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Robert Franklin, President, McFarland & Co., Inc., Publishers

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ATG Interview with Robert Franklin

President, McFarland and Co., Inc., Publisher

by Ron Chepesiuk (Winthrop University) <rchelesiuk@winthrop.edu>

Eighteen years ago, Robert McFarland Franklin started a publishing company in one the most unlikely places: Jefferson, North Carolina. Today his company, McFarland and Company Publishers, Inc., is the biggest publisher in the Southeast. Many librarians will recognize the McFarland name, for the publishing house carries a long line of reference books and is one of the country's biggest publishers of professional library books, many of which end up on library shelves.

A Yale graduate and an alumnus of Columbia Library School, Franklin got his start in publishing as an editor at Scarecrow Press before deciding to make the plunge into entrepreneurship. Since then, McFarland has published more than 1,200 books at the rate of about 130 a year. In addition, to a thick catalog 192 pages, McFarland has an Internet presence. Its online catalog is open for inspection at <mcfarland.pub.com>. Franklin is active in ALA, having served as a member of the Publications Committee, Intellectual Freedom Committee, the Pay Equity Committee and on the council since 1988. Contributing editor Ron Chepesiuk, recently caught up with the busy publisher to ask him a few questions about his background and company and his views on the changing world of publishing.

alumnus of the Columbia library school, too. I've always loved books and been a precocious reader. I was reading at three years of age, and by the time I graduated from high school, I had read many thousands of books.

ATG: So have you been a practicing librarian yourself?

RF: Yes, I did practice librarianship. I held paraprofessional positions at the New Haven Public Library and the Yale University Library and had a year of quasi-professional duties at the Columbia University library's cataloging department.

ATG: Has the training in librarianship helped you in publishing?

RF: Yes, because we do sell a lot of books to libraries and it's helped me to understand the market.

ATG: Why did you decide to leave Scarecrow?

RF: It was one of those standard progressions. My mentor Eric Moon resigned in 1978 to take early retirement. I knew it was time to move on, so on March 31, 1979, I received my last paycheck from Scarecrow. On April 1, 1979, McFarland staggered up to its feet like a newborn bull.

ATG: Why did you decide to become a publisher? It's a big leap to go into business for yourself after being in a comfortable salaried position.

RF: It's like why do critics want to become directors. Editing can be a lot of fun, but it's like a white water canoe trip down a river. You chew your nails and change the comma or a phrase, delete them or put them back ... and so forth ... by the time you do all that, you're really not serving the author very well and readers really don't care.

ATG: But isn't the editing part of publishing a lot more fun than the business

part?

RF: I like to search for the balance in everything involved in publishing. As a publisher, I feel that I need to get involved in all aspects of the business. I have to know the marketplace, make sure the deadlines are met for the payment for and the manufacture of the book, watch out for the general mental health of my editors, make sure all my employees enjoy coming to work ... If you keep all these elements in balance, you hardly ever have to look at the spreadsheet or financial chart.

ATG: Why Jefferson, North Carolina, of all places to start a publishing company?

RF: Well, Jefferson, is, of course, in the heart of Appalachia. The first paved road came here in the 1930s, and the first light bulb was turned on in the county in 1927. What I'm saying is that the area here is a beautiful, delightfully unspoiled place.

ATG: So setting as much as publishing concerns led you to establish McFarland in Ashe County?

RF: My decision to start McFarland has nothing to do with publishing. When my wife and I moved here, we really were not thinking about establishing a publishing company. I was actually thinking about buying a weekly newspaper because the one they had here was dying. I always think fate saved me from the wrong choice. I had given Scarecrow four or five months notice. It was really amiable and the last few months were wonderful. I had friends here in Ashe County and had been coming here since 1972, so in 1978 we decided to move here. By December, 1978, I had decided to become a publisher. I should mention Mike Strand, my buddy from childhood days. He put up some money and retains a small percentage of the ownership in the company. He was a supportive and real confidence builder.

ATG: Are there any disadvantages to being away from New York City, which is the center of the publishing world?

RF: No, I think the opposite is true. Of course, I was inexperienced and there were things I never thought about, such as the labor market. By the mid 1980s, I well knew what it meant: the county does not favor strong and intelligent women for its relatively few local posts of leadership and influence. I'm not saying they are bad about it. What I'm saying is that they are pretty traditional, and it is the South. Ashe County has a lot of strong and intelligent

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ATG: Let's start at the beginning. How did McFarland begin?

RF: It started in 1991, but the reason for why I started the company goes back to 1969 and Scarecrow Press, when Eric Moon hired me to be his bright young boy at the house, so to speak.

ATG: You mean he hired you to work as a junior editor?

RF: Yes, and in a few years, I became executive editor. I was at Scarecrow for ten years and learned an immense amount from Eric, who, of course, was actively involved in librarianship. He was a President of ALA and at the center of the profession, particularly ALA politics. So I picked up a lot from him. Perhaps the most important thing Eric Moon taught me was how authors relate to books. He also taught me another important aspect of publishing; namely, how to make book.

ATG: You have strong library roots, don't you?

RF: Yes, both of my parents were librarians and graduated from Columbia library school in the early 1930s. I'm an

women, and it has worked out well for McFarland. There were women in Ashe County who were the best people you could probably hire, and they were available. By the mid-1980s, I had hired several women, and by the end of the 1980s, I had a staff that was the envy of all. Today, I have 29 people working full-time and we are the largest publisher in the Southeast. This may be megalomania, but I'm convinced that we have the finest personnel of any company certainly in this county and possibly in the region and state.

ATG: *McFarland must be one of the largest publishers of library science books as well.*

RF: Yes, I think **Neal Shuman** puts out twice as many as we do. There are other large publishers ... **Oryx** and **Libraries Unlimited**, for example ... I think we are a moderate to large publisher of library books, probably no higher than third and not much lower than fifth or sixth.

ATG: *Do library books make money for you?*

RF: (Laughs) They are not a big money maker.

ATG: *What type of books are?*

RF: General reference books, which can include about anything. For example, we have published an encyclopedia of Antarctica, which has done well. We have published reference works on all the wars since 1600 ... a book on all track and field record holders ... Russian place names in the former Soviet Union.

ATG: *How many letters and proposals do you get from people wanting to publish a book?*

RF: In the neighborhood of a thousand a year.

ATG: *Is it hard to find the right books to fill your list?*

RF: Only in the sense that we tend to acquire five to ten percent too many books (laughs). I've always had a mild streak of a lack of restraint.

ATG: *So is it difficult in finding authors who can deliver what they promise?*

RF: You might think, so, but not really. We do apply an intense evaluation process about a manuscript before we say yes or no. After that, the process of publishing a book is quite

smooth.

ATG: *How do you distribute and sell your books?*

RF: Our books are sold in virtually every country of the world. For example, we do know our books have sold in Syria, Libya and Iraq. We don't rely on some kind of global bulk mail. Instead, we rely on the standard, somewhat traditional scholarly nineteenth century route, which involves using specialized review media, news notices in specialized journals, significant for what might be called the third ring out.

ATG: *How does that work?*

RF: Let's start out and move in. I've mentioned the third rung — the wonderful century-old tradition of scholarly communication around the planet is sufficient for establishing a large market worldwide. The next ring out is made up of individuals who we joke about as being "McFarland groupies." Of course, we don't take that lightly and we appreciate their loyalty. They buy to a large extent our baseball and performing arts titles and to some extent also our chess and Civil War books. We are the world's largest publisher of reference books on the performing arts. There are buyers who love good typography, nice paper and crisp formats. Our books are sturdy; we use acid-free paper; and we spend an enormous amount of time on book design. We have tens of thousands of loyal types who just can't wait to see what we will put out next. And we also do a lot of direct mail. The next rung, of course, is the library market. Every decision we make is dominated, if not overwhelmed, by the library market.

ATG: *What about the print versus media publishing.*

RF: You mean semi-permanent format versus plastic and fluid.

ATG: *Are you moving toward media publishing?*

RF: No, although we have a Web site and are interested in electronic publishing.

ATG: *So are you confident that traditional book publishing is going to be around for a long time?*

RF: Yes, but with the online glitz I think there is going to be a real Dark Ages in publishing

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many subjects have almost disappeared. There is a rise and fall in publishing that follows academic fashions and demands. We have a very nice list in Aviation Psychology. This is a totally international area.

Subjects go in and out of fashion. For example, more and more research is being done on the Third World. It also surprises me that more and more philosophy is being published, more comparative religion which is very heartening.

A good publisher follows where the research and demand go. We do a lot of conference work. We send three people to the **American Sociological Association** and many to history conventions. There's a medieval conference in Kalamazoo. These are big occasions and publishers feel they have to be there. America is the home of the big academic convention so it's a good place to meet people from all over the world. There's a lot of revenue supporting these people and we have to pay attention to what they are saying. And we have to publish books that will travel around the world.

ATG: Are you doing any partnering in publishing ventures?

NF: We do lots of publishing with international agencies and academic institutions and in that is one of the features of this kind of publishing. In the old days, we would co-publish with an American press like **St. Martins** and **Rowman and Littlefield**, but we don't do that anymore. I guess in the final analysis, we do little co-publishing these days, whereas 15-20 years ago we did a lot more.

ATG: Can we talk some more about the scholarly monograph which is your bread and butter? Are you able to publish books which the university presses cannot? How?

NF: Yes. We keep our overheads quite low and we don't spend a lot of money in terms of administration. When we sell a book around the world, we go through our own outlets and also through an independent agent so we can try to keep our costs down and our revenues up. University presses have felt pressure to deliver the "high profile" book. They feel pressure to have a book reviewed in the *NY Times*. I don't think it is very intelligent pressure. There have been a lot of British university press closures. **Oxford** and **Cambridge** are massive textbook publishers. There are only four or five significant university presses left in England — Manchester and Edinburgh, Oxford, Cambridge. Leicester was absorbed. Partly this is because of poor funding on the part of the university.

ATG:

So what do you see as future trends in monograph publishing?

Any chance of seeing an Ashgate e-monograph initiative? And are you going to keep publishing in library science?

NF: We have to choose what we think we can do and do it well. Among our electronic products, we have a growing chemical reference line. CD-ROM has a lot of potential. Our specialty will continue to be the monograph.

We will keep our significant list in library science. There is an extensive amount of information out there and my colleagues read about 6-7 newsletters on collection management regularly. The li-

brary has changed beyond recognition. There is less to be done in classic library science; the demand is for current information.

ATG: Thanks for the interview. One last parting shot — what do you do for fun?

NF: What should a late middle-aged reputable publisher do? I travel a fair amount — all over the world. I do a lot of collecting of art that I like. I have three daughters in publishing and one works for Ashgate. Another is director of a small successful company that publishes in social work and is a competitor. The other daughter teaches in Thailand.

Rumors

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addresses: <URL:http://info.lib.uh.edu/sepb/sepb.html>; Acrobat: <URL:http://info.lib.uh.edu/sepb/sepb.pdf>; Word: <URL:http://info.lib.uh.edu/sepb/sepb.doc>

Endeavor Information Systems Inc. has announced that **Villanova University** has gone into production on **Voyager**, Endeavor's information management system for academic research libraries. The library had been using GEAC 8000. Villanova's Falvey Memorial Library serves over 10,000 students with a materials budget of over \$2.3 million. If you want more info, go to <http://www.endinfosys.com>.

Endeavor has also announced that **Northwestern University** will also convert to **Voyager**. Ranked as one of the "most wired" campuses in the nation, Northwestern University deploys information technology to create an electronic environment that allows effective collaboration among leaders of its community.

Serials Review (v.23#1, Spring, 1997) contains many useful articles. One that caught my eye was by **Don Jaeger** on "The

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ATG: What's going to happen?

RF: There is going to be a real weak period in publishing, where publishers are going to die and all the online stuff is going to overwhelm the culture for half a lifetime of someone who is ten or twelve years old today. I'm hoping that McFarland will be able to help maintain the bridge across. We want to keep our integrity intact and hope we can keep going until the online era comes to its inclusive end.

ATG: If you were to start out today as a publisher, could you be as successful, given the current climate and trends in publishing?

RF: Yes, there is a darkness in the sky, but the first question you have to consider if you are going into publishing today: is

do you want to publish books in the old familiar way, bound and sturdy, printed on nice paper and having good typography, or do you want to do something else in the printed realm? As I noted, McFarland is in a period of transition, rethinking its corporate strategy. We are asking ourselves: do people want to pay \$55 to \$85 for a fine book that gives them information they are really interested in, or would they rather pay \$18.95 to \$24.95 for a cheaper book that gives them a portion of everything our book has? We have so far decided to go with what we've always done — the comprehensive, exhaustive, filled out book. In other words, if you want information in your field, you have to buy our book.

ATG: What has been the significance for your company of the trend of diminishing library budgets? Has it created prob-

lems for your marketing strategy, since the library market is so important for you?

RF: The library world is really into the electronic media stuff. As a result, their budgets have been cut for non-media materials. For the past ten to fifteen years, serials budgets have eaten up most of the overall materials budget. Journal publishers have been increasing their prices maybe three to ten times the inflation rate every year for the last ten or fifteen years. That trend will continue. We are feeling it.

ATG: What's the future for McFarland going to be like?

RF: We don't believe in talking about new directions. We believe books need to be published for literate individuals. That always has been the case and always will be. So there is no such thing as a new direction, just careful management.