

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



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

rob mclennan

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

In August 2013, rob mclennan's Ottawa-based above/ground press will celebrate its twentieth anniversary (give or take a month, as the interview below illustrates). 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. At the time of going to press with this interview, above/ground has just published item #685 (with likely another small handful of items appearing by the time this interview is actually in your hands, reader). Bearing in mind that above/ground produces print runs between 200 and 1000 copies depending on the item, there are several hundred thousand pieces of paper across Canada (and elsewhere) bearing the familiar "above/ground press c/o rob mclennan rr#1 maxville ontario k0c 1t0" mark. This high visibility (at least as far as small press goes) underscores the ambition of the name "above/ground." To celebrate the achievements of above/ground press, and to interrogate the still-active practices, ambitions, and frustrations of the press, Apt. 9 conducted the following interview between May 23, 2013 and July 19, 2013 over email.

**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 (some poetry posters, the two chapbooks of your own, *LOVE & COFFEE* and *book of angels*, and a handout for a reading with work by several poets). 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.

(An interesting, if not frustrating, sidenote: I've been celebrating the above/ground press anniversary for over a decade in August every year, managing to get my own date wrong by a few weeks, most likely distracted by the title of *AUGUST*. It was only through *FREE VERSE ANTHOLOGY* contributor Alexander Monker during the period of this interview that I re-discovered the original date, thanks to his scanning and posting the event flyer on Facebook.)

At that point, both my partner and I were twenty-three years old, and our daughter Kate was two. I'd been writing occasionally for some time, and it really began to form in high school around a social group of other writers that included Clare Latremouille (writer), Chris Page (musician), Paul Neumann (animator), Terry McDonald (journalist), Patrick Leroux (playwright) and Ann-Marie Seguin, with whom I share our lovely daughter. When I was still in grade eleven or twelve, it was Paul who founded our student literary publication, *The U-Name-It-Zine*, collecting poems and stories from a group of us for our English teacher, Bob MacLeod, to produce. One issue was themed "the pink running shoe issue." After the first year, Patrick and I took over the "editing," which was really pestering the rest in our informal group, predominantly part of the OAC Writer's Craft course, for submissions that we could pass on to Bob.

I submitted terrible poems, and terrible short stories, the latter I passed along under a pseudonym.

It was in high school that writing started to really take hold as an idea, but it wasn't until Kate was born in January 1991 that the real push began: if I was going to write at all, I realized I needed to put the proper time and effort

into it, or not bother. The last thing I wanted was to become some kind of "hobbyist." If you want full-time out of it, Margaret Atwood said, you have to put full-time into it.

So, by the time summer 1993 came around, I'd already been through my single class at the University of Ottawa, a poetry workshop that ran during the 1992-1993 academic year. Facilitated by Ottawa writer Mark Frutkin, this was where I also met Rhonda Douglas (poet and fiction writer) and Joseph Dandurand (poet and playwright). Being that it was Seymour Mayne's sabbatical year, Frutkin was a substitute, resulting in the fact that we were one of the very few poetry workshops at the University of Ottawa without an end-of-year chapbook.

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.

And every draft was generated longhand, sometimes twenty or thirty drafts (or more) before a piece was completed. Now most of those changes occur internally. It certainly saves a great deal of paper.

**CA: What was behind the decision in 1992 to produce the poster poems (according to the bibliography in *Groundswell*: "11x17 photocopied poems with illustrations, hand-coloured in crayon, collages, drawings & poems by rob mclennan, distributed free by stapling to telephone poles & through Richard Fitzpatrick books")? It seems explicitly to call back to William Hawkins and his legendary poster poems. Were you aware of Bill at the time? You have been a practicing visual artist over the years as well. What was the balance, in your mind, between the poems and the visual art in these items?**

rm: In 1992 I'd never heard of William Hawkins; that would have been through Nicky Drumbolis in Toronto, somewhere around 1996 or 1997, during my first visit to his warehouse space. He pointed to the "Postage Stamps" poster of Bill's and asked, where's Hawkins? I had no idea what he was talking about.

The posters were influenced by the graffiti artist Go Fish, who was quite active around 1990-3, producing artwork under a pseudonym and plastering all over Ottawa's downtown core. His argument was that if people won't go to see visual art, then visual art should go to where the people already are. In my mind, he wasn't altering what he did for the sake of the public, simply allowing the public to be aware of his work in a very immediate way. I admired him greatly, and wanted to produce my own version of the same. Richard Fitzpatrick was kind enough to let me put posters on his second-hand bookstore window, and I think I sold copies for a quarter a piece. I put a few dozen of the each on telephone poles around Centretown, and over the years, I've even met people here and there since who claim still to have copies, including a couple in Guelph (they apparently keep such on their fridge). Considering that I rank the work as juvenilia, I find the whole of this wildly unsettling.

The art was something to illuminate the text, and catch the eye. It was part of my early experiments in design, obviously, some of which was somewhat interesting, and some of which was simply terrible. Still, one could say the "poem" broadsides are an extension of this original idea.

A decade or so later, b stephen harding, who co-ran The TREE Reading Series with me for a couple of years, admitted that the original impetus for founding *graffito: the poetry poster* was seeing those posters of mine, and deciding that they could do better. I think they did.

**CA: I know you were involved in some non-above/ground editorial work. When were you active with *The Carleton Arts Review*? What about the TREE Reading Series? What were your roles? Were there other projects you worked on before above/ground? Did these influence the origins and development of the press? I'm thinking of these as collaborative editorial projects in contrast to your sole control of above/ground.**

rm: *The Carleton Arts Review* came to me through Douglas Ivason, who was seeking someone to take over the journal, as he had finished his degree at Carleton University, and was about to move on. You seem to be connected, he said. He came to the launch of *THE FREE VERSE ANTHOLOGY* and approached me there, an event that also introduced me to b stephen harding. I was co-coordinating editor of *The Carleton Arts Review* for four semi-annual issues, from summer 1993 to 1995. The last year I was there, the other co-coordinating editor was Warren D. Fulton, who started Pooka Press not long after we handed the journal over to others.

*The Carleton Arts Review* was how I first interacted with the works of Gil McElroy and Stan Rogal, two poets who became important to me not only as influences and above/ground press authors, but long-time friends. It was through *The Carleton Arts Review* that I was also first able to start publishing their work (above/ground press items by McElroy and Rogal soon followed), as well as the work of Karen Moffatt, Michael Dennis and B.Z. Niditch.

I was enormously frustrated by my time at *The Carleton Arts Review*, and felt regularly thwarted in my plans and ideas by an editorial board that appeared extremely indifferent. Of the six or so of us that ran the journal at any given time, I was the only participant during this period that wasn't a student at Carleton University. I wanted to publish, for example, the winning poem and short story in a high school writing contest hosted and sponsored by Carleton University, something that I myself had won when I was in my grade thirteen year. I was quite baffled by the fact that there were winners to a writing contest, but the winning works remained unpublished, and were even ignored. The editorial board liked the idea in theory, and I put the effort into finding the poetry winner and her winning poem, but then the editorial board nixed the idea, claiming they "didn't like the poem." To me, that was completely against the point. Hadn't she already won?

My time at *The Carleton Arts Review* cemented a wariness in working with others to actually getting anything done. It is perhaps the largest reason I have predominantly worked alone since.

During this period, I was also writing regularly for *The Charlantan*, doing two-page centre spread journalistic pieces on local literary events, including an interview-feature with underground comic book producer Greg Kerr. Not bad for someone who didn't even make it through the first month of my first year of university, four years prior.

When I started with The TREE Reading Series, they needed someone to be the director, and I took that position in June 1994 from Chris Sorr (as he was known then), running the series through to January 1, 1999. The first reader I hosted was Christopher Dewdney, who James Spyker and I picked up at the airport. As he collected himself into the back seat of Spyker's car, he announced to us that Warren Tallman had just died. After a while, TREE co-organizers James Spyker and Catherine Jenkins moved on, and b stephen harding came on board, to be my other half. The series did influence the press, providing not only a regular audience and interaction twice

a month, but allowed me the space to produce chapbooks by the occasional writer, in part for those audience members who might not be able to afford full trade books. During my tenure at TREE, I produced TREE-specific chapbooks by featured readers Ken Norris, Judith Fitzgerald, Sharon H. Nelson, David W. McFadden (his first reading in Ottawa), Dennis Tourbin and Michael Dennis.

Once b stephen harding and I were co-directing TREE the roles were clearer: I predominantly chose the readers, hosted events and worked publicity; he provided backup, including paperwork. He didn't care for hosting, even during those rare times I managed to convince him to take the stage.

**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 *blevointment*, 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 Ouroboros 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—*blevointment* was certainly the best example of that. The hard part would be in making any of it interesting.

**CA: It seems absurd to ask, but when you first starting making books and handouts in 1992, did your thinking ever account for long term goals? Did you start the press with it in mind that this could be a lifelong work? What were your goals when you started?**

rm: Honestly, I hadn't really thought about it. I simply began. One thing led immediately and directly into another, and then another, and then another.

**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: Let's talk about the material terms of your productions. You actively resist the fetish-object orientation of much small press and chapbook production. Stephen Cain, in his introduction to *Groundswell*, writes, "above/ground publications exist in a discourse of excess and are distributed via potlatch." In an interview with Derek Beaulieu, you state, "I've never been the kind of writer interested in altering the work for the sake of accessibility, focusing more on altering publishing, bringing it directly out into the world." Talk to me about the thought processes behind this aesthetic. What do you mean by "altering publishing"? What do you see as the benefits of such a position? Have you ever considered shifting this aesthetic?**

rm: Well, I've often said I'd rather produce and distribute one hundred copies of an item for four dollars than, say, fifty copies of the same for eight dollars. At four dollars, I can afford to have the occasional freebie and/or trade without hurting myself financially, or depleting my print run. I want to have copies enough for subscribers, author, friends, trade, book fairs and for months and years down the road. I mean, I don't want a ton of them five or ten years later, but enough that if the occasional person comes forward wanting a copy of something older, I still have some available.

I feel that to price any small item high (say, fifty to one hundred dollars) and have a print-run of minimal copies is to do a disservice to the writing, and therefore, the writer (unless the opportunity for a cheaper, "trade" edition of the chapbook is somehow available). If the production is less about the work being actually read and appreciated, then what is it really about? True, I very much enjoy the "fetish item" known as the book/chapbook, but there has to be some kind of balance (something I think your own publishing house manages quite well).

My aesthetic of the seemingly-quickly produced inexpensive photocopy and uncut pages is entirely deliberate. It initially came from my extremely low income, but also came from the idea that one didn't need to do anything expensive or complicated to get the work out. And inexpensive means I could afford to give copies away. When I think of early models of such, I am reminded of Maggie Helwig's lowlife publishing from the 1980s and early 90s. I love the rough edges of the chapbooks she used to produce. At \$2 a title, I even used to purchase small handfuls (predominantly her Michael Dennis and Lynn Crosbie titles) from her at various of the Toronto Small Press Fairs to give away to friends back in Ottawa.

**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: I want to return to The Factory Reading Series and the Ottawa Small Press Book Fair shortly, but first, 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: When did you launch The Factory Reading Series? Was there a direct connection to above/ground?**

rm: The first event was in January, 1993, when I launched my first self-published chapbook at The Stone Angel Institute, a little coffeehouse on Lisgar Street run by neighbours of ours. The idea for the series has always been occasional, creating events for touring authors or for above/ground press launches. When I was co-running TREE, the events I organized outside of that were for those authors who were through town outside of the mandated second-and-fourth-Tuesday of TREE, or simply wouldn't fit for a variety of other reasons. The connection to above/ground press was as much as anything else: it was in realizing that to make chapbooks was not enough, that there required other kinds of events and infrastructure to support community. The series wasn't there as any extension of the press, but an extension of the same idea that fueled the press (and the reviewing and the essays and the small press fair and the reading tours): writing and writers that I wanted to engage with, and support because I could and wanted to (and that so few others were doing the same).

Over the years, the series now known as The Factory Reading Series has held events at The Stone Angel Institute, Mother Tongue Books, Collected Works Bookstore, Gallery 101 (where the series went from being known as "poetry 101" to "The Factory Reading Series"), The Mercury Lounge and, finally, The Carleton Tavern, where it has lived for a bit more than a decade. Since it started, The Factory Reading Series has remained to these rough guidelines: whenever I felt like organizing an event, I organizing an event, whether at the prompting of a touring author, a chapbook worth launching, or simply because there are a couple of writers I haven't heard read in a while (and was curious as to what they'd been up to).

**CA: When and how did SPAN-O begin? Did SPAN-O serve functions other than facilitating Small Press Book Fairs? How were the early fairs? Have they always been at the Jack Purcell Community Centre?**



## How have they changed in the intervening years?

rm: In the summer of 1996, I participated in a conference on small and micro presses in Sechelt, British Columbia, organized by Michael Barnholden and Victor Coleman, where I interacted over the space of a weekend of drinks and amazing food with Rob Manery, Tom Snyders, Victor Coleman and Joe Blades, as well as a number of Canadian small press folk I hadn't yet met—Tim Landers, Barry McKinnon, John Pass, Barnholden and a gaggle of the *filling Station* collective, including Cybèle Creery, Doug Steedman and Blaine Kylo. Part of the function of the weekend was for us to meet, mingle and take stock in what it was we were doing.

And the conversations were magnificent! I was able to leave the conference with whole mounds of Tsunami Editions publications from Michael Barnholden (he now runs *West Coast Line* and LineBooks), as well as most of the other participants. There was just so much going on that I wasn't aware of, or hadn't yet seen. It really was a great weekend. Even on the way there, I was able to spend a fine evening in Vancouver with the poet Mark Cochrane, wandering the beach before I crashed on his couch.

Concerning SPAN-O, specifically: part of the conversation that emerged was that those of us who made small press should be working as an actual network, and not just random conversation. Snyders had been running SPAN out of Vancouver for a few years by that point, so we simply decided to have others in various corners of the country attempt the same. Joe Blades spent a few years using the name SPANNER (small press action network – eastern region). Unfortunately, the whole enterprise fell apart after a few years, and Tom even threatened legal action for some reason against me using the name. I mean, if we weren't going to attempt a network at all, didn't that make his original name fraudulent?

My use of the name has been to compile some of the activity I was already doing into some kind of umbrella organization. Otherwise, the events had too much of a disconnect, including the readings I'd been organizing throughout the early/mid-1990s (before the reading series had a name), to the book fair, and other activities. For example: James Spyker and I originally co-founded the ottawa small press book fair in fall 1994, and Rob Manery and I co-founded the WHIPlash poetry festival in 1996, which lasted three years before quietly disappearing.

When James and I founded the small press fair, we held a two-day event in the foyer of the National Library and Archives building on Wellington Street, and I held a pot-luck for exhibitors in my terrible apartment on Fifth Avenue on the Saturday night. I wanted a venue for the out-of-towners to bring drink and be fed, and for vendors to be able to engage in conversation without having to slip back to their tables (we now do post-fair dinner and drinks at the James Street Pub, where we've been twice a year for more than a decade). The first fair included Insomniac Press from Toronto, and even John Metcalf sat a few years' worth of tables for The Porcupines Quill. Soon after the first fair, James moved to Toronto, and I ended up organizing about a decades' worth of fairs at the Glebe Community Centre, until the renovations at the centre moved me over to Jack Purcell, where the event has remained since.

It's a good question: how have the fairs changed? I'm not sure it actually has. It has become larger, better organized, and with larger crowds, but the structure has been roughly the same, but for the addition of the pre-fair reading the night before at The Carleton Tavern.

The micro/small press conference also prompted me to start an official bibliography for above/ground press, something Barry McKinnon (I think it was) said we should all be doing, and sending to each other (which, to my knowledge, never actually happened). Joe Blades said he was too far along in the process to start any kind

of bibliography. At that point, I was only three years into it, so mine was relatively simple (although I am still discovering errors throughout). There were a lot of plans discussed at that conference, but on the whole, I don't know if anything else occurred between participants apart from individual activities.

What's strange looking back on the conference is in realizing how few of the participants are even still involved in small press.

**CA: On that note, 'how few are even still involved,' what differences do you see between Ottawa's community in 1993, and Ottawa's community in 2013? Likewise for the national community, as you experience it?**

rm: Well, for years I've complained that Ottawa hadn't a proper infrastructure for writers, given that we haven't creative writing programs in any of our universities, have supposedly the lowest per-capita arts funding in the country, and haven't really any trade publishers, or media interested in discussing books or authors. During the period I was running The TREE Reading Series, I had the feeling that I was running everything by myself, especially given that I was running other readings solo, as well as the Ottawa small press book fair, above/ground press, etcetera. There were also a couple of exoduses I lived through, watching younger writers such as Rob Manery, Louis Cabri, Tamara Fairchild, Warren D. Fulton and Stephanie Bolster leave town at various points throughout the 1990s. Part of the frustration was in knowing that had there been teaching work in a creative writing department, say, there would have been writers able to remain, even before the benefits of a writing culture emerging through and encouraged by the universities.

That began to shift by the late 1990s, during a period James Moran hosted an impressive and open program at The TREE Reading Series, the Wilsons invented the Ottawa International Writers Festival, and writers such as Stephen Brockwell, Monty Reid, Shane Rhodes, David O'Meara, Anita Dolman and Rhonda Douglas and a few others emerged, arrived or simply started to come out of the woodwork. Others, such as Michelle Desberats and Karen Massey had been quietly here the entire time. The poets that emerged in Ottawa over the previous decade, such as Colin Morton, Blaine Marchand, John Barton, Nadine McInnis, Susan McMaster and Sandra Nicholls, a number of whom simply appear to disappear from sight, emerging almost randomly at points, at least for those of us at ground level were concerned. Morton did produce a small chapbook press for a period in the mid-90s, and he seems to be one of the more active members of the group, participating in a couple of the small press book fairs, but for the most part, I don't really know if any of those writers have even managed to make it to more than a single fair. Maybe two.

National? I've been connected to various groups and individuals in interesting ways for a decade or more, including Derek Beaulieu in Calgary, Jason Dewinetz in Victoria, Joe Blades in Fredericton and so many, many others. There was a period that Calgary was getting a good amount of attention, and then the fiction writers of Newfoundland got noticed, or later, the poets of Prince George, British Columbia. Through email, letters, books, chapbooks and journals I attempt to maintain connections to various groups, individuals and publishers across the country. There are some magnificent things happening in literature, just about everywhere.

And yet, at the same time, I've been attempting to bring publishers together through the "(canadian) small press book fair" blog, attempting to get all of those who organize a small press fair in Canada to post their upcoming fairs and events to the site, so there could be one place where anyone could find out about national activity, but, so far, the experience has been equivalent to herding cats.

Any community has a series of ebbs and flows, certainly, but there has to be the infrastructure in place to help encourage participation and activity, otherwise so much of it simply falls away.

**CA: When did you begin the subscription model? How did you fund it previously? How have you kept your head above water all these years and continued your relentless stream of publications?**

rm: For the most part, I haven't really a clue. For the first few years I lived in Ottawa, I would visit home a couple of times a year, and use the opportunity to drive the ten or so minutes over to where Gary Geddes still lived. I met him when he did two annual day-long poetry workshops at my high school (his daughters Charlotte and Bronwyn went to the same school, yet there was little to no overlap with either of them to my time there). Dunvegan, where he invented Cormorant Books, is quite close to where I grew up, so I would wander over there and present him with what I'd been working on, and we'd drink beer in the treehouse on his property. It was there that he suggested to me the idea of subscriptions, most likely in 1993 or 1994. He said that Quadrant Editions, the press that eventually became Cormorant Books, originally kept itself afloat through subscriptions.

Otherwise, how? Not entirely sure. Hook, crook, you name it. I found my way into various places where I could acquire cheap or free photocopies, the occasional mailing done by a friend who used to work in an office and slip them into the office mass-mailings, that sort of thing.

I've produced "poem" broadsides at the offices of ECW Press in Toronto, *Prairie Fire* magazine in Winnipeg, and even in the offices of the Saskatchewan Writers Guild in Regina (all with generous permission). During my nine months at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, I was not only (they told me) the first writer-in-residence in three-plus decades to run through my \$900 budget (producing the "ALBERTA SERIES" chapbooks and various issues of *The Peter F. Yacht Club* from my office), but I owed them a couple of hundred dollars at the end. I was also the only one to request a re-fill on my photocopy card (five hundred copies per fill). When I first asked, they had no idea how to answer: are we even allowed to give you more? Each re-fill meant another broadsheet, and I produced pieces by Sandra Ridley, Carla Milo and others while there.

During the 1990s, I attempted to sell a chapbook a day. That way I could buy stamps, groceries, a drink, what have you. For a period, I even managed to convince one of the owners of the Dominion Tavern to trade a chapbook for a pint, during those Friday nights circa 1994-5 I used to meet Tamara Fairchild, Grant Wilkins and Warren D. Fulton (among others) in the tavern after their weekly basketball games. Those were stressful, exciting, heady times.

For years, the only holdup was financial. If I had money, I made books. If I didn't, books had to wait.

**CA: How many staplers have you gone through? Have there been any shifts in your material conditions of production? How were you designing and laying out the earliest items in 1993?**

rm: The first long-arm stapler lasted a little more than a decade, and the second hasn't yet given up the ghost. I did get a larger stapler for the sake of deeper staples around the time I arrived in Edmonton, in September 2007, so I could put together increasingly larger issues of *The Peter F. Yacht Club*, as well as the "ALBERTA SERIES" publications. I don't think the material conditions have specifically shifted, although there is the occasional title that falls outside of above/ground press that I have attempted different kinds of design work (with deliberately smaller print runs).

I'd say above/ground press is unique in that I'm still utilizing the cut-and-paste method, something that I've done from the very beginnings of the press. It has been easier to continue with that then actually learn how to work a design program. I will have to figure it out at some point, I know. It means I go through quite a large amount of tape.

**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: Under the golf-sized above/ground umbrella, there is a constellation of related productions. Several have come up so far, but let's take a second and catalogue these. In terms of print items, I am immediately aware of *Missing Jacket*, *drop*, *STANZAS*, *Peter F. Yacht Club*, and the "poem" broadsides, as well as "ALBERTA SERIES" of chapbooks you mentioned above. So, housekeeping: when did these publications run? How many items were produced?**

rm: Well, the bibliography in *Groundswell: best of above/ground press 1993-2003* (2003) tracks a good amount of that activity, and each series had and/or has its own purpose, so would have its own individual print run, and so on.

For example: *Missing Jacket* was a writing and visual arts magazine I attempted in the mid-90s, producing five or six issues, something that came out of my interaction with the visual arts community in Ottawa. There were very

few connections between the writing and visual art communities in the city, but for rare links such as Michael Dennis and the late Dennis Tourbin, who produced both artwork and writing. When Tourbin ran Gallery 101 in the late 1980s, for example, it became a meeting place for two different communities, including The Transparency Machine reading series organized and curated by Rob Manery and Louis Cabri.

Each issue of *Missing Jacket* included an interview with a visual artist, two interviews with writers, a short story, a column by James Spyker and a comic strip by Greg Kerr, various book reviews, poetry features by three poets and a further, single poem on the back cover. I was even fortunate enough to launch the first issue at an impromptu art show at the Enriched Bread Studios, as a number of the artists there were in the first issue (I had been hanging around the studios at that point for a couple of years). Being that I was only one person, the magazine was impossible to sustain, given my lack of money and resources. I wonder if things would be different now? I forget how many copies I produced of each issue; maybe 200? The bibliography would (at this point) would be far more knowledgeable than I.

*Drop* was a small chapbook-sized occasional journal that emerged from workshops I was running every second Monday through Jack Purcell Community Centre from 2002 until the end of summer 2007, when I left for my nine months in Edmonton. The informal workshop was for people living with mental illness, and predominantly consisted of Paul Thornton and (the recently late) Damian Firth. The issues were produced through Kathy Watcham at Jack Purcell, and distributed free through the group of us.

I've written of *The Peter F. Yacht Club* before, telling the story of how it was created out of a writer's group I invented back in the late 1990s.<sup>1</sup>

**CA: What was the impetus behind *STANZAS*? I know you have cited George Bowering's *Imago* in previous interviews. A couple answers ago you discussed the development of your unit of composition from individual poems, to chapbooks, to books, to sequences of books. Did an interest in long poems and sequences develop out of your work on *STANZAS*? Or did *STANZAS* result from an existing interest?**

rm: The journal emerged from existing interest, one that emerged through reading writers such as George Bowering, bpNichol and the like. When I was still in high school, I was introduced to *Poets of Contemporary Canada 1960-1970* (1972) edited by Eli Mandel, gifted by the woman who would eventually be mother to our daughter, Kate. Not long after we hit Ottawa in 1989, I started digging around for other reading material that intrigued, and what really began to strike was the idea of the book-length long poem. I engaged with the work of Nichol, Barry McKinnon, Daphne Marlatt, Phyllis Webb, Christopher Dewdney, Jack Spicer and plenty of others, and was fascinated by the form. Throughout my 20s, it was really Bowering's work that made the biggest mark, including the fact that to read Bowering is to interact with dozens if not hundreds of other writers (he has written more, critically, on other writers than anyone else of his generation), from critical works, anthologies, dedications in poems and other editorial projects. My reading exploded from that one central point.

Part of the interest, as Stephen Brockwell and I have discussed over the years, has come from attention. Since I write full-time, I have an attention for working within longer forms, and *STANZAS* came very early through this process, well before I really understood any of it. I suppose the magazine grew as I did. But to the nuts and bolts: I did a handout run of 500 per issue until issue #7, which went to 750, and then to 1,000 for issue #31. I couldn't justify to myself running a chapbook series I sold and a magazine I also sold; I thought by having one as

handout, it might help promote the rest. That way I could mail copies to folk in other cities, etcetera.

For *STANZAS*, I learned crafty ways to be able to produce extremely inexpensive runs. I had a friend (who shall remain nameless) who would allow me into their office on a Sunday for photocopying. I brought my own paper (usually a full box of 5,000 sheets), and would pay roughly \$30-\$40 for toner and annoyance. I would do anywhere up to 10,000 copies over a photocopying session of up to twelve hours. When I produced issue #12, the George Bowering issue, I managed to produce an issue of 750 copies, some 40 pages each, for less than \$40, since my mother had been good enough to pick up a box of paper for me on one of her runs into Cornwall.

**CA: As of June 2013, you have produced some 319 "poem" broadsides, at least based on the most recent one in my mailbox. What prompted your initial desire to produce these seemingly disposable little items? I say seemingly-disposable because a single, folded sheet of paper has the tendency to disappear. They also strike me, though, as remarkably practical items. They fit squarely in the general gift-economy mold of much small and micro-press activity (and are great bookmarks in larger collections of a given writer). Were there similar items being produced in Ottawa in 1995 by other people? How and where do you distribute them? How far have these little poems travelled, that you know of?**

rm: The handouts came from the response I was getting from people in bars. Well, let's back up: at that point, I was writing predominantly in public spaces, from the daily donut shop to the evenings at the original Royal Oak Pub on Bank Street. When I told people I was writing poetry (often because I was asked), the response was often a mix of "I don't like poetry" and "I haven't read poetry since high school," which was usually some dead white English fella from two centuries back. I couldn't afford to hand out chapbooks, so the poem one-off became a suitable response. My goals were simple: if only one percent of handouts caused the reader to want to read another poem, it was all I could ask for. I wanted people who said they hated poetry to actually know what the hell they were talking about.

I was also starting to get a good amount of unsolicited material through the mail, most of which didn't appeal to me to publish. I didn't care for the rejection letter that included subscription information, so would include a "poem" handout with such instead. I was also hoping it might give some writers I rejected some sense of what I was interested in, which was usually very far away from what was being sent to me.

I've long thought that any publishing venture, whether a journal, book or chapbook series, should have a clear sense of itself well before the first publication appears. If it doesn't know what it wants to be by the third publication, then it most likely never will. Quite honestly, in Ottawa during the early 1990s, nothing else was really being done such as these. There are publications I became aware of after the fact that felt like sibling publications, whether jwcurry's 1cent, Tamara Fairchild's "Verse-O-Matic," George Murray's mid-1990s "Perhaps, a self-centred geisha," or the Backwoods Broadsides, and others have started publications clearly influenced by the "poem" broadsides, including items by Joe Blades at Broken Jaw Press and more recent publications through In/Words.

I know on one tour, I think in 1998, I handed out a few hundred poems across Canada, with only about a third of them being my own. During the same period, I was touring with a group that included Susan Musgrave and Marnie Woodrow, and produced and distributed poems by them. A year earlier, I did another tour that produced mid-travel handouts by Michael Landry and Clare Latremouille (who was still living in Kamloops, B.C.).



A couple of times, I've distributed "poem" broadsides around Word on the Street in Toronto; the first time I participated, wandering the streets handing out pieces, as well as leaving a stack on The League of Canadian Poets table, I think over 1,200 poems were distributed. The staff at the League table said they couldn't keep copies in stock. I've dropped copies at coffeeshops, English departments, The Manx Pub, and handed directly to individuals. I always try to have at least a couple with me at all times. I even left some around London, Paris and Brussels last fall during our honeymoon, slipping copies onto shelves at Shakespeare and Company. I recently produced a "poem" broadside by Pearl Pirie, which she distributed around Europe during vacation travel.

When I was a guest on The Tom Green Show in March 1995 (back when he was still on Rogers Ottawa), I produced a "poem" broadside of my own in part as a handout to the studio audience. I mean, why not?

I've been attempting to make the "poem" handouts less ephemeral by posting each piece on the above/ground press blog a couple of weeks after the print version is produced. Since part of the purpose of the publications at all is to get the work widely distributed and read, it seems only logical. Over the years, I've used various "poem" broadsides as bookmarks, and my library is littered with them. Whomever ends up with my books in the end will either ignore them completely, or be able track roughly when I might have read certain titles.

**CA: Outside of the above/ground umbrella there is an entire other set of related activities. Chaudiere and *ottawater* are the most prominent, but the *ottawa poetry newsletter*, *seventeen seconds*, *poetics.ca*, and even your own blog seem to be part of the larger enterprise of being an engaged writer, reader, and community member. I won't push you to catalogue each of these here as above, but I will push you a bit on some of them. When you launched Chaudiere in 2006, did you ever consider framing it as a trade outlet under the above/ground name? Why did you decide to mark it off separately? I'm similarly curious with *ottawater*—why resist making it an above/ground publication? What distinguishes these activities, in your mind, from above/ground?**

rm: It's a good question. Chaudiere Books might be the trade book extension of above/ground press, but it is entirely separate. I don't keep track of stock or money or anything in the same way with above/ground: once the author gets their copies and the subscribers as well, I don't worry too much about how many I have left or where they are. Chaudiere Books is a business, and one I co-invented with others, so the model is entirely different. We have to keep track of everything. But, as far as concept and editorial, it is certainly directly related.

*ottawater* is an entirely different creature as well, being an online pdf poetry annual journal, publishing only those either currently or formerly resident of the City of Ottawa (or, Ottawa-ish). Neither above/ground nor Chaudiere exist within such a strict geographic/editorial mandate (although Chaudiere exists with a non-exclusive "Ottawa focus"). I see so many ways that other cities and publications celebrate the writers of their regions and cities, whether *Prairie Fire* doing another Winnipeg issue, or the Vancouver 125 publications that came out last year, but celebrations of Ottawa writers or writing is extremely rare. When I founded the journal, the City of Ottawa was about to turn one hundred and fifty years old, and I deliberately released the first issue in January of that year, presuming it might be the first of a year-long celebration of our fine capital. Unfortunately, what emerged was a year's worth of near-silence. What the hell is the problem with people? Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver and just about every other city in Canada are willing and able to celebrate themselves. Why can't we?

**CA: Does any library have a complete set of above/ground publications? Or does the only such set exist in your own personal archives? Do you have a rough (or exact?) estimate for how many items have been**

**produced under above/ground since 1993? I see 322 items in the first decade, according to *Groundswell*. I wonder if your rate picked up or slowed down in the second.**

rm: There isn't anyone I can think of with a full set, although David McKnight, former Rare Book Librarian at McGill, was one of my first subscribers and still is, which makes his collection of above/ground press items one of the most comprehensive. Over the past decade or so, I would suspect Monty Reid, Stephen Brockwell, jwcurry, Jennifer Mulligan, Gil McElroy and a few others might be sitting on some impressive mounds of material. Warren D. Fulton, Tamara Fairchild, Joe Blades and Stephanie Bolster would have a good array of earlier publications. Unfortunately, libraries haven't seemed terribly interested. The University of Buffalo has been a subscriber for a decade or so, and Simon Fraser University has been for a couple of years. Only very recently did the University of Toronto become a subscriber, and the Ottawa Public Library's "Ottawa Room" is willing to take anything from above/ground press, but only those publications by Ottawa authors. I understand the logic of such, especially given the limited budget they most likely have to play with, but it is still disappointing.

Judith Fitzgerald and Ken Norris warned me years ago to keep multiple copies of everything, which I've attempted to. I deliberately scattered such all through my archive at the bottom of boxes so I would be less tempted to hand such out, which means I'm not entirely sure where everything is, exactly. But such archiving allowed me to sell one of my ten remaining copies of the edition of one hundred copies I produced of David McFadden's *The Death of Greg Curnoe* (1995) to a university library in California roughly a decade ago for \$75 US (which, back then, was \$130 Canadian). They actually called my parents, seeking me out, so they could complete, as they said, "their David McFadden collection."

The Pearl Pirie broadsheet I made a couple of days ago, "let us make," is above/ground press "poem" broadside #320, but item #685 in the bibliography as a whole. That's a whole lot of material sitting in my apartment and storage unit. Some even still sit on the farm, taking up more space in my former bedroom than my father is comfortable with.

Since my domestic has been far more settled over the past two years, the rate of production has increased from what it was in the previous couple of years. Items #617 to #663 appeared in the year 2012, for example, most of which were single-author poetry chapbooks. That's a lot of material to go through. Occasionally subscribers respond that they have barely opened one envelope before another appears, but I find it best on my end to simply work how I work. If a lot of material is produced in a certain space of two months, for example, it makes a fallow period over the subsequent three or four more bearable, I find. Summer, for example, is usually far quieter in terms of production, given other distractions that come to the fore. The possibilities of actually going outside once in a while.

**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.

**CA: Any regrets? Who do you wish you could have published that you haven't?**

rm: There are tons of folk who are doing amazing work that I would love to be able to produce through above/ground. Some I've been approaching without luck for years, and others I haven't managed to approach yet. I'll keep the list of names to myself for now, but will mention that it took years of soliciting and patience to be able to produce works by Robert Hogg (since 1996), Mark Cochrane (since 2000) and David Phillips (since 2000; forthcoming).

**CA: Where does above/ground stand after twenty years? Given how productive 2012 was (some 47 items according to a previous answer), your energy seems sustained. Are you making plans for the next decade? How are you planning to mark the 20th anniversary?**

rm: It's a worthy question. Certainly the publication and launch of a 'best of the second decade' anthology will help mark the celebration, to be held this fall through the Ottawa international writers festival. Otherwise, I'm currently in the midst of curating the annual August anniversary celebration, and working to figure out not only where and when, but who might be able to read and launch at such.

And as far as the third decade is concerned? No specific plans yet, although there are new chapbooks by Gary Barwin, David Phillips and Rae Armantrout currently in the works. Admittedly, I'm pretty focused on a couple of other things on other fronts at the moment, including rebuilding Chaudiere Books, editing the tenth issue of the annual *ottawater*, the eighth issue of *seventeen seconds: a journal of poetry and poetics*, looking at houses so we can move this year, and the fact that Christine and I are expecting a child in mid-November. I'll most likely have a better space to think about new directions after all of that is figured out. Give me a few months.

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<sup>1</sup> See "The Peter F. Yacht Club: a miscellany," published on rob mclennan's blog (8 August 2010) for a history of the writing group and publication, as well as a listing of contributors up to 2010.

## **I simply began: above/ground press at 20**

[an interview with rob mclennan]

Epigraph is quoted from *Economies of Scale: rob mclennan interviews derek beaulieu on NO PRESS / derek beaulieu interviews rob mclennan on above/ground press* (Ottawa: above/ground press, 2012).

Born in Ottawa, Canada's glorious capital city, rob mclennan currently lives in Ottawa. The author of more than twenty trade books of poetry, fiction and non-fiction, he won the John Newlove Poetry Award in 2010, and was longlisted for the CBC Poetry Prize in 2012. His most recent titles are the poetry collections *Songs for little sleep*, (Obvious Epiphanies, 2012) and *grief notes*: (BlazeVOX [books], 2012), and a second novel, *missing persons* (2009). *The Uncertainty Principle: stories*, is scheduled to appear in spring 2014. An editor and publisher, he runs above/ground press, Chaudiere Books, *The Garneau Review* ([ottawater.com/garneaureview](http://ottawater.com/garneaureview)), *seventeen seconds: a journal of poetry and poetics* ([ottawater.com/seventeenseconds](http://ottawater.com/seventeenseconds)) and the Ottawa poetry pdf annual *ottawater* ([ottawater.com](http://ottawater.com)). He spent the 2007-8 academic year in Edmonton as writer-in-residence at the University of Alberta, and regularly posts reviews, essays, interviews and other notices at [robmclennan.blogspot.com](http://robmclennan.blogspot.com).

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