



Diary

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Diary

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Stenography is dying out; so are stenographers. When I mention that I'm working on the history of shorthand, people tell me that their mother knew shorthand, or their grandmother, or their husband's first wife. Google 'stenography' and you'll find obituaries from small-town newspapers. Only bloggers now use the word, the new media's name for what the old media do: shorthand, so to speak, for the charge that the newspapers and TV networks merely parrot press releases.

Journalism degrees in Britain still include a speedwriting test; the persistence of a requirement dropped in many other countries can be explained either by the peculiarities of British libel law (shorthand notes are admissible in journalists' defence) or by the prohibition on the use of sound recording in court. But the distinction that emerged a century ago between mechanical devices (forbidden) and human scribes (permitted) is beginning to blur. In the US, court reporters have abandoned stenotype machines, whose keyboards use chord-like combinations to represent sounds, for a technique called voice writing. The 'writer' – really a speaker – repeats testimony into a microphone nestled in a hand-held mask that prevents her voice from being heard in court; the recording is later transcribed, usually with speech-recognition software. The Stenomask dates back to the 1940s, when an American court reporter encased a microphone first in a cigar-box, then in a tomato tin, and finally in an old coffeepot, but it didn't become a standard fixture until the advent of speech recognition programs. It's also cheaper: machine stenography takes three years to learn, voice writing six months.

Stenography didn't begin life in the office or the courtroom. Only recently has your boss become the person you're most likely to take dictation from: before the 1870s, shorthand was used more often for recording one's own thoughts or for copying others', not always with permission. In early modern England, tachygraphy, tachography, zeitography, zeiglography, semigraph, semography all vied for the loyalty of court recorders, parliamentary reporters, diarists (think of Pepys), clergymen (who used it to rip off each other's sermons) and theatregoers (who used it the way some filmgoers use a handycam). Dickens broke into parliamentary reporting by memorising Thomas Gurney's book, *Brachygraphy, or, an Easy and Compendious System of Shorthand*. Shorthand enabled upward mobility, but it couldn't take the place of a classical education: when his fellow journalist R.H. Hutton asserted that 'in some important intellectual, if not mechanical respects, Mr Dickens did not cease to be a reporter even after he became an author,' the social connotations of 'mechanic' must have grated. Like Dickens, David Copperfield owes his professional start to a ten-shilling shorthand manual:

The changes that were rung upon dots, which in such a position meant such a thing, and in such another position something else, entirely different; the wonderful vagaries that were played by circles; the unaccountable consequences that resulted from marks like flies' legs; the tremendous effects of a curve in a wrong place; not only troubled my waking hours, but reappeared before me in my sleep. When I had groped my way, blindly, through these difficulties, and had mastered the alphabet, which was an Egyptian Temple in itself, there then appeared a procession of new horrors, called arbitrary characters; the most despotic characters I have ever known; who insisted, for instance, that a thing like the beginning of a cobweb, meant expectation, and that a pen-and-ink sky-rocket, stood for disadvantageous.

By the time *David Copperfield* appeared in 1849, the days and nights that Dickens spent studying an 1824 reprint of a 1750 manual must have felt doubly galling thanks to the publication, in 1837, of Isaac Pitman's new method, *Stenographic Soundhand*. Like Esperanto a generation later, shorthand spread through a counter-culture of early adopters – spirit-rappers, teetotallers, vegetarians, pacifists, anti-vivisectionists, anti-tobacconists. Pitman himself associated shorthand with 'the dawn of religious freedom' and 'the dawn of political freedom' (verbatim transcription, he claimed, prevented parliamentary reporters from privileging favourites). His empire grew with the British postal system. In 1840, he condensed his method into a 'Penny Plate' the right size for sending through the new penny post. A network of 'gratuitous correctors' (Pitman's language veered between pedantry and hucksterism) encouraged autodidacts in the provinces to send one another their shorthand exercises to be marked; later, chain letters called 'ever-circulators', composed in shorthand, were sent through the imperial mail. When correspondence was conducted in shorthand, Pitman claimed, 'friendships grow six times as fast as under the withering blighting influence of the moon of longhand.' Those exchanges tended to link men to other men, with the notable exception of a girl called Martha Watts, who practised her shorthand by sending Pitman love letters. When the suspicious Mrs Pitman finally broke into her husband's desk, she had to persuade a student to transcribe them for her: Pitman had been too busy spreading shorthand across the world to teach it to his wife.

Pen pals in Africa and Australia found one another through the classified pages of shorthand magazines that juxtaposed new material with reprints of published fiction: *Robinson Crusoe*, *Around the World in Eighty Days*, all the Sherlock Holmes stories and even an unabridged run of the *Strand Magazine*. The depositories of copyright libraries are littered with Victorian shorthand editions of *A Christmas Carol*, Aesop's fables, English-Welsh and English-Hindi dictionaries, the Old and New Testaments, and biographies of Calvin and Galileo. Pitman's *Shorthand Weekly* (later called the *Phonetic Journal*) featured 'serials and short stories by well-known authors; miscellaneous articles; illustrated jokes and anecdotes; and prize competitions'. On 17 August 1901, it offered a prize for the best biography of Isaac Pitman by a colonial subscriber. Submissions, naturally, were accepted only in shorthand. You can still read every syllable from the first International Shorthand Congress and Jubilee of Phonography, thanks to transcripts produced by 'an army of phonographers . . . not at all concerned with the economic rewards of shorthand, important as these are, but only with the service – personal, social – even professional – which one Pitmanite can render another in any part of the world.' One delegate described shorthand as a 'bond of brotherhood'. Like the open-source movement a century and a half later, Pitmanism was idealistic, distributed and male.

And then everything changed. The American Civil War and, later, the First World War removed men from the workforce; the commercialisation of the typewriter and the invention of the phonograph upped the demand for white-collar labour. Women's delicate hands began to look like the right tools for turning speech into shorthand, or manuscript into typescript, or one copy into many. By 1901, the shorthand transcript of a Midlands stenographers' club records a speaker arguing that 'it seemed degrading for a strong, healthy man to be occupied all day long in using the pen upon what was little more than copying words.' Advertisements for 'wrist exercisers' seemed to hint that a man who hunched over a desk all day would not stay strong and healthy for long.

As stenography fell into the hands of girls and hypochondriacs, its ethos changed from identitarian to utilitarian, from voluntaristic to vocational. By 1901, the *Phonetic Journal* was complaining that ‘the great majority of young girls study simply for the proficiency which will enable them to enter business.’ Isaac Pitman outlived the ‘brotherhood of the pen’. The metaphor was unlucky: while he continued to tinker with the system his brother Benn realised that ordinary users were tired of endless refinements, and froze the US version of the system at its 1852 release. By the time of Isaac’s death, there was a new threat from Gregg’s 1888 system, which cornered the American market by billing itself as user-friendly, and more specifically as a friend to the ladies. Gregg was to Pitman as Windows is to Linux, or Pilates to yoga: a technique stripped of the ideological baggage that had originally impelled its spread.

Outside the US, Gregg didn’t do so well; in Britain and its colonies, Pitman remained the market leader. George Bernard Shaw preferred the unpopular system invented by Henry Sweet (who nicknamed the Pitman ‘Pitfall’), but continued to draft in Pitman so that others could transcribe what he wrote. Today, a version of Pitman’s whose simplification would have horrified Isaac competes for the loyalty of British journalism students with an even more rudimentary system called Teeline. What’s left of shorthand? Most concretely, a stockpile of corporate and personal records, many of which have never been transcribed and never will be. On shorthand-themed list serves, the most poignant postings ask for help decoding a grandmother or an aunt’s diary. That these requests are answered suggests that the spirit of ‘gratuitous correction’ remains alive on the net.