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I Hear the Train A Comin' -- A Tale of Two Cities

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a Green, a church and the “holy wells,” which gave the site its name. It still teems with meadow life, just as it was described in the Doomsday book. Although its peace was temporarily disturbed during the Civil War, and again in the eighteenth century when it was used as a cockpit and a bowling green, it was restored when Merton College acquired the land and made it available as a burial ground. Benjamin Harris’s grave lies NW of the Church, and a notice, by the wooden bench, points it out. And he is in good company. At the sound of a Stanley Spenceresque trumpet, he could arise to a roll-call of many notable book people: the writer Kenneth Grahame, poets like Maurice Bowra, brushing up on his Pindar, Charlie Williams, Basil Blackwell’s old OUP friend, and the drama critic, Kenneth Tynan. There are others too, who served the causes of the University, and far beyond: Radcliffe-Maule, for example, who founded UNESCO. Benjamin Harris’s glee can only be imagined at when he discovers himself in the company of the great Victorian church composer, John Stainer, hymning himself through eternity.

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Editor’s Note: In next month’s issue Rita will consider the role of women in the Blackwell story. The modest Benjamin Harris is not forgotten: his beginnings in bookselling were the inspiration for the future book selling and publishing “empire.” But it is doubtful if his small shop “on the wrong side of Oxford’s City wall,” would ever have been revived if it had not been for the determination of his wife, Nancy. — KS

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I Hear the Train A Comin’ — A Tale of Two Cities

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“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times…,” so begins the Dickens classic A Tale of Two Cities. This contradictory statement, this duality, will also serve as the theme for this November’s 28th annual Charleston Conference. At that time, publishers, librarians, information providers, scholars, and vendors will gather to discuss the state of affairs at this wondrous intersection of technology, content, and academia. As both a preview of the conference and an homage to Dickens’ masterpiece, let’s look at some other key passages from A Tale of Two Cities and how they map to some critical scholarly communication issues sure to be discussed in Charleston.

“A dream, all a dream, that ends in nothing, and leaves the sleeper where he lay down, but I wish you to know that you inspired it.”

To Harvard University’s Faculty of Arts and Sciences and its recent adoption of an open access mandate. In February, Harvard became the most prominent university in the United States to require open access to its faculty members’ research publications. This kicked up a great deal of dust within the space, but what does it actually mean? As Sandy Thatcher and others have pointed out, the policy is either inconsistent, underdeveloped, or silent on several key points, including the timing of deposits, copyright retention rights, and versioning. Nevertheless, other institutions seemed poised to follow suit, including Stanford’s School of Education and Macquarie University at this writing. What influence will this have on scholars’ actual behavior, publishers’ policies, and the general accessibility of scholarship? In the short run, if other high profile mandates such as the NIH’s are a template, the impact will be more abstract than practical. Adoption rates have been less impressive than the publicity these initiatives have generated. It is quite possible that an eventual tipping point will be reached as wave after wave of institutional mandates erode the traditional structures of information dissemination. That is the dream of open access advocates, of course. Or it may be that Harvard has started a chain reaction that, like the Dickens quote, “ends in nothing.” In any event, Harvard, “I wish you to know that you inspired it.”

“Up the two terrace flights of steps the rain ran wildly, and beat at the great door, like a swift messenger rousing those within.”

To the Kindle, a device that has burst onto the scholarly communication scene amidst a clamor of fervent expectations. In my conversations with textbook and journal publishers, students, librarians, and university administrators, I have been asked numerous times over the past few months about Amazon’s handheld reader device. Vendors like Highwire are tweaking their platforms to deliver content in a Kindle-friendly format. University presses such as Princeton, Yale, University of California, and Oxford have been very quick to make their catalogs available for Kindle. It is wonderful to see the market excited over new developments, particularly when sectors like the university press have often been flat-footed in embracing emerging media. However, before we get too excited, let me ask something. Are you using a Kindle? Do you know someone who is using a Kindle? Have you even seen a Kindle? We have been roused by the Kindle; it is the rain running wildly and beating at our great door. It may well turn out to be a trans-
The ghost of beauty, the ghost of stateliness, the ghost of elegance, the ghost of pride, the ghost of frivolity, the ghost of wit, the ghost of youth, the ghost of age, all waiting their dismissal from the desolate shore…

To the aforementioned university press. For many years, the university press imprimatur has connoted quality and intellectual vibrance. The effects of the scholarly communication crisis have been keenly felt by this group over the past two decades. Monographs continue to struggle finding a place within library budgets, as do, increasingly, print books in general. Marketing dollars are scarce, and fixed costs are nontrivial. However, we can clearly observe pockets of innovation emerging over the past few years. Rice University has revived its press in digital only mode, relying on low-cost print-on-demand for those who want hard copy.

Columbia University Press has teamed with the library and the IT department to co-found Electronic Publishing Initiative at Columbia (EPIC). EPIC’s goal — to create new kinds of scholarly and educational publications through the use of new media technologies — has already resulted in the development of the Columbia International Affairs Online and Earthscape platforms. Penn State Press and the University Libraries have partnered on an Office of Digital Scholarly Publishing to recognize efficiencies on project management, budgeting, and opportunity evaluation. Will these types of experiments reinvigorate the category? Or is the venerable institution truly in danger of joining Dickens’ ghosts on the desolate shore?

adoption. There certainly will be more to watch in the coming months related to OOXML.

There are numerous ways that community members may participate in the international standards development process. Although there is an added level of logistical challenges when participating at this level, it can be a truly rewarding experience. Not only is this a great opportunity to interact with colleagues internationally and experience their culture, it is also an opportunity to help shape the future directions of information exchange. If you are interested in engaging more directly in international standardization, please contact the NISO offices at nisohq@nis.org.

To the notion of social networks. I have had at least a dozen clients in the past year for which Web 2.0 strategies were a key concern, so I must be careful not to bite the hand that at least has a hand in feeding me. Having said that, the ever-increasing immediacy and intimacy of communication may be reaching its terminus. From blogs to MySpace to Facebook to Twitter, we are now looped into the most evanescent of moods, thoughts, and ruminations. The borders between personal and professional, profound and piffling, insight and inanity have never been blurrier. How do these networks influence the way scholars interact? What efficiencies are created? What impact does the ability to be so wired into other people’s thoughts and actions, and, in turn, to have other people so wired into yours, have on the exchange of ideas? Perhaps the Charleston Conference can help us untangle these issues and learn to cut through the cluttering aspects of social networks.

“I am a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to, than I have ever known.”

This one is easy isn’t it? What is better than strolling through the lobby of the Francis Marion Hotel in early November when the Charleston Conference is in session? Catching up with old friends. Exchanging ideas on the next big thing with colleagues. Holding court in an overstuffed armchair as a session ends and familiar faces pour out, enlightened and invigorated. And crashing into the hotel bed after a full day of intellectual stimulation, capped off by a fine southern meal. A far, far better thing indeed. See you in November.

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Endnotes


