Against the Grain

June 2013

From Walled-Garden to Wilderness: Publishing in the Digital Age

Donald Beagle
Belmont Abbey College, donaldbeagle@bac.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg

Part of the Library and Information Science Commons

From Walled Garden to Wilderness: Publishing in the Digital Age

by **Donald Beagle** (Director of Library Services, Belmont Abbey College, Abbot Vincent Taylor Library; Phone: 704-461-6740) <donaldbeagle@bac.edu>

In the Age of Print, publishing was like a walled garden — authors gained admission if others (editorial boards, peer reviewers) judged their work to be worthy. If not, authors were kept outside and only then considered self-publishing, which was not considered very respectable. In the Digital Age, those walls are crumbling; and the garden becomes a wilderness. Print publishers see their economies of scale erode, and self-publishing is losing its stigma. Today, librarians will not necessarily find the best new works laid out in an orderly manner. We need to develop a "hunter-gatherer" mindset and learn from their skills. It helps that good authors (our "quarry") *want* to be found. How might we help them and thereby help our libraries select quality self-published content?

I first ran the gauntlet of traditional publishing with two books, one with a trade press, the other academic. Both were successful — a point I make to stress that my move to self-publishing is driven by new opportunities, not old frustrations. My self-publishing projects thus far include a third book through print-on-demand and a fourth through **Amazon's** Kindle eBook channel (properly known as **Amazon** Direct Publishing). I will briefly compare these four experiences, and — importantly — describe why the differing nature of each project dictated varying routes to publication. Then, I will offer thoughts about future scenarios.

Trade Press

The Information Commons Handbook (**Neal-Schuman, 2006**) — This project grew out of articles written for the *Journal of Academic Librarianship* and published in the 1990s by **JAI Press**. Positive reaction prompted **JAI** to offer me a book contract in 1999. But print publishing was already churning, and **JAI** was soon swallowed by **ABLEX**. Even as I revised the draft for **ABLEX**, it was swallowed by a bigger fish named **Elsevier**, with yet another editorial slant. After further revisions, I found this an uncomfortable fit and withdrew. The project languished until 2004 when **Neal-Schuman's** editors saw growing momentum for the **Information Commons**. With contributions by colleagues **D. Russell Bailey** and **Barbara Tierney**, the book went to press in October 2006.

Online media played a crucial role in the title's rapid acceptance. The book was announced on the INFOCOMMONS-L discussion list. More importantly, it was mentioned in **Stephen Abram's** high-profile blog. In a widely-read blog at **OCLC**, **Lorcan Dempsey** described attending a workshop where two experienced IC managers endorsed the book. Traditional media also played a key part: after receiving a "starred" review in *LJ*, the *Handbook* received positive reviews in seven profes-sional journals worldwide.[1] A WorldCat search now indicates that of the forty-two titles issued by **Neal-Schuman** in 2006, the *Handbook* currently ranks fourth in number of catalogued library holdings. By 2012, the online posting of favorable Commons' assessments on campuses where the *Handbook* was used in IC development continues to drive sales. **Google Scholar** indicates the book has been cited ninety-five times — definitely an undercount, but valid as a benchmark in comparison to **Google Scholar** counts for other monographs on the same topic.

Academic Press

Poet of the Lost Cause (**University of Tennessee Press, 2008**) — While the *Handbook* met an emerging need, my second book addressed a longstanding gap in the scholarly record. **Abram J. Ryan** had been a battlefield chaplain in the Civil War, an important newspaper editor, and a poet, whose volume of verse became one of the bestselling collections in U.S. history since it went through forty-seven editions by the 1930s. Academics on numerous campuses had tried to write his biography but failed due to difficulties researching **Ryan's** fragmented archival record. By the 1990s, **Ryan** was the most significant 19th-century U.S. poet without a biography.

In 2000, I discovered an important archive of Ryan papers, including letters to his family from the warfront. Further **Ryaniana** emerged via digitization projects such as **REA-DEX** historical newspapers and **Google Books**. These proved critical not only in reconstructing **Ryan's** narrative, but also in documenting his cultural importance as a reason why his biography should be published. **Ryan's** fame from 1865 through the 1930s was legendary. (**President McKinley** recited his verses in the White House; **Margaret Mitchell** gave him a cameo role in *Gone with the Wind*.) Today, his cultural impact has become occluded. With co-author **Bryan Giemza**, I unearthed findings that surprised historians: an interview from the *New York Times*; a poem in the *Saturday Evening Post*; praise by period critics in journals like *The Dial*, *New Eclectic*, and *Southern Literary Messenger*.

Poet of the Lost Cause appeared in April 2008. Even though its topic seemed less amenable to digital publicity than the *Handbook*, online reactions were important. Professor **Michael Pasquier**, at **Harvard** on a fellowship from the **American Academy of Arts and Letters**, gave the book favorable comment in a highly-regarded blog. On the popular side, newspapers that no longer included book reviews in their downsized paper editions gave it notice online. The scholarly print record was even more generous as the book received positive reviews in nine academic journals during a period when many deserving titles received only one or two reviews (if any). It was certainly not a bestseller as it was issued into the fierce headwind of the 2008 economic collapse and subsequent budget cuts. But again, a WorldCat search indicates that of the forty-four titles published in 2008 by **University of Tennessee Press**, *Poet of the Lost Cause* ranks sixth best in catalogued library holdings.

Print-On-Demand

The Life and Art of Ralph Ray, Jr. (**XLibris, 2009**) — Given these positive experiences, why turn to self-publishing? Print publishing entails financial risks. This factor weighs against acceptance of monographs that treat topics of regional or limited topical interest as in the following book on artist/illustrator **Ralph Ray, Jr.** This title also "illustrates" the cost factor of risk as publishers weigh expense versus likely demand. Any title requiring illustrations — color in particular — is at a disadvantage. Other production factors also figure into cost calculations — **University of Tennessee Press** allowed 35 black and white illustrations for *Poet of the Lost Cause* but, to cut costs, published the book in 10-point type (which one faculty colleague likened to reading a 300-page footnote).

Ray was an artistic prodigy who grew up during the 1930s in North Carolina and went on to become a successful illustrator of more than 50 young adult books issued by New York publishers through the 1950s. **Ray** also did remarkable watercolors of wildlife and illustrated two classic bird books for **Oxford University Press (OUP)** in the 1940s. In 2005, faculty colleague **Robert Tompkins** and I began roaming the southeast with a digital camera to document scattered originals in museums, galleries, and private collections. But the prospects for a biography remained dim. We felt the book might be a fit for **OUP**, but **OUP** expressed no interest. Fortunately, two foundations with ties to western NC gave us production grants, which we used to underwrite self-publication through **XLibris**.

This book has been successful, but primarily through our own promotional efforts

aimed at **Ray's** regional appeal. We gathered works from **Ray's** relatives for an exhibit at the Schiele Museum of Natural History, including a well-attended reception and book signing. We submitted the book for scholarly recognition and received the **Willie Parker Peace Award** from the **Society of North Carolina Historians**. We underestimated, however, the demands of promotion on our own limited time and energy. Our efforts to reach libraries beyond the Carolinas remained stunted. For instance, my online search revealed a "**Ralph Ray, Jr.** Collection" in the **University of Minnesota's** Children's Literature Research Collections (CLRC), including original **Ray** sketches. But my email to CLRC announcing our book brought no response, one of numerous cases where further follow-up seemed not worth the time and energy.[2]

Neither **Tompkins** nor I were on Facebook in 2009. Were we to issue such a book now, we feel that Facebook could offer a promising channel. A number of authors I befriended in college writing seminars now use Facebook to promote titles. **Anne Serling**, for example, has linked her personal Facebook page to an auxiliary page promoting her newly released memoir about her father, screenwriter **Rod Serling** of "Twilight Zone" fame. As this is written, Facebook has announced the beta release of its new Graph Search app — a tool that, with future refinement, may offer users (and librarians) new ways to trace patterns of "likes" and endorsements across the social network. Were a similar app designed for the academic blogosphere, with appropriate metadata, we might have a tool to make visible what used to be nicknamed the "invisible college" with associated article and book recommendations.[3]

Amazon Kindle eBook

The Collected Works of Abram J. Ryan **(in progress)** — Research on the **Ryan** biography uncovered a remarkable number of poems and essays never before published or published in fugitive outlets. These are historically important but did not fit into the biography. When I received a formal invitation to deliver a presentation in Richmond for the Civil War Sesquicentennial, I felt my topic ("**Fr. Abram Ryan** and the Civil War Chaplains," scheduled for April 2014) would make early 2014 an ideal time to release a major new collection of **Ryan's** writings. While **University of Tennessee Press** has been wonderful in supporting the biography, I have decided to pursue this as a Kindle eBook. This gives me production flexibility to avoid another large volume in 10-point typeface and allows a sale price under $10 per copy. It also permits more illustrations — vital to convey the scale of **Ryan's** 19th-century cultural impact.

Conclusion: Future Strategies

We need to track developments across a number of social media fronts beyond established channels like Pinterest and Goodreads: the next iteration of **Google's** Penguin/Panda search engine optimization (SEO), future refinements to **Google** Analytics and Alerts, Facebook's aforementioned Graph Search app, and federated knowledge discovery keyed to what **Lederman** terms the "deep Web."[4] What might librarians do with access to reader analytics as discussed in the *Wall Street Journal* article "Your E-Book is Reading You?[5] Crowd-source collection development? A full discussion is beyond the scope of a 2,000 word article. For now, the low-hanging fruit, in my view, is still the blogosphere. My first two books clearly benefited from its impact. As librarian, I am consequently more attuned to seeking out influential blogs in disciplines where I might find mention of authors and titles.[6] After all, blogging has become the quintessential first rung in the self-publishing ladder. Dissertation research by **Carolyn Hank** supports digital curation of academic blogs and reveals that 80% of scholar bloggers believe their blogs should be preserved for future access.[7] The best deserve to be archived for their own worth, perhaps using a curatorial tool like BlogForever.[8] Tracking disciplinary aggregators like Researchblogging.org can yield blogged references to articles and monographs. For instance, a study posted at altmetrics.org explores preferences among science bloggers for articles in certain subcategories of journals.[9] By early 2014, I will definitely be seeking opportunities to post mention of my forthcoming Kindle eBook on Civil War-related academic and popular blogs. 🐗

Endnotes

1. A list of the journal issues with reviews of *The Information Commons Handbook* and *Poet of the Lost Cause* can be accessed on my LinkedIn profile, at: *http://linkd.in/rDKecu*. Accessed: February 1, 2013.

2. "**Ralph Ray Jr.** Collection," *Children's Literature Research Collections*. **Elmer L. Andersen Library**, **University of Minnesota**: *http://special.lib.umn.edu/findaid/xml/CLRC-1276.xml*. Accessed: February 1, 2013.

3. **Donald Beagle**, "Visualization of Metadata," *Information Technology and Libraries*. 18 (4), 1999. pp. 192-99.

4. **Abe Lederman**, "Science Research: Journey to Ten Thousand Sources," Special Libraries Association Annual Conference – June 15, 2009. Available at: *http://www.sla.org/pdfs/sla2009/SciResJourneyTenThouSources.pdf*. Accessed: February 1, 2013.

5. **Alexandra Alter**, "Your E-book is Reading You," *Wall Street Journal*, July 19, 2012. Available at: *http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304870304577490950051438304.html*. Accessed: February 1, 2013.

6. And of course book-review blogs continue to multiply. See: "Top 50 Books Blogs," BlogRank: the top blogs in one place. Available at: *http://www.invesp.com/blog-rank/books*. Accessed: February 1, 2013.

7. **Carolyn Hank**. (2011). *Scholars and their Blogs: Characteristics, Preferences, and Perceptions Impacting Digital Preservation* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses database (UMI No. 3456270).

8. "Blog forever," BlogForever Consortium. Available at: *http://blogforever.eu/*. Accessed: February 1, 2013.

9. **Hadas Shema** and **Judit Bar-Ilan**. "Characteristics of Researchblogging.org Science Blogs and Bloggers." Available at: *http://altmetrics.org/workshop2011/shema-v0/*. Accessed: February 1, 2013.

See also: **Cornelius Puschmann**, "Form and Function of Digital Genres of Scholarly Communication: Results of the SciLogs study," Conference on Science and the Internet (#cosci12), August 1-3, 2012, **Düsseldorf**. Available at: *http://www.slideshare.net/coffee001/form-and-function-of-digital-genres-of-scholarly-communication-results-of-the-scilogs-study*. Accessed: February 1, 2013.

writing a column for *ATG* and **Joey** is writing a column for *The Charleston Advisor*! *http://libguides.library.cofc.edu/notmeet*

And speaking of **TCA**, did you see the **CRL** website's posting about the reviews in TCA which are a free benefit to **CRL members**? *www.charlestonco.com* *www.crl.edu/news*

And, did you hear that **CRL** and the **North East Research Libraries Consortium (NERL)** recently came to an agreement to relocate **NERL** operations to **CRL**? Under this new arrangement **NERL** will be managed as a cooperative program under the **CRL** organizational umbrella. There is a job posting for the **NERL Program Director** at **CRL**. **CRL** is looking for someone who can be a strong and astute negotiator and is well versed in collection development. During the next few months, the incumbent will work with **Joan Emmet**, the current **NERL Director at Yale**, to ensure an orderly transfer of the program to **CRL**. Posted on the *ATG* Job Bank 4/18/13. *http://www.against-the-grain.com/2013/04/job-bank-41813/*

And just learned from the wonderful **Becky** Lenzini, the publisher of *The Charleston Advisor*, that her daughter, **Anne**, is moving to New York where she will work for **Teach for America** in a Brookyln-based charter school. She will teach AP English and writing for seniors. You might recall that **Anne** used to work for **Serials Solutions**. **Anne's** colleague, the highly-competent **Brian Sloan**, will continue to work from New York for **Serials Solutions**.

Long-time **Charleston Conference** attendee, **Diane Lohr** (Trident Technical College) <diane.lohr@tridentech.edu> will be presented a plaque at the upcoming **PASCAL general members meeting**. **Diane** has served as