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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Working with Hans Zell

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I worked directly for Hans Zell from 1984 to 1995. I had been seeking a change of career after a move to Oxford, and saw the advertisement by Hans Zell Publishers, exactly matching what I sought – publishing, books, with the bonus of Africa. That job informed the rest of my working life.

It was the most wonderful opportunity to learn, and be empowered, by working directly to Hans. He had a wealth of experience. After training in his native Switzerland, he came to the book trade in Manchester; then to Sierra Leone where he set up the University Bookshop and Press; and then to Nigeria where he headed the fledging University Press and Bookshop – the Ife Bookshop became a landmark place. Other publishing ventures took him to senior management at the Africana Press in New York, Pergamon Press in Oxford, and Alquist & Wiksell in Stockholm. He returned to Oxford in 1974 and established the Hans Zell imprint, specializing in reference and bibliographic works in African Studies. In 1976 he established the quarterly journal *The African Book Publishing Record* (*ABPR*), the comprehensive bibliographic listing of African publications. He also published *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature.*

The award-winning list was prestigious, and Hans was not only recognized as a notable African studies publisher, but an authority on many of the issues surrounding African publishing. In 1980, the list became part of the K G Saur group of companies, Hans retaining editorial control of his list. This was the company I joined in 1984, a decade after the imprint had been established.

The offices were then at 14a St Giles, the magnificent street in central Oxford – it is best imagined as a boulevard. I remember well the interview. I nervously sat on a bench nearby to collect my thoughts, then bearded the den.

I was interviewed by Hans, having sent in my CV. As one does, I had emphasized the experience I had which I thought would be relevant. It was congenial. However, a couple of days later, I received a package from Hans' secretary with the information I had needed for the interview. I so wanted the job that I rang Hans to say that I had not seen the information before the interview, and explained – apparently naively – how I could have presented better, how much I wanted the job etc. I did get the post, but Hans told me some time later that he had decided for me, but I was so keen with that phone call that I almost put him off! It was a training post in the sense that I learnt on the job, with supervision from Hans, and Desktop publishing courses.

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There were the three of us in one office: Hans, his secretary, and now me, thus very open. I always knew what was going on. In those largely pre-digital days, we did not have computers: we had a telex which was the main method of communication with African publishers, and it was exciting when the secretary got an electric rather than a manual typewriter. The hours were specific; Hans also kept to them. There were many visitors. I remember, in awe, the visit of renowned Africa historian, Michael Crowder; and later James and Clare Currey coming to consult Hans about how they could set up a publishing company, James having left Heinemann (James Currey Publishers was founded in 1984). They took advice from Hans as to how to proceed.

Hans taught me, or shared information, not only about the acquisition and content of the books and journals, but the business of publishing – mysteries such as gross profit margin calculations. I well remember the first time he sent me off to London to talk to a problematic (late delivery) author and how to handle it. He had fully briefed me about every aspect of the book. He did not blame me when I only partially mitigated the sins.

I worked across the board, learning and being supervised by Hans, although the journals, particularly *ABPR*, took a fair amount of my time. In due course I became Deputy Editor. In those days, when the articles came in and were typed up, I had the job of cutting with scissors and pasting with glue (copy and paste now!) to organize the pages. Hans arranged for me to visit our printers: astonishingly they showed me a computer screen, and explained how this could be done if you had a computer – online rather than physical.

Wider work

At the same time, Hans was thinking not only about his own publishing programme, but about wider African publishing issues. He was principled in his support for African development through publishing. For example, during the apartheid days in South Africa, he would only list titles or have dealings with oppositional publishers; and those who did not put their heads above the parapet were not recognized. He was the first Secretary of the annual Noma Award for Publishing in Africa, which he established in concert with UNESCO. It was unique in that it was for the best book by an African author, published by an independent publisher on the continent, and adjudicated by an African jury. He was also the UK arm of the Zimbabwe International Book Fair, and he undertook Ford consultancies.

He also pursued the question of international distribution of African published titles. It was a time of harsh structural adjustment impositions on Africa, paucity of foreign exchange, and inefficient postal services. Two issues were thus impacting. Africana librarians in the US, the major customer base of *ABPR*, were asking: you give us this information, but we are unable to acquire the titles. African publishers were asking: you disseminate information about our titles, but we have no means of selling them. Hans posited how the mismatch could be met and worked on a grant application. The result was Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) funding for a conference to examine what might be done. Hans fully informed

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and discussed with me. When the seed funding came from Sida, we organized a conference in London in 1989 of key African publishers. It followed the first Bookweek Africa at the Africa Centre – an initiative by Hans to showcase African publications. Thus, publishers could attend the conference after the exhibit. Much of the practical organization of the conference was delegated to me. I enjoy organizational work, and I had a clear brief. About twelve publishers came to the conference at the Grafton Hotel in Tottenham Court Road. They deliberated and decided to seek to establish African Books Collective (ABC).

That first engagement with Sida funding, and how to handle it, was key for me in the future in our work to secure funding for African Books Collective. I was probably not aware at the time, but I imbibed lessons from Hans about the psychology and realities of donor mindsets.

The partnership and division of work

In due course, we formed our two-person partnership. Hans retained the editorial direction and work of the Hans Zell Publishers books; and we jointly worked, me as his Deputy, on the Noma Award for Publishing in Africa and the establishment of ABC. We moved over the road, still in St Giles, and each had our own office. Good employer practice – I was allowed to choose the furniture for my own room!

In due course, the burden of the main three arms – books/journals, Noma, ABC – became too much for both of us. Thus, we amicably decided, in 1995, to split. Hans retained the Hans Zell Publishers books and journals, which was of course his unique great expertise; and I took on the Noma Award and ABC. ABC took up the major part of my time. When it was established in 1989, we took offices in the Jam Factory in Oxford. We had a staff complement which grew as the work expanded. For the period until 1995 while Hans headed it, he worked from home – a precursor of WFH – and I worked in the offices. So there was a good deal of visiting Hans at home with papers, reports etc. But we got our first computer, which was a mystery which took time to master. It is extraordinary to think now how ABC has been hugely and positively impacted by harnessing of all the IT and digital tools available (Ail *et al*. 2024).

Hans as an employer

What was it like working for Hans Zell? He is a hard task master. His standards and ethics are so high, that woe betide anyone who errs in fact or judgement. But along with his energetic work ethic, all work has not made Jack a dull boy. He loves good food, wine, hotels, music. He is a film buff. His dress is "smart casual", although there was one very formal occasion when he was known to wear a tie.

I am not the only person he nurtured professionally. The current Editor of *ABPR*, Cécile Lomer, was also a Hans protegée, having worked for the journal under him until he handed over to her. By spotting lieutenants whom he trained up, he ensured a successful continuation of his wider work, as he concentrated on Hans Zell Publishing. His generosity as an employer has afforded me a rich and fulfilling professional life, and I salute him.

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Reference

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Mary Jay worked in Hans Zell Publishers for ten years. She was then CEO and later a Director of African Books Collective. She has served as the Secretary of the Noma Award for Publishing in Africa, a Trustee of the International African Institute, and has written widely on independent African publishing issues.

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