From Morse Code to Metadata: Bringing Scholarship to the World

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As the thirteenth director of Cornell University Press since 1869, I arrive each morning acutely aware of my place in the continuum of this outstanding institution—the first of its kind in the nation. My current position reaches back in a direct line to Andrew Dickson White, who helped found the university and identified the need for a press to serve as an “intellectual organ” that would provide a publication outlet for scholarly achievements. White arranged the donation of a steam-driven cylinder press and type—our technology has fortunately advanced significantly since then. Since joining the press in 2015, I have focused my efforts on enabling the global access to and discovery of our high-quality humanities and social sciences scholarship, fulfilling the land-grant mission of Cornell University by demonstrating openness, promoting public accessibility, and disseminating knowledge that shapes the future of the world.

My office is just inside the mammoth front doors of Sage House, now a scholarly oasis on a terraced hillside halfway

down East State Street. Cornell trustee Henry W. Sage built the house as his home and we now meet to discuss projects in the former dining room where he, President A. D. White, and the other members of the board of trustees discussed the future of the university. Sage House was later the Cornell Infirmary. Vestiges of the X-ray equipment remain visible on the conference room ceiling and this gives the press its modern day bona fides as a laboratory for experimentation and innovation.

On a shelf next to my desk rests a formidable corduroy ledger that tracked every expenditure from 1930 to the 1950s in handwritten columns. The production costs for our best-selling title, *The Handbook of Nature-Study* by Anna Botsford Comstock, were adroitly captured. The royalties for Linus Pauling's *The Nature of the Chemical Bond* totaled more than

\$30,000 in the 1950s. Copies of correspondence from Vladimir Nabokov to former director Victor Reynolds are tucked between the pages. Throughout our history, we've published thousands of award-winning books and launched numerous careers. The history of the press is palpable to the touch.

The press is thriving in 2019. Our annual scholarly output is currently the highest in the press's history at 150 new titles per year. Our entire publication output—nearly 7,000 titles—is in the process of being digitized. We serve the *academy* as a credentialing body supporting the tenure process for thousands of scholars since our inception. We are aligned with the *university*, publishing faculty and Cornellians such as former president Frank H. T. Rhodes, ILR professor Samuel Bacharach, and the poet A. R. Ammons. We support the *community* through the publication of field guides and practical scientific research in books like *The Beekeeper's Handbook*. We provide visibility and access to our titles throughout the world via open access and digital collections. In an era of so-called fake news, the press is an authoritative voice. From the UN's role in covering up the cholera epidemic in Haiti (*Deadly River*), to a never-before-reported Bosnian genocide (*Violence as a Generative Force*), to a journalist's undercover view of a fascist group in Italy (*Sacrifice*), we take seriously our vision to change the world one book at a time.

I often reflect on university founder Ezra Cornell, who passionately pursued the idea of connecting communities through the telegraph, creating a vast network of communication. Samuel F. B. Morse hired Cornell to lay the cable for the test line because he had designed the machine to dig the trench. Publishing ground-breaking works requires an in-the-trenches mindset. As we enter our anniversary year, our publications are reaching communities in 150 countries. University presses like ours actively engage in ideas and

solutions for making the world a better place through scholarship. Our classic titles can now engage new generations of scholars around the world. Our new books will reach a global audience through the discoverability and accessibility of the digital age. We refer to these activities as “Cornell Open.”

We begin our next 150 years with a commitment to openness and inclusion. A. D. White’s vision for the diffusion of learning and Ezra Cornell’s advocacy for making higher education available to all gave rise to a university press. Our efforts to bring scholarship to the world extend the mission of Cornell University—that any person interested in any course of study can discover the scholarship contained within our publications. White’s steam-driven press is long gone but our insightful forebears would most emphatically support and embrace our efforts today. Imagine a world in which university presses play a lead role in extending their university’s brand on a global scale through the release of openly accessible monographs. It’s already happening.