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ATG Interviews Mark Saunders

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: *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 fit 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 backlog 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

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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 everchanging 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*

against the grain people profile

Mark Saunders

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BORN AND LIVED: D.C. area, Philadelphia, New York, and Charlottesville.

EARLY LIFE: My father was a diplomat, so I traveled overseas a lot as a child.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: I came up in university presses through sales and marketing, first at **Columbia**, then **Virginia**, where I became involved with our electronic imprint, now called *Rotunda*, at its founding in 2001 and started managing the project in 2004.

FAMILY: My wife, **Robin Stafford**, is an antiques dealer and we have a daughter and two sons, ages 17, 15, and 13.

IN MY SPARE TIME: Playing outside, building things, coaching and watching my kids’ sports.


FAVORITE BOOKS: *All the Kings Men*, *The Quiet American*, *The Moviegoer*, *Dog Soldiers*, *The Untouchable*, among many others.

PET PEEVES: “This American Life.”

PHILOSOPHY: Existentialism.

MOST MEMORABLE CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: *Rotunda*, with a whole lot of help.

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: I would like to integrate the content workflows of the books and digital side of the Press in a sustainable way.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: While the core values of university presses and what they add to the creation of new scholarship will remain, I think that our community will see a great deal of integration, adoption of shared services, and collaboration with other entities within the next five years. This change will take place at every stage of the publishing process and even within the larger cycle of scholarly communication. Scale and the pace of change will drive this transformation. Not even the largest presses will enjoy the necessary scale to develop, define, and deliver the content, platforms, and tools by themselves, so all the players, including scholars, societies, presses, and libraries will need to work together even as the presses remain competitive with each other. 

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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ATG: *We understand that you are also a published author. How does it feel to have your novel “Ministers of Fire” named a notable work of fiction by the Washington Post (perhaps new owner Jeff Bezos will make something of it on Amazon?) and listed as one of the Wall Street Journal’s top ten mysteries/thrillers of 2012? How did you come to write it? And are there other mysteries in the offing?*

MS: The seeds of the novel go back as far as the late 1970s, when my father was working in the State Department, and to 1989 when the Tiananmen Square massacre kindled my interest in China. 9/11 brought the themes and characters together into a plot that made sense. The novel received about as nice a reception as any first novelist could hope for, so I feel thankful and very good about it. I’ve been working on another political thriller but my day job gets in the way.

ATG: *Besides writing acclaimed novels what else do you like to do with your time outside of work? Any chance we’ll see you at the Charleston Conference this November?*

MS: I spend a lot of time with my family, skiing and mountain biking and boating and coaching and watching my kids play sports. In the summers, we go to Maine. We have an old house that I enjoy working on, and of course I read like a fiend. I look forward to Charleston every year; *Rotunda* has exhibited there since there was still empty space in the ballroom, and the food is great!

ATG: *We know that this is particularly busy time for you, so we truly appreciate your taking the time to talk to us.*

MS: Thanks to you, too. It’s been a pleasure. 🍷

against the grain

publisher profile

University of Virginia Press

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AFFILIATED COMPANIES: Rotunda: New Digital Scholarship. www.rotunda.upress.virginia.edu

ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIPS: We are a proud member of the **Association of American 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

NUMBER OF JOURNALS PUBLISHED ANNUALLY: 0

TOTAL NUMBER OF BOOKS ON YOUR BACKLIST (PRINT, ELECTRONIC, ETC.) (IN PRINT): 1,000

TOTAL NUMBER OF JOURNALS CURRENTLY PUBLISHED: 0

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. 🍷

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 that: “A study conducted by the Department of Psychology at **Indiana University** claimed ‘Because non-alcoholic beer provides sensory cues that simulate alcoholic beer, this beverage may be more effective than other placebos in contributing to a credible manipulation of

expectancies to receive alcohol’ making people feel ‘drunk’ when they physically are not.”

To strengthen our metaphor, the bar was serving Green Near Beer for the day. (It might have been St. Patrick’s Day, but Near Beer was the only bar drink available since this wasn’t a “private” club.)

The three are respectively a Consultant, an Arch Evangelist and a Librarian, all with a strong perspective and position on Green OA. Finding they could not all agree on the ostensible topic of the meeting (Green OA), they fell to considering the situation of Green Near Beer, 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. 🍷

