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Nigel Farrow-President-Ashgate Publishing

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ATG Interview with Nigel Farrow

Chairman — Ashgate Publishing

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

Well. I talked to **Nigel Farrow** over the telephone when he was staying in one of my all-time favorite New York hotels — the Algonquin. He was heading to the west coast of Australia and Hong Kong, so **ATG** was privileged to catch him in the States! — KS

ATG: Ashgate is 30 years old this year. It started as **Gower press** I believe and I understand you have recently brought together some of the company's former imprints?

NF: Yes, Gower Press specialized in business management and we are still a leading publisher of management books for practitioners. In the early 70s, we pushed out and bought **D.C. Heath** in the UK and made a number of other acquisitions, especially in the social sciences and the humanities. Academic publishing overtook business publishing.

This year, the company is consolidating its academic imprints (Avebury, Dartmouth Scholar Press and Variorum) under the name Ashgate which has been the name of the distribution company for quite some time. This is the first step in a series of changes in the company's far reaching international operation. By consolidating the extensive marketing and editorial departments of its academic imprints under the Ashgate name, we are aiming to provide our various markets with even better service.

ATG: You began as a British company and moved to an office in the US? Where else do you have offices?

NF: We opened a U.S. office about fifteen years ago. We have companies in Singapore, Australia and the UK. We employ about 150 people worldwide.

ATG: Who owns Ashgate? Is it a private company? How is it administered?

NF: I own Ashgate, but there is a board of four directors and we work in small teams that work on their individual distribution lists. We have a centralized distribution and accounting base, however.

ATG: How did you get into publishing? What sort of publishing experience do you have?

NF: I was a business journalist and I noticed that there weren't very many British books on the subject. I saw it as an opportunity so I published a few books and when the business took off I moved across from journalism. My own background is English literature but I was keen

to broaden out. I served as the editor of *Business Management* in the UK, the leading monthly journal. I was also Vice President of **Xerox Publishing Group** when I was in my thirties and had responsibility for all educational and publishing outside America. I am chairman of various companies around the world. For example, **Ginn** and **UMI** and **Bowker** are all closely associated and I am Chair of the company that represents them outside America. That business is mainly electronic. I am on my way to visit Kuala Lumpur and Singapore and some other countries in that capacity as we speak, etc.

ATG: You have an art background? Are you a painter?

NF: No. I am not an artist. I am a keen collector of modern British painting and I have a gallery in London. We are also doing an increasing amount of publishing in this field. My father painted all his life, a "Sunday painter," and I have a lot of

"There is a rise and fall in publishing that follows academic fashions and demands."

enthusiasm about the endeavor. There were always a lot of artists around our house. I am not scared to try different things. I am unfashionably committed to the book as a medium in academic publishing.

ATG: I just returned from a day and a half seminar given by **ARL**, **AAUP**, and **ACLS** about the crisis of the modern scholarly monograph. There was a lot of talk there about the e-monograph. What sort of publishing are you doing in electronic formats?

NF: We do publish a chemical reference series in CD-ROM under the Gower imprint. **UMI** is a 50/50 electronic business. But I believe that the book has an enormous cultural value.

ATG: Do you publish any journals or are you just a publisher of books?

NF: We have about 6 journals, but journals are not our game. One of the things we specialize in is monograph publishing. We have had to give up some of the very scholarly type of publishing and this is a pity but I believe that books will last quite a long time. With the electronic medium, we can publicize them more effectively and distribute them quickly. The book is still a very convenient source and has tremendous cultural resonance. People like

to scroll on the screen to see what they want to read. They do not want to read on the computer screen.

ATG: And your books are selling in the international market? How many copies do you print of one of your books generally speaking?

NF: Yes. We have worldwide operations that are thriving on book sales. We are particularly strong in SE Asia and have 20 people in our office in Singapore. I have known that part of the world for many years and it is one of the few places where there are new libraries being built. We publish books on the comparative laws in SE Asia, a series of books on the social and welfare regimes and the economics of the Pacific Rim. This is a growing area.

In the US, we have started our own business many years ago and it has been a big success. Thirty percent of our authors are American. Publishing has to be international and worldwide and that means America because you are by far the largest market. We can sell more on English composition here, for example, than in England. There is more funding over here than in England.

ATG: I guess it's a matter of what you got used to. We don't think we have much money any more to buy books. How do you decide what to publish so that you are sure of getting good sales?

NF: We use a whole range of criteria — the reputation of the author, the originality of the research. Art is more of an investment in the future. And it depends on the scale of the investment. Some books are agonizing to set up funding for and others are straightforward.

ATG: A nitty-gritty issue. How about paperback versus cloth publishing? Are you doing more of this and how is it impacting your bottom line? Are you publishing dual editions?

NF: There has been a rise in libraries buying paperback books, especially in public libraries in the UK. Academic libraries buy fewer paperbacks. We don't usually do dual editions except when they are genuine books for student use.

ATG: What new areas are you looking at? Do you turn down a lot of manuscripts that are submitted?

NF: We cover the waterfront in the social sciences and the humanities which we have been developing most recently. The market is changing all the time and

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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.

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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.