

August 27, 2012

President Timothy Wolfe  
University of Missouri

Dear Mr. Wolfe,

I am writing to formally resign as editor of the Mark Twain and His Circle series of scholarly monographs published by the University of Missouri Press.. The series began in 2003, and since that time the press has published 19 titles in it. I am proud to say that it has earned a certain reputation and has become something of a magnet for solid and significant Mark Twain manuscripts.

My familiarity with the University of Missouri Press is longstanding. I joined the English department faculty on this campus in 1979, and my first book was published by UMP in 1982. In total, I have published five books with the press; I have read many, many manuscripts for the press on several subjects and have written evaluations on their merits; I served three three-year terms on the Press Board, twice serving as chair; and finally I have been the editor of the Mark Twain and His Circle for nearly ten years. Recompense for this service probably equals \$400 a year, or about \$2.00 an hours. Lest you think my relation to the press is too cozy or my experience with publishing too provincial, I should point out that I have published with several other publishers—university presses, commercial publishing houses, and reference book publishers. In a word, I think I know something about university publishing and something about scholarship. (I have received two awards for scholarly excellence; one from the Board of Curators at this university.) I say these things not to toot my own horn but to give you a sense of my perspective on recent events.

It so happens I was a member of the committee assembled to discuss what to do about the University of Missouri Press, including closing it and, it so happens, to establish a “new model” for it. I misspeak when I call it a committee, since it did not have a charge; it wasn’t a task force either, since there was no clearly defined task. No votes were taken, nor were minutes recorded. Perhaps you can imagine my dismay, even anger, when I heard such remarks on the first day I attended the meetings on that committee as: “Oh, the University of Missouri Press is a lousy press.” I think the widespread reaction to the closing of the press testifies to the fact that the UMP is a very good press and that a lot of qualified people think so. On the subject of the press serving as a venue for vetting and publishing quality books, “Oh, vetting of manuscripts is old-fashioned.” Apparently, academia at large doesn’t think so, since matters of tenure and promotion, grant getting, and scholarly reputation (both for individuals and institutions) rely on outside evaluations by qualified scholars. That “The Press should really be preparing publications for professors to use in the classroom,” to which I replied “The University Bookstore already prepares course-packs for faculty.” There were other remarks along those lines. I tell you this for a couple of reasons.

First, it seemed to me that some of the members of that committee were and are woefully ignorant about what a university press is and does and the fact that its function is not restricted to the University system but involves academia at large. More to the point, they did not seem very

eager to correct that ignorance. This has a second implication. If this is the sort of advice you were receiving, you were getting very bad advice. Also, university presses are woven into the very fabric of what institutions of higher learning are supposed to be doing and their function is not restricted to those disciplines which happen to publish scholarly monographs. I think there is evidence for this statement in the fact that the audience of one of the protests of the closing included chemists, mathematicians, alumni, graduate students and others who were deeply concerned about this issue.

This letter has already become longer than I intended it to be. Let me conclude on a personal note. At one time or another, I shared all the emotions that have been expressed by people throughout the country—surprise, dismay, indignation, outrage, disgust, anger, and so forth. Those emotions have subsided for me. I am now left with a single response—humiliation. A friend of mine, who happens to be the President of a well-known and highly regarded California college referred to the University of Missouri as the “book killers.” I hope that expression was hers alone and not widespread. She meant it as a jest, but it made me squirm. Even so, I have no real reason to complain, because I am one of the lucky ones. I did not lose my job; I didn’t have my career put in jeopardy. I was contacted by another press to continue my series at that university, and I have agreed to do so. Still, after 33 years at Missouri, and I will be retiring after this year, I am left merely with the bitter taste of humiliation.

Regretfully yours,

Tom Quirk  
Professor of English

P.S. This is not a letter I wanted to write. Personally, I don’t think you are to blame for this mess so much as those who advised you. I hope in the future, when there will be other issues, as there surely will be, that you fare better, for your sake and the university’s.