That Knowing Twinkle in His Eyes

Jason Mitchell

A graduate of the Publishing Studies MPhil program at the University of Stirling, Jason Mitchell has been working in academic publishing since 2001. Currently he is Senior Development Editor at Elsevier. Mitchell has a continued interest in all sectors of the publishing industry. He is the founder and coordinator of the Mentoring Scheme of the Society of Young Publishers in the UK, an initiative inspired by and named after Gordon Graham. Here, Mitchell shares some insight into how the project came about.

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My initial introduction to Gordon Graham came in 2006 when I interviewed him for an article in the Society of Young Publishers’ (SYP) magazine InPrint, of which I was then a committee member in Oxford. Our association has now spanned five years, a notably short time considering Gordon’s long and distinguished career. Within my own short and undistinguished career, however, he has made a profound and lasting impact on me in two distinct ways.

He has sharpened my understanding of the industry through Logos and his own books, especially As I Was Saying: Essays on the International Book Business.

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Gordon has also nurtured, for my own part, a cerebral, reflective approach through my personal dialogues with him: touching upon the nature of the industry in present and previous times; discussing the contribution one personally has made, and can potentially make, towards it. Gordon is a natural leader and mentor. Everyone familiar with Gordon will understand what I wish to convey by “that knowing twinkle in his eyes.” In my chats with Gordon he has displayed not only a nurturing fellowship but has also challenged me in my thinking, and this is certainly what I needed. With that knowing twinkle he has made me grow as a young publisher, and as an individual. Mentoring from Gordon entails evaluation on three fronts: the industry, oneself and one’s role within it.

(As an aside, whenever you read “me” and “my” you should also infer deliberate reference to “the next generation of publishers”)

As I Was Saying is an enriching book for young publishers and, I would advise, recommended read-
ing for those undertaking professional publishing courses. As with its author, it is far more than the sum of its parts. There is much to be gleaned from its part personal, part professional composition; a “journal” in the true sense, married with the benefit of wide business experience and wisdom.

Gordon has, as I mentioned in my SYP article, acquired over six decades of publishing experience, and As I Was Saying gives many key insights to his particular expertise gleaned from his outstanding contributions as publisher, soldier, student and family man. We have the privilege of learning about his thought processes and impressions, at different times in his life, in different roles and in different geographic territories.

Living and working in Scotland, to India, to America, and the UK makes internationalism a discernible vein that runs through As I Was Saying, and Gordon’s own life is the embodiment of this concept. All of these facets make the book an invaluable resource for future generations of publishers. In the multinational company where I work we have an online tool called Cultural Navigator, which is basically parlance for “how not to alienate yourself from foreign people when working with them.” I wonder what Gordon would make of it, and also at what cost progress has been made through the wired world.

There are only three mistakes that a publisher can make with regard to the electronic revolution. One is to get into it too early; the second is to get into it too late; and the third is not to get into it at all. Pioneers achieve glory, but not always profit... The pressures on publishers at this moment in publishing history arise from the fact that technology has outstripped the demands of the marketplace. As a result publishers face pressure from hardware which is hungry for software, and if they do not supply it non-publishers are likely to step in. The danger... is that the role of the publisher in the information chain will be invaded by electronic corporations... (As I Was Saying, p. 188)

The final sentence of the above quote could quite easily be appropriating the activities of Google in the past four years, but in fact was written by Gordon in 1984. As I Was Saying displays a keen prescience on the part of its author on issues of multinational companies and culture, copyright and electronic publishing. There are subtle perceptions on the changing face of business, not only from his perspective, from the positions he occupied at those times, but also from the position of his industry fellows: authors, printers, readers, booksellers, and librarians. This sense of empathy I consider to be one of Gordon’s distinct strengths.

Any publisher needs only to consider and reflect upon his publishing matrix as evidence of this. (See “Gordon Graham’s Matrix” in Charles M. Levine’s article “Working Alongside Gordon Graham,” elsewhere in this issue.)

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Throughout As I Was Saying, especially in the Interludes, there is always the warm, wry-humoured, cerebral author. Gordon’s continual involvement ready encouragement of – and interest in – the next generation of publishers (an ethical concern) represents the true spirit of a successful and considerate publisher. I once asked Gordon if there can ever be a strategy for a successful and fulfilling career in publishing for young people. His response was typically prompt, succinct and wise:

“Be in the right place at the right time. Be receptive to ideas. Keep emotion out of business. Accept jobs because of where they might lead. Never discuss salary.”

Who would disagree with any of those points? One of my own favourite examples of Gordon’s common-sense-becoming-wisdom occurs in As I Was Saying: It is “that decisions not to publish are sometimes more profitable than decisions to publish.” Another gem which will stand any young publisher in good stead.

The theme of future generations of young publishers naturally predicates my relationship with Gordon, and in fact the entire genesis of the SYP...