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John von Knorring, President, Routledge, New York

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Interview with John von Knorring

President, Routledge, New York

by Katina Strauch (College of Charleston)

He's buoyant, he's entertaining, he's a publisher. His name is John von Knorring and he is President of Routledge U.S., located in New York. He publishes no journals, only books! Those old timey things that our grandparents used to curl up with when we were young. — KS

ATG: Where should we start? Are you the same company that used to be called RKP or Routledge and Kegan Paul? And weren't you bought by Thomson at some point?

JVK: In part. Routledge is the successor to the company founded by **George Routledge** over 150 years ago. That company became **RKP** in due course, and in turn was acquired in 1985 by the British group that owned **Methuen** and **Tavistock Publications**. Starting what was then **Methuen, Inc.** in 1978 was what brought me to New York. In 1986 I consolidated **RKP's** Boston office into **Methuen, Inc.** The next year we acquired **Croom Helm**, whose founder, **David Croom**, is now Chair of what we now call the Routledge Group. It was in 1987 that we decided we needed to integrate all these various strands and establish a single, strong imprint image, renaming the company **Routledge** and adopting a new logo. In 1991 we acquired the **Unwin Hyman** academic list from **HarperCollins**. It's been an eventful 16 years here.

Routledge was bought by **The Thomson Corporation** back in 1987. We are wholly owned by them.

ATG: You have offices in both New York and London, right? How does that work? Who runs the company?

JVK: We have a Group board which runs the two companies. The Board is composed of four people, — the Chair,

David Croom, and Managing Director of the London company, **Janice Price**, who also goes back to Methuen days, the Financial Director, **David Tebbutt**, and myself. It's a small board which works very cohesively. We've worked together one way or another for a long time. We meet 5 times a year in the U.S. and 5 times a year in the U.K. We believe that is the only way to do it, as we need to be in touch with all our colleagues to share the values and attitudes of the business. Given the global nature of our marketplace, we are working towards far more

"We try to develop fields before they become overpublished."

integration, and defining common policies and sharing resources in such areas as electronic publishing.

ATG: How many people work for both companies?

JVK: We employ 80 people in NY and 150 in London.

ATG: I remember your telling a group of us a story about your first job in publishing. Can you tell it again?

JVK: My first job in publishing was joining a Catholic publisher as the tenth member of their staff in 1964. It was founded and run by a husband and wife team, **Geoff** and **Sue Chapman**, who had started the business in their kitchen five years earlier.

Catholic publishing was extremely cutthroat, the most competitive environment I've come across in my life. Anyway, the story goes — it may be apocryphal but it's a good story and captures the aggressive rivalry between what was a small community of direct competitors — when the news of the death of Pope John Paul XXIII broke, my boss Geoff

hopped on the first plane from London. His arch-rival **Frank Schworer** of Herder & Herder left Freiburg for Rome equally hurriedly. John Paul XXIII's will bequeathed his literary estate to the bookseller he'd patronized from his seminary days. The shop was located in a third story walk up behind the Bernini arcade. The story I was told is that the two publishers' taxis simultaneously drew outside the building. The two men faced each other at the bottom of the stairs. Who went up was decided by force. Geoff won and signed up the rights. The prize was **Journal of a Soul** (the diaries of John Paul XXIII). The company, by being the first really to champion the reforms of Vatican II, ended up dominating its field for the next ten years or so.

It was the first book, and the biggest book, I've been involved with. I worked on the advertising in the U.K. It was a worldwide bestseller. Every convent, monastery and presbytery the world over bought one. The paperback rights sold

for a lot of money, but piles were left propping up the paperback publisher's warehouse roof. The hardback had saturated the market.

That phenomenon still happens today. Occasionally the cloth edition will satisfy the market. Routledge NY pub-

marketability.

We rarely make a decision based on a whole manuscript but work instead on a sample chapter, table of contents, and 5-6 page proposal. The market is so competitive that if we waited to see a whole manuscript we probably would not see

are you doing about the ubiquitous Internet?

JVK: As a Group we publish journals. We don't originate any in New York — yet — but the UK has a journals list. As a Group our emphasis is on books: we publish over 800 titles a year, with 100 coming from New York.

We are very interested, obviously, in the Internet and in the electronic availability of titles. We are in the process of setting up a formal electronic publishing unit, one of the first big initiatives we have taken as a Group. The emphasis will be both on CD-ROM and the Internet. I personally think that the Net will be where the market will move in about five years. As a commercial medium, the Net is still in its infancy. Copyright and security issues have to be addressed; and the technology isn't wholly reliable. When all these things get solved, the market will coalesce fast. We're following with great interest such experiments as Johns Hopkins' journals project, and other Internet journals.

"We need to go further in terms of gaining access to what is inside our books."

lished a book on transvestism, which was very original at the time, being a serious cultural and historical analysis of the subject. It was widely reviewed and sold strongly. The paperback rights were bid for spiritedly, but the paperback supposedly didn't quite live up to expectations.

ATG: *How do you go about acquiring a title? Do you basically go out and solicit authors or do they come to you? Does the board decide or is it left up to the acquisitions editors?*

JVK: We have over 20 acquisitions editors in London and in the US we have 6 and are about to hire a seventh. In the UK, we have three different editorial committees, while in the U.S. we have one. Each editor has a field or discipline. His or her job is to get to know the field, keep up with trends, get to know who is doing exciting work. Editors may spend three months of the year out visiting campuses and talking to professors, keeping in touch, to find out what's needed. From those contacts, they present projects to the editorial committee. The aim is to create a coherent list of the highest quality possible, and which will have a long life as backlist.

The New York committee is run by our Editorial Director, **Bill Germano**. All editors attend, as does our VP Marketing, and members of sales, promotion and publicity departments. We discuss sales potential, print runs, pricing, packaging, offer suggestions for improvements. Each acquisition is a serious investment. We look for a return on that investment. But before we get to that point we have to be sure of academic standards. Every book we publish goes through a peer review process, some also get some formal market research. We pride ourselves on making decisions quickly, and on working with authors, where appropriate, to help them reach a wider audience by improving content and

very many books because other publishers would be bidding for them already.

ATG: *Who do you see as your competitors? Are they the university presses or mainly commercial publishers?*

JVK: That varies depending on the discipline. Each editor has a different range of competitors. In the area of cultural studies, competitors are the university presses like Oxford, Indiana, Duke, but also commercial publishers like Blackwell or Westview. We mostly compete with university presses, and a very wide range of those, but we also sometimes compete with commercial presses like Basic Books, W.W. Norton, Free Press, Guildford.

ATG: *I notice a lot of your books on our approval plan. You seem to be publishing in some adventurous areas, maybe areas that at one time were considered taboo.*

JVK: Yes that is true. Certainly areas like cultural studies, women's studies, gay and lesbian studies. Five or six years ago publishing in those areas was considered to be adventurous, leading edge, risky. We do a lot of that. We try to develop fields before they become over-published. Success breeds imitation.

"The card catalog was designed for an age when there were far fewer books published."

The competition is very alert. No one can monopolize a "hot" field for very long these days. For example, anthropology has become a big area, attracting a lot of activity.

ATG: *What's this about publishing no journals? Can that be true? And what*

vice. But, yes, one search point is vital.

ATG: *In this issue of ATG, we talk about some of the expenditures for books and journals as well as database fees over the past ten years. What are your impressions from where you sit?*

JVK: I think the monograph (which I define specifically as a short-run hardback, which is not I think how you as a librarian would define a monograph) has taken very much a secondary role in libraries. Serials have been the primary

"Success breeds imitation."

publication dominating library thinking and funds. The monograph has been marginalized. A smaller proportion of acquisitions budgets has been spent on monographs and that has been reflected in the search databases like ERIC and PsychLit which are very serials oriented. Now students go to the CD or the OPAC screens and pull up the serials databases without referring to the monograph at all. The monograph needs to get into the same system. People like Blackwell North America and BookData (which B&T bought a share of, I believe) are trying to develop a system of accessing the interior of monographs. Serials are practical and bite-sized pieces. People need access to the interior of monographs when they are doing searches and background reading. The Table of Contents is a start, but I am not sure if it goes far enough. We need to go further in terms of gaining access to what is inside the books.

ATG: *That's an interesting comment. From the cataloging standpoint, the book has always received more attention subject wise than the journal. That's why indexing developed to get inside journals, because the cataloging of journals was so sparse.*

JVK: Yes, but the cataloging is still weak in terms of what is inside the book and the card catalog approach is pretty useless. Subject headings of books don't give you enough leads to track down a specific item of information, the specific site of the articulation of an argument or theory you're looking for. The card catalog was designed for an age when there were far fewer books published. The traditional card catalog relied on the titles and the author and nothing very dramatically revolutionary was added. It reflected a time when the scholarly community was much smaller and the author's name was a guarantee that you would get something good. You didn't see that much duplication of publishing on topics. The traditional card catalog doesn't help readers make refined searches, which is what I think students

and scholars will want to do more and more in the future

ATG: *What about the Table of Contents then? Is that why we are seeing this move toward Tables of Contents information?*

JVK: Yes, I think so. But the Table of Contents is also very weak. In the humanities, the chapter titles are often quite whimsical and don't tell you what is going on in them. Many books are "narratives," articulating a theory. People may want to first look at the assumptions or the conclusion before deciding they want to read the entire text. We need to identify such elements better. If we did we might see the revival of the monograph.

I have spoken to a lot of librarians about the demand for a monographic search database and people see the need for it. How to do it is another issue. There are no abstracts for books by and large. On the other hand, most journal articles have abstracts. The ways into a book are rather primitive compared to a serial.

ATG: *How about the index? Aren't there value-added services out there that are looking at making the indexes of books available as a way into the contents of books? Or how about the publisher's blurb in a catalog?*

JVK: Yes. We don't publish any book without an index. But I don't know whether the index is as valuable to the end user or even the librarian as it might be. Could we make them more useful? I don't think we as publishers ask these sorts of questions often enough. I sus-

It's hard to imagine how this extra level of detail for the monograph will be done. Monographs can be searched in electronic form, but it gives me sheer indigestion just to think of mounting all of this data, not to mention the universe of publishers' backlists, on a database.

ATG: *So — who do you sell your books to?*

JVK: Basically, our customers fall into three categories — one third library, one third trade through bookstores, and the other third texts where the market is the professor and her/his students.

We saw the library market visibly shrink 2-3 years ago. Sales of the short run monograph really dropped then, but now the levels are building back up. Where we are seeing erosion is in the dual edition where cloth sales are eroding. Where it is a cloth only monograph, we find the sales units are getting back to where they were, say, in 1991. Are we increasing print runs again? Modestly, yes. Winning back those sales has helped. I think librarians have become more conscious of the library monograph collection and how it has been ignored. I think they feel that it is time to restore some kind of balance.

The library market seems static and budgets are under more and more pressure. At Routledge we have been consciously trying to keep prices steady. Three or four years ago we might have passed on costs, those resulting from lower print runs or higher exchange rates to the library market, but we decided to gamble and stick to a stable price rate. I think that has helped.

ATG: *Are you worried about the text-*

"... no publisher [knows if] the industry is sustainable on the income of permissions as opposed to the sale of hardcopy."

pect we take the index for granted.

And the publisher's blurb is not impartial like an index. What we are missing is an extra level of detail. I am always appalled by — I forget the research — was the name Trueswell? — that most monographs aren't checked out. This is because material is not accessible. Only the most determined researcher can find it. On the one hand, there is an overload of information, while on the other, there is no key to what is going on inside the book.

book market disappearing? I think that a recent NACS survey showed 70% of teachers creating course packs. Isn't this putting a dent in the textbook market?

JVK: The increasing movement toward the course pack is quite remarkable. The National Association of College Stores' survey shows sharply increased course pack production and that is clearly putting a dent in the traditional textbook. We have to respond to that in some way, and that brings us back to our

earlier conversation about the necessity of selling books by the chapter, and creating systems to give people access to what is inside each chapter. We're working on a project to do this, which will make use of the Internet

But no publisher has worked out the full implications. Is the industry sustainable on the income of permissions as opposed to the sale of hardcopy. We also have to ensure our authors derive their fair share of the income.

From some recent figures I saw, Stanford bookstore, for example, had printed the equivalent of 40,000 books through their course pack program. It's a big industry; and a huge market. There are all kinds of initiatives going on, starting with McGraw Hill's "Primis" project. It will always be cheaper to buy a "mass produced" book (say anything over a 3000 copy print run) than a custom product. On the other hand, the student uses 100% of the item and there is no redundant material. The whole thing raises more questions and challenges than we have good answers for at present.

Still, the textbook market will never disappear. Teachers need to teach. The market size for course packs may depend on the discipline. The course pack is likely to flourish more in the humanities and social sciences courses since they are much more eclectic and dependent on the tastes of the teacher. When you get into science and math, though, you need some kind of text to communicate the body of the discipline in a logical sequence. Here the traditional text may live longer.

ATG: Tell us about bookstore sales. Is that a big market for you?

JVK: At the moment, that's a very buoyant market. We saw a lot of growth last year and this year. Are we making smart publishing decisions? Yes, but it's not entirely that. There is no question that the growth of the superstores has helped in that they have created extra and new markets. This has in turn put the pressure on the independents and the college stores to compete more vigorously. The depth of inventory has gone up and has helped to increase the marketplace. With the economy on the rise again and more discretionary spending, we have seen a rise in the last six to nine

months and expect it to continue.

ATG: What is the role of approval plans in your sales? Is it significant?

JVK: Direct to library approval plans don't represent a huge amount of our business. We largely do that for the jobbers. We are seeing less and less buying on approval plans and more and more later, after the reviews are out. I think the approval plan numbers represent a small part of the sale of the print run. I feel there has been more reordering from the jobbers and filling orders long after publication.

ATG: How quickly do your books go out of print? If people are waiting for reviews, is the book likely to be OP or OS by then? And with all this Docutech technology, it seems like the out of print book will become a thing of the past anyway?

JVK: Like everything, it depends. The short run monograph lasts in print 3-4 years. That will change with Docutech. It used to be when we ran out of stock of a title, unless there was high demand, the book went out of print. With Docutech technology and the double fan binding on Docutech, it is now possible to reprint 25 copies at a time reasonably economically. This new Xerox technology will actually extend the life of monographs, but using it automatically and consistently requires changing a lot of internal systems.

ATG: Can we get back to book reviews? Will they become more important as the marketplace of information continues to expand? We are interested in covering this topic at the 1994 Charleston Conference.

JVK: We send out a lot of review copies of our books. A critical part of the marketing job is getting publicity and reviews, and the problem is the fact that it takes a year or two to get reviews published. Scholarly journals are a year to two years behind. **Choice** is better, but it is still 6 months behind.

Everyone wants their books to get talked about. I have heard the grumblings that only positive reviews are published and I suppose there is probably a ten-

dency to omit negative reviews, when space is tight, unless the review is controversial or newsworthy on its own account. Someone has to decide what reviews to print or to omit. Still, only a small part of the total output gets reviewed. With over 40,000 titles published a year, there aren't enough places out there to get them reviewed. Do we need another review medium? This would be an interesting topic for the Charleston Conference.

ATG: How much about yourself will you tell us as a parting shot?

JVK: I'm married, with two daughters. My wife is Tasmanian, a former journalist, who's working in the local junior high school library. We've been married over 25 years. One daughter's doing post-graduate work at CUNY Queens; the other's just starting her senior year at St. Michael's in Vermont.

I try to keep a book or two going all the time: a mixture of pure entertainment (I love mysteries, Sue Grafton, Paretsky; the O'Brien naval series) when I need to unwind, to books which reflect business or other interests. I have a project I started about six months ago, which is to read through Balzac's *Comédie humaine* chronologically. I'm about one tenth of the way in. I recently finished Drucker's *Post-Capitalist Society*, and have the mediaeval volume of the Ariès/Duby *History of Private Life* waiting on my bedside table.

I like cycling (road not mountain bike); and cover about 50 miles a week.

I was sent to boarding school in England from the age of eight — my parents were in China at the time. I was educated by Benedictine monks for nine years, then went to Oxford, where I ended up studying mediaeval romance languages: a great training for publishing! ☺

Now, y'all if you were listening closely, there is a clue in this interview. John says he loves to cycle and covers 50 miles a week (!) — did you hear that, Carol [Hawks]? Anyway, he had a bike accident (fractured elbow) while we were working on this interview so when you see him next (in Charleston?), be sympathetic and don't lend him your bike!
— KS