that, and then I say, "And the vertical isn't quite vertical..." And maybe I go on to ask for serifs, and get more and more annoying in my polite demands.

The point is, *it can't be done*. What they are attempting to "write" is a mechanically-reproduced image derived from letters on monuments that were created using stonemason tools — squares, straight-edges, agents of geometry. The human body is not designed to do that.

Then I show the class the E from the Eastern Cham script of Vietnam, and I say, "Okay, I want you to write this, with your fingertip, in the air."



The letter E in the Eastern Cham script of Vietnam. Carving and photo by the author.

They're a little self-conscious about being so demonstrative in public, but they do it, and I tell them to keep doing it, writing in the air, until the motion starts to feel natural. Then I say, "Okay, without stopping, just look around at everyone else. Look at their wrists, their hands, their fingers. That is the hand of a Thai dancer."

I'm making two points here, I hope. One is the difference between a script, something written by hand, and a typeface, something designed to be printed. The first is an extension of the natural, graceful movements of the human body; the other is not.

The other point has to do with geometry, and with the values that are embedded in writing. The Latin alphabet as we use it today descended not from everyday Roman handwriting but from monuments to emperors. The letterforms themselves represent the virtues of a military empire: stability, balance, longevity. Almost any Latin uppercase letter stands on its own feet, as if bestriding the known world. What's more, every Roman emperor was by definition a god, so graphically, these qualities had to be represented not by ordinary, everyday, vernacular shapes but by ideal Euclidean forms: symmetry, parallelism, rectangularity, perfect circles. Shapes not found in nature.

The Cham script doesn't care about those values. There's a grace, and an implied balance, but no symmetry. It is still a human script rather than a divine one, or a mechanical one.

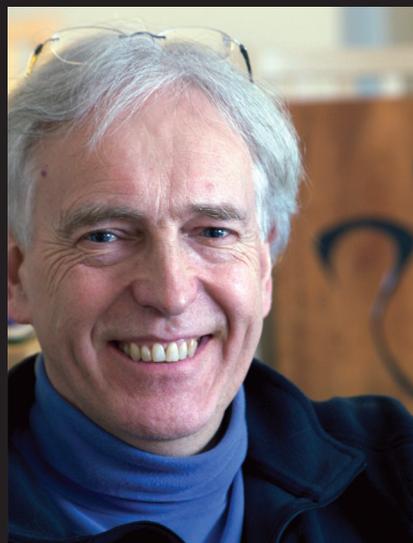
In the nineteenth century, when an explorer returned to London or New York from distant lands, the tradition was to invite them to speak at the Royal Geographical Society or the Explorers Club, to report on their findings.

Tim Brookes has spent twelve years discovering the world's fascinating indigenous and minority scripts and their cultures of origin.

He found scripts that have been banned and burned, script creators who have been assassinated, scripts consisting of geometrical patterns in sand, scripts used for divination and magic, scripts whose scribes abstained from sex before embarking on acts of writing or copying, and, perhaps most remarkable of all, a sacred Indian alphabet that is recited aloud as a religious ritual.

This book is the equivalent of his talk to the Explorers Club, and also the response to an imagined question from the imaginary audience: "What can we learn from your journey about writing itself?"

In response, he offers not only new perspectives but even new definitions of writing — and a new way of thinking about how our own beliefs about writing have affected the world, and not necessarily for the better.



“After many years of neglect, this book brings the world of alphabets, scripts, and the entire process of writing into the limelight. It provides an overview of the subject that is unprecedented in its wealth of language illustration, and gives much-needed practical suggestions for dealing with the crisis facing those communities whose scripts are endangered. Tim Brookes’ unique experience as sculptor, investigator, networker, and indefatigable fundraiser provides an artistic and functional vision that will make everyone think again about what writing is all about. It offers an alert to those who are unaware of the scale of endangerment, and a stimulus to those who do know and who are trying to do something about it. I have no doubt it will be seen as a game-changer in years to come.”

“This book is a sustained love song to one of humanity’s most remarkable achievements in all its glorious embodied and enculturated forms. Retracing Tim Brookes’ personal adventures in the world of endangered scripts, it invites the reader along on a magical journey across the diverse cultures of the written word. In presenting humanity both at its most creative and its most oppressive, it constitutes a call to care — to care about the precious cultural heritage of the world’s minority and Indigenous peoples. It is a deeply human and humane book.”

DAVID CRYSTAL

author of

*The Cambridge Encyclopedia
of Language*

AMALIA E. GNANADESIKAN

author of

*The Writing Revolution:
Cuneiform to the Internet*

