



The Gehenna Press

In 1955, the Gehenna Press opened its doors at 51 Clark Avenue, its presence announced for many years by an elegant slate sign whose lettering is reproduced in the title for this marker. From Clark Avenue, then from Lurley, Devon, England, and, after 1983, from the founder's home in the Northampton village of Leeds, would emerge more than 100 books, masterworks of art, design, and production that contribute richly to our political, social, artistic and literary history.

Leonard Baskin (1922-2000), sculptor and graphic artist, founded the press in 1942, while a student of fine art at Yale. Inspired by poet and bookmaker William Blake, Baskin issued a selection of his own poems as the first book from his new press, the name for which he took from a line in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, "And black Gehenna call'd, the type of Hell."



Over the next six decades, the Gehenna Press worked to the highest publishing standard, combining significant text with meaningful images and estimable design, materials, printing, and binding. Among the

projects that issued from the press are the *Gehenna Essays in Art*, a series of commissioned pieces in art history, and *Gehenna Tracts*, reprints of landmark social texts. Gehenna brought out the first U.S. printing of Wilfred Owen's poems, with drawings by Ben Shahn, and *The Book of Plains Indians*, a collaboration in words and art between Baskin and Fritz Scholder. It gave us new translations of works by Aeschylus, Euripides, and Goethe, among others. Ted Hughes, Anthony Hecht, Anne Halley, and James Baldwin contributed poetic accompaniments to Baskin artwork for yet other press creations.

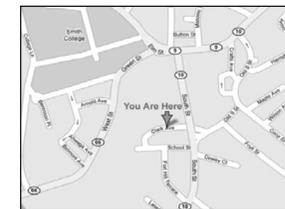


Baskin once said, "People like me who care about printing constitute the tiniest lunatic fringe in the nation." Happily, significant numbers from that fringe joined him, editor Sidney Kaplan, and pressman Harold McGrath in a collaborative and creative community at the Gehenna Press. During the Clark Avenue years in particular, Baskin likened the press to a "free academy of the typographical arts," one in which writers, artists, designers, printers, binders, and

printing. Together they created books that are internationally recognized as intellectual and artistic milestones in the history of the book.

The Gehenna Press continues to exert its influence on the region today. For many of the apprentices who honed their skills at Clark Avenue have since established studios in the area and now comprise a vital sector of the creative economy of 21st-century Northampton, a city that is thriving in its post-industrial era.

STEP INTO HISTORY



HISTORIC NORTHAMPTON Museum
46 Bridge Street Northampton, MA 01060
www.historic-northampton.org

STEP INTO HISTORY is funded in part by



This marker is sponsored by the Massachusetts Center for the Book, a state affiliate of the Library of Congress. The Center includes the Gehenna Press on the *Literary Map of Massachusetts*, a tour of the commonwealth community of the book maintained at its web site: www.massbook.org.