

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARC A. JOLLEY

Keith Harper, editor of *The Journal of Baptist Studies*, recently interviewed Marc Jolley, who serves as the director of Mercer University Press. Over the past four decades MUP has established itself as a leading academic publisher in the field of Baptist Studies.

KH: How did you get into publishing?

MJ: Broadman & Holman Books needed a copyeditor and they called a professor at Southern Seminary—Page Kelley—and he recommended me. I could not believe anyone would pay me not only to read books, but also to comment on them.

KH: Have you seen any trends in Baptist history over the past 10-15 years?

MJ: The trend I have seen is “interest.” In the United States, the “controversy” that the SBC faced in the 1980s and 1990s spurred an interest in identity and a need to take serious looks into Baptist history. This, along with the supposed decline of denominationalism, has created this interest. But, more, students in American History are now investigating the function of religion in history and culture as never before, and Baptists were major players in the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries.

KH: How has technology changed the way MUP publishes Baptist history, i.e. the Internet, print on demand, etc.?

MJ: It has helped in two ways. One, there are more options in how to publish. And, two, with print-on-demand, things can stay in-print indefinitely.

KH: Are all MUP titles available as print-on-demand titles?

MJ: No. Only some of the older titles are available. As print-runs sell out, books will either be reprinted (if demand is present) or will go to p.o.d.

KH: Of the titles MUP has published under your direction, which one has been the most memorable? Most controversial? Most surprising? Most disappointing? And, of course, *why*?

MJ: Memorable. There are three. A book I edited called *Distinctively Baptist: A Festschrift for Walter B. Shurden* is a book of essays on Baptist history in honor of the editor of our Baptists series. He had no idea it was being done and we surprised him with it the night he received the Judson-Rice Award. Similarly, two other Festschriften, one for Fisher Humphries (*Theology in the Service of the Church*) and one for Harry Leon McBeth (*Turning Points in Baptist History*) are memorable in that they not only honor two legends in Baptist academic life, but they are excellent books on their own. The most controversial book is probably the book by James Slatton, *W. H. Whitsitt: The Man and the Controversy*. This was controversial for a number of reasons before it was ever published. Why? Buy the book.

The most surprising? Again, there are two. The first is *Send the Light: Lottie Moon's Letters and Other Writings*, edited by Keith Harper. It was surprising because it was a book that should have been done a long time ago, and it was an honor that MUP could have a role in its publication. The other is *A Genetic History of Baptist Thought* by William Brackney. It is just as surprising because that book is mentioned at every Baptist meeting I attend. Its popularity is surprising for a book as large as it is.

The most disappointing? I don't have one for this category, but there are a few that have disappointed in sales and the reason that bothers me is I know how good those books are and how much they would contribute to Baptist life if more people would take the time to digest them.

KH: How do first-time authors get started?

MJ: They need good support from their professor and from their dissertation committee if they want to publish their dissertations. There is much to go into here. Essentially, a person needs to find a topic not written about or a perspective not taken on an old topic or they need to dig and find new letters, diaries, and other materials to make a book needed. And, just as important, they need to be able to write engagingly.

KH: Would you describe Mercer's approach to publishing Baptist history?

MJ: We seek a balance between general and scholarly interest. Arcane subjects or subjects too small for an audience may be of interest to some, but sales potential does have a say in what is published. We look for both topics missed by earlier scholars as well as new approaches to old ideas.

KH: Describe Mercer's review process for publication.

MJ: Each manuscript is reviewed in-house by an editor and by an outside reader or editor of the series. After the manuscript is approved by the editorial team the acquisitions board makes the final decision.

KH: What sort of rights does an author have to their own work?

MJ: These rights are negotiable. Although, few of our Baptist authors need to worry about film rights.

KH: What is your manuscript acceptance to rejection ratio?

MJ: We receive about 300-350 submissions per year and we publish about 36-40 books per year.

KH: Does the Press have page minimums and maximums?

MJ: Not really. But suffice it to say that we did not publish a 96-page “history of the world” that was offered to us many years ago. Our parameters are mostly on necessity. Is the subject covered? Is it done so economically? Is it engaging?

KH: Are some books more difficult than others to publish?

MJ: Yes.

KH: If so, what might complicate a book’s publication?

MJ: The audience. The author. The publisher. The retailers. Each of these can be a complication in many ways.

KH: What are the advantages of publishing with a university press like Mercer?

MJ: Two things. One is that Mercer is an academic publisher. We are looking for academic integrity, not biased propaganda. Two is that we are small enough to make the experience personal. Each book is critical to our success, and therefore, each author is important to us.

KH: About how long does it take for a finished manuscript to get into publication (i.e., Press production time)?

MJ: The contract usually states that the book will be published 12-15 months after the final manuscript is submitted and accepted.

KH: What about royalties? Are Baptist historians apt to make a fortune?

MJ: No. Mostly because the Press itself is on a shoestring budget. But also, books that we publish rarely sell more than 500—1,500 copies.

KH: If you could change one thing about Mercer's academic publication, what would it be?

MJ: Nothing.

KH: Over the past generation do you think Baptists have tended to receive more scholarly attention than other religious groups?

MJ: Yes. But not as much attention in the media. The media treats one Baptist as representative of all Baptists. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

KH: If so, why?

In part due to the widespread interest in religion in the South as a growing subject.

KH: Is it my imagination or has Mercer published a relatively large number of Baptist biographies since you became director? Is there any particular reason for that?

MJ: We have published books on particular (no Baptist pun intended) individuals but they are more on their thought and writings than their lives. However, biographies are always welcome. Biographies sell well, and books on individual thinkers do well.

KH: Let's play, "What if..." What would you say to a young grad student or early career scholar at Somewhere U if they told you they had been discouraged from studying Baptists?

MJ: They need a different professor. If they have an interest in the subject then they should pursue it. There is plenty to pursue.

KH: I see that MUP has launched a new series titled "Early English Baptist Texts." Would you give our readers some details about this series?

MJ: The series will focus on Baptist English texts of the seventeenth-century. The selected works were penned by seven different English Baptists leaders, namely: John Smyth (d. 1612), Thomas Helwys (1550?-1616?), John Murton (d. 1625), William Kiffin (b. 1616), Katherine Sutton (1630-1663), Hanserd Knollys (c. 1599-1691), and Thomas Grantham (1634-1692). The first volume will be out in the late Spring 2009.

KH: Do you plan any other series in the near future?

MJ: We have another great series being discussed but nothing definite yet, although it is most likely to happen. It will focus on Baptists in America.

KH: Does Mercer University Press do anything to "cultivate" Baptist historians, i.e. workshops at professional meetings, etc?

MJ: That is a great suggestion, if I can call it that. Maybe that would be the thing I would change about Mercer's publishing program. I have thought about some kind of award for the best Baptist dissertation of the year, but have done little with the idea. Hmmmmm?

KH: Are there any books about Baptists not currently available that you would like to see? Why? (Here I'm thinking about books that need to be reprinted and/or books that *ought* to be written but for some reason have not been.)

MJ: The biggest neglect here is in the area of biography. We are publishing this year a biography of George W. Truett. I think someone needs to write a dual biography of Smyth & Helwys. Biographies of Lottie Moon and Annie Armstrong are long overdue. People have mentioned these to me, but no one is doing them (the only things that have been done are of a previous generation and there is much new material). And, someone needs to write a biography of Martin Luther King Jr. as a Baptist. What about Billy Graham as a Baptist? What about Baptist presidents? This area is wide-open.

KH: As you see it, what constitutes good scholarship?

MJ: Balance, fairness, integrity—these words come to mind. Anything written with an agenda from the left, the right, the top, the bottom, is lacking in vision and integrity.

KH: Mercer recently published its first Baptist history textbook—how did publishing a textbook differ from any other type of book?

MJ: Audience. Doug Weaver's *In Search of the New Testament Church: The Baptist Story* was written for college readers. He let his students read drafts. I told him that if they could not understand it then he had to rewrite it. He did a remarkable job.

KH: Isn't it a bit unusual, even risky, for a University Press to publish a textbook?

MJ: Not at all. Seriously, it is like any other book to us on our list. Now, if we were to do quantum physics or finite mathematics, then yes. But a Baptist History book has a wider audience than just students.

KH: Some texts have readers with primary source material. Do you plan to publish a reader for *In Search of the New Testament Church*?

MJ: No plans unless someone would like make such a proposal.

KH: Would you describe Mercer's marketing strategy?

MJ: It is focused on our core business. We look to sell the books to scholars, students, libraries, to any interested reader.

KH: Most professional societies have special awards for books and authors, i.e., the American Society of Church History's Albert C. Outler Prize, the Philip Schaff Prize, etc. Does Mercer nominate their books for such awards? If so, would you explain that process?

MJ: Yes, of course. Those groups or societies awarding prizes are often sending out notices. More importantly, we ask our authors to let us know of any prizes. The process varies from prize to prize. Most want only a few copies of the book for the judges and some want up to several hundred dollars (we shy away from some of those).

KH: B&H Academic, a division of LifeWay Christian Resources, recently launched a series dedicated to Baptist history and theology. How does a commercial press like LifeWay differ from a university press like Mercer?

MJ: First, their new series should make a real contribution to the discussion and the field. However, commercial publishers must make a profit. They must look for sales in the thousands. Mercer looks for sales of 500 or more (for our academic books). Commercial publishers (at least most) usually do not peer review their books. So, any criticism comes after the fact. For academic (university presses) such review comes early and eliminates some of the criticism (this is not perfect).

KH: I've noticed that some presses have begun publishing rather large-scale histories again—David Kennedy's *Freedom from Fear*, George Herring's *From Colony to Superpower*, not to mention Mercer's own *Baptist Theology: A Four Century Study* by James Leo Garrett. Do you think we will ever see the large-scale Baptist histories again?

MJ: First, the books you mention are by Oxford University Press. They are more of a commercial press than we are. That they publish such large books is more astonishing. Our book by James Leo Garrett is astounding in size and scope. As I write this, the book has been in our warehouse for only three weeks. Mercer's philosophy on this is, why do a 200-page history of Baptist Theology when everyone would be complaining on what was left out. With Garrett's the opposite will be true. They will complain about its size while they enjoy its comprehensiveness. Sure, he may have left someone out and there will be people who will pick, but why do a book that needs to be redone because the first one was incomplete. As a professor of mine once said, "the great thing about such a large book is that no one else will have to that again for some time."

KH: What do you think the field of Baptist history will look like ten years from now?

MJ: I think it will be as fragmented as ever, and yet it should be thriving. After all, fragmentation is what we Baptists do best. The fragmentation does not concern me, as long as it's done with integrity and responsibility.