

Publishing a First Book

Norris Pope
Stanford University Press

Presented to the NACBS annual meeting, Boston, November, 1999

The distinguished critic Northrop Frye allegedly observed, referring to the New Historicism, that some *literary critics* can now apparently find useful things in the PRO; “and then there are critics,” he added, “who, like myself, could not find the PRO.” It’s reassuring to be among people who could certainly find the PRO.

To outline the predicament of university presses, the main North American means of publishing first books in history, I’ll turn to a metaphor, which derives from an anecdote I once heard from J.G.A. Pocock. Many years ago, Professor Pocock was invited to give a series of endowed lectures at a university in rural Texas. Then teaching in St. Louis, he decided that he and his wife would drive to the small Texas town where the university was located. The university had made prior arrangements for the Pococks to stay at the town’s leading or perhaps only motel. This motel had a large roadside sign, illuminated from within, on which large letters could be arranged at will. As the Pococks drove into town, they were immensely flattered to see that the sign carried the greeting “Welcome Professor Pocock.” The other side of the sign, which carried its more routine message, read “Thank God for traveling salesmen.”

University presses operate under just such ambiguous and double signage—on the one hand, serving the growth of knowledge and academic disciplines by publishing

refereed scholarship deemed valuable, and on the other hand, trying to sell enough books to stay in business. It will be obvious that these two goals are often in tension; and this tension will lurk behind everything I say in this brief talk.

On the assumption that talks of this kind are most useful when they're most practical, I'll organize my remarks according to a series of questions. (1) How real is the so-called crisis of the monograph? (2) What do university presses look for in an academic history manuscript? (3) How do you select a publisher? (4) When should you approach a publisher? (5) How do you approach a publisher? And (6)—the question on which I'll be *least* helpful in a short talk—how do books differ from dissertations?

How real is the crisis of the monograph?

Crisis is an alarming way of expressing a problem, but as Robert Darnton's often-discussed article in the [New York Review of Books \(March 18, 1999\)](#) indicates, university presses are finding it increasingly hard to publish first books and monographs in many areas of the humanities and social sciences because of a significant decline in library sales. Library purchasing has supplied the traditional economic foundation for scholarly publishing, and library budgets are now unable to provide adequate support for book publishing in a number of fields. The reasons for this are many and complex, but they include the increasing specialization of research knowledge in *all* fields, and the highly path-dependent nature of much research in the sciences. Serials budgets, predominantly in the sciences, end up claiming an ever-larger proportion of relatively flat library resources, with the result that monographs in the humanities and social sciences are being squeezed out. (According to the Association of Research Libraries, in 1986 the ratio of

book to journal expenditures was 44 percent to 56 percent; in 1998, it was 28 percent to 72 percent.) A traditional “just-in-case” model of library acquisitions, with an emphasis on ownership, is by necessity being replaced by a “just-in-time” model, with an emphasis on access and consortial borrowing arrangements—which has greatly eroded the sales base necessary to support scholarly books. All of this has made it unquestionably much harder to publish a first book in history. But it’s only *much harder*, not impossible: most university presses still see publishing a number of first books as an essential part of their mission.

I should add that the web makes it quite easy for individuals or institutions to provide open access to documents, whether text or images. But that’s of course not publishing in the sense currently meant by most authors or by tenure committees, for whom refereeing and selection are the critical factors, followed by marketing and a guarantee of reasonable archival stability and longevity. And so far at least, the digital revolution has not provided significant cost savings to book publishers—although there are some experiments in mixed on-line and on-demand print publication (via pdf or other page-image files) that may hold out some eventual promise.

What do university presses look for in an academic history manuscript?

For first books, significance is almost always the key ingredient—assuming, of course, that a work’s execution meets appropriately high standards. This isn’t surprising, since significance translates pretty directly into interest, prestige, and salability. As a category, significance is obviously field-specific, contested, contingent, impermanent, and to some degree hard to predict. My point, however, is that you can have an

extremely well-conducted and well-written piece of research that nevertheless remains unlikely to become a book because it fails to grapple adequately with issues or questions that deeply engage scholars and advanced students in the field. At some point, outside the framework of your degree requirements—and here I'm addressing graduate students—you'll need to think hard about why your work *really* matters, and for whom. The greater a work's significance, the wider its potential audience, including libraries outside the top hundred or so research libraries, which purchase all books from leading university presses. For some of you, it may be appropriate to think about the significance of your project when you're conceiving a dissertation topic. In other cases, the best time will be when you sit down with a completed dissertation in hand, and ask yourself (and your friends, advisors, and colleagues) how to revise your work for publication. But the question of significance remains central for scholarly publication—which is supposed to be, after all, a system for sifting projects via refereeing, editorial judgment, and also the marketplace (even if in general a subsidized marketplace), to assure the dissemination of work that is thought to matter to particular intellectual communities.

What else does a university press look for? It goes without saying that an intellectually respectable book with unusual sales potential will attract an editor's attention quite quickly, as will any book that might reach outside a particular historical field. Needless to say, however, reaching a broad audience for an academic book in British history is an extremely difficult thing to do, especially for a first-time author or for a North American university press. Also, the intellectual trajectories of different areas of history differ, and this has implications for the role and sales of first books in particular fields. At the risk of raising some hackles, I'll opine that it's easier for a really

major work to emerge from a dissertation topic in, say, Chinese or Latin American history, than from a dissertation in such a densely monograph-strewn landscape as British history. Academic and intellectual promise is a further point for university presses. Presses often take on an ill-selling first book, frequently referred to as “gambling” on a first book, when they’re persuaded that the author has a wonderful second book in mind, or a stellar career in the making. Finally, university presses are themselves focused on distinction, which is obviously a form of cultural capital. They therefore usually like to remain strong in fields where they’re already strong; and this has traditionally meant publishing a number of first books, books that used to be referred to in a less postmodern era as the “building blocks of scholarship.”

How do you select a publisher?

It’s very important to approach publishers actively publishing work in your field. If you approach a publisher not actively publishing in your field, not only are you unlikely to get much interest, but you look as if you don’t know your field very well. You should take pains to know which lists are most appropriate for your book—and (in a cover letter) to be able to mention books on a given publisher’s list with which your book would resonate well, or have a complementary fit.

It’s also important to recognize that press editors are in the business of screening and filtering, and that they have lots and lots of projects to screen and filter. Stanford Press turns down at least 150 full-blown book proposals per month. About a quarter of these are amateur, lunatic, or works of fiction or poetry; and perhaps another quarter are academic projects that simply fall outside the areas in which we actively publish. That

still leaves, however, quite a few projects to think about. And because editors are under pressure to screen and filter as quickly as they responsibly can, anything you can do to make your proposal stand out is advantageous. For example, it's helpful to get a senior person in your field or perhaps a dissertation advisor to commend your work to an editor. But you can also introduce yourself to editors at academic meetings, and try to engage their interest.

When should you approach a publisher?

There's certainly a temptation to try to secure a publishing contract as a way of strengthening your position in the job market. But a publisher is more inclined to take seriously a letter from someone who has landed a job, is a couple of years and perhaps a couple of articles beyond his or her dissertation, and has thought about how to revise his or her dissertation for a book. Because so-called raw dissertations are not usually ready to be published as books, editors tend to take more seriously projects that they have reason to think are a stage more mature. (Moreover, an academic appointment also holds out some hope of a subsidy to support a narrow study; and an appointment is also likely to provide a young scholar some paid leave to complete revisions or do further research.)

How do you approach a publisher?

I've already suggested that you attempt to have some contact with appropriate editors. At the very least, go to the websites of the presses you want to approach, and find out the names of the right editors. And write directly to them, not to the editorial department. Incidentally, whereas multiple submissions of full manuscripts are frowned upon and discouraged, there's no reason why you shouldn't send out a prospectus to a

group of publishers. Then submit the full manuscript to whichever press provides the strongest combination of standing in your field, apparent interest in your work, and desirable publishing practices.

When you approach a press, always take the trouble to create an impressive prospectus. In general, a strong prospectus has the following elements: an excellent cover letter (of no more than two or three full pages); a contents list; a résumé; and a sample chapter (often the Introduction, if you think it's strong). A chapter-by-chapter synopsis can also be enclosed, but keep it to a few pages.

Finally, it's worth emphasizing that you should use your cover letter to spell out in clear, careful, and forceful language—language that may be inappropriate for the manuscript itself—exactly why your project is significant. Say *why* the project really matters for its field, and why it will interest people in the field (and perhaps across other fields, if you can say that plausibly). Don't say that your book will interest general readers, since it probably won't, and don't make extravagant claims about markets or sales—areas in which the editor is likely to know a great deal more than you do.

How do books and dissertations differ?

In some cases, they don't; in other cases, dissertations are transformed almost beyond recognition as they become books. So there's no simple answer to this question. The conventional suggestion is to remember that the audience for a book will expect you to have mastered the sources and historiography for your topic—mastery that you often need to demonstrate at great length in a dissertation. Some of this can be eliminated, along with all references to the project as a dissertation or thesis. You may also be able

to eliminate certain sorts of appendixes and data compilations—since you can cite this material in your dissertation. And watch the length: it's much harder for a publisher to get back the investment required for a long book, and you'll force a price that puts it out of reach of all individual scholars. Focus on making the book notable, and of interest not just to people who work on your topic, but to people in your general area and, if possible, beyond it. And of course try to do all this without undoing the project's scholarly authority and value.

In conclusion, four general points

First, get as much advice as you can about your project, especially views on how to turn it into a book: from colleagues, teachers, and academic friends. Second, if you have an appointment, talk to your chair or dean or grants officer, and try to secure a promise of modest funding to accompany your manuscript as a subsidy. (Your institution is investing a lot in your career in other ways; persuade them that \$3K-\$5K of book-subsidy investment will yield high returns.) Third, think about getting one or two articles out before you worry about a book. The articles should help build an audience for the book, and they'll demonstrate for a book publisher that your work has already been well received by referees and editors. (Editors react to impressive cv's.) Finally, persevere. There are lots of scholarly publishers, and the system, far from perfect, contains many random variables. Remember, it's your *book* that will ultimately be reviewed, not the imprint. (Every major press has turned down books that have gone on to win prizes.) So keep doing the best scholarly work you can.