

Hawkins Award Acceptance Speech

AAP/PSP meeting, 10 February 1994
Claude Conyers, Oxford University Press

Mr. Sweete, Ladies and Gentlemen, Colleagues and Friends,

Some years ago, an Oxford author, G. M. Young, is reported to have said that "being published by the Oxford University Press is rather like being married to a duchess. It is sometimes more an honor than a pleasure." Whatever the circumstances that occasioned this plaintive remark, I trust that I may take it as a point of departure for noting that it is both an honor and a pleasure for me to accept, on behalf of Oxford University Press, the Hawkins Award for our series of books on the Buildings of the United States and to have the opportunity to address this distinguished gathering.

We are here tonight, in our nation's capital, as an association of American publishers engaged in professional and scholarly publishing in all fields of research and study. Before I tell you a bit about the books that have won this year's Hawkins Award—the product of American scholarship on a distinctly American subject—I would like to set this series in the context of Oxford's current publishing program by sharing with you some facts from the long and interesting history of Oxford University Press.

There were people making books in Oxford at least as early as 1215. The scholarly activities of the university, dating from the twelfth century, provided work for scribes and bookbinders from the early thirteenth century until well into the fifteenth. In 1478, only a year after William Caxton printed his first book at Westminster, Theodoric Rood, a printer from Cologne then resident in Oxford, printed a book purporting to be an exposition of the Apostles' Creed

by Saint Jerome. This work is celebrated as the first book to be printed in Oxford and as the beginning of the history of Oxford University Press. Honesty compels me to confess that it is also notable for containing a major typographical error: the publication date, given in roman numerals, was printed as 1468 instead of 1478. Clearly, Mr. Rood could have used the help of a good proofreader.

Undaunted, he continued to print books for the university, chiefly grammar books and academic texts. But the experiment did not last, and for the next century the printing of books at Oxford was erratic, if not dormant. In 1586, however, things took a decided turn for the better. A Decree of Star Chamber officially empowered the university to print books, the post of Printer to the University was then formally established, with the tacit permission of Queen Elizabeth I, and from then onward a steady stream of books has issued forth, many of them dealing with American topics. If not the first of these, then undoubtedly among the earliest, and certainly the most notable, was Captain John Smith's Map of Virginia, published in 1612.

In the nineteenth century, in the heyday of the British Empire, Oxford University Press began its great international outreach, as salesmen of Bibles and other books traveled around the globe and set themselves up in trade. Over the years, offices were established in India, in the African colonies, in the Far East, in Australia and Canada, and, of course, in the United States.

Oxford University Press–USA was founded in 1896, just two years shy of a century ago. In fairly short order, the firm was transformed from being simply a sales office for books produced in England to being a producer of its own books and a publisher in its own right, joining the vigorous ranks of American publishers in the early decades of the twentieth century. Although quasi-independent in our publishing decisions and operations, OUP-USA is very much a part of the worldwide network of the university press, and our mandate is the furtherance of the academic, educational, and cultural goals of our parent university. We have a commitment to publish learned works in the arts and sciences, and—whether we be seen as an American publisher with an international reach or an international publisher located on American soil—we

have for almost a hundred years taken a particular interest in American studies. Today, our lists of works in American history, American music, and American literature are among the longest and strongest in our catalog.

Thus, in 1986 it was with particular pleasure that Ed Barry, president of Oxford University Press–USA, signed a contract with the Society of Architectural Historians for publication of a series of books on the Buildings of the United States. This series, inspired by and modeled upon Sir Nikolaus Pevsner's forty-six-volume, county-by-county survey of the Buildings of England, is designed to cover—and here I quote from the jacket copy— "the dynamic heterogeneity of American architecture on a state-by-state basis."

Upon completion the series will include either fifty-five or seventy volumes, depending on how you count, on who's counting, and on a number of factors that are currently unclear. The architecture of some densely populated, heavily built, and culturally diverse states (California and New York) will obviously require several volumes for adequate coverage. Many states (Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Virginia) will probably require two. Whatever the final number of volumes in the series, its aim is to provide a complete record of America's architectural heritage on a national scale from early settlement to the present.

The first four volumes in the series, on Michigan, Iowa, Alaska, and the District of Columbia, were published in 1993. If you examine the copies on display in the PSP book exhibit, you will find information on, and illustrations of, not only the structures that you expect to find— courthouses, churches, theaters, great homes, businesses, industrial complexes, university campuses, and public monuments—and not only on buildings that you may be pleased to find— sod houses, log cabins, mining camps, taverns, saloons, farmsteads, barns, and silos—but on architecturally notable examples of a good many kinds of building that you may be somewhat startled to find—gas stations, hamburger stands, dry cleaners, and other commercial establishments necessary to our everyday lives. In the volume on the District of Columbia, you will find information on all the great buildings of our federal government, including the Cannon House Office Building, where we are gathered tonight. In the volume on Alaska, you will find information on a prototypical duplex doghouse that serves as the equivalent of a garage in our northernmost state. The whole

range of building types—public and private; urban and rural; civic, commercial, industrial, and domestic—is here.

When the series is complete. . . . Ah, well, when will that be? It took eight years from the signing of the contract in 1986 until publication of the first four volumes in 1993. At that rate, publication of the last volume in the series—if it totals fifty-five volumes, as I expect—will be 102 years hence, in 2096, the bicentennial of OUP-USA. If the series totals seventy volumes, as Ed Barry hopes, the last volume would not see the light of day until 2125. Both Ed and I do, of course, hope that we can bring forces and resources to bear that will enable us, or our successors, or their successors, to complete the series well before either of these projected dates.

In any event, Oxford University Press has a tradition of perseverance to uphold, a tradition of "hanging in there for the long haul." We have, as publishers, the distinction of two entries in *The Guinness Book of World Records*. One record is for accepting the most overdue manuscript in the history of publishing. In 1901, a young chemist signed a contract with Oxford for publication of a book entitled *Studies in the History of Chemistry*. He delivered his manuscript sixty-nine years later, in 1970, and it was published the following year. Our other publishing record is for keeping a book in print for the longest period of time, or—viewed from another perspective—as publishers of the world's slowest selling book. This dubious honor belongs to a translation of the New Testament from Coptic into Latin, which was published in 1716 in a printing of five hundred copies. The last copy of the first printing was sold 191 years later, in 1907.

I trust that Oxford's long history of publishing and its tradition of perseverance will stand us in good stead in future years as the volumes of the Buildings of the United States continue to appear, initially in print and subsequently in digitized form. The first four volumes make it clearly evident, I believe, that the series is a remarkable undertaking, that it will provide a unique record of America's cultural heritage of inestimable value to scholars and to everyone interested in our nation's history.

The series was first conceived in the 1940s, by an early president of the Society

of Architectural Historians, Turpin Bannister, but it remained only a dream for many years. In the late 1970s, spurred by a challenge from Sir Nikolaus Pevsner himself, successive presidents of the society began to lay plans for realizing the dream. In the 1980s, with a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the society was able to make the series official, under the direction of founding editors Adolf Placzek and Bill Pierson.

With full acknowledgment of the vision and determination of all the officers of the Society of Architectural Historians, past and present, and of the knowledge, skill, and judgment of all the scholars who have served as authors and editors of the first four volumes of Buildings of the United States, I am happy to accept the R. R. Hawkins Award for the outstanding scholarly publication of 1993.

I congratulate the PSP judges on their choice, and I thank you all for your attention.