

# MWPA: Looking Back

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*\*Written on the occasion of the MWPA's 20th anniversary in 1995.*

**Everything was different in those days**, or maybe only we were different. Portland was a pretty dumpy town, the waterfront was dangerous, the Old Port hardly existed, only some potters' studios, the storefront Street School, a few bars. Nobody knew what a latte looked like.

We didn't have jobs. We didn't have ambition. We didn't own much. Except a press. Contraband owned that, a hand-run offset press. It was kept in the dilapidated old mansion on Park Street where Bruce Holsapple lived in a sort of poet's commune. I don't think he paid rent.

It wasn't totally true that we didn't have jobs. Bruce worked at Drug Rescue. So did I. I just don't remember getting paid. David Empfield with a bunch of other guys who called themselves the Strong Joint Collective did carpentry work on the People's Building on Brackett Street. Lynn Siefert waitressed at Boss Tweed's which later became the Sun Tavern and is now a stockbroker's office. Miriam Dyak lived on a farm in Brunswick and wrote poetry. Lee Sharkey wrote poetry too and so did Peter Kilgore.

Truth is (I'm ashamed to admit) we all wrote poetry. We were poets, all of us. Bruce used to sell poems in front of the Baxter Library. Maybe he gave them away. David was also writing a novel and tracts of various sorts. He and Bruce and Peter had been putting out Contraband for a few years from the house on Park Street. Then David, the political animal among us, decided it was time to apply for grants from the state to buy paper and ink. Postage money maybe. Rumor had it there was money available from the Arts and Humanities Commission.

Around this same time, Lynn and I and Marcia Ridge, soon to be Marcia Brown, and Pat Rowbottom, soon to be Pat Levasseur and on the FBI's Most Wanted List, decided that with all these male poets about, we needed a women's press and women's poetry, so we organized Littoral Books and solicited poetry from women all over Maine. (Marcia, Pat and I were already old hands at publishing; we had put out *The Rag* in '72 and the *Portland Occasional Times* occasionally in '73.) We also applied for a Maine Arts and Commission grant to publish it, and we got one, a whopping two hundred dollars. Amazingly enough, with that money we managed to put out *Balancing Act*, an anthology of Maine women's poetry, that sold over a thousand copies and made us think there was a future in publishing in the state of Maine.

It seemed that all over the state people of all genders were writing up a storm and small presses were popping up like fiddleheads in spring. In Lewiston, Kendall Merriam, Paul Martin, Gunnar Hansen, Monica Wood, Gary Lawless, Martha Blowen and Denis Ledoux had formed an ad hoc poets group, which Kendall dubbed the Pine Street Cafe Poetry Workshop. In Brunswick, Steven Cook was publishing a poetry magazine called *The Maine Edition*. Several years before, in Orono, Constance Hunting had founded Puckerbrush Press.

But there was only so much money and we were all competing for the same pie—against each other. The next logical step was to organize. One for all and all for one. We'd unite, form an alliance of small presses, get the money, divvy it up cooperatively among ourselves. Any press that had a project in the works would get a combination grant and interest-free loan from the alliance to publish. Repayments on the loans would be put toward the purchase of a cooperatively owned printing press that all members could use. Cut out the bureaucrats and their elitist ideas of "good" literature, their forms, their proposals, their mo and fo. One grant would be all we'd need. And then, Let a thousand presses bloom!

We were talking about a major pot of gold. Somewhere between three and five thousand dollars.

We began meeting. My memory's not what it was, but I remember some of the folks who met and argued for hours at a time in various living rooms and kitchens all through the late winter and spring of 1975. Besides the Contraband poets and the uppity women from Littoral Books, there was Gary Lawless, Denis Ledoux, Miriam Dyak, Lee Sharkey, Constance Hunting, Kendall Merriam, and others. From this gathering was born the Maine Alliance for Writers and Publishers, "a cooperative organization of small, non-profit presses and publishing houses and writers throughout the state of Maine (whose corporate purpose is) to further the growth of the literary arts in the state, to implement the co-operative sharing of equipment and skills, to unite Maine publishers, writers and printers for purposes of obtaining and utilizing grants and other kinds of financial assistance." Birthdate, June 3, 1975.

(Less than a year later, in February, 1976, Contraband would publish a front page diatribe written by David called *Aid to Writers and Publishers with Dependent Publications*. It would read in part: "I consider this publication twice as potent as the usual run of the mill literary rag, because you, the consumer, pay twice for the privilege of reading this issue. Once with your tax dollar, to support the strange system of endowment to the arts which in turn sustains us, and once when you innocently purchase this production... It is a dilemma—how are the prescriptions of freedom of the press to be protected and preserved when the marketplace is incapable, or refuses, to support the very organs of its free activity? To rely solely on government dollars is to beg invitation to that agency's control... Can government funding guarantee that quality literature will thrive and grow? Or does it create, instead, an intelligentsia that becomes self-serving and protective of their own critical interests, a sort of elite labor union? Imagine literary artists as civil servants and you get an idea of the dichotomy we now consider. The danger inherent in the growth of such a mandarin system is only too obvious... Somehow, in a fantasy wrought from a mind tired and disabled from preparing and collating copious funding documents, I envision a future support system which includes the disbursing of funds in a manner similar to that prescribed for government grants for the economically indigent. An Aid to Writers and Publishers with Dependent Publications Program... Everyone would stand in the same line at the distribution center. This will provide room in the system for a vigorous network of free and cut-rate presses.")

concentrate  
survival is the poem  
I know what I want is  
generous dangerous speech  
gain some self-control  
await coincidence  
ride the rough horned dark  
and crazy motion  
—Lee Sharkey, "tales," 1976

David could rail about the mandarin system of arts administration, but we kept getting our grants. Two hundred here, five hundred there. In 1975, five hundred bucks was a small fortune; it would have paid my rent for a six and a half months.

When Mark Melnicove arrived in Maine in 1978, MWPA was an all-volunteer organization that held monthly meetings of small press publishers to divide up the Maine Arts Commission grants to the organization, five to ten thousand dollars a year. Constance Hunting was the president. In 1979 Mark started Dog Ear Press and the following year he became the director of MWPA. MWPA had received a National Endowment grant to set up a distribution network. Eleven thousand dollars. With that, Mark put out a catalogue of the Alliance's 100 titles, mostly poetry, and was able to start making sales calls. His cabin in South Harpswell became the MWPA office, warehouse, and distribution center. He drove around the state in his VW van distributing books to libraries and bookstores, blowing four engines in the process. In those days bookstores had a Maine Writers and Publishers shelf, with the books taken on consignment, and a day's work would net about thirty bucks. Total sales that first year amounted to \$5,000.

Mark was director from 1980 to 1982, followed by George Bennington, who moved the office to Forest Avenue in Portland. Joe Richey, another poet, took over from him, brought Allen Ginsberg to town, started producing *The Underground Forest* from that same MWPA office on Forest Avenue. (Joe is now living in Costa Rica, still publishing.) The original newsletter of the '70's became *This Month in Maine Literature*, and the original intention, to form a cooperative organization of small, non-commercial, grass-roots Maine presses, expanded to include more commercial publishers of all sizes and all genres.

Our original contact at the Maine Arts and Humanities Commission was Denny Wilson, whose support for fledgling presses, feisty poets and MWPA itself, this radically anti-establishment organization, was unflagging. Looking at some of these Arts Commission funded books today, in this post-cold war climate of repression and self-censorship by artists dependant on government funding sources for their survival (not for much longer, of course, if the handwriting on the wall can be trusted) may be the only way to appreciate the freedom of expression that was simply taken for granted twenty years ago, how much ground has been lost.

I'm an absolute cynic  
There's nothing left to trust...  
fuck God, God can kiss my ass  
I want nothing to do with God Man  
Paradise Plans NEVER  
I'd shove the spear in Christ's side  
Out of Pride  
Spirits control everything!  
I seriously advocate giving up  
Mass suicide  
but they control even our death wish  
—Bruce Holsapple, "Eat Shit," 1976

Now it's two decades later, and Portland's gone through changes. The condos arrived, the poets left. Where did they go? David moved to New York, still lives on City Island in a house boat. Still writing, bad back and all. Bruce teaches somewhere in the Southwest. Miriam Dyak lives in Seattle, does a lot of globe-trotting looking for rocks and fossils with her husband, a rock and fossil merchant, is still writing poetry. Lynn lives in L.A., writes screenplays. You might have seen one of her movies, *Cool Runnings*. Made by Disney Studios. She says they cut a lot of her dialogue. I'm not surprised. Some of us stayed. Denis Ledoux started Soleil Press, which publishes Franco-American writers. George Bennington's Coyote Love Press recently published a book by Colin Sargent. Gary Lawless publishes Blackberry Books, owns Gulf of Maine Books in Brunswick, and works with writing groups, disabled adults and homeless people in Portland. The latter writing group, out of Preble Street Resource Center, just published a book of their work, [Voices from the Curb](#). Lee Sharkey is still writing and teaching, both in Maine and in Russia. Constance Hunting and Puckerbrush Press are both going strong. Mark Melnicove's press, Tilbury House, is thriving. Kendall Merriam is writing poetry and plays. And Denny Wilson, our former mentor, is now director of the Maine Arts Commission.

tedium of lights  
GREEN GREEN  
i have been  
city too long  
fields too long  
village forest  
TOO LONG  
TOO LONG

—Peter Kilgore, “River/Road,” 1975

*\*Peter, sweet, gentle poet, committed suicide a couple of years back*

Maine Writers and Publishers survived our departures, our changes. It's now an established institution itself, with fifteen hundred members, a thriving program of writing and publishing workshops, and an impressive regional book distribution network, representing over two hundred presses and seventeen hundred titles, with yearly book sales of \$190,000 and an annual budget of \$300,000. It has become the center for literary activity throughout the state, to my knowledge the only state-wide organization of its kind. Unique.

Meanwhile across the country small presses are flourishing, with or without assistance from state or national endowments. And they have to flourish, they have to survive. Because David was right twenty years ago. You take the king's shilling, you become the king's man. These days, though, the king isn't the national endowment, (or if he is, he may be about to lose his head). No, the king is the media conglomerate, proud owner of most of America's mainstream publishing houses—along with its newspapers, TV stations, film companies, bookstore and video chains. Just a passing glance through Literary Marketplace tells the tale. Little Brown is owned by Time Warner, which owns four other publishing houses and has the distinction of being the world's largest communications company. Simon and Shuster is a subsidiary of Paramount, itself owned by the entertainment mega-corp, Viacom, the world's second largest communications company. Putnam is owned by MCA; William Morrow by the Hearst Corporation, which also owns Harcourt and Avon; Doubleday, Bantam and Dell by Bertelsmann; HarperCollins (and Fox TV) by Rupert Murdoch. And let's not forget that other media giant, S.I. Newhouse, who owns Random House, Knopf, Crown, Pantheon, and Vintage. It's the market, not politics, that is currently driving American literature, and it's driving it to ruin. It's clear that if we are to have any vital literature in this country, it will come out of small, independent presses, will be sold in small, independent bookstores, will be produced by indigent writers working other jobs, supported by a true intelligentsia, readers who love the generous, dangerous speech of the poet, the dark vision of the novelist, the harsh rudity of risky, edgy, uncensored speech.

We didn't foresee the shape of the next two decades when we sat together forming the Maine Writers and Publishers Alliance back in the glory days of 1975. But somehow or other, clairvoyantly, in our blissful naiveté, we managed to do the right thing.

Happy anniversary MWPA! May you have books and more books and many many more!

—***Agnes Bushell***