

BOOKS *to Believe In*

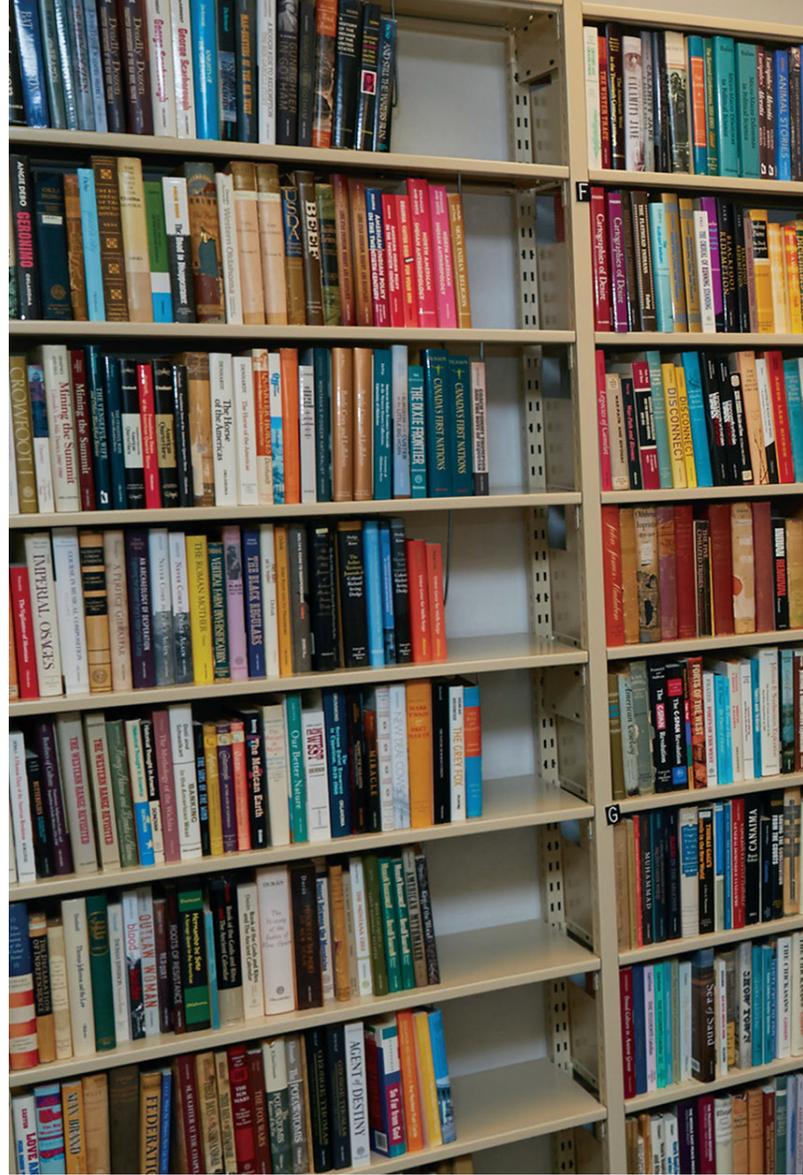
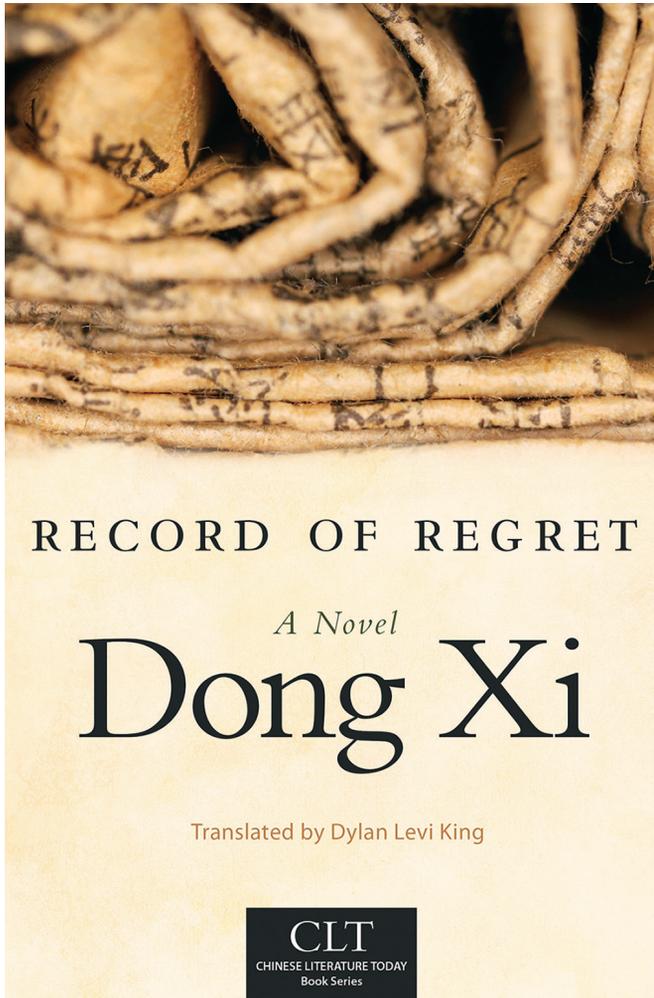
With an international reputation for excellence, the OU Press begins its 90th year of supporting scholars and sharing knowledge with the world.

Of all human endeavors, the creation of paper might be one of those seminal turning points in history. When paper was bound into books in the 1400s, the dissemination of thought, knowledge and scholarship was suddenly much more widespread and portable. Unlike stone tablets, papyrus scrolls, and electronic devices, paper can survive for millennia. The continuous publishing of books is a testament to the ongoing quest for information and the desire for shared scholarship that continues to this day.

That sharing of scholarship is the foundation upon which the fifth president of the University of Oklahoma, William Bennett Bizzell, formed an operation to publish books. His desire was to spread the scholarship of his faculty beyond the university campus. In 1928, Bizzell recruited OU alumnus, Rhodes Scholar and *Tulsa Tribune* city editor Joseph A. Brandt to Norman to lead this new endeavor, the OU Press. Brandt would later go on to serve as the sixth OU president and was succeeded at the Press by Savoie Lottinville in 1938. Under the guidance of Lottinville the Press grew to the international prominence it enjoys today.

For nearly a century, the OU Press has brought distinction to the university in part by its unique location. As the first university press in the Southwest, it became the international standard bearer for books on the American West and the American Indian. *continued*

BY SUSAN GROSSMAN



From its first publication – a pamphlet on physical science – the OU Press has published approximately 3,000 titles while maintaining more than 1,400 active titles. Nearly 2,000 orders are processed every month and its inventory includes 750,000 volumes. In addition to its single titles, the Press also supports 28 book series. Published in 1953, *The Sacred Pipe* by Joseph Epes Brown, remains the continuous and all-time bestseller.

Over the years its niche subject areas have expanded to include the classics, Latin American studies and military history, among others. New fields such as environmental history and music are in development. Paging through the Press catalogue is a sumptuous feast for any reader. The list of titles is as vast as the Oklahoma prairie.

The OU Press has much to celebrate as it observes a milestone birthday this year, says B. Byron Price, Press director. To make it to 90 takes a combination of guts and determination, luck and an occasional dose of serendipity. In the ever-changing and sometimes challenging world of book publishing, its core purpose to foster and spread scholarship has never wavered.

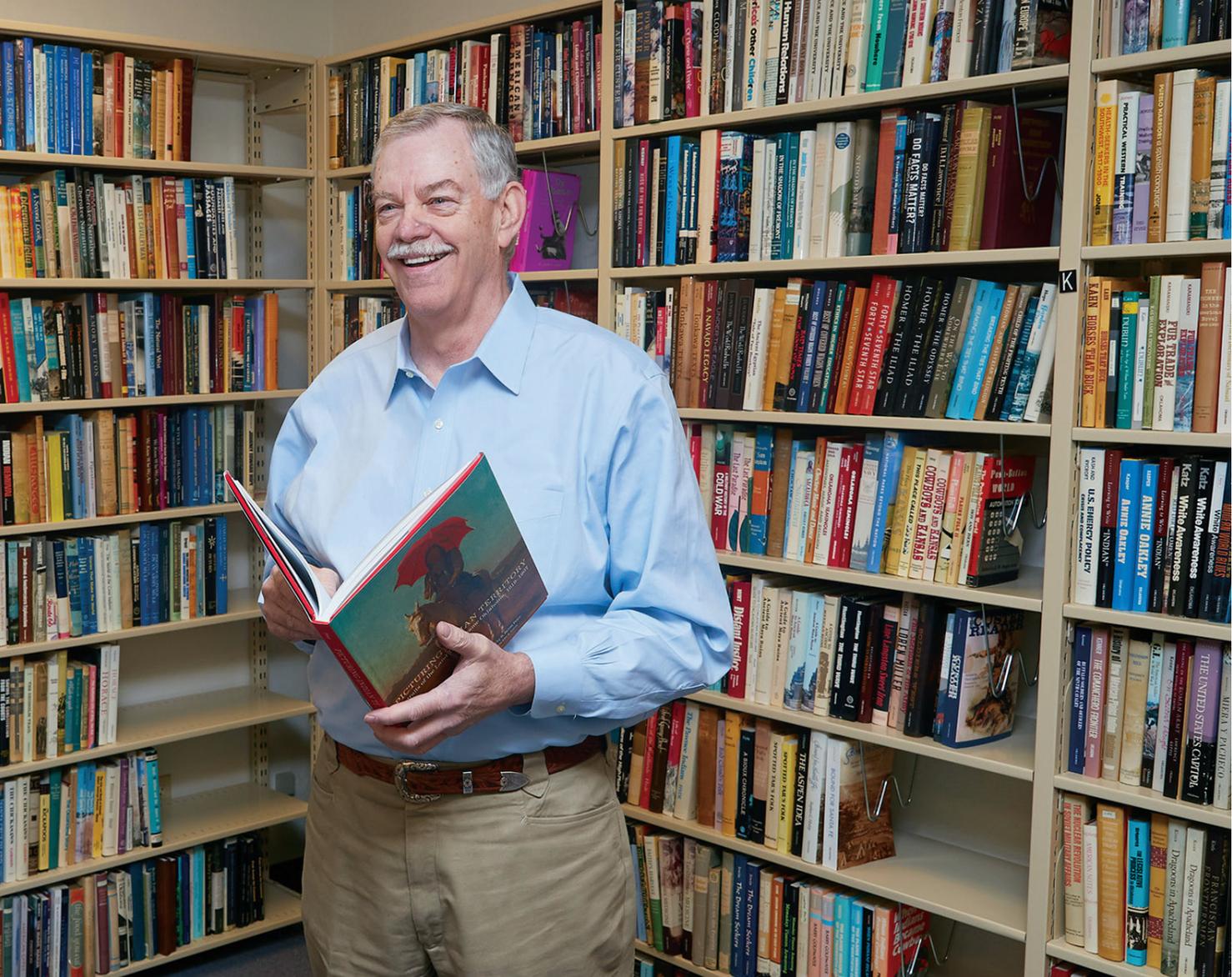
“Our mission is still the same mission that we have always had,” Price says. “We publish scholarly and general interest titles, helping both new and mature scholars turn their manuscripts into books that will find an audience.”

Adds J. Kent Calder, acquisitions editor, “One thing people don’t always understand about the role university presses play within the academic world is that, without them, scholars in the humanities usually can’t get tenure and promotion. It’s as simple as that. Yet as libraries move away from buying monographs and institutional support lags, university presses find it increasingly difficult to fill this vital role.”

Sitting in an administrative conference room surrounded by OU Press titles, Price and Calder explain the ins and outs of publishing in today’s academic arena and the place where OU fits in that realm. Of the 140 presses associated with universities, each is identified by particular areas of publishing expertise.

“At OU we are best known for books on American Indians and Western American history,” says Price, who holds the concurrent title of director of the Charles M. Russell Center for the Study of Art of the American West. “In the field of Western history, we are in the top two or three.”

As a mid-sized press, OU publishes approximately 80 books a year. What separates a university press from traditional publishing houses is the route a book takes from beginning to end. At the time of acceptance, each proposal is subjected to a rigorous vetting process. Every title must receive two posi-



Hugh Scott

B. Byron Price, director of the OU Press and director of the Charles M. Russell Center for the Study of Art of the American West, stands in a conference room at the press office surrounded by books the Press has published over the years.

tive reviews from outside readers, as well as endorsement by a faculty advisory board. Comprised of up to eight senior faculty members, the board represents the academic fields where the press holds prominence.

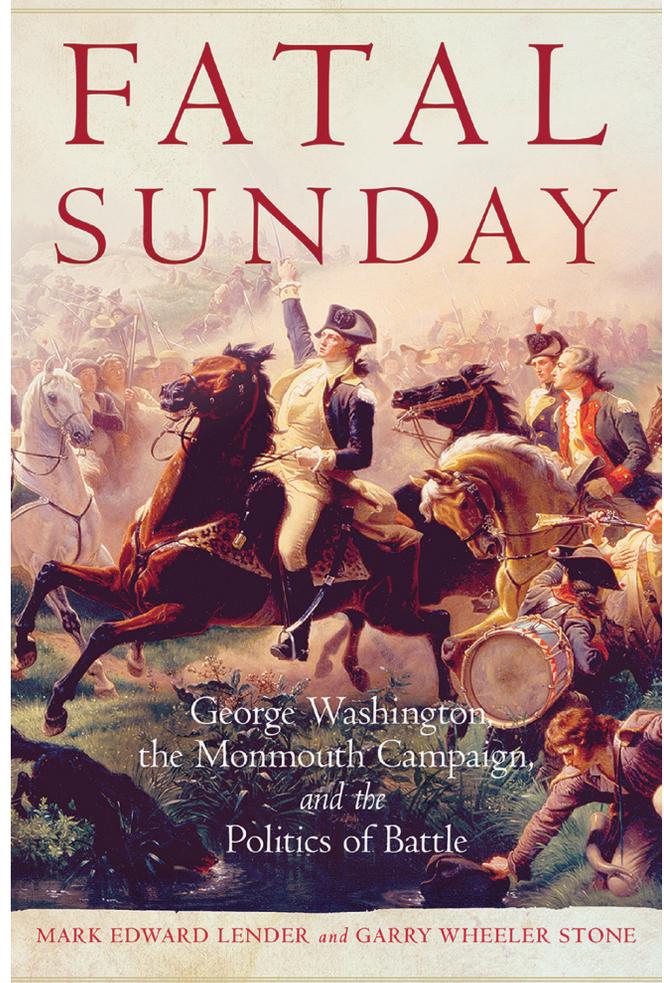
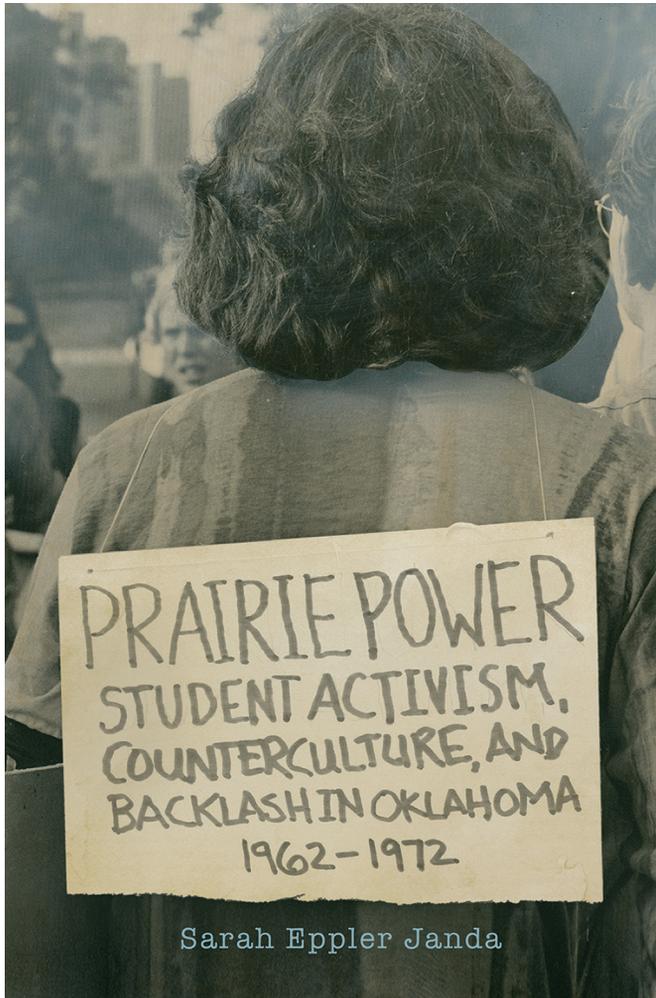
“Peer review is key to what distinguishes university presses from other publishers,” says Calder. “This process enables us to publish information that will add to knowledge. Without university presses, there is no foundation on which to base the knowing of anything. It is important to have a basis of knowledge and information that we can trust. And that trust is based on peer review.”

This strenuous vetting forms a foundation for knowledge that can be trusted in an era where anyone can publish anything with a single click of the mouse. A longtime member of the OU Press advisory board, Keith Gaddie, says the OU Press and its publication process represent a hallmark of excellence for the university as a whole. The professor of political science, senior fellow at OU’s residential Headington College and executive faculty fellow in Evans Hall observes that in the digital age, peer review is more important than ever.

“One of the biggest challenges in the digital era is that people think you can go on the Internet and find accurate information,” he says. “It is cheap, free and easy to put out there. The thing university presses do by having a vigorous vetting process is to ensure that only the very best scholarship is going to be produced under their imprint. And their reputation acts as a shortcut for people who consume information. Readers know that what they are reading and learning comes from a truly high-quality book.”

The Press also is an avenue for publication for authors who may not find a voice within a traditional publishing house. If not for the OU Press, Rilla Askew says some of her books may never have been published. The award-winning author and OU English professor has three books under the OU Press imprint: a novel, *Harpson*; a short story collection, *Strange Business*; and a recently published book of essays that is part memoir and part social commentary, *Most American: Notes from a Wounded Place*.

The tie that binds the work of Askew is her strong sense of place: Oklahoma. And that is why her books are in print with



the Press.

“OU Press does not publish a lot of fiction but when they do, it is regional fiction,” Askew says. “In addition to its absolute strength of Western and Native American history, they allow writers who write of place, and specifically this place, an opportunity to publish. The editors respect the region from which our work arises and offer us a voice.”

“It is important to ensure the endowment of the Press so it can thrive, continue to make smart choices and be seen as a vehicle for disseminating high-quality content in the future.”

Born in southeastern Oklahoma, Askew spent 35 years in New York before returning to her home state a few years ago. During her absence, her roots remained firmly planted in the red dirt that is reflected in her work. Having worked with both national publishing houses and the OU Press, she says she is grateful for the opportunity to publish work centered on the subjects she cares about most.

“I don’t have to convince the editors at the Press that there

is deep value in this place,” Askew says. “They have the understanding and appreciation, as well as a deep respect, for the south-central region of the country that our work arises from.

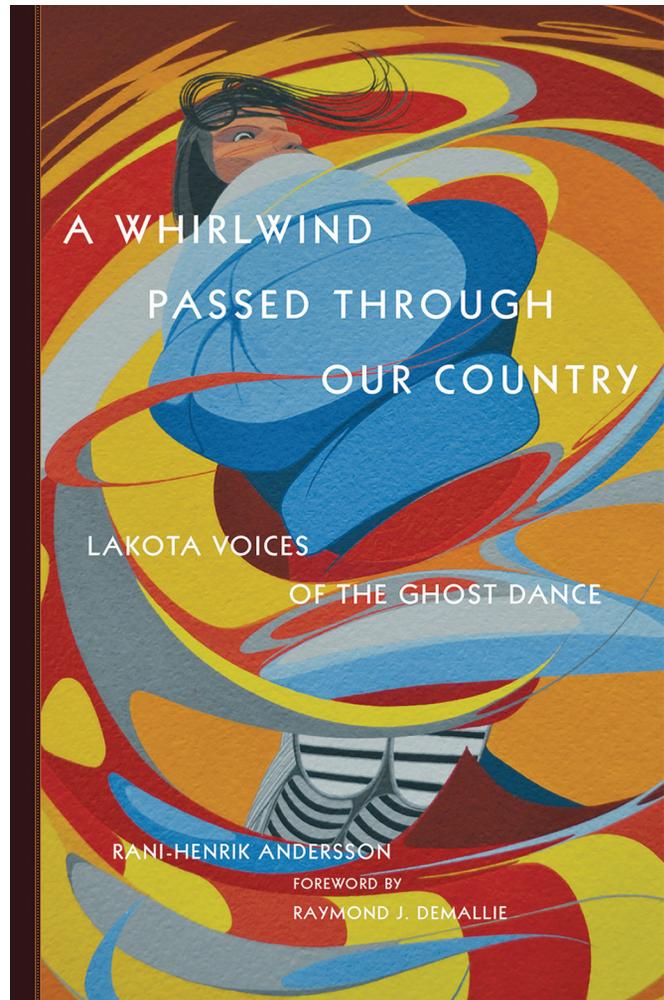
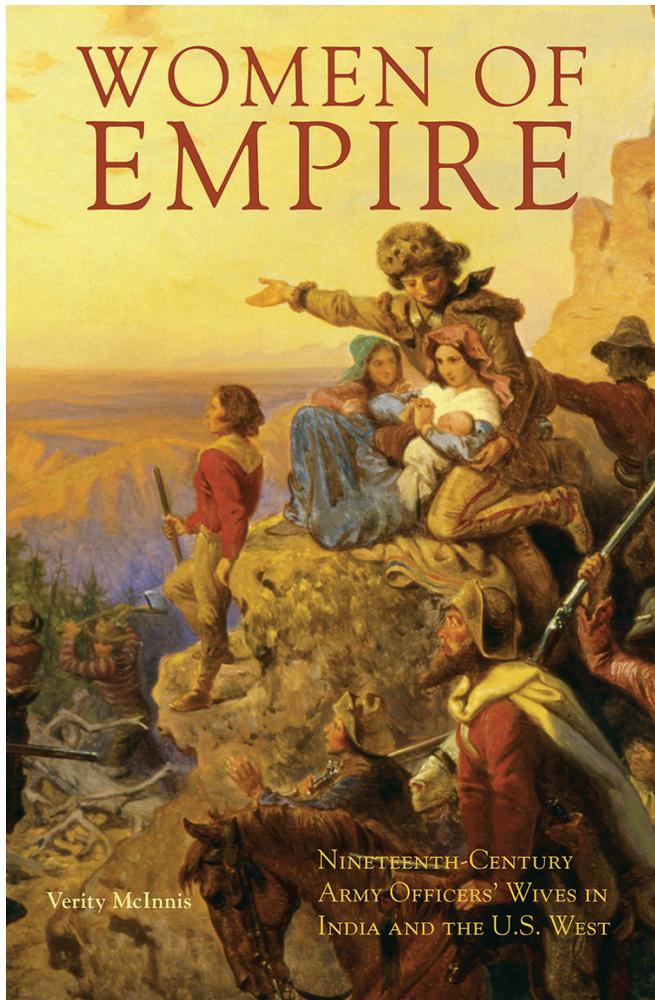
“From my perspective, this is one of the greatest advantages of having books published by OU Press,” she says. “Once they publish your book, it stays in print. They stand behind it, stay with you and don’t sideline you after the initial release.”

As a nonprofit operation, it is this practice of maintaining a backlist that helps support the OU Press.

“It’s our backlist that carries us,” says Price. “We could not support ourselves without it. Many books that were published

decades ago are still viable and relevant. Sometimes we benefit from serendipity. A recent Ken Burns documentary on the Great Depression mentioned a book that we published in the 1940s, resulting in the sale of several thousand copies — an unexpected boost to the Press’ bottom line.”

Like most university departments, university presses serve a scholarly mission and are not meant to be totally self-supporting like their for-profit counterparts. In the early 2000s,



Cover images reprinted from the OU Press Spring 2018 catalog of new books

the Press took great strides to survive the digital wave that washed over the publishing industry. And while the Press adapted, that wave, Price says, has evened out.

“Printed books have been around since the 1400s,” he says. “Electronic books cannot reproduce the feel, look and smell of a printed book, which is why the latter remains so popular with readers.”

To continue to publish the best scholarship and grow its list of publications, the Press hopes to establish an endowment for future operations. Attracting the best and brightest authors helps the Press remain at the top of the academic publishing industry. And to do that, he would like to have funding for things like author advances — especially for non-academic authors who are writing general interest books — as well as to enhance new book series.

“The key to being competitive in any field is the ability to attract and maintain the best in the business, and in scholarship it is no different,” says Calder. “We want to be known as being on the cutting edge of new fields of academic endeavor.”

For Gaddie, the importance of a secure financial future for the Press cannot be overestimated.

“It is important to ensure the endowment of the press so it can thrive, continue to make smart choices and be seen as a

vehicle for disseminating high-quality content in the future,” he says. “The OU Press contributes to the university’s reputation for excellence and promotes the OU brand to the world.”

Perhaps no story drives home that point more than one told by OU President David L Boren. As a young Rhodes Scholar he was asked by an Oxford dean to name the most significant entity at OU. As Boren thought over the legendary scholars and programs for which OU was famous, the dean answered his own question, “Young man, it’s the University of Oklahoma Press.”

“The OU Press is one of the crown jewels of the University of Oklahoma,” Boren says. “Across nine decades, the Press has brought thousands of scholarly works into our public discourse, including many that blazed new trails in different academic areas. Its rich history and outstanding legacy of service continue to make a profound impact on our state and beyond.”

While celebrating its 90th birthday, this trailblazing press will continue to do what it does best — to forge new pathways for others to follow into the frontiers of knowledge. 🍷

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