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Charles Willett, Editor, Counterpoise

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Against the Grain

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Counterpoise: A New ALA Review Journal

A Brief Conversation with Charles Willett

by Katina Strauch (Editor, *Against the Grain*)

I have known Charles Willett <willett@afn.org> a long time. I first met him when he was at the University of Florida in Gainesville, I worked with him when he worked for a library bookseller. And I kept up with him again when he opened *CRISES Press*. And Charles is always up to something new and exciting. Here is the latest news! — KS

Ed note: A version of this conversation was distributed as an ATG pre-print for ALA Midwinter, January, 1996.

ATG: We're been hearing about a new ALA Review Journal called *Counterpoise*. Can you tell us about it?

CW: Right now, *Counterpoise* is a non-existent review journal, and I'm its editor. Quarterly publication starts in January 1997. For years I've dreamed of working with the American Library Association to edit and publish a comprehensive selection tool that would help librarians buy independent, non-corporate materials. Now the dream is coming true. This new ALA review journal will identify, discuss and promote alternative, English-language books, periodicals and non-print materials worldwide. I had the idea. My wife Nancy hit upon the name. And dozens of librarians and writers here and abroad have volunteered as editors and reviewers. Now we are looking for subscribers, donations, grants and publicity.

ATG: ALA has done a lot to cover this type of material already, right?

CW: The Alternatives In Print Task Force (AIP) of ALA's Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) certainly has! Many active AIP librarians work with alternative publications. Noel Peattie has self-published the biannual *Sipapu* since 1970 and is ending it now after 52 issues. Sandy Berman and Jim Danky have edited *Alternative Library Literature* (McFarland & Co.) biennially since 1982. Chris Dodge and his wife Jan DeSirey have self-published *MSRRT Newsletter* ten times a year since 1988. I've put out *APT for Libraries* (CRISES Press) annually since 1992. Byron Anderson, on behalf of AIP, is compiling the third enlarged edition of the directory *Alternative Publishers of Books in North America* (CRISES Press, 1997). Dan Tsang does indexing for alternative books and journals. Steven Harris is Book Review Editor of the *SRRT Newsletter* and has set up an AIP website: <http://www.lib.lsu.edu/hum/aip.html>. Many others were active in the past, such as the late Jackie Eubanks, for whom AIP's annual award is named.

As coordinator of AIP since 1993, I've received terrific support from colleagues for the *Counterpoise* idea. Individual efforts like *Sipapu*, *MSRRT Newsletter*, and *APT for Libraries* achieve only modest success. Circulation is low; they're not comprehensive; they don't carry the authority of an organization like ALA; marketing and financing them is difficult, and they rarely outlive their first editor.

Counterpoise can overcome those difficulties as a cooperative effort organized and operated by an experienced group of librarians

and editors. At the 1995 ALA Midwinter Meeting in Philadelphia, the SRRT Action Council led by Stephen Stillwell, Jr. voted unanimously to support the project. Now we are setting it up.

ATG: What kind of reviews will you publish and how many per issue?

CW: *Counterpoise* is fortunate to have good models to follow: ALA's *Booklist* (trade and reference works for public and school libraries) and ACRL's *Choice* (trade and university press titles for academic libraries). SRRT's *Counterpoise* will be the third leg of the stool, covering the alternative press for all libraries in much the same systematic, reliable fashion. We plan to include occasional bibliographic essays and resource lists in addition to many reviews.

It's hard to say how many we will publish per issue. For Volume 1 in 1997 we are inviting all alternative publish-

ers in the U.S. and abroad to send us two copies of each 1995 or 1996 English-language imprint to be considered for review. No one knows how many titles that will involve, or how many publishers will respond, or what our operating budget will be. The 1995 edition of *Alternative Publishers of Books in North America* describes 119 active presses, publishing a total of about 1,000 books a year. *Counterpoise* will start modestly, examining every title submitted and establishing a high standard. Then we'll gradually expand as circumstances permit.

ATG: Who will write the reviews? And what kind of materials will be reviewed?

CW: So far, about fifty librarians around the country and in Britain and South Africa have agreed to write reviews, and more are expected. Volunteers choose the subject area(s) in which they have experience. We send them one copy of each title (which they get to keep), and hold the other copy at the editorial office for control. We review just about any subject. When I was order librarian at the Harvard College Library 25 years ago, the order forms told vendors (in three or four languages) not to send cookbooks. But last year the Vegetarian Resource Group sent me a copy of Debra Wasserman's *The Lowfat Jewish Vegetarian Cookbook*, and I realized it made a strong political statement against meat. We consider everything, as long as the imprint is 1995 or later: monographs, new and continuing serials, A/V tapes, compact disks, even databases like Ralph McGehee's remarkable *CIABASE*.

ATG: Could you talk for a bit about alternative publishing? What is alternative publishing? And what have the trends in this been over your career?

CW: The best definition I've seen is in the *Introduction to Alternative Publications: A Guide to Directories, Indexes, Bibliographies and Other Sources*, produced by AIP and edited by Cathy Seitz Whitaker (McFarland, 1990). It lists four criteria which convey the

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spirit of the alternative press: 1) The publisher is noncommercial, i.e., more concerned with communicating ideas than making money, or 2) the subject matter pertains to social responsibility, such as the attempt to: a) achieve rights for an oppressed group of people; b) see economic justice for all individuals; c) disperse political power among members of society, or 3) the publisher would define itself as a publisher of alternative materials, or 4) the work is published by a small-press poetry or literary publisher.

Several elements have come together to produce the alternative press revolution: new communications technology, protests against media monopolies, responses to political and economic repression, and grassroots movements for human rights, peace, the environment, personal freedom, and a more democratic and equitable society. In our field, an added factor is the increasing dependence of libraries on corporate sponsors and business partners, to the exclusion of alternative publishing.

ATG: Can you comment on the relation, if any, between alternative publishing and small press publishing?

CW: The alternative press (which the Library of Congress still calls the "underground press") is a subset of the small press (which it calls the "little press"), but the boundaries between the two are not clearly defined. It's the thought that counts. Many concerned anthropologists, economists, environmentalists, etc. create thought-provoking, socially responsible literature; so do many concerned poets, novelists, critics, etc. *Counterpoise* will give concerned librarians a way to identify, evaluate and acquire that literature and to build thought-provoking, socially responsible collections.

ATG: How about telling us a little bit about Charles Willett? How did you get so committed to this idea?

CW: In an odd way the story of *Counterpoise* is a legacy of my father's father and my mother's mother. Both grew up rather poor, both had extraordinary success in business but lost most of their money, and both lived into their 90s, looming over the early lives of their two grandsons. My brother and I were supposed to get the best possible education and then redeem the family fortune. So we were sent (on scholarship) to the same private schools in New York City and Connecticut as the sons of the rich and then on to Harvard College. But I didn't stick to the plan. I broke away in 1952 at age 20. I was majoring in history and government, studying at Harvard's new undergraduate Lamont Library, where the best books, selected by the best bibliographers at the best college library in the world, were organized by subject in open alcoves. None of that sophomore history and political science warned me that dropping out of college, enlisting, and volunteering for Korea as a rifleman was a stupid idea. That's what I did.

Back from the war with hearing loss and nightmares, I finished up at Harvard, married, took a graduate year at the University of Munich on the G.I. Bill, joined the Foreign Service, learned Czech, and spent most of the 1960s in Germany and Austria as a diplomat. At a reception in Berlin, a Czech diplomat asked me why the U.S. was sheltering Nazi war criminals. I denied it. He laughed. Years later, I learned he was right. Europeans don't get their information from Lamont Library.

In 1966, on home leave in Boston with my wife and children, I had two troubling encounters. The first was an interview I arranged with Mel King, director of a community center in Roxbury. Mel (now a professor at MIT) was a huge man wearing overalls and a farmer's straw hat, quite a contrast to my dark suit. I said I needed to be able to explain to Europeans why African Americans were demonstrating and rioting. What did they want? Mel's reply was a rambling story about how the president of a Boston bank had invited him to address a meeting of bank presidents in his paneled board room, and how the host had risen and graciously welcomed him, and had said how eager they all were to learn what they could do to help the people of Roxbury.

Mel stopped. I waited. He just looked at me. That was the end of the story. It took me a long time to see it was aimed at me. We talked some more, went out for a beer, got acquainted. He accepted my sincerity and invited me to come the next day to a church where Cardinal Cushing would be listening to grievances. I went and heard Black women tell about absentee landlords, lead poisoning, rats biting babies. Things I hadn't learned in Lamont Library.

The other encounter took place at a cocktail party given in my honor by an old friend in Cambridge. All the guests but one were glad to meet an American diplomat. The exception was a Harvard undergraduate, fifteen years younger than the rest of us. He pushed his way into the circle and asked me why President Johnson was spending two million dollars a day on the war in Vietnam instead of on the War on Poverty in Appalachia. I glanced at my host, hoping he would intervene, but he and the guests just stood there, waiting for my answer. Caught off balance, I said, "Well, there's always been war ... and there's always been poverty ... You can't stop these things overnight." Even while I was saying those words they sounded false. There was a long, awkward silence. My host still said nothing. I told my wife we were leaving. She objected. I insisted. The host came with us to the door, asking us not to go so early. But I stormed out, refusing to sign the guest book. Why hadn't anyone spoken up? They all knew the Communists were expanding in Central Europe, in China, in Korea, in Cuba, now in Vietnam, trying to take over the world! This was like World War II! We were defending freedom! I had risked my life! Were these people stabbing us in the back? What was happening in America? Where was that kid getting his information? Not in Lamont Library!

ATG: So — where does this lead? Are there more libraries in the picture?

CW: I forgot the name of that young man, but I took his question,
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and my answer, back with me to the embassy in Vienna and thought about them often as events unfolded. I also thought a lot about Mel King's bankers and Roxbury's rats and absentee landlords. Two years later, I resigned from the Foreign Service. Unemployed in 1968, with a non-working wife, four children and no advanced degrees, I was lucky to be hired as administrative assistant in the Department of Resources and Acquisitions at Harvard: not much pay but a free internship for a master's degree in library science at Simmons College. Early in 1969 student radicals occupied Harvard's administration building, broke into confidential files, and published correspondence showing that professors (including one I had studied under) worked for the CIA. Police evicted the students, injuring many, and hundreds of us — students, professors and staff — were radicalized overnight. That Fall I joined my first anti-war march and helped organize Harvard Librarians for Peace. The information we distributed about peace actions, draft resistance, and the U.S. military-industrial complex was not available in Lamont Library. Time passed. I got divorced, moved to Buffalo and then to Gainesville, remarried, and supported my distant children.

Counterpoise

is edited and published by the Alternatives In Print Task Force of the Social Responsibilities Round Table of the American Library Association.

It is designed for use by schools, colleges, universities and public libraries — and by inquiring individuals — as a reliable source of information about significant, English-language titles published in the United States and abroad which have been overlooked or slighted by mainstream review journals.

coun'terpoise n. 1. A counter-balancing weight. 2. Any force or influence that balances or equally counteracts another. 3. The state of being balanced or in equilibrium.

counterpoise' tr. v. 1. To oppose with an equal weight; to counter-balance. 2. To act against with an equal force or power; to offset.

— **The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language.**

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Seventeen years in acquisitions and collection development at Harvard, SUNY/Buffalo and the University of Florida taught me a lot about books and libraries. In ALA I was elected chair of the Acquisitions Discussion Group and to the RTSD (now ALCTS) Executive Committee, and served for six years on the Collection Development Librarians of Large Research Libraries Discussion Group.

I might never have become concerned about the alternative press if I hadn't been denied tenure in 1986. To be on the street again, this time at age 54 with the house not yet paid for and one child still in college, was scary. I had four options: to sue, to go back to school, to get another job, or to become a fighter for social justice. As it turned out, I studied journalism, bought a computer, wrote and lectured. I was elected president of the ACLU of Florida. From 1987 to 1995, I worked part-time as a sales representative for a library jobber in the U.S., Europe and South Africa. On a trip through the Southeast in 1988, my wife Nancy and I gathered data about alternative holdings at 45 libraries, and I delivered a paper at the 1989 ACRL conference: "Politically Controversial Monographs: Roles of Publishers, Distributors, Booksellers, *Choice* magazine, and Librarians in Acquiring Them for American Academic Libraries." That paper raised puzzling questions. Why do undergraduate libraries have such poor alternative holdings? (The term "Lamont Library" is being used here to symbolize the thousands of college libraries, most not nearly as good as Lamont, that claim to present all points of view, but fail.) Why is there no system to identify and review publications outside the so-called "mainstream?" Why is so little written about self-censorship in libraries? Why don't more librarians address these questions?

ATG: Is that when you began *CRISES Press*?

CW: Yes. Out of these concerns sprang the idea for an exhibit booth at ALA conferences where Nancy and I could display alternative books and periodicals. We would need a van, shelving, and enough small publishers to share costs. I named this enterprise *CRISES Press*: Critical Research Institute for Social and Environmental Sciences. Social science research may be defined as either "administrative" or "critical." Administrative research works within the existing political-economic system, proposing modest changes to alleviate problems. It is the bread and butter of corporate, scholarly publishing. Critical research looks at the big picture within and outside the existing system, trying to get to the root of problems and eliminate them altogether. Often its controversial conclusions and proposals can reach publication only in the alternative press.

From 1991 to 1995 Nancy and I staffed the *CRISES Alternative Press Exhibit* booth at nine ALA conferences, driving an old Dodge van all over the country, displaying many hundreds of alternative books, periodicals and non-print titles, and handing out free, annotated catalogs. I also organized a Gainesville alternative press group, the "GAP Group," and considered its advice in compiling an annual, annotated bibliography: *APT for Libraries: Alternative Press Titles for the General Reader, 1992—1996*. And two unexpected spin-offs have developed from *CRISES Press*. The GAP Group has founded the Civic Media Center, a non-profit library now in its third year, with 400 paying members. Many of its 1000 alternative titles are not held anywhere else in the city. The other spin-off is a change in my perspective. I have started really reading alternative publications, not with a "What-are-those-people-writing-now?" attitude, but thoughtfully, with respect and appreciation. "All points of view," says the Library Bill of Rights. That means ALL POINTS OF VIEW! Before democracy can be achieved in the world, alternative materials about controversial issues must be integrated into high-school, college and public libraries, so every citizen can get an unbiased education that will equip them for real life. My grandparents wanted me to redeem the family fortune. I want to redeem the world's fortune: the quality of justice.

Charles says if you're coming to ALA Annual in New York stop by the ALA/SRRT/COUNTERPOISE booth (#467) to learn even more. Sounds like a winner to me! — KS