

I simply began: above/ground press at 20
[an interview with rob mcLennan]

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"Writing and publishing and simply *existing* in the world
is supposed to be a conversation."

rob mcLennan

In August 2013, rob mcLennan's Ottawa-based above/ground press celebrated its twentieth anniversary. This is a remarkable achievement for any small press activity, but seems particularly notable for a press as ambitious and active as above/ground. rob's work with the press is marked by a seemingly bottomless work ethic, a tireless output, and a staggeringly broad range of interests and aesthetics. To celebrate the achievements of above/ground press, and to interrogate the still-active practices, ambitions, and frustrations of the press, Apt. 9 conducted an interview with rob mcLennan between May 23, 2013 and July 19, 2013 over email.

Excerpts from the interview are reproduced below.

Cameron Anstee: Let's go back to August 1993. *FREE VERSE ANTHOLOGY*, the first title to bear the above/ground press imprint is about to be published, though you have already published a small number of items that pre-date the name. Where are you in your life? How old are you? Where are you working? How long have you been writing?

rob mcLennan: We (the "royal we," I suppose) launched the *FREE VERSE ANTHOLOGY* on July 9, 1993, the same month my chapbook *AUGUST* appeared, the first chapbook with the above/ground press name. At that point, both my partner and I were twenty-three years old, and our daughter Kate was two.

I'd been working at the Blue Cactus in Ottawa's Byward Market for some time, and had started running the daycare during weekdays, to watch over my daughter and two others. I had figured, with no work experience, there was little I could do that would pay for anything more than daycare, so staying home with Kate seemed to make the most sense. I did fifty-hour weeks with three preschoolers until the end of 1994, when Kate's mother and I broke up.

During the period of the daycare, I started writing three nights a week from seven pm to midnight in a coffeeshop that used to live at the corner of Gladstone and Elgin Streets.

CA: What models did you have available to you at the time? When did it become plain to you that you could simply do this yourself?

rm: I've mentioned before spending weeks, months and years sifting through the literary stacks in the library at the University of Ottawa, discovering issues of *blewointment*, and small items such as bpNichol's chapbook *Beach Head* (Sacramento CA: Runcible Spoon, 1971). Being young and broke, the library was a great place to not only get hours of solitary writing done, but be able to explore the endless stacks of contemporary writing. I spent most of the 1990s self-educating Canadian poetry back to the early 1960s, pouring through titles that otherwise I simply would never have seen.

At that point, Ottawa didn't really have any small publishing that I was aware of. Rob Manery and Louis Cabri's *hole* magazine was publishing far more experimental works, but no chapbooks yet, and presses such as Colin Morton's Ouborobos and Patrick White's Anthos Books had disappeared (and honestly, I didn't even know about either of them yet). From what I was aware of, there seemed an odd vacuum at that moment in Ottawa. The shelves at the University showed me that small press was lively, thriving and had an ongoing history, and gave me a permission to

enter into by simply beginning. I mean, anyone with access to printing equipment can publish—*blewointment* was certainly the best example of that. The hard part would be in making any of it interesting.

CA: 1993 is the first time you publish a chapbook by another author, David Collins in this case. Was *above/ground* originally conceived as a vehicle for your work solely, or was it always the plan to publish others?

rm: I simply began by making something of mine, and it was relatively easy. David Collins was someone I saw as doing some interesting things, but someone who wouldn't be producing anything of his own, so I offered to produce it through *above/ground*. I quickly saw *above/ground* press as something that I could do that not everyone else could, or might want to, so I approached the press as a way to offer assistance to others in the community.

In hindsight, this most likely comes from my farming experience, growing up. One exists within a community. My father was always the one who snowplowed the laneways of neighbours, for example. Another neighbour was the one with the combine, and did the fields for at least a dozen neighbours (including my father). Literature didn't seem much different: you do what you can for others, and ask for assistance from others for the things you aren't able to do. Through being a chapbook publisher, I had simply found my own way to offer assistance.

But to say: I was certainly the press' most enthusiastic author.

CA: You also eschew the tendency towards the hyper-local of much small press production, despite your regularly professed interest in promoting and supporting Ottawa writers. How do you see *above/ground* fitting into the national (or even international) landscape?

rm: In many ways, *above/ground* works to help encourage and promote the local Ottawa scene to the larger national and international conversation. For years now, if a writer comes through Ottawa to do a reading, I slip them an envelope of *above/ground* press goodies. Often it's a mix of titles I'd hope the writer might be interested in, along with a good mix of Ottawa writers they might never have heard of. Since we haven't a creative writing degree in either university, or journals such as *filling Station* and *Matrix* magazine, or presses such as Turnstone Press or Arsenal Pulp, how do we not only encourage the local writers, but to present them to the larger world? Certainly, through the Ottawa International Writers Festival, our annual poetry festival VERSEfest, and bloggers such as Amanda Earl, Pearl Pirie, Charles Earl and others, Ottawa poets and Ottawa poetry as something viable and enviable have been receiving significant attention. The worst thing we can be is invisible. Any community requires support on a number of fronts to thrive, including critical support, publishing support, financial support, etcetera, and *above/ground* press has worked in part to provide publishing support, and through The Factory Reading Series and the Ottawa small press book fair, for example, something further.

CA: One thing that I have most appreciated about the press is its willingness to publish new writers alongside writers who have been active for decades. How early was this a part of *above/ground*'s DNA?

rm: Pretty early, I'd say. If you look through the list of contributors to the *FREE VERSE ANTHOLOGY*, you can see names such as George Bowering, Henry Beissel, Gary Geddes, Susan Musgrave and Michael Dennis alongside Clare Latremouille, Karen Massey, Stan Rogal, David Collins and Thea Bowering (who finally has a first collection of short fiction out later this fall). Honestly, I've always gone after writing and writers that have excited or intrigued, and that has always included both emerging and established.

And if emerging doesn't receive the right kind of encouragement and support, how might they ever make their way to established?

CA: How has above/ground influenced your own writing? How do you see editorial, publishing and writing practices encouraging each other?

Through above/ground press, I spent my twenties developing my unit of composition as the chapbook. Once I started getting books published in my late twenties, I spent the next decade entirely focused on the book as my unit of composition. My attentions, apart from expanding to fiction and non-fiction, have simply broadened. Books connect to other books, often. I might still put together poetry chapbooks, but they're very much part of a larger construction first, and have been for a very long time.

Joe Blades and I have discussed the fact that there are very few writers in Canada with such a wide array of perspectives on publishing (Victor Coleman might be another), especially given that I've edited books for other publishers, wrote a column (reviews and interviews) in *The Ottawa X-Press* for four-and-a-half years, and even worked in a couple of bookstores, here and there. I've reviewed for the *Globe and Mail*. I might not entirely know how the entire system works, but I have a sense of how many arbitrary cogs there are in such a machine. It gets frustrating to then hear first-time authors complain loudly and publicly about their publishers when their books aren't getting reviewed by the *Globe*. It betrays a complete (and even wilful) misunderstanding of how publishing works.

One feeds into the other because it gives an entirely different perspective on the process. When I run poetry workshops, part of what I want participants to develop is a series of reading skills. There are quirks you might overlook in your own writing, but might see in someone else's, which can't help but shine a spotlight back on your own. I know a number of writers who have actually become far more critical of their own work since becoming editors/publishers, some, unfortunately, to the point that they've barely been able to release work. Developing the skills to be self-critical is certainly essential, but not to the point that it prevents you from writing or publishing.

One of the best examples of a writer utilizing printing processes into his compositional processes has to be bpNichol. There are entire texts of his produced with production in mind, which can only broaden the boundaries of what is possible with the book.

CA: Is there a favourite item you have produced?

rm: It would be difficult to pinpoint a single one, but there have been titles that have stood out to me over the years, including Stephanie Bolster's first solo publication, *Three Bloody Words* (1996), or David W. McFadden's *The Death of Greg Curnoe* (1995), John Newlove's *THE TASMANIAN DEVIL and other poems* (1999), and even Rae Armantrout's *Custom* (2012). The Newlove title was his first publication of new work in fourteen years. I produced a chapbook by Anne Stone that launched as part of the opening night of a late 1990s Ottawa international writers festival, alongside Michael Turner. I was able to produce a chapbook by Phil Hall that later appeared in his award-winning *Killdeer* (2011), the combinations of which I still find astounding. Part of the joy of the press has been in being able to produce stellar works by some of my favourite writers, including George Bowering, Sarah Mangold, Stephen Cain, Kate Greenstreet, Lisa Robertson, Rosmarie Waldrop, Monty Reid, Jon Paul Fiorentino, Paige Ackerson-Kiely, Fenn Stewart, Joshua Marie Wilkinson and derek beaulieu. I consider myself pretty fortunate to have been allowed to produce two chapbooks each by Marilyn Irwin and you, also. The list goes on and on and on.