The Pleasures and Perils of University Publishing

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The urge to write, particularly among modern academics, seems irresistible. Little wonder. Peers expect conference papers and journal articles and books. Haunted by deadlines, scholar-authors yearn for readership. Nor is this mere vanity. Indeed, professional advancement depends on it. Hence the need for printing outlets. Hence the pleasures and perils of university publishing.

Naturally, this urge to write brings to bear upon university presses enormous pressures and responsibilities. There is, mind you, nothing especially new about all this. In 1478, only a year after Caxton's first publication, and a mere two dozen years following the probable completion date of the Gutenberg Bible, Oxford University Press was persuaded to do a rare commentary on the Apostles' Creed, attributed to St. Jerome.[1] Today, the extent of this academic pressure to publish can be imagined by reference to some spectacular statistics. There are 68 member presses listed in the

Directory of the Association of American University Presses. These publish as few as 6[2] to as many as 143[3] titles per year. Their aggregate for 1966 was 2,300 titles.[4] Yet 15,000 students received American Ph.D.'s in 1965. Twenty-two thousand are estimated for 1970, and 32,000 for 1980. University faculty members have likewise multiplied. There were 250,000 of them in 1955, 370,000 in 1965. Both newly-qualified Ph.D.'s and established faculty, moreover, are highly motivated to appear in print. But the rate of North American university publishing in 1965 was one book for every 181 faculty members.[5] And whereas not every one of 370,000 potential faculty authors actually produced manuscripts that year, and thousands of them doubtless contracted with commercial houses, the probable rate of manuscript rejection constituted a melancholy prospect for other thousands of hopeful, scholarly writers.

So, as one wag put it, the university publishing problem is not the genesis of a good book on birth control but the birth of good book control. Faced with urgent decisions on what, why, and when to produce, university presses find themselves thrown into complex and sometimes delicate relationships with numerous interested parties. Some of these relationships are obvious; some not so obvious. Let me point to a couple of not-so-obvious ones.

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First, *the commercial publisher* is certainly interested in what the university press is about. He has good reason. For one thing, university presses accounted for about 8% of America's 1966 nonfiction titles.[6] For another, they operate on a nontaxable basis and have the strategic advantages of professional connections of exceptional importance in search editing for new material, book adoption, and distribution. Furthermore, they are often subsidized. Accordingly, they sometimes arrive at limited-edition publishing decisions exclusive of fiscal considerations. Generally, to be sure, relationships with commercial establishments are cordial, as indicated in the excellent coverage of university press affairs in trade journals like *Publishers Weekly*.[7] Now and again, cooperative efforts between university presses and commercial concerns result in better book distribution for both. But sometimes, open resentments appear.

Second, *the financial community* usually expresses keen interest in university presses. For the usual basis of university press operation is nonprofit, and the desideratum that golden fleece called the "break-even point." Understandably, authors appreciate royalties, royalties accrue with sales, and sales with promotion. Yet, in their nontaxable marketing efforts, university presses must preserve a distinctly noncommercial posture. Upon occasion this is hard to do, since they employ many of the same marketing techniques as do commercial publishers. To complicate matters, university presses occasionally find they have inadvertently spawned a best-seller. The classic example is Yale's 1950 first 1,500-copy printing of David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd,* a supply at the time judged ample for a decade or two. At last count, it had sold over a million copies! Thus, the university press treads the economic-legal tightrope. Balance is everything. If *Lonely Crowd*-type situations develop *in spite of* soft pedal sales tactics, all well and good. But with tax inspectors on one side and university controllers on the other, university presses must eschew both Madison Avenue sales pitches and the infinite distribution of complimentary copies as alternative means of proclaiming their wares.

These not-so-obvious relationships are frequently little-known to the very writers upon whose work university presses ultimately depend. Yet, if it is not recognized that university presses are in a sense hemmed in by their own limited production, distribution, and surplus budgeting capacity, and ever vulnerable to charges of excessive zeal on the one hand and costly benevolence on the other, then decisions concerning certain more-obvious relationships can be sheer torture.

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First and most obvious of all is the relationship between university press and *the scholarly writer.* The initial point of contact is the manuscript, sometimes received after much searching; more often unsolicited; always extended every courtesy. The basis of selection varies. Many university presses submit all materials for collective committee decision to accept or reject. Others depend on the views of series editors, and all seek the best-obtainable independent opinions in the disciplines.

Two equally-obvious author irritations are built into a system of this sort. The one is that it is extremely time-consuming. If "extending every courtesy" is to mean something other than a feat of speed reading every fourth manuscript page and rejecting by return mail, then one must provide time. Even very small university presses may have dozens of manuscripts in the house at a given moment. Large ones frequently have hundreds. University personnel customarily requested to offer editorial advice are themselves already committed to heavy reading responsibilities, not to mention committee work. And the time which slips by as a result of these efforts to avoid publishing decisions resting on hazard, ruthlessness, or politics, frequently turns out to be a period of unaccustomed trauma for the potential client, particularly since, as he himself will often readily admit, his material may be ephemeral.

But there is another more formidable reality the university press must face in its relationships with the author. Since the university press is a nonprofit organization catering to a limited readership, it would be a logical contradiction to employ, as the opening gambit of a letter of rejection, the useful commercial euphemism that the manuscript is really quite good but not *economically* feasible on account of its high specialization and corresponding restricted appeal. So if a given manuscript is correctly placed in a university press, the *only* measures of acceptance or rejection are relevance and quality. Here, to be sure, are splendid criteria for acceptance. But what dreadful criteria for rejection when it comes to a university colleague who simply *has* to publish!

What, though, of the allegedly fortunate? What of the relationship between university press and publishable author? In a scintillating article, Dan Davin, Assistant Secretary, The Clarendon Press, recently argued — ideally at least — the university press editor is very much the background figure. His author, on the other hand, is "a specialist . . . not particularly interested in the views of his editor." And his prescription for a healthy relationship between these two is probably not far off the sincere aims of most North American university presses. "Relations between author and editor," he writes, "should begin with a synapsis of interest and sympathy and should aim at developing these into symbiosis. Like marriage, the association should ideally be for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, for better and for worse." [9] Granted,

brisk exchanges between editor and author often reveal not so much two co-workers as two intellectual solitudes. But I think it fair to say that the same institutional proximity which often places university press editors and authors at close quarters, and provides for some moments of tension not generally encountered in commercial publishing, can produce the ideal state of symbiotic bliss which Davin so eloquently postulates.

This brings me to my second obvious relationship — that of university presses to *the university at large.* A tricky one, this! Academics are said to conceive of their presses as something between a dilatory duplicating service somewhere in the basement and an amateur club given to hiding its publications in a warehouse and never advertising, thus avoiding the bother of ever having to pay royalties. Press people, on the other hand, are reputedly prone to viewing their academic colleagues as intense, ivory-tower stereotypes who, for all their erudition, fervently recommend unsound business practice and unaesthetic — even comical — design.

Happily, visionaries have transcended these amusing but intellectually suffocating notions of the two solitudes. Such a person was Daniel Coit Gilman, a Yale man and first president of Johns Hopkins. Gilman "perceived instantly that there is a third force in any responsible institution of higher learning. In addition to teaching (the faculty) and research (the faculty and the library) there must be publication (the faculty and the library and the university press). Advance knowledge 'far and wide' was his message and the medium was to be the scholarly publishing house." [10]

Since Gilman's time, America's great universities have hearkened to his advice. Some of them approach the problem of press/university rapport by joint appointments. Others ensure that their press directive or advisory boards are widely representative of university disciplinary interests. Still others recognize in their presses a major point of contact with the public at large. These latter provide for a high degree of coordination between press and university department of extension or of college relations. Resident general-editors of series publications often furnish an invaluable bridge between the technical and the academic aspects of university publishing. Furthermore, its professional contacts make it possible for the university press to attract manuscripts from a wide field. It is

said, in fact, that a university press with more than a third of its titles springing from its own institution's professoriate is getting a bit parochial.

There is a third obvious relationship stemming from the second one — the relationship with *the reading public.* Here, too, the reefs can be treacherous. A man once wrote me and said he had been to his college bookstore to buy a book. "To my great shock and disgust," he complained, "the price tag . . . was $2.50. I have complained vociferously to all who would listen, including the teacher of the course. Surely, the goal in producing books for education should not be to fleece the student of every last dime on a cheap book you think he has to buy . . . When I get to be a college teacher and can order books, I will not forget this incident nor your prices."

Of course, the man is perfectly right about prices. But here the university press is in a dilemma. Naturally, when it produces volumes which will mostly head for academic libraries, no one person bears the brunt of the cost; the wistfully optimistic slogan EVERY LIBRARY WILL BUY ONE is well-known. But the individual buyer, too, is very much interested in and, certainly, entitled to quality at reasonable prices. However, the university press faces substantial expenses. Unit manufacturing costs tend to be greater than those of many commercial houses because of relatively small printings. By virtue of their frequent inclusion of detailed footnote, tabular, and illustrative material, university press books ring up considerable costs at both editorial and compositing stages of production. Moreover, because author and editor may perhaps work in the same building, or on the same campus, there is a great temptation for a superabundance of alterations and afterthoughts beyond initial estimates, all of which drive costs still higher.

Now, there are factors which offset these comparatively high production costs. Some university presses seek and receive outright grants from parent institutions, foundations, or appropriate professional organizations and are able as a result to build very reasonable price structures. Others feature rotating subsidies, returnable through profits for re-use in further publishing ventures. Chester Kerr of Yale has said of subsidies that a university press director must be "a man who understands why publication is as

important to his institution as the library, and that it is going to cost money in the same way that an English Department costs money." [11]

The fact remains, though, that trends in university publishing are toward higher prices. This trend is inevitable in a world where operations analysis, with its inputs and its outputs, is becoming so much a part of the educational order of things. I suggest that as prices are forced up, finer discrimination regarding the form and purpose of university publications becomes necessary. Borrowed dissertations, compressed journal articles, multilithed or mimeographed pamphlets, microfiche cards, centralized systems like the U.S. Office of Education's Educational Resources Information Centers, and microfilms have a distinct part to play in the business of exchanging the fruits of higher studies. Admittedly, intermediate publishing steps of this sort fail, perhaps, to lead to that exhilaration marking the miraculous appearance of fresh, glossy, new-smelling volumes, offspring of one's dawn inspiration and dusk agonizing. Warehouses, however, are too often stacked with university press books whose authors and editors once dreamed about a manuscript metamorphosed in aid of the popular image (and misconception) of bookselling.

I have tried to show that a university press must not be a passive adjunct to a broader university operation, ready to accept the equivalent importance of each and every manuscript coming its way merely to accommodate an urge, no matter how strong and legitimate, to appear in print. Rather, it must be a dynamic force, sensitive to the best of what is going on in the university and in the disciplines it professes. But beyond this, it must speculate about the future; for it may take two or three years at least to carry an idea from writer to reader by way of the meandering and sometimes frustrating path from first draft outlines to mint books. There is no instant book. So the university press needs to refine its prophetic powers in the realm of ideas. This, of course, it can scarcely do by publishing frivolities or by pricing its leading works out of the market.

To conclude, I should like to mention a fourth obvious relationship — that of the university press to *its widest possible public*. G. P. Day, founder of Yale University Press used to say that

a university press should "render distinct service to the world in general, through the medium of printing or publishing or both, and in such ways supplement the work of education which commands the devotion of the University whose name the press bears." [12] In a latter-day observation, Marsh Jeanneret, distinguished Director of Toronto University Press, correctly declared that "the purposes and possibilities of the scholarly publishing arm of any university are more easily perceived by those who comprehend the purposes of the university itself." [13] One might add that considering the career implications of publishing and the pressure to publish subsequent to them, university presses need to preserve careful priorities if their publications pertinent to the solution of urban, race, illiteracy, poverty, or survival problems of a troubled world are to achieve maximum originality and power.

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Since Oxford University Press first printed its commentary five hundred years ago, since men like Daniel Coit Gilman of Johns Hopkins, William Rainey Harper of Chicago, and Nicholas Murray Butler of Columbia made the connection between scholarly research and university publishing toward the end of the 19th century, since the formal organization of the influential Association of American University Presses in 1946, the formula of "teaching + library + press = university" has continued to test out pretty well. University presses, once on the periphery of university activities, through some centripetal intellectual process, are moving steadily toward the heart of university life. Theirs is the office, however, of developing relationships with their commercial associates, their financial mentors, their authors, their parent institutions, their readers, and their broader world of influence so that they can effectively resist the lesser calls of the moment — immediacy, visibility, glossiness, or pressure to publish trivia in the cause of personal advancement — and address themselves, rather, to the greater calling, advancing knowledge.

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References

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3. *Ibid.*, see "Harvard University Press," p. 57.
4. Hawes, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
7. See, for example, "Professional Seminars Mark Annual Meeting of AAUP," *Publishers' Weekly*, CXCL (July, 1967), 23-33.
8. Hawes, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-18.
9. Dan Davin, "Editor and Author in a University Press," *The Times Literary Supplement* (December 7, 1967), p. 1191.
10. See Hawes, *op. cit.*, p. iii.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
12. Cited in Charles A. Madison, *Book Publishing in America*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966, p. 385.
13. Marsh Jeanneret, "The University as Publisher," *The University as Publisher*, Eleanor Harman (Ed.), Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961, p. 3.