

Paul Marion

*Alentour: One of the Lost
'Little Magazines'
(1935-1943)*

INVISIBLE STRINGS

IN LATE 1949, Jack Kerouac wrote to journalist Charles Sampas at his hometown newspaper in Lowell, Massachusetts, to tell him about his first novel, *The Town and the City*, which was due in stores that coming February. Toward the close of the letter, Kerouac asks about friends of his from the early 1940s. Among the pals is Michael Largay:

So this brings us...back to the nights when we'd all bump on the Square—Sammy, Ian MacDonald, Mike Largay, Conny Murphy, Eddy Tully, yourself and others like Jim O'Dea and John Koumantzelis and so many others, and chat about what we all felt...an enriching background for all of us. Strange dark Lowell... Where is Michael Largay these days? I hear no more from Ian. The invisible strings got tangled in the night.

When I first read the letter in 1974 in the biography *Visions of Kerouac* by Charles Jarvis, I was struck as much by the familiar remembering of old friends as by the big-idea thinking in the closing—Kerouac compares Lowell to other landmark literary places, such as William Saroyan's Fresno, California. Poet Mike Casey reprinted the letter in the Spring 2002 issue of *The Acre*, the literary magazine he edits and publishes in Andover, ten miles downriver from Lowell. Rereading the letter twenty-eight years later, I knew a lot more, but far from everything, about Largay and his achievement. He was the printer-poet of his generation in Lowell, born into a family of printers in the city's Centralville neighborhood. He died in Southern California in 1991, leaving a modest legacy in New England that has been all but forgotten.

When Kerouac was twenty and shuttling between his family's home in Lowell and his various activities out of town, he spent time with Largay and other aspiring intellectuals in Lowell. In the winter of 1943, reporting to his friend Sebastian Sampas, younger brother of Charles and a soldier at the time, Kerouac wrote, "I saw Michael Largay the other night, we drank beer with Ian, talked, and made an appointment to go see him at his Boston apartment this Thursday with Billy Ryan—we shall feast in a good restaurant, take in a concert, get drunk and discuss all night...it should be a memorable evening."

ALENTOUR

Browsing in a used bookshop in Concord, Massachusetts, in the fall of 1989, I noticed a plastic freezer bag in which there were several staple-stitched booklets. Inside were six hand-sized publications with the words *Alentour: A National Magazine of New Poetry* on the faded covers—two issues from 1935, three from 1936, and one from 1937. On the inside cover of one, contributor Arlene Hope had written her name and address, 926 Moody Street, Lowell, Mass., in blue script. The editor was Michael Largay of 3 Hart's Avenue in Lowell. Belle Irene Gillis of 118 West 79th Street in New York City was associate editor. In the lower, right-hand corner of the front cover was the price: "Dollar A Year" or "25 Cents A Copy." Gillis designed the magazine and Largay handset the type and did the printing at Alentour House.

The masthead on early issues featured an illustration of a knight bearing a long-handled axe, on guard in front of closed wooden doors that curve to a peak. On the doors are ornamental hinges. The knight's headgear resembles a Saracen's hood, but the face is that of a European. An old etching of a castle atop a rocky hill high above the surrounding territory dominated the cover of the Spring 1935 inaugural issue.

I asked Montreal poet François Pelletier if the word "Alentour" was familiar to him from his readings in French literature. According to *Le Robert Dictionnaire Historique de la*

Langue Française, the word originally meant “around a tower.” The French “tour” means “une maison en hauteur” or a house that is high or on a hill.

“I guess that definition is the closest meaning to the drawing of the castle, which is a tower, on the cover of the magazine,” said Pelletier. “‘Alentours’ indicates nearness or proximity in time or place. The Larousse dictionary gives us ‘around’ for the definition of ‘alentour,’ and for ‘alentours’ the English translation is ‘neighborhood.’ Regarding the magazine, the name could suggest that the publication is about a well-circumscribed place, like a Little Canada neighborhood in New England or like the Beat writers were around (‘alentours’) North Beach in San Francisco.”

I had my hands on a piece of Lowell’s cultural history that had been buried by the years. Who knew (or remembered) that young writers had published a poetry quarterly while the city was in the jaws of the Great Depression? There were no copies at the City library, none at the University of Massachusetts-Lowell’s Center for Lowell History or in the library at Lowell National Historical Park, and none in private collections around town. The lack of mention was odd, given that Lowell’s general history had been combed, sifted, probed, challenged, re-compiled, and backfilled by dozens of scholars since the middle 1960s, when people started pushing to make the city a living monument to the American Industrial Revolution.

THE KEROUAC CONNECTION

My interest in *Alentour* re-ignited in 1991, when I began cataloguing Kerouac’s treasure-chest of unpublished, and mostly unseen, papers for his family estate in Lowell. Among the papers was a two-page autobiography written by Kerouac in New York City in late 1943. He was looking for a job as a script synopsis in the film industry, and needed to introduce himself to prospective employers. There were two drafts of the statement; in both drafts he touts his experience as a writer, but in the first version he mentioned that he had had a poem published in *Alentour*. He deleted the detail in the revised version. He gave

no further explanation of the magazine, as if the name should ring his reader's bell. It rang mine.

That reference to *Alentour* became even more important to me after I received a contract from Viking Penguin to edit a collection of Kerouac's early work. Published in 1999, *Atop an Underwood: Early Stories and Other Writings* by Jack Kerouac includes short stories, parts of novels, poems, essays, prose sketches, and plays, all written before Kerouac turned 22 years old. I used the second, improved draft of the autobiography to connect the three chronological sections of the book. Although the *Alentour* reference had been excised by Kerouac, I dug deeply to find what I thought might be his first published poem.

In 1997, librarian Renate Olsen of Regis College in Weston, Massachusetts, helped me track down a set of *Alentour* (1935 to 1943), at the Widener Library of Harvard University. There also were issues at Brandeis University, the Library of Congress, Yale University, the University of Pennsylvania, and scattered copies at colleges in Minnesota and Wisconsin—which suggested to me that major libraries had subscribed to the journal while it was live or thought it serious enough to collect afterwards.

I didn't find Kerouac's poem. One explanation could be that the editor had accepted a poem of Kerouac's before the decision was made to cease publication. The editors mention returning manuscripts in the final issue. Since Kerouac was traveling between Lowell and New York City and Merchant Marine voyages in the early 1940s, he may have believed the poem had been published. There is, however, a poem by Jack Greenhill in the Summer 1941 issue. In the summer of 1940, Kerouac had been injured in a car accident while on a road trip with friends in Vermont. Vermont is from the French for "green hill" or "green mountain." It is a stretch, but I can imagine Kerouac using a pen name that was a play on the French. One of his first published pieces about the Beat Generation was signed, "Jean-Louis"—his given name in French. Teen-aged Kerouac at times used the name "Jack Lewis" in his writings. The problem is that the poem, "Without Words," is a stilted, formal poem ("He

slowly sipped his bit of wine, as she/Drew near, and settled at his feet. Her hair,/In golden length fell softly across his knee;/And from her pretty eyes tears spoke despair.”). The writing does not sound like Kerouac, even in those early years, when he was still experimenting with various forms of writing, including some rhyming poetry. In a 1940 note about his writing, he explained why he avoided traditional forms of poetry: “I feel that the words are put backwards. I’d rather have simple prose-poetry, to the point, concise, and more digestible.”

YOUNG PROMETHEANS

Alentour was a bridge from Largay’s generation to Kerouac’s crowd. Ian MacDonald, a regular contributor to *Alentour* by 1940, was counted among Sebastian Sampas’ high-minded pals, whom he dubbed the Young Prometheans. It is clear from Kerouac’s letters cited earlier that Largay was in the mix, standing out as an older role model. When Kerouac and his literary soul mate Sebastian began to pursue their artistic aspirations as high-school students, they didn’t have to look far for examples of others doing the same thing. The presence of Largay and company along with a Lowell-based literary quarterly had to have emboldened them. They could point to a tight-knit group of young writers in the city who were publishing their own work, as well as that of others around the country. On February 2, 1943, in his daily column, Charles Sampas referred to Largay as “Lowell’s most authentic poet.” The older Sampas likely had copies of *Alentour* in his house from the start, and Sebastian and Jack would have seen the freshly minted poetry.

In their correspondence, Kerouac and Sampas debated the philosophical foundations of their “Prometheanism.” Sampas’s Promethean notion was bound up with an ideal “Brotherhood of Man” and the hoped for evolution of a new American with an artful, enlightened soul and eyes filled with love. Here is Kerouac upbraiding his friend for squishy thinking on one aspect of the Promethean vision—the role of the artist:

... I want you to get more serious about your poet's station, more diligent, searching, and scholarly—forget the romantic 'outcast' notions and continue observing the phenomena of living, with the patience and scrutiny of a scientist in his laboratory. ...

John "Ian" or "Yann" MacDonald, along with Sebastian and Kerouac, had been at Bartlett Junior High School when *Alentour* debuted in the mid-1930s. He was a charter member of the Young Prometheans. In a sprawling letter to Sebastian in 1943, Kerouac talks about their mutual friend:

I see within the realms of his truly great mind the wry diamond of Shakespeare's visage, the bejeweled heaviness of Beethoven's face, the pale purple vistas of long-ago poetry, long-ago love, trees on the horizon, all the classic meaning of life, pent up in his pale brow like a submissive nightingale. ...

MacDonald had three poems in the final issue of *Alentour* (1942-43): "To a Young Lady," "Song," and "I Will Not Ask These Things." The poems are romantic flights of language from a young man desperate to find the vocabulary equal to the science of his nervous system. His antennae were receiving cosmic transmissions, and he was discovering that he could say things in a poem that did not fit elsewhere in the daily conversation. Here he is in "I Will Not Ask These Things":

I cannot give my trust to time, I'll buy
This "Now" with every jeweled word I know,
And sell the formless future for a sigh—
If one must pay with sighs who loves you so!

In "A Soldier Contemplates the Fallen Foe," published in 1940, a soldier pleads with his enemy not to die after wounding the adversary severely. He tries to rationalize his action: "I drove the willing blade,/But steel I never made/Nor hate I bore./I saw the wild blood run,/Thus was my duty done:/ I live today!/But now your hand is chill,/Your eyes reprove me still—/What words to say?"

A NATIONAL MAGAZINE OF NEW POETRY

Alentour premiered in Spring 1935. On the back cover of volume one, number one, is a full-page ad for “Pollard’s, Lowell’s Biggest, Busiest, and Best Department Store.” The magazine also landed advertisers beyond downtown Lowell—the Autumn 1935 issue had a large advertisement from G. P. Putnam’s Sons of 2 West 45th Street in New York City for Dorothy Quick’s second book, *Changing Winds*. Quick is described as a “well known writer, contributor to numerous publications, and member of important poetry groups.” The publisher claims that readers of her first book will appreciate the “spontaneity and charm” of the new poems.

In a practice that would continue through the years, the first issue carried an announcement for awards for the best work in the issue. Winners would receive copies of *I Go A-Walking* by Barbara Young and *From Gold to Green* by Margaret Lathrop Law. For the summer issue, a donor gave a copy of Edna St. Vincent Millay’s *Wine from These Grapes* for one prize.

In later issues, prospective contributors were advised to send “experimental forms of poetry” (read free verse) to Gillis in Manhattan and “regular models” or “patterned verse” to Largay in Lowell. *Alentour* was a fair reflection of modern poetry in its time. Examples of spare, visual, imagist verse and haiku appeared alongside poems in closed form. While most, if not all, of its contributors could be described as “emerging writers” or even less experienced hopefuls, *Alentour* was the springboard for a number of writers whose poems reached larger audiences. The editors were handling requests to reprint *Alentour* poems from editors of anthologies and other publications.

THE PRICE OF THREE LEMONS

Under the Alentour House imprint, Largay and friends expanded their activity beyond the magazine to produce chapbooks or booklets like George Chapman’s *A Song of the Chinese Night*, described as a “light, airy phantasy in the gentle tradition of

lyric poetry.” This collection was available in the Art in the Mart Series for ten cents a copy. Another title in the series was Largay’s own *Counterpane*, billed as the first edition of his “hospital poems.” Here is Largay’s announcement for Art in the Mart:

The Alentour Associates are comprised of a group of poets who are publishing their own poetry and that of others. They are bringing typographical distinction to poetry that could hardly be achieved by other than a poet.

Within a year, the series had grown to include Philip J. Garrigan’s *Nine Poems*, Ralph Lee True’s *Among Other Things*, and Mabel Chase Rundlett’s *Sylvan Lights and Shadows*, in addition to the Chapman and Largay titles mentioned above.

“Alentour House continues to contribute something new to current poetry,” wrote Largay, “in its growing collection of first editions, artistically printed and selling for as little as the price of three lemons. Books like these are usually collectors’ items and sold to the few who love good printing, fine materials and artistry; but belief that song is a close second to what you find in the market-place has led living poets to leave their eaves and offer these songs in their own span of life.” In 1941, Alentour House released a full-length collection of Largay’s poetry, *The Unlistening Street*. Some of his poems had originally appeared in *Bard*, *Kansas City Journal Post*, *Lowell Journal*, *Santa Fe Examiner*, *The Writer*, and others.

“THEY WERE INTELLECTUALS”

Largay, born in 1911, was “a brilliant student with dark wavy hair,” according to retired teacher Mildred Scanlon of Lowell, who, as an underclassman at Lowell High School, had watched the progress of Largay and his circle. She wrote poetry, too, and mixed with the crowd that gravitated to the school literary magazine, *The Review*. “They were intellectuals, a little different,” she said, recalling their effort to organize a writers’ workshop. The late Stella Mazur, a classmate of Largay’s, remembered him as “popular, smart, good-looking.” Class president Largay graduated in 1931 and went on to attend Bard College, where he later

solicited poems from students for his new magazine. Mazur last saw him at a reunion. He had come up from New York with a fellow classmate, a football star.

Largay's right-hand man was Philip J. Garrigan, Jr., born in 1914, who served as the first business manager of the magazine and contributed poems. Tall and thin with close-cropped hair, Garrigan was a classmate and captain in the respected high-school Officers' unit (a kind of pre-R.O.T.C. program). He was president of the Literary Club and had published poems in *The Review*. He played "Homer, the Wandering Bard" in a 1930 production of *The Iliad*, which also featured Largay as Laertes. "Philip's ego was in full bloom in high school," said Scanlon. He signed her autograph book with this message: "Save this autograph. Some day it may be worth \$100,000."

Occasionally, *Alentour* would devote a handful of pages to a featured poet. In Spring 1937, Garrigan was represented by seven poems. Introducing him to readers, Largay wrote:

It seemed to him, now he came to think of it, very little to have done with twenty-two years: two hundred poems, counting all, half a very dull novel, all a hopeful novelette, some newspaper articles, and the thousands of plans more foolish than all these. It may be, he reasoned, that no one else has done more. But I should have.

One of Garrigan's better pieces is "Northern Mill City," a grim take on the urban scene at his feet: "The full bank and the empty plate/Confuse them, the cloth not of their weaving,/And why a city built great/Falls in a century, crumbles, only leaving/Weeds in the millyard, a locked gate." The poem concludes with the image of a worker, one of the "simple people," shivering on a bench in the winter sun, trying to pull himself together, as the poet with certainty observes that the next day will be no better. Garrigan also published translations of poems in French by Maurice Vaucaire and Stuart Merrill.

Two other poets from the region earned multi-page spreads in the magazine, George S. LaBelle, a Bard College sophomore and fellow student of Largay's, and Rose S. Goldman of Lowell, who had attended Boston College. In 1935, Largay prefaced LaBelle's poems with this note: "... he finds time for the craftsmanship of

the light shadings and small differences of nuance in poetry, landscape gardening, art, music, and journalism. His background is an early boyhood in New Hampshire, followed by removal to the industrial Merrimack Valley, where he received his education in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of its public schools.”

Largay even gives us a description of his friend: “average height, dark hair, hazel eyes, a glowing enthusiasm that sometimes breaks through his reserve, and a love of beauty.” LaBelle’s contribution includes a group of seven poems presented under the title “Poems from the Japanese.” Among these imagist poems is “Unbelief”:

the cherry trees
are blooming again
on the mountain side.
if my heart were my eyes,
I would not believe
that winter had gone.

Here is Largay’s introduction to Goldman’s “City Poems” in 1936: “Poetry of the people, city streets, and ‘realism’ are not often found in good taste and by anybody with anything but bloodshed to offer as a remedy. Too many champions of the oppressed would use them to climb to political prominence. It is with surprise that we see the streets of a large metropolitan city through the hurt eyes of a woman with no propaganda to slant her verses.”

In long rhyming lines, she renders an overwhelming cityscape: “The tents of the city have folded, but the demon of speed rides high./Speed is their blood and their heart beat, pulsating, sullen and cold;/Its rule and lure and its power are tainted like larcenous gold./ ... I have left behind trees touched by autumn in colors of copper and red,/I have come to the mass maddened city, where the dream and the dreamer have fled.”

Featured poets from beyond the region included Jean Paul Talbot of Saskatchewan, Canada, and Arthur Dubois, associate professor of English at Duquesne University and editor of *The Journal of English Literary History*. In 1936, Talbot wrote that she felt sorry for people who do not have “noisy children, a big shabby kitchen with a wood-burning stove, the urge to write, a

garden, a white kitten with one blue eye and one brown, a typewriter named Maria whose ribbons must be put in upside down, and two great-great grandfathers who fought under the Iron Duke himself." The same year, *Alentour's* readers found Dubois' "Grasshopper Lyrics," a selection of "light lyrics, many of them written to be sung to popular music."

**"IF YOU CAN BE SHOCKED BY BAUDELAIRE,
SHAME ON YOU."**

Alentour's editors made room for book reviews and a Books Received section, features lacking in many of today's literary magazines. The reviewers graded books A to D, sometimes handing out bad marks. There were a few exceptions to the system, such as a 1936 review of Robert Frost's *A Further Range*, which stood on the reviewer's laudatory comments, and in the same year a page-long review of *Flowers of Evil, From the French of Charles Baudelaire*, translated by George Dillon and Edna St. Vincent Millay. The unsigned Baudelaire review begins: "It is not necessary to voice approval or disapproval of the Poe of the Continent; but pass on the merits of the translations done by two gifted American poets. If you can be shocked by Baudelaire, shame on you."

Assessing Frost's latest work, Largay recounts an evening when he challenged a lecturer from Oxford who made dismissive comments about the New England poet. He continues: "It is no longer necessary to champion this poet. He has grown on the American people and firmly established his place as one sane and stabilizing influence in the poetic revolution of mumbo-jumbo. That he had to go to conservative England to establish himself before we would read him, we had best forget. After all, we still mistreat poets and weep in the cinema."

Among the books reviewed were *Stones for My Pocket* by Marion Lee (Dallas: Kaleidograph Press), *Hills of Hope* by Velma Lee Toney (Beebe, Ark.: Underhill Press), and *Without Flame* by George mac Kaye (Fitchburg, Mass.: Aries Press). Reviewer Rena V. Outcalt of Kansas City, Missouri, is effusive about the poems in

Without Flame: “George mac Kaye’s love sonnets have much of the Chopin appeal, and come as the songs of a singer who raises his voice and passes on without announcing himself... Like Lindsay, mac Kaye is one of the last troubadours.”

They also took notice of new anthologies, like *The Anthology of Boston College Verse* edited by William C. Kvaraceus (Boston: Manthorne & Burack, Inc.) and *Chorus for America*, edited by Carlos Bulosan (Los Angeles: Wagon and Star Publishers/Harvey Parker & Craftsmen), an anthology of six poets of the Philippines. About *Chorus for America*, *Alentour* wrote: “This is an interesting and worthy attempt to bring the work... to the attention of the American that has increased its affection and respect for the people of the islands who have proven that they can fight as well as provide a romantic background. The poetry is, for the most part, poetry of revolt showing a vigorous and independent spirit, maintaining each man’s right to absolute freedom.”

Alentour’s editors were never shy about advocating for poetry even though they had no illusions about the poet’s lot. With the coming of David Brook as editor in 1940, the editorial voice of the magazine sharpened. The Winter 1940 issue has two page-long editorials that spell out the *Alentour* agenda. In “Poetry and Pay: The Rewards of Poetry,” Brook lays out the flat truth:

The old picture we have of the poet starving in the attic and writing deathless poetry is as true today as it was in the days of the early bards. However, since the advent of the linotype machine and the flood of printed papers and magazines we have the rhyme makers and homely philosophers who write for so much a yard and sometimes manage to acquire sleek cars that purr past the humble folk they inspire. Between these writers and the pure poet are many variations. In general, though, nobody who wrote great poetry ever made much money.

NEW ENGLAND MUSE

On the facing right-hand page is an unsigned essay titled “New England Thought,” which is lofty compared to Brook’s plain potatoes sense. This short composition is a key to understanding how Largay and his circle saw themselves. While the Transcendentalists are long gone from Concord, Massachusetts,

the town's river still flows into the Merrimack. The new poets in Lowell imagined tapping the Concord's source by way of the enduring muse. Through poetry, maybe, the worn-out factory city could project a hopeful voice. The anonymous writer imagines the journey of a twig dropped into the river by Emerson long ago.

Down the serene Concord floated the twig, down the quiet river. It was long in getting to the city and by that time there were piles of dust where many of the mills had been. The people were nervously claspng their idle hands.

It would be good to think that as the twig finally reached the other river with the city of empty mills, the piles of dust, that perhaps a boy playing barefooted by the edge of the river picked up the twig, long from Emerson's hand, and planted it that later it would grow into a tree, bringing life to the ruins. And then because workers were idle and had time to listen, perhaps the birds would come to the tree to sing. Perhaps, again, the muse of poetry, weary from travel would rest a while beneath the tree. It would be good to think this.

When *Alentour* featured Lowell poet Rose S. Goldman's "City Poems," Largay wrote, "She is a spirited member of the modern group not far from *Concord* [emphasis added]." Like young Kerouac in those years, the *Alentour* poets subscribed to Emerson's vision of the poet in America, as presented in his essay "The Poet":

Every man should be so much an artist, that he could report in conversation what had befallen him. Yet, in our experience, the rays or impulses have sufficient force to arrive at the senses, but not enough to reach the quick, and compel the reproduction of themselves in speech. The poet is the person in whom these powers are in balance, the man without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and to impart ... The poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty. ...

For a young writer in Lowell, a close reading of the essay might cause a shiver of recognition at the mention of the very city ("In the political processions, Lowell goes in a loom, and Lynn in a shoe, and Salem in a ship."). The passage becomes a kind of mental weld between the Lowell reader's mind and Emerson's old brain. Here he is, or there he was, considering the

meaning of Lowell, even briefly, in the towering essay about the poet in society.

Although Kerouac pointed out that his roots were in Brittany, not Concord, he credited Emerson and Thoreau as important early influences. Kerouac's *Atop an Underwood* includes the short composition "The Wound of Living," written in 1943, in which Kerouac elaborates on the subject: "But there is something about the landscape, the weather, the face of New England, where I was born, that has brought out the Transcendentalist in me through the earlier years of my life. For this reason, I call myself of the New England tradition, because my style is New England, my muse aims at simplicity and frankness, and I love pine forests and pure thought."

POETRY IN A TIME OF WAR

In the Fall 1940 issue, Brook meditates on the darkening prospects of the time:

It is true that poetry is given little place in time of great national stress; but the lifetime of a personality is not made up of great historical events. Men count their days in terms of simple joys, human dignity, a remembered song. That the fragile artist who is the poet shall have a voice in these troubled times this magazine returns to the poetry field when the little magazines are scattering like leaves in a high wind.

The magazine absorbed the news of the era, and poems written in response to the world war found their way into its pages. Among these poems were Ian MacDonald's "A Soldier Contemplates the Fallen Foe," Celia Keegan's "The Battle," Largay's "A Year of War" and "Air Raid," and Marion Lee's "Reserve Forces." Following are examples of the war poems:

Paratroops

Death blooms in silhouette against the dark
Like pale moonflowers caressing alien sod;
Some pierced by shafts of flame lie charred and stark,
Some blown to safety by the breath of God.

Zita Harris

To a Soldier Husband

You ask me if I miss you. Let me say
Last night I read the paper on the porch
As usual—one green chair I’ve put away—
The news was maddening—no gains... The torch
Of coral pink we love was in the west
All spilling along the mountains, and the Ginger
Who pressed so soft against me wished to rest
Right there until you snapped your finger
And poured milk into her saucer. I walked
Awhile to get myself out of my mood—
No use—I met Lucille and Jack—we talked
About you—where you were—It was no good
To pretend longer. But I’m fine, now, Joe.
You asked me if I missed you, so you know.

Caroline Eyring Miner

The all-consuming war effort eventually crowded out what time, energy, and resources had kept *Alentour* going in the early 1940s—but not before Brook guided the last four issues into readers’ hands. By this time, Largay was designing, as well as hand setting and printing the matured magazine. In the mid-30s, Raymond Frechette of Beaver Press in Lowell would set the type before turning it over to Largay’s print shop. In 1938, Largay had married Rose Cashman, a doctor at Massachusetts General Hospital, and she became the business manager. No longer were there two editorial addresses, one in the Big Apple. Associate editor Gillis had moved on. By 1942, it was a Lowell operation start to finish.

In the Spring 1942 issue, a defiant Brook dismissed the notion that a poetry magazine was superfluous in wartime, that valuable paper and metal type should be reserved for the war effort. He wrote, “A poetry magazine is handed from one reader to another; it is something a scholar or a soldier can carry in his pocket. No country is lost because of that.” Here is more of his statement:

The sincere creative expression of fine minds is one of the real liberties we are fighting for. If we become identical to the barbarian, what kind of a victory shall we have? All the poetry magazines of

the country could be published for a year on the paper content of one issue of any one of the popular love, sex, movie, or confession magazines.

The Fall 1942 *Alentour* leads with another defense of the magazine by Brook. The Lowell poets must have been feeling terrific pressure to cease operations. The by-product of Brook's editorial, of course, is more beating of the poet's drum, with pounding lines like this: "The poet is the nation's conscience, the country's better self." We can imagine why the *Alentour* faithful had to keep bucking each other up. It is no easy task to produce a quarterly poetry magazine even in relatively safe and prosperous times. Listen to Brook on his soapbox:

In times of peace, when his country is growing soft and complacent, [the poet] sings of arms and men and in times of war he sings of the peace that will come and of what nature it must be. The poet is the nation's conscience, the country's better self. The sharper the truth of what he says, the louder the milling throng would drown him out, and when at last he has been proven right he is again the razor at the throat of thoughtlessness.

It is as the eyes of a beauty-hungry world that the poet is best remembered, however. It is when he comes fresh on the old familiar things and gives them life and meaning again. This is the fruit of the tree.

FOR THE "LITTLE POETS"

Alentour's editors saw themselves as champions of the overlooked and unconnected, in their words, "the little poets." Largay and friends were nothing if not open and generous when they accepted poems for their magazine. The result was a magazine of mostly beginners' writing, or worse—typically, a decorative, formal poetry leaning on end rhyme. More often than not, the poems exude a high-art tone that sounds like it comes from the preferred seats in the theater. These are the poems of the young writer who is supersaturated with emotion and big ideas. This is where almost everyone starts. And in the 1930s, these writers were following the prevailing notion of what made a successful poem.

Importantly, some of the better poems emerged during World War Two, when many contributors confronted immediate dangers and found his or her authentic voice. Drawn outside the internal struggles that had usually shaped their poems, the writers produced fresher and more urgent works.

One disappointment, especially among the Lowell contributors, is the absence of local reference. There is not much sense that their poetry is rooted in time or place. Again, the war poems stand out. The poems from Lowell contributors aim for the ethereal orbits of the day's textbook poetry. As editors, publishers, printers, organizers, publicists, and distributors, the gestures of *Alentour's* leaders are sincere. They are self-consciously taking action as artists in their community, but the writing for the most part is unoriginal. When they do engage subject matter in their front yards, the work has more of an authentic ring, as in Largay's "Inspiration," from his collection *The Unlistening Street*:

Child, mother and driver of hayrakes,
Ten year old driver of hayrakes,
Daughter of Canadian raconteurs,
Fille de Azarie, le raconteur,
Singer of songs of voyageurs,
Where are the echoes of your songs,
My sturdy little mother?
The songs you sang to me,
Lilting songs of early springs and racing streams
Roaring at my father, Pierre, who rode the logs,
And small boys who tease their little sisters.
Is it strange I do not see the northern rivers,
The lakes and forests of your songs;
But see only the wistful girl of the hayrake,
And the naïve little mother who comes to the hospital
With word of carnations doing well on the window sill
And the first few blades of green grass
On the South Common.

"A BEAUTIFUL EXPERIMENT"

Editor Brook wraps up the story in the Winter 1942-1943 issue. Eight years is a long run for a literary magazine. Author, editor, and actor George Plimpton, whose *Paris Review* is nearing

its fiftieth anniversary, said, “Most literary magazines have the life of a butterfly.” Poet William Carlos Williams had observed that the little literary magazine is one project, a movable production with changing stewards. Commenting on the crucial role played by small publishers such as James Laughlin of *New Directions*, poet William Corbett writes: “Simple principles. Publish books you believe in and keep them in print so that when the world catches up—Pound figured there was a twenty-year lag—the books will be there.”

Michael Largay (editor/typesetter/printer) and Rose Largay (business manager), Belle Irene Gillis (editor/designer), Philip Garrigan (business manager), Rena V. Outcalt (associate editor), Raymond Frechette (printer), and David Brook (editor) took the lead over the years, but the pages needed poets. The little magazine’s longevity is a tribute to the stubbornness of the artist, who keeps making art because, as Brook believed, he or she is compelled to do it.

Around the same time that *Alentour* was near the end of its run, newspaperman Charles Sampas was championing poetry for Lowell. At a University of Massachusetts-Lowell symposium in 1997, Anthony Sampas quoted from one of his uncle’s columns in 1943: “Readers keep sending me poems—really lovely poems, and it makes one aware of the need of a poet’s corner in this column or somewhere in the *Sun*—I mean a large corner where several of the poems can be published—there are so many really good original ones.” Maybe he knew what was in store for *Alentour*, and was lobbying for someone to take up the slack.

© In the final issue, Brook summed up the *Alentour* experience:

It is with genuine regret that we announce that the pressure of war work makes it necessary for us to suspend publication for the duration. To our many friends we say goodbye for a while and many thanks. Manuscripts and subscriptions will be returned as soon as possible.

Alentour leaves at the peak of its career. It was truly a beautiful experiment, one as full of mistakes as the impulsive heart of man. The

miracle was that it lived the years that it did, a little magazine run by little people who boldly published the early work of the little poets. It was true faith to have believed that little poets would batten on time's dust and become giants. The dream was dreamed and it lives unafraid, as dreams always do.

CODA

Philip Garrigan served in the Army in World War Two and returned to Lowell, where he was known as a church-going man who was active in the charitable Community Chest Association. He and wife, Eugenia, had no children. Doctor Richard Sachs, who cared for Garrigan in his later life, said, "He had published some short stories and fancied himself a writer, though I believe he paid the bills working for the state welfare system. I remember seeing among his books one or two American short story anthologies with some of his work." He died in 1985.

Some time after he shut down the *Alentour* operation, Largay headed for California to make a name in the movies. He remarried and had a son. According to one of his nieces, Marjorie Sonia of Peabody, Massachusetts, "Uncle Michael wrote screenplays in Hollywood. He took a job as a professional waiter at the Beverly Hills Hotel to earn a living. We heard stories about the famous people he met, including Frank Sinatra. Michael had a great personality and a strong mind. He and my father, Frederick, a graphic artist and a partner in Alentour House, were ahead of their time. They were hip guys."