

150 years: A Beacon of Good Publishing

by Brenna McLaughlin, AAUP Communications Manager

Information on the history of Beacon Press was gathered from the pamphlet "A Brief History of Beacon Press," Susan Wilson (2003). All quotes refer to this publication. Read more at www.beacon.org.

In the course of 150 years, a lot of history can be made. From its earliest mission to publish and distribute books that would "explain and defend Unitarian thought and promote... 'more reasonable' thinking," to the full flowering of its contemporary commitment to "publish intelligent, eloquent answers to the pressing questions of the day," Beacon Press has been making publishing and intellectual history.

Established in 1854 as the Press of the American Unitarian Association (AUA), Beacon celebrated its sesquicentennial this January. The Press's initial publishing program consisted mainly of religious works on doctrine and theology. But Beacon Press, even at its birth, was interested in social reforms such as temperance, abolition, women's rights, and the education of the working class.

One interesting early AUA Press publications was *A Soldier's Companion*, a booklet of hymns, poems, and practical advice (such as "wear flannel all over in all weathers") distributed free

of charge to Union soldiers throughout the Civil War. An intriguing later parallel was the 1969 *Guide to the Draft*, which explained the laws, government forms, and options to young men of draft age during the Vietnam War.

Over the years, while the Press has retained its commitment to religious scholarship, Beacon has become well known for its support of powerful progressive thinkers. Books such as Cornell West's *Race Matters*, James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* and Jürgen Habermas's *Toward a Rational Society*—among many others—confirm Beacon's place at the forefront of American publishing.

Publication of the *Senator Mike Gravel Edition: The Pentagon Papers* in 1971 tested the strength of Beacon's principled willingness to publish important books that other publishers couldn't or wouldn't. And the principles stood, despite political pressure, threats of jail, and financial risk.

Beacon Press has been an associate member of the Association of American University Presses since 1988. This is a

category reserved for non-profit presses of non-degree granting scholarly institutions or associations whose publishing programs reflect the high standards and scholarly rigor otherwise required for AAUP membership. Associate members include museum publishers, historical societies, research institutions, and scholarly associations.

The missions of these presses is that of all AAUP members—to facilitate the creation and preservation of knowledge to the highest standards of scholarship, writing, and production. The depth and variety of their publishing programs add immense value to *Books for Understanding* bibliographies. The experience, knowledge, and collegiality of their staffs is a boon to professional development throughout AAUP. The importance of Beacon and other associate members to the AAUP community is immeasurable.

The Exchange and the AAUP join in the celebration of Beacon Press this year, recognizing the Press's lasting importance to American publishing and the Association.

Next Thoreau, continued

and innovative look at particular issues that are important to them.

Editors are looking for work to match these readers' interests—timely, issue-driven work that investigates many sides of a problem. Mary Elizabeth Braun, of Oregon State University Press, sees writers tackling health, food, agriculture, environmental justice, and quality-of-life issues. Buchwald looks for ideas for how to preserve, rebuild, rewild and rethink. And Barbara Ras of Trinity University Press wants work that not only informs but instructs people about how to be in the world. Rachel Carson might have been excited to see this confluence in the interests of readers, writers, and

publishers, the new energy pouring into the search for ways to think about and address issues.

Readers *are* looking for the next Thoreau, the next Carson, the next great writer who can tell powerful stories, reflect on our culture in relation to the rest of life, teach and provoke us.

University presses, as regional publishers, have a perfect opportunity in this field because we know the places, know the markets, and can take risks on publishing books that might or might not break out to a national audience. The books answer our commitment to help to preserve the distinctiveness of local cultures through publication of works on our home regions. We're good at

discovering talent; once in a great while, we'll find even those writers who can shake up culture with a book of nature writing.

In *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, John Steinbeck says: "A child's world spreads only a little beyond his understanding while that of a great scientist thrusts outward immeasurably. An answer is invariably the parent of a great family of new questions." University presses exist to perpetuate questions, analysis, reflection, and cultural conversation. Place-based creative nonfiction sustains a singular line of inquiry with its intertwined reflection on people and nature. It's a perfect match.