April 8, 2026

A note to readers:

The following text is based on a talk that I delivered recently to prospective authors on a college faculty with the goal of guiding them in how to think about securing the right publisher for their respective books.

I offer it herewith on the conviction that it will be of interest to those in academia and affiliated enterprises. Professionals in these fields come into contact with publishers in various roles: as authors, reviewers, pundits, series editors, editorial board members, translators, foundation or museum executives, producers, readers, and in future publishing positions.

I hope this piece will help illuminate those connections.

Thank you,

Peter J. Dougherty
Editor-at-Large
The American Philosophical Society Press

How to Find the Right Scholarly Publisher: Imagining *The Moon Under Water Press*

The topic of my talk, for prospective authors, is "how to find the right scholarly publisher," and I plan to begin in an improbable place, a London pub:

In 1946, George Orwell published an article in *The Evening Standard* titled "The Moon Under Water." In it, he describes an idyllic London pub which, by the end of the essay, we learn is an imaginary establishment. It is Orwell's ideal pub–possibly his ideal society in miniature. He begins his brief litany of ten defining features by focusing on "atmosphere:"

> If you are asked why you favour a particular public-house, it would seem natural to put the beer first, but the thing that most appeals to me about the *Moon Under Water* is what people call its 'atmosphere'.
>
> To begin with, its whole architecture and fittings are uncompromisingly Victorian. It has no glass-topped tables or other modern miseries, and, on the other hand, no sham roof-beams, ingle-nooks or plastic panels masquerading as oak. The grained woodwork, the ornamental mirrors behind the bar, the cast-iron fireplaces, the florid ceiling stained dark yellow by tobacco-smoke, the stuffed bull's head over the mantelpiece — everything has the solid, comfortable ugliness of the nineteenth century.
>
> In winter there is generally a good fire burning in at least two of the bars, and the Victorian lay-out of the place gives one plenty of elbow-room. There are a public bar, a saloon bar, a ladies' bar, a bottle-and-jug for those who are too bashful to buy their supper beer publicly, and, upstairs, a dining-room.

And so on (including an endearing preference for drinking beer from a china mug, as opposed to glass). Scholarly authors interested in finding the right publisher for

their books tend to concentrate on the "beer;" that is, the specifics of pricing,

format, schedule, royalties, sales, etc. And so they should. But I'd like to suggest that you consider taking a page from Orwell and focus on "atmosphere," by imagining what the ideal press might be.

Why atmosphere? A press's atmosphere comprises a set of seemingly intangible elements that will determine how effectively its team publishes your book, and how it relates to and treats you as an author. Also, the press staff constitutes the first audience for your book. The more engaged and responsive they are in responding to it, the more closely they work together, and the better they communicate with you to get it right, the likelier it will succeed.

What would *The Moon Under Water Press* look like? Here's my idea of such a press, captured in seven atmospheric elements, the equivalent of Orwell's Victorian fitting and fireplaces:

First, *The Moon Under Water Press* and its staff have a strong collective awareness of a well-defined mission: Erwin Glikes, a great editor and publisher whom I worked for years ago at The Free Press in New York liked to say that "All good publishing is *about* something." That "something" is a publisher's mission. In Erwin's case, and that of The Free Press, it was mainly about conservative politics and culture, with books such as Robert Bork's **The Tempting of America.** At the same time, another publisher across town, Routledge, was becoming synonymous with progressive politics and culture, with books such as **The Cultural Studies Reader** and authors such as bell hooks.

In those days, The Free Press and Routledge were at least partly political in their missions, and serve as good examples of mission-driven presses, but missions proliferate among scholarly publishers, from religion (the Catholic University Press) to science (The MIT Press) to regional culture (the University of New Mexico Press), to genres (the University of Iowa Press, specializing in poetry).

Even larger, more diversified presses have missions. In fact, the bigger the press, the more important an articulated mission, because large presses need a focal point to keep their sprawling publishing sharp.

I struggled with the challenge of defining a mission when I was director of Princeton University Press because we were so broad in our portfolio, encompassing not only the humanities and the social sciences, but the physical and natural sciences, as well as mathematics. It was hard to find the red thread. Eventually, I enlisted the legacy of PUP's most illustrious author, Albert Einstein. I felt that Einstein best personified our mission, comprising three elements: scholarly excellence, scientific and humanistic cross-fertilization, and global reach. This sense of mission gave us a way to organize our thinking as editors and our business as publishers. Editors working in fields as far flung as art history and geoscience and with differing approaches could come together in a shared, coherent conversation about what defines a "Princeton book." This sense of mission was important in making us attractive to authors whose books fit and enhanced our list, just as we could enhance those books through our collective focus.

I would be remiss in failing to mention that the greatest mission-minded scholarly publisher of all time was one that I encountered only late in my career at The APS

Press: Benjamin Franklin, in 1743 explicitly defined the mission of his proposed American Philosophical Society as that of "promoting useful knowledge." This exhortation would characterize the APS Press's publications from its earliest days, with works by the likes of David Rittenhouse and Franklin himself, writings that helped establish late 18th century North America as a serious scientific and scholarly place. Since then, for nearly 300 years, "useful knowledge" has been nurturing the explosion of economic growth that has raised living standards all over the world. Much like the Victorian architecture of Orwell's atmospheric pub, the APS Press set itself on a mission that was powerfully "about something." There was a real payoff to Franklin's stated mission and the atmosphere it helped to establish.

So authors seeking the right publisher should look for a press whose mission aligns best with and amplifies the author's own sense of how to help define the scholarly conversation. It creates the opportunity for *fit,* a strong if intangible feature of successful publishing.

Second, the press employs a self-assured editorial staff, who strive to change the world in their individual editorial programs, and as a team. The most important person in an author's publishing life is his or her editor, and the most important property an editor brings to publishing any book is an active commitment to a well articulated vision–a vision that draws muscle from the press's mission.

Editorial vision is not always easy to identify. For example, a field like history is probably populated by as many editors as there are presses publishing history

books (almost all presses), but every list is different because each editor is

different. So prospective authors need to find the right editor by studying the lists of relevant publishers. Good readers make good authors. Once the author has identified an editor whose list he or she admires, the next step is to find out what the editor (like me) is trying to accomplish with his list, and how he wants the books comprising his list to change the world–that is, to shape the scholarly conversation.

Editors who bring a lively vision to their work are mostly made, not born, and tend to emerge in collaborative conversation, continuous brainstorming, and hearty competition with their colleagues. An excellent scholarly press invariably will employ at least a few seasoned, *successful* editors who invest the operation with know-how and authority, in combination with younger, highly motivated editors who complement their experienced colleagues with the energy of fresh ideas, while learning from them. They help each other by thinking through the inevitable challenges that come with framing a book for publication, from asking hard questions about a book's intended readership through positioning it for the market. For example, I had a colleague at Princeton University Press, Rob Tempio, who was a wizard at coming up with book titles, and whom I would enlist whenever I needed help.

I am the product of such a symbiotic culture. When I moved from The Free Press to Princeton University Press as its economics editor in 1992, I did so with the benefit of having worked with, and learned from, some of the best editors in commercial publishing. This experience helped me develop what I thought was a compelling editorial vision for my new Princeton job. I had become an admirer of Adam Smith

and of his idea that a good society comprised not only wealth-creating

markets, but countervailing institutions such as family, religion, education, law, and government to fuse economic growth with social civility.

I wanted to build an economics list that would go beyond outstanding books in technical economics to incorporate works in economics history, sociology, law and economics, and psychology. Such a list, according to my plan, would reflect the structure and spirit of Smith's civilizing project, and enable us as a publisher to change the scholarly conversation in a purposive way.

What I discovered in pitching this self-styled vision to prospective authors is that they liked it, if only because they felt that it bought them exposure to readers beyond their closest colleagues to scholars in contiguous fields. The economists wanted to be read by historians and socioologists, and vice versa. The strategy worked, helping us build a list that, in my two-and-a-half decades at the Press, produced books by some twenty-eight Nobel Prize-winners, and three *New York Times Bestsellers,* the latter including two works by scholars specializing in economic history.

Finding an editor whose vision conforms with the author's can be decisive in a book's publication. But editorial vision all gets back to engaged editorial teamwork, so it's important for an author to keep this broader feature in mind. Perhaps even Orwell would recognize the lively editorial conference table, perhaps made in the same Victorian style as *The Moon Under Water's* bars, as another necessary dimension of a great scholarly publisher's "atmosphere."

Third, the press has a Vince Lombardi attitude with respect to book reviews, and collaborates in generating reviews. The celebrated football coach is said to

have asserted that winning isn't the most important thing; it's the only thing. At *The Moon Under Water Press,* the staff believe that reviews are the only thing, because they are. Reviews are the key to sales and all further exposure for the book and its author. If a book receives reviews, all other marketing initiatives (social media posts, email outreach, advertising, academic exhibit display) tend to work. If not, nothing works.

Publicists are the professionals employed by publishers to pitch their books for review and so, working with the book's editor, must apply their imaginations in generating review attention for their books.

With the demise of the nation's newspaper book review pages, the publicist's job has become much more challenging. In the old days, this was a simpler (if not easier) job because it entailed mainly connecting review copies with book review editors at established publications. And there were established publications–newspapers and magazines–everywhere.

Today, publicists have to be much more strategic in their approach, pinpointing online publications, blogs, substack columnists, specialist scholarly and public websites, features journalists, opinion page editors and, importantly, international publications. And it requires working with the book's editor to make sure public intellectuals within the academy are on their respective lists, and also the authors.' Effective publicity is a collaborative process, and it is well worth an author's time

confirming the quality of a publisher's publicity resources and approach before signing a contract. There's an old story that a certain New York-based commercial publisher considered publicity so vital that he employed three editors and nine publicists. Whether that's true, it certainly underscores the importance of reviews.

It is also important to realize that effective publicity targets sharply pinpointed reviewerships, not only those broadly defined. Scholarly publishers typically describe their mission as disseminating ideas. This characterization never satisfied me because it implies passivity. In fact, I've often thought that it is downright unhelpful because "disseminating" always sounds to me like crop-dusting, while what great publishers do is much closer to animating highly specific readerships–more flame-throwing than crop-dusting. By lighting up the conversation about a book within a highly specific, tightly networked community of reviewers, review publications, editors, and journalists, publicists build a book's reputation within the core readership. Then, when a book "breaks out," that is, it reaches the larger audience, it is almost always by succeeding first within the core market, then jumping the fence to the concentric circles comprising the larger market. That's not crop-dusting.

Authors typically, and justifiably, want to know about how well their book will sell. Fair enough. But first, the conversation should be about publicity, because publicity drives sales, and everything else. Author, editor, and publicist must work in tandem to achieve results. A great press will bring up publicity with prospective authors before the book is signed, so that the ideal, intended readership is clear, and can be strategically cultivated from the first day forward.

Fourth, the press displays a zeal for Thinking Big. The greatest thrill in

academic publishing, and among the most rewarding, is to invent big projects in-house. Some of the most important, successful, and enduring publications are books generated on the basis of editorial invention and initiative. An encyclopedia of your city, a companion to computer science, an introduction to research

methods, a history of the modern world; a new anthology of world literature, a series of brief texts, a program of foundational books serve as examples of big-book invention. From *The Princeton Companion to Mathematics* to the University of Texas Press's *A Big Wonderful Thing: A History of Texas,* to Yale's *Little Histories,* to the *Encyclopedia of Chicago,* presses have developed ideas for books that define fields and drive growth, and help build their all-important backlists. Inventing project ideas costs nothing, but, if effectively realized, can give personality and confidence to a press, reflecting the publisher's intellectual energy and sense of mission, and thereby making it attractive to authors.

Thinking big also implies an appetite for publishing various kinds of books–that is, not only research monographs, but texts, reference works, and trade books for multidisciplinary audiences. Such a multi-genre approach not only provides the publisher with an opportunity to amplify its presence within its chosen fields and its capacity to reach the core audience from multiple perspectives, but gives it the greater financial depth that comes with publishing for larger markets. And it reflects an editorial staff's imaginative application of its craft.

The beauty of such a press for an author is that he/she may have several opportunities to work with a favored press, on different kinds of books. This kind of relationship serves both parties well.

Fifth, the press employs a design strategy that captures and conveys its sense of mission. Our society is so visually-oriented that a publisher's graphic identity, reflected in both individual book design as well as its larger organizational design (including its logo, website, et al) stands as a window into its strategic sensibility, just as Orwell's smoky ceilings and ornamental mirrors captured its Victorian

identity. Many years ago, my colleagues and I at Princeton University Press commissioned the illustrious design firm of Chermayeff + Geismar + Haviv to revise our logo and graphic identity. We got that and much more. The designers first step was to interrogate us to find out who, exactly, we thought we were. They got into our sense of mission, and built our graphic identity–our visual atmosphere–from the inside out.

After some initial tentativeness, my colleagues and I began to clearly articulate our mission: to publish excellent scholarly books across the disciplines, to represent a great historical legacy in a totally modern way, to succeed in digital and print contexts, and to be both proudly American and boldly global. The designers came back with a new logo and graphic identity that captured visually the various dualities that defined our mission, thereby providing us with a graphic grammar for communicating our values and aspirations to the outside world. The PUP logo–our brand's aesthetic centerpiece– has held up brilliantly since we launched it in 2007.

Our heightened appreciation of design in turn affected the way we thought about and executed the design of individual titles, collectively adding up to a sharply defined Princeton look. George Orwell, given his obsession with physical features from wooden table tops to china beer mugs, would certainly have appreciated the

way design both concentrates and generates a publisher's atmosphere.

Sixth, the Press deploys a global perspective. Except for a host of locally and domestically-oriented academic fields, most subjects have global appeal, and so *The Moon Under Water Press* should be globally oriented in its publishing. This means establishing strong distribution and sales partnerships around the world, striking and maintaining excellent translation licensing relationships in all the

major language markets, and developing strong personal publishing relationships via the Frankfort, London, and other international book fairs. But it means more than that. It means thinking like a global publisher.

My greatest education as a global publisher came in the late 1980s when I worked for the Oxford-based publisher, Blackwell's. I discovered that my UK-based colleagues had to think beyond the relatively small British market to strategize how their books would perform around the world, especially the essentially important American market. The arrival of the internet as a publishing tool enhances the press's ability to reach markets around the globe if the editors, marketers, and publicists think about–focus seriously on–the global market. During my years at PUP, almost all of our growth came from outside the US. That's how important a global perspective is. Authors, too, should think about this.

Seventh, the press holds an annual dinner or lunch. It's perhaps fitting to end this talk with a reference to a social event given that it was inspired by an article about a very social pub, but staging such an occasion reflects the Press's regard for the people who enable it to thrive: the trustees, administrators, advisors, authors, and other stakeholders in the press's publishing.. The annual dinner performs the

same function for the Press as the garden does in Orwell's pub:

The great surprise of the *Moon Under Water* is its garden. You go through a narrow passage leading out of the saloon, and find yourself in a fairly large garden with plane trees, under which there are little green tables with iron chairs round them. Up at one end of the garden there are swings and a chute for the children.

On summer evenings there are family parties, and you sit under the plane trees having beer or draught cider to the tune of delighted squeals from children going down the chute. The prams with the younger children are parked near the gate.

Many as are the virtues of the *Moon Under Water*, I think that the garden is its best feature, because it allows whole families to go there instead of Mum having to stay at home and mind the baby while Dad goes out alone.

The Press's annual dinner or lunch or barbeque serves the same communal function. It is the "family-gathering place," assembling supporters, friends, and partners of various stripes in a single setting for everybody to hear about the press's publishing plans, its accomplishments, the challenges it faces, and the other markers and milestones defining its vision. As I learned at The Free Press, an editor's internal colleagues and associates are the first market. One succeeds in this market before engaging the rest of the world. If the internal staff comprise the press's first market, its external stakeholders make up its second. Personal, face-to-face engagement is vital to presses in securing the ongoing support of their stakeholders. Establishing an event--a dinner or other occasion--and repeating it yearly serves a strategic purpose by inviting the press's guests to share its internal atmosphere, and learn what it is doing.

Orwell finishes his essay by revealing that *The Moon Under Water* is an imaginary pub, but that there exist in his experience several that come close to his ideal.

But now is the time to reveal something which the discerning and disillusioned reader will probably have guessed already. There is no such place as the *Moon Under Water*.

That is to say, there may well be a pub of that name, but I don't know of it, nor do I know any pub with just that combination of qualities…

But, to be fair, I do know of a few pubs that almost come up to the *Moon Under Water*.

When I imagine *The Moon Under Water Press,* it too is imaginary, but it is also drawn from the best publishers I know of, several of whom I have had the privilege to have worked for. The closer these presses have come to the ideal, the better they serve their authors, and the more enjoyable and

gratifying an experience these authors have. So it is worth learning the atmosphere–the culture–that makes a press what it is.

THE END