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ATG Interviews Mark Saunders

Director, University of Virginia Press

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ATG: Mark, you have recently been named the new Director of the University of Virginia Press, succeeding Penelope Kaiserlian, who served as director from 2001 until her retirement in 2012. You began at UVA as Associate Marketing Manager in 1995. How did you come to land at UVA Press, and what has led you to stay so long, besides, of course, the beauty of Charlottesville and the UVA campus?

MS: I came to UVA as a Henry Hoyns Fellow in the creative writing program, and landed a part-time job at the Press through a colleague from my days at Columbia. In addition to the many benefits of raising a family in Charlottesville, I stayed here because the university and the Press have continued to offer the opportunity to do exciting things, particularly within the realm of digital publishing. It has been a serendipitous run, and I consider myself exceedingly lucky.

ATG: Tell us about your career trajectory. We believe you have worked at Columbia University Press as well. Did your experience there involve work with CIAO? And was that in any way an inspiration for Rotunda?

MS: I started my career as a bookseller at Politics & Prose, then moved to New York as a sales rep and ultimately national sales manager at Columbia. Toward the end of my tenure, we began throwing around the ideas that became CIAO. Clinical Trials had just been created, and we were excited to build a project that used this new technology. The key question was, what content in the humanities and social sciences would benefit from the speed of dissemination offered by the Internet? We were all keenly aware that a new interpretation of Shakespeare might not present a similar urgency as an open heart surgery procedure. I remember the most important aspect of that discussion as being an insistence that we didn’t let this new technology dictate the nature of the project; that we find a content area that fits the technology well.

ATG: Among your duties prior to becoming the director was being the acquiring editor of Rotunda, the press’s electronic publishing initiative. Tell us about Rotunda. What part does it play within the press? Will you still maintain a hands-on involvement now you are director of the press? What are future plans for Rotunda?

MS: For almost ten years I have been the manager of what was first called the Electronic Imprint, with responsibility for setting the strategic direction for the operation and overseeing a gifted team of editors and programmers. Rotunda was founded to explore how the traditional strengths of a university press could be extended into the digital realm. Today, we publish collections of documentary, comparative, and reference material in the American Founding Era, the American Century, Literature and Culture, and a new online encyclopedia of the built world called SAH Archipedia, which we have developed with Society of Architectural Historians. These collections include features that we will continue to extend, such as multimedia in the presidential recordings of LBJ and Nixon, GIS-driven interactive maps, and innovative visualizations. Over the past year, my colleagues and I have been deep in a strategic planning process that foresees an even greater integration of Rotunda into the operations of the Press.

ATG: After being appointed the director of the University of Virginia Press, you commented that UVA Press had “a foundation that blends the traditional strengths of a university press with innovation sparked by digital technologies.” What does that mean exactly? Can you give us specific examples?

MS: UVA Press has many of the best characteristics that have always defined university presses, including rigorous and thoughtful peer review that helps scholars develop their projects, excellent editing, beautiful production, and creative marketing. Rotunda has given the Press the opportunity to see how that role applies in the digital world. What we have discovered is that our instincts as publishers remain the same, while the tools we use change. The Rotunda Founding Era collection derives much of its content from the letterpress editions of the Founding Fathers papers published by UVA and other university presses, and the building entries in SAH Archipedia come from the Buildings of the United States book series. Within Rotunda, this content can be transformed into projects such as the People of the Founding Era, which includes biographical data on human beings and visualizations of populations that have been underrepresented historically. The business model for SAH Archipedia is a hybrid, including licensed material and open access to the most notable building entries for each state, and fully open metadata to assist further scholarly inquiry. In June, working with the National Archives, we launched a free version of some of our Founding Fathers papers called the Founders Online, which extends the vital work of documentary editors to a far larger audience. These are examples of how digital technology is leading UVA Press in new directions.

ATG: We know that you have a backlist of over 1,000 print titles, but will print still play a substantial part in your future plans? Does UVA Press participate in any new eBook collaborations among university presses — such as Books@JSTOR, University Press Scholarship Online through OUP, and Project Muse?

MS: I don’t think I’m alone in believing that our future will include a combination of digital and print. We offer our content in UPCC/Project Muse and through numerous other library aggregators and on consumer devices, in business models ranging from single-copy to DDA, rental, and no DRM. Some content doesn’t display well in electronic editions and many of the features in our Rotunda projects could never be realized in print. We are committed to offering the scholarship we publish in whatever format or formats our customers find most useful and convenient.

ATG: When discussing your appointment, David Klein, chair of the Board of Directors of UVA Press, said that you had an “exciting vision for the press in a fast-changing industry.” Can you tell us what that vision is? How does that vision fit within the overall mission of the university? And within the vision of the place of university presses in the scholarly communication landscape?

MS: I am either blessed or cursed by the fact that my university press career has been characterized by an atmosphere of constant change. I’m too old to be a digital native but still young enough that I can’t afford to cling to the notion that what a Press represents is a fixed idea. That’s not to say that I don’t take maintaining the integrity of our mission seriously, but my definition of that mission and how we realize it goes well beyond what presses were doing 25 years ago. We have an opportunity to become even more embedded in the scholarly process. We work with our authors and project sponsors earlier and more deeply because the tools they use, some of which we have actually developed, align with our publishing platform. We collaborate with scholarly societies such as SAH. We speak with librarians a lot more than we used to because we want to use common tools, standards, and platforms to accelerate the
creation of knowledge. All of this enhances our impact on behalf of our host university.

ATG: Mr. Klein also acknowledged that scholarly publishing is a “fast-changing industry.” What do you think are the most critical transitions facing UVA Press in successfully dealing with this change? What about for university presses in general? How does the university press adjust and succeed amid this ever-changing landscape?

MS: The tools of our trade are expanding at a very high rate — it’s no longer enough for us to be good editors or designers or publicists alone. It’s a challenge for us all to keep up and to make informed decisions about which technologies and business models are transitional and which will take root in the scholarly publishing environment. To complicate things further, the legal ground under our feet is constantly shifting, too. What we’ve learned from developing Rotunda — which was like building a plane during flight — is to master the variables as best you can but don’t assume that you know the solution. Collaboration is increasingly important, even crucial, to fulfilling our mission.

ATG: There are a number of instances where the university press is very involved with the library. In fact, at some universities the press is part of the library operation. What is the relationship between the library and press at the University of Virginia? Has there been any formal collaboration? If not, is that a future possibility?

MS: Presses and libraries have historically had very different cultures, but I think that the two are growing together, which is good for the system as a whole. UVA has a long tradition of digital innovation from entities that make their home in the library, from the original E-text center to the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities and the Scholars Lab. The Press has enjoyed strong, collaborative relationships with those digital incubators at all levels. I think that in the near future new mechanisms for sharing resources will develop that will increase the opportunity for more formal, shared innovation.

ATG: Are there some specific examples of these “collaborative relationships with the digital incubators” housed in the library? And what about the “near future new mechanisms for sharing resources?” Can you talk a little more about those?

MS: Last year our Provost, John Simon, commissioned an environmental scan of the digital humanities at UVA, with the goal of conceiving a framework through which resources, including people, technology, and funding, could be more effectively managed across the various DH shops at the University. This initiative is meant to nurture and increase the kinds of collaboration that have thrived here since the 1990s. The original grant for the UVA Press Electronic Imprint was co-written with the founder of IATH, John Unsworth, in 2000. The Rotunda publication, Herman Melville’s “Typee,” was originally conceived at IATH, and Clotel was built at the E-text Center. Collaboration with IATH and other incubators has taken place at the level of technology and expertise sharing, and service to the TEI consortium. We would all benefit from a more formal administrative structure for that activity.

ATG: What is the primary source of funding for the UVA Press? Does it have a line in the university budget, or does it have to be self-sustaining?

MS: Our primary source of revenue is cost recovery through the sales of our books and Rotunda content, so we are largely self-sustaining. We receive a small subsidy from the university that amounts to less than 5% of our operating costs, and we have an endowment that provides an additional funding stream. Of course we enjoy numerous benefits from being a part of the University that do not show up strictly in the budget, but are worth a great deal.

ATG: Can you tell us more about the “numerous benefits from being part of the University” that don’t show up in the UVA Press budget?

MS: Two major benefits that come immediately to mind from our host institution, in addition to various back-office functions, are the services of our faculty editorial board and the advice of our associate general counsel. The UVA Press board helps to guard the integrity of our imprint as the final stage in the peer review process. Our counsel, Madelyn Wessel, provides an expert opinion in intellectual property and other legal matters, including contracts that come before the Press.

ATG: What would you say are the topic/subject strengths of the UVA Press? How many books do you publish a year? Journals? What proportion of your publications are electronic, and what are print? Do you expect this mix to continue moving forward?

MS: We publish roughly 70 books per year on American history, literature, politics, architecture, religious studies, and topics about Virginia. The American Founding Era is a particular area of strength, reflecting Jefferson’s role in the creation of UVA. We are strong in African American studies across all disciplines. Last fiscal year, over 85% of our books were published in print and electronic formats simultaneously, and we released three new Rotunda editions. I expect most of our content to be available in multiple formats for the near future.

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The Nemesis Returns

Three visionaries walk into a bar in Utah. Well, they actually were there to debate at an international conference. Two were staying at The Inn at Temple Square (Fantasy alert — in real life this Hotel has been demolished). And they all agreed before their meet-up to drink the same thing in the spirit of solidarity. One of them might have liked a martini. One, since the meet up was from 3pm to 5pm, would have preferred High Tea, and the third really wanted Coca-Cola, no caffeine. When they arrived, they discovered the only thing the bar served was Near Beer. In accordance with their previous agreement, all ordered the same thing. Knowing nothing about Near Beer, with smartphones in hand they Googled and learned from Wikipedia "Near Beer, a topic that at first blush seems unrelated to the ostensible topic of the meeting (Green OA), but fell to considering the situation of Green OA, a topic that at first blush seems unrelated to the topic, but to which topic each discovered affinities as they debated.

The consultant felt that Near Beer was too cheap, and besides, would drive real beer out of the marketplace. So he came down firmly against the whole idea of Green Near Beer. The Arch Evangelist saw the potential of Green Near Beer because of its lower impact on driving skills and simpler production process and the ability to make people happy to be the next great wave, and the librarian opined that it would reduce the cost of going to a bar (something he’d never done before) and might mean more people could get something for almost nothing and could spend their meager dollars on something else. (I did warn you this was a fantasy, didn’t I?) Would Green Near Beer drive real beer out of the marketplace, or could the consultant save the world of higher production value real beer? Would the Arch-Evangelist’s hope be fulfilled? Would the librarian get his wish? Stay tuned for the next fantasy meeting report from your intrepid fly-on-the-wall reporter. AKA — the Nemesis.