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Katina Strauch

Against the Grain, kstrauch@comcast.net

Tom Gilson

Against the Grain, gilsont@cofc.edu

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ATG Interviews Jason Coleman

Marketing Director, University of Virginia Press

by Tom Gilson (Associate Editor, *Against the Grain*) <gilson@cofc.edu>

and Katina Strauch (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <kstrauch@comcast.net>

ATG: Tell us a little bit about yourself. What is your role at UVa Press? What is it about working for a university press that attracts you?

JC: As Marketing Director, I'm responsible for many of the things you might expect — advertising, our seasonal catalog and other direct mail, Web marketing. Our press handles many eBook and print-on-demand issues through its marketing department, so we are involved in everything from agreements with aggregators to the management of metadata. A large part of my work centers on our electronic imprint, **Rotunda**, for which I handle all marketing and sales.

I originally came to the **University of Virginia** to do an MFA in their Creative Writing program, and as a writer I naturally was very attracted to working in publishing. The university-press world allows you to work with intelligent, gifted people who are applying their talents in a refreshingly uncynical way. I have no wish to sell orthopedic shoes or radial tires, although the world needs those things; I like selling books.

ATG: Although UVa Press publishes some 50 to 60 new book titles each year, the **Rotunda** Digital imprint and its collections seem to be a growing focus. Can you tell us more about **Rotunda**, its purpose and the subject emphasis of its collections?

JC: We have been releasing electronic publications through our **Rotunda** imprint for a little over a decade now. The content reflects the strengths of our print list, and so it is very strong in history, for one. Our *American Founding Era* collection is anchored by some of the best documentary editions in American scholarship, including the papers projects of the first four presidents, and offering digital editions of this content in a searchable, inter-operative environment has probably been **Rotunda's** biggest contribution to scholarly publishing. We have branched into modern history with our *Presidential Recordings* database, which allows users to read and listen to thousands of Oval Office tapes. We also offer a *Literature and Culture* collection that has been a useful laboratory for us as well as a very steady seller. Architecture is another strong suit of the UVa Press, and so we developed *SAH Archipedia*, an online counterpart to the *Buildings of the United States*, a state-by-state print series we publish in collaboration with the **Society of Architectural Historians**. This database already has entries for nearly 17,000 structures in nineteen states, but we are going to cover all fifty states eventually.

ATG: According to your Website there are currently four **Rotunda** collections. Can we expect the content of these collections to



continue expanding? Are there plans to add new collections?

JC: We are always adding new titles to **Rotunda**, but as far as expansion goes, there are a few things that stand out. I already mentioned the ever-growing *Archipedia*. There is also our recent expansion of the *Presidential Recordings* Website, which debuted in 2011 with several hundred transcriptions and audio files from the **Lyndon Johnson** administration. We have just recently expanded this publication to include substantial material from the **Kenedy** and **Nixon** administrations, so the user now gets a very broad, but still intimate, view of a whole era. And then we have plans to transform our very successful *American Founding Era* collection into a broader *American History* collection. This is being driven by the addition to **Rotunda** of notable projects lying outside the founding era. One is a project we have been planning for awhile, a collaboration with **Mississippi State University** on the *Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*. And we have just announced a partnership with the **Princeton University Press** and the **Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library** to bring out a digital edition of the *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*. The transition to a broader history collection will also be an opportunity to renovate the whole platform and implement some exciting new ideas in design and navigation.

ATG: When we interviewed Mark Saunders, Director of UVa Press, a couple of years ago, he said that **Rotunda** was founded to explore how the traditional strengths of a university press could be extended into the digital realm. What key lessons have been learned so far?

JC: Well, some of the things we learned might seem more obvious now than when we released our first publication in 2004. Because a reliable revenue stream took years to arrive at, **Rotunda** depended heavily on grants in the

beginning, particularly from the **Mellon Foundation**. A requirement of our first Mellon grant was that we publish only born-digital content. This was a very worthwhile goal to pursue, but we soon realized that digital editions of the *Papers of George Washington* and the *Papers of James Madison*, both of which we published in print, were not only excellent opportunities for us to expand into the digital world but were also badly needed by the scholarly community. Our born-digital beginnings helped foster a creativity, however, that was invaluable when it comes to something like *The People of the Founding Era*, a biographical archive covering tens of thousands of individuals that was developed specifically for **Rotunda**. So I think it was important that we didn't begin by doing straight conversions; it helped to set the bar pretty high for us.

Another learning experience was the crash course we had in the library landscape. As long as we produced only print books, our contact with libraries was minimal. The rise of eBooks has probably forced all publishers to learn something about how libraries acquire content and build collections, but venturing into digital publishing with **Rotunda** already a decade ago allowed us to navigate that world ahead of the pack.

ATG: At that time Mark was also deep in a strategic planning process that foresaw an even greater integration of **Rotunda** into the operations of the Press. Can you point to some examples how this has occurred? How does **Rotunda** compliment your other efforts?

JC: I'll begin with the simple fact that **Rotunda** did not even reside in the same building as the rest of the Press, so this integration began with bringing that staff physically into the same space. We have used their expertise for a number of things. They helped us create eBooks that link directly to online resources such as our *Presidential Recordings* audio files, and this is something we will pursue further. We're currently involved in a complete overhaul of the Press Website, and the ability to do this completely in-house, through the participation of the **Rotunda** staff, is a great luxury. We will be shifting to an XML workflow for our book production, and our experience with the XML-based **Rotunda** publications is certainly helping to ease that transition.

ATG: A couple of years ago, working with the National Archives, UVa Press launched a free version of some of your *Founding Fathers* papers called the *Founders Online*. Are those resources still available? Have there been any recent additions to that collection?

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JC: Yes, *Founders Online* is very much a going thing. We just recently added over 3,000 documents from the **Washington, Adams, Madison, and Franklin** projects. *Founders Online* was the result of a congressional act to ensure that all American citizens have free access to the papers of the founding fathers, and in working with the **National Archives** to fulfill this mandate we wanted to do something different than what we had done with **Rotunda**. Although there is some overlap of content, *Founders Online* is aimed more at the general user — the high school student writing a paper, say, or the person doing genealogical research on his family. The **Rotunda** databases include a far greater range and depth of content, and the interface is intended more for sustained scholarly use. The projects are closely tied to their respective letterpress editions, retaining the indexes and all introductory essays and allowing users to navigate by the print editions' series and volumes. We have consistently heard from the scholarly community that this connection to the letterpress editions is valuable, and this is reflected in our sales, which have not been significantly impacted by the introduction of the open-access site. So *Founders Online* and **Rotunda** seem to serve two different populations.

ATG: *What have been the effects on your print imprint as Rotunda and other digital efforts have received more attention and resources? How would you characterize the demand for print titles? Is there a place for print in the long term future of UVa Press?*

JC: The Press has a diverse list that includes scholarly editions, monographs, heavily illustrated books, national trade and regional titles. We have decades-long relationships with both the **Washington** and **Madison** papers projects, and as you might guess we were concerned about the effect of digital editions on the print volumes, which had been a reliable source of income for us as well as a staple of historical scholarship. The fact that our print sales have remained stable since the introduction of **Rotunda** strongly suggests that, rather than one canceling the other out, the print and digital editions complement each other. As for our print monographs, like all scholarly publishers, we no longer see the robust sales of ten or twenty years ago — largely because of libraries' dwindling budgets and increasing emphasis on digital content — so we are going with smaller print runs than in the past, and relying more on print on demand and digital

against the grain

publisher profile

University of Virginia Press

PO Box 400318, Charlottesville, VA 22904
Phone: 800-831-3406 • Fax: 877-288-6400
www.upress.virginia.edu

EXECUTIVE TEAM: Mark Saunders, Director

ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIPS: Member **American Association of University Presses**.

KEY PRODUCTS AND SERVICES: Books in American history, literature, politics, religious studies, architecture, and regional titles about Virginia. **Rotunda** new digital scholarship collections in the *American Founding Era, Literature and Culture, the American Century, and SAH Archipedia*.

CORE MARKETS/CLIENTELE: Scholars, students, general readers, research libraries.

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 23

NUMBER OF BOOKS PUBLISHED ANNUALLY: 70

TOTAL NUMBER OF BOOKS ON YOUR BACKLIST: 1,000

HISTORY AND BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF YOUR COMPANY/PUBLISHING PROGRAM: The **University of Virginia Press** was founded in 1963 to advance the intellectual interests not only of the **University of Virginia**, but of institutions of higher learning throughout the state. A member of the **Association of American University Presses, UVaP** currently publishes approximately 70 titles annually, including digital editions. New titles are approved by the Board of Directors after a rigorous process of peer review. The **UVaP** editorial program focuses primarily on the humanities and social sciences with special concentrations in American history, literature, politics, architecture and books about Virginia. **Rotunda**, our digital imprint, was created for the publication of original digital scholarship along with newly digitized critical and documentary editions in American history, literature, and architecture. **Rotunda** collections combine the originality, intellectual rigor, and scholarly value of traditional peer-reviewed university press publishing with thoughtful technological innovation designed for scholars and students. 🌳

short runs. In the library market, overall sales of monographs seem to be flat, but eBook sales, with their lower margins, make up a greater portion of the whole. Despite these shifts, we are committed to print books and have no plans to decrease the number of print titles on our list. There are some things that print books still do much better than any database or eBook — I'm thinking, for example, of heavily illustrated books that are real showcases for design — and, if anything, we are ratcheting up our development of such projects.

ATG: *Speaking of the future, what do you think UVa Press will look like in two years? Five years?*

JC: I mentioned our upcoming shift to an XML workflow, which should give us a new flexibility with our content, including more

dynamic eBooks. Looking a bit farther ahead, I would personally love to see an expansion and acceleration of **Rotunda** production. We are busy thinking of ways, from responsive design to the creation of apps to greater integration of GPS functionality, to encourage broader use of our **Rotunda** resources. I look forward to the day when it's routine for an *Archipedia* user to pull out her smart phone and look up the entry on, say, the Mercer-Williams House in Savannah as she's standing in front of it. She would not only learn the architectural history of the house without having to open a book; she'd get directions to **Flannery O'Connor's** childhood home, which is just around the corner. 🌳