

JACK SHOEMAKER

Gary Snyder's *Riprap* and the Community of Letters

In the late 1950s, Cid Corman, an American poet and editor, thirty-five years old, had recently moved from Italy to Japan. He had settled in Kyoto and had—a few days before—picked up from the printer, Genichi-do, five hundred copies of a small book that were now stacked before him. The poet had worked to arrange the selection of poems, mostly written during a working season spent on trail crews in Yosemite, and Corman had himself designed the book in a traditional Japanese format: square-sewn with navy blue thread, what is properly called *stab-sewn*, with a white paste label. Now the books were stacked in piles of thirty copies that he wrapped in wax-coated paper with built-in padding, drawn up and about each bundle, with each end exposed for ease of postal inspection, to show that they were indeed just books—in those more innocent days the inspectors were mostly concerned with plants and foodstuffs. The bundles were tied with frayed yellow hemp-twine—the only other use I've seen for this material is securing Christmas trees or building supplies on the roofs of cars. Red wax seals were applied to the knots at the Japanese post office. Sent by sea mail, these copies would take more than six weeks to reach their destination:

City Lights Books
261 Columbus Avenue
San Francisco 11, California

I've been a publisher all my life, and early on I also ran a bookstore, so I enjoy the notion that a collaboration between a publisher and a bookseller, which took place more than fifty years ago, set on course a literary revolution that would influence a broad community of writers and readers. At the time Corman was packaging up his books, Lawrence Ferlinghetti had recently joined in a partnership to open City Lights, famously called “A Pocket Book Shop,” which was at the forefront of the paperback revolution in publishing, the last great format change to precede our electronic book age. Ferlinghetti had made a deal with Corman and Origin Press to pay for the first edition of the book, and five hundred copies had been printed.

It was 1959. Gary Snyder was twenty-nine years old. He was publishing one of the great first books in the history of American literature. With a voice as mature and refined as any other, *Riprap* joined a remarkable string of

first books of poems, including Hart Crane's *White Buildings*, Wallace Stevens's *Harmonium*, Robert Lowell's *Land of Unlikeness*, John Ashbery's *Some Trees*, Ginsberg's *Howl*.

On what was most likely my first visit to San Francisco, in 1962, Shig Murao, the City Lights bookshop manager, greeted me with the annoyed look of a man just awakened from a nap. I found a copy of *Riprap* in the basement cul de sac poetry section, marked \$3.50. Books have the power to change people's lives, as we all know, and the purchase of that book changed mine. I must have been sixteen or seventeen years old.

Gary was already associated with Lew Welch, Philip Whalen, and Allen Ginsberg. But Corman may have first heard of him through Robert Creeley or Kenneth Rexroth, other early champions. Rexroth's then-wife, Marthe, typed an early manuscript version of another sequence of Gary's poems, and then she promptly left Rexroth and ran off with Creeley on a road trip to the Southwest. My wife, the novelist Jane Vandenburg, says that when Marthe left her husband to run off down the highway with Creeley, the fifties became the sixties right at that moment. Creeley kept that typescript, Snyder's *Myths & Texts*, in the trunk of his car for a long while before delivering it to LeRoi Jones, but that's another story.

This remarkable network of writers kept in touch with each other via a constant stream of postcards, letters, and parcels. They were in every sense men of letters, and perhaps this is the last generation we can describe in that way. And they thought of themselves as members of a worldwide network of writers. Inspired in part by the work of Ezra Pound, they explored this attitude by translating the work of their contemporaries and reaching back to the great literatures of all languages.

So for several years, from 1953 to 1956, Snyder studied East Asian culture and languages at the University of California, Berkeley. He was a proud student of Edward Schafer, one of the greatest professors ever to teach on that campus. During that time, he began his experiments in translation from the work of Chinese and Japanese poets. He discovered a special affinity with the work of Han Shan, and in fact a sequence of Han Shan poems, “Cold Mountain Poems,” preceded *Riprap* by appearing in *Evergreen Review*, in the fall of 1958. A few years later, the “Cold Mountain Poems” joined the poems from *Riprap* in a new edition

containing both works, and now they have become forever paired through their publishing history. Throughout his entire career, Gary has devoted himself to both the arts of poetry and the arts of translation.

I was one of those who were profoundly influenced by Gary's work, as my discovery of *Riprap* in City Lights led to my entry into publishing. In 1967 I produced a broadside poem of Gary's, and since then I have gone on to publish a dozen of his books. His writing has been a centerpiece not only in my life but also in the lives of a huge number of my contemporaries. While still a young man, Gary was an elder to the counterculture movement of the late sixties and early seventies. He has spent his life as an environmental activist, Zen student, and revolutionary literary force. His personal biography is a great, Transcendental mix of the exotic and the mundane: studies as a Zen student in Daitoku-ji in Japan; labor in lumber camps, in forestry lookouts, and on oil tankers; work as a homesteader in the foothills of the Sierra; life as a neighbor, a father, and a husband. His books contain such eloquent, broad ambition, it is easy to overlook that he has also composed some of the most beautiful domestic poems in American literature. And in a way, it all began on a packing table in Kyoto. Like so many great works of literature, it was the outcome of a collaboration between a writer, a publisher, and a bookseller. It was a great individual achievement, but one that was rooted in community.

Over the course of his long career in book publishing **Jack Shoemaker** has established himself as one of the leading editors and publishers of literary writing. With William Turnbull he founded North Point Press in 1980, which published 365 books in its twelve years of operation. Subsequently he worked as an editor with Pantheon Books and elsewhere in New York and Washington, DC, before returning to California at the helm of Counterpoint Press. Among the many notable authors Shoemaker has published are Gary Snyder, M.F.K. Fisher, Guy Davenport, Evan S. Connell, Gina Berriault, and Wendell Berry. He lives with his wife, the novelist Jane Vandenburg, in Berkeley.