Gordon Graham

A Man o' Mony Pairs

A history graduate of Edinburgh University, Colin Whurr joined Addison-Wesley as a sales representative in 1965. After thirteen years at Butterworths, he founded Whurr Publishers in 1987. The company was sold to John Wiley in 2005.

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Gordon was born in Glasgow, and attended Hucheson's Grammar School and then Glasgow University. He intended to read law and become an advocate, the Scottish equivalent of the English barrister. He obtained his law degree, but decided against a legal career. World War Two had started and Gordon was impatient to join up. He wrote to the War Ministry complaining about their delay in sending him his call-up papers. Finally, in 1940, he joined the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders.

Let’s jump 35 years, to 1975, when I first knew Gordon, because this isn’t a history but a series of anecdotes, some I hope amusing, some less so, which give insights into the character of a very private, very unusual, and very fine man. But there is the odd wart, and one or two of my stories may hint at these, because this should not be a panegyric, but more an outline map of the Gordon Graham I know.

We are now in the Butterworths years. I had joined the company the year before Gordon, in 1974, as sales manager of the small scientific and medical division. Our next door leviathan was the legal division, the largest law publisher in the Commonwealth. At the time, Butterworths was a not very profitable and rather ill-fitting subsidiary of the International Publishing Corporation (IPC), itself a part of Reed International. The merger with Elsevier was a long way off.

Butterworths had many merits, loyalty of staff, authors and customers, consistency, and a peerless backlist among them, but many demerits too. Resistance to change, introspection, incompetence, complacency and bureaucracy were rife. Many new Managing Directors would have fired many of the top executives, and brought in fresh blood. This was not Gordon’s way. He worked with the existing team, subtly moulding and shaping them in ways of which I sometimes felt they were unaware. He gave more responsibility to the younger element, so they felt encouraged, and before long made two DOI: 10.1163/095796511X560150
appointments of younger people to the board.

Unlike his predecessors, he regularly visited the “overseas companies” in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Canada, and re-established a Butterworths presence in the USA. These companies responded with better performances, and links with the UK were strengthened. As usual, he was bringing people together.

I don’t think Gordon has ever himself used a computer of any kind, but perhaps his greatest contribution to Butterworths and indeed Reed was his electronic foresight. It is the direct result of his prescience in the 1970s that the legal division of Reed Elsevier is today known as LexisNexis, and that more than half of its revenue derives from online services.

But back to the anecdotes. “Why don’t you offer Dennis a job in the sales force?” asked Gordon. The idea appalled me. Dennis was an able editorial assistant, but his manner and personality were unlikely to appeal to our bookseller customers. Gordon often said that management goes in both directions – up as well as down. I wondered if I was being given an opportunity to do a spot of upwards managing. How I got out of my awkward predicament I don’t recall, but Dennis did not become a salesman.

Towards the end of Gordon’s Butterworths tenure, he was asked how he would characterise his contribution. “A catalyst,” he said, “I think I was a catalyst.” A stimulus to change.

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Working with Gordon was also fun. Two colleagues were Derek Day and David Summers. At a meeting Gordon contrasted what each of them had said: “Shall I compare thee to a Summers, Day?”

In the 1980s, Butterworths became a jewel in the Reed crown. We were said to contribute one per cent of the turnover and ten per cent of the profit. At a Reed management meeting, Gordon rose to speak from the floor. He rubbed his well-tailored right buttock furiously – he was nervous, and like the rest of us after all! A touch more important was what he said – essentially, if the most profitable parts of Reed are publishers, why not sell the other parts of the corporation and become exclusively a publisher? Despite the barely restrained derision of the papermakers, building material manufacturers and others, that is precisely what Reed rapidly became.

Let’s go back to earlier years. Gordon served most of the war in Burma and India, and emerged as a Lieutenant Colonel with a Military Cross (MC) and bar, aged 26 – one of the youngest colonels in the British army, I have been told, and tragically a widower, his wife Peggy having died in childbirth in February 1946. (Years later I found that Gordon’s boss in the Reed hierarchy did not know of the MCs – that says quite a lot about both of them!).

He returned to India, and became Asia correspondent for The Christian Science Monitor, and a little later, McGraw-Hill’s representative in India. (Many years later, in 2004, at Gordon’s instigation,