



TRIBUTE TO ALBERT PRIOR

*When Albert Prior decided on a lifestyle change back in July this year, it wasn't just Swets and Zeitlinger that lost out. UKSG and the subscription agency business in general will miss one of the most widely respected figures of the last twenty-five years. **Paul Harwood** looks back on his career and his contribution to the industry.*

A qualified librarian with a remarkable eye for detail and a strong entrepreneurial streak, Albert Prior was always going to be a good catch for any commercial organisation selling into the library market. It was Blackwell's who first sensed that potential and gave him the opportunity to move from gamekeeper to poacher in the early 1970s working as a Library Services Advisor. In addition to the skills and experiences he picked up in those early years with Blackwell, he also had the benefit of working with one of the great characters and influential figures of the serials scene, John Merriman, and there is no doubt a whole article of a different nature that could be written about the exploits of John, Albert and colleagues in those early days!

When Swets and Zeitlinger began to expand their operations beyond The Netherlands and went in search of a UK representative, Albert was the perfect candidate, and accepted a position in 1977 as the company's first UK employee. He has recalled to me on more than one occasion the difficult decision he had to face in making that move, which coincided with the second Blackwell's Periodicals Conference at Trinity College in Oxford. In particular he remembered walking around Oxford in the early hours of the morning with David Ellis, the then MD of Blackwell's, who was trying to offer all manner of inducements to persuade him to stay.

That move was a significant one in many ways, not just for Albert, but also for the subscription agency business in the UK. It meant that before long, Blackwell's had a major competitor in their

backyard and Swets was to become a major thorn in their side over the years. It also opened the way for other overseas agents, notably Faxon and Ebsco, to establish UK offices.

What has always struck me about Albert's early years with Swets in the UK was not so much the growth of the company in terms of turnover or size of the customer base (which was quite remarkable in its own right and clearly convinced the Dutch Head Office that they had made the right choice), but the way he set about the task. No short-term gimmicks or price gouging here but a genuine attempt to offer high-quality customer service and a long-standing relationship based on a real understanding of customer needs. What were also evident in those early years were the high standards and principles that he set both for himself and his colleagues: no attempts here to poach ex-colleagues from Blackwell's to join him in the new company, but a recognition of the need to make a fresh start with like-minded people.

Through Blackwell's, Albert had been involved in the early Periodical Conferences established by John Merriman, and in 1981 he became a member of the UKSG committee, an association which was to last for the next thirteen years. He was the founding Editor of *Serials* at that crucial point when it moved from being merely a newsletter to a fully-fledged journal. He was also served as Treasurer and between 1992 and 1994 was Chair of the Group. Much has been documented – and rightly so – about the role of John Merriman in establishing UKSG, and the existing committee

and many of the members of the group will be aware of the tremendous energy and contribution of Hazel Woodward, but it is important to record that between 1981 and 1994 Albert Prior did as much as anyone to raise the profile and stimulate the activities of UKSG, not just in the UK but internationally. The most obvious example of the international profile was his involvement in the first two European Serials Conferences held in The Netherlands in 1990 and 1992.

Whilst UKSG occupied much of Albert's time outside of Swets, it was by no means the only group that had the benefit of his clear thinking. The constitution of ASA (The Association of Subscription Agents) was changed to allow non-UK members to join, and he was a member of the ASA Council for many years, including a spell as Auditor. He was also a member of the Medical Information Working Party for four years in the early 1990s, working closely with many of the medical librarians who were increasingly becoming customers of Swets.

Between 1978 and 1994, Swets' growth in the UK and Ireland was hugely impressive, and the Abingdon office was held up by the parent company as an example of what could be achieved with the right approach. Yes, there were acquisitions along the way as companies like Bailey's, HK Lewis and Stobart sold out, but it was not purely down to chance that these companies sold their business to Swets. In most cases, these family owned and managed companies knew Albert personally or by reputation and trusted him to look after those staff who moved across and the customers themselves.

Recognition of the success in building the UK Company came in 1994, when Albert was invited to become a member of the Board of Swets and Zeitlinger. He served as Commercial Director, before taking on key Business and Product Development roles on behalf of the group. He still had time for the UK, however, and worked closely with Loughborough University on Project Acorn in the mid-1990s (one of the early e-Lib projects) and with MIMAS and other Swets UK colleagues on NESLI, the National Electronic Site Licence Initiative.

Through his UKSG connections or by dint of his *de facto* role as an ambassador for Swets within the industry at large, Albert represented the group and his company at numerous library

conferences and seminars around the world, giving papers or sitting on discussion panels. I have lost count of the number of occasions I have met overseas librarians at various UK conferences and exhibitions who recall having met him or heard him give a presentation and ask after his well being.

The entrepreneur in Albert was behind his last venture at Swets and Zeitlinger, and the launch of Extenza at the recent Frankfurt Book Fair was the culmination of much of his thinking and energy during his last two years with the company. That entrepreneurial spirit is now being channelled into his new venture and life away from Swets, and centres around the development of SCR Publishing Ltd. Building on the solid foundations of *Scholarly Communications Report*, Albert is working closely with David Brown from the British Library in developing their publishing activities, and a report on authentication and authorisation will be published by the end of the year.

The change in lifestyle alluded to in the introduction to this piece is not just about branching out into other areas of the same business. Having given 25 years to Swets and Zeitlinger and our industry at large, Albert is keen to catch up with some of the things that have been neglected along the way, and high on the priority lists are his musical interests, family history and the garden!

Along with a number of my current colleagues, I can say that it has been a real privilege to work with Albert Prior over the years. He is one of those rare people of whom you never hear a bad word, only warmth, affection and respect. In business, he was open, highly principled and always able to see an opportunity. In these days of management speak and excessive analysis, he was able to construct and execute unambiguous business plans that everyone could relate to and understand, and his success with Swets in the UK and the legacy that he left are testimony to the success of his approach.

UKSG and Swets and Zeitlinger have many reasons to thank Albert Prior for his contribution to their growth and development, and with a foot in both camps and on behalf of both parties, I wish him every success and enjoyment with this next phase in his life.