

Profile: Richard Charkin



We interviewed Richard Charkin on a beautiful sunny day sitting on the roof terrace of the Macmillan building with a panoramic view over north London. Quite appropriate really as Richard is the self-stated 'boy from North London'. After attending a 'Dickensian' prep school in Birchington, Kent, a boarding school in Hertfordshire, and taking a gap year in Paris (to learn French) and in Suffolk (to teach scripture in a prep school) he originally intended to study medicine. However, a week into the course – including the dissecting room – he decided that medicine was not for him. He therefore changed to studying Natural Sciences leaving Trinity College after four years with an ambition to be a journalist. As luck would have it his friend Roger Law (of Fluck and Law fame) got him a deal to go to the US to write an article on environmental issues in Utah for *The Sunday Times*. For this article he was paid the magnificent sum of £10! To make a living in journalism he quickly realized he needed an NUJ (union) card. Friends in the know told him that book publishers gave employees union cards so he started applying for jobs in publishing thus starting his lifelong career in an industry which he clearly loves.

His first job was with George Harrap and Co where he was appointed in 1971 as Commissioning Editor for their new science list. He describes this as an extremely good apprenticeship and great fun. (One of the great things about interviewing Richard was the sense that he has really enjoyed his

career. 'Having fun' was a recurrent theme.) He also met his wife of over 30 years at Harraps. They married in 1972 and have three children. In 1974 he moved to Oxford to join Pergamon Press as Life Sciences editor. He met Robert Maxwell on his very first day at Pergamon (Maxwell having returned to Headington Hill Hall on that very same day after the Leasco affair). Richard describes the 11 months he spent at Pergamon as "the most fantastic months of his career". There he learned his trade and "did all sorts of weird things like turning books into journals". In those 11 months, as well as launching many new journals, he experienced many aspects of Maxwell's eclectic management style which included personally distributing the post each morning; hiring, firing and re-hiring people; and sending his employees out to canvass for him during the 1974 elections! When Maxwell told him that in order to get on he would have to leave the union he decided it was time to move on. A colleague handed him an advert for Biology Editor at OUP (then Clarendon Press) and he soon found himself being interviewed by a panel of the great and the good at OUP. A couple of weeks after the interview he was offered the post of Biology Editor at £3600 a year. One week on, this was amended to Medical Editor at a salary of £4000. (He later discovered that one of the delays in offering him the post was because of their concern over his young age, 25. Some time later he was chatting at the bar and told his neighbour he had

only got the medical job because someone called Snowstorm had turned it down. The neighbour said that was me, and my name is Tim Hailstone, and the £6,000 they offered wasn't enough money.)

Once again he describes the job as "enormous fun". It was an amazing time with a huge boom in medical publishing. All medical publishers were doing well and making money. He moved on from his original post to running all science and medicine publishing and then added journals to his portfolio. Within OUP at that time "journals were a backwater – held in a warehouse at Neasden". Journal management was, in his own words "devastatingly, obviously, horrible" with library claims piled high in the Neasden warehouse. The big break for OUP came when Macmillan undertook a major strategy review and decided they did not want to keep any of their journals except 'Nature'. OUP reviewed the list and acquired 'Brain'. The dangers of strategy reviews!

During the next few years, Richard rose rapidly up the OUP corporate ladder. Following a company review in 1979 (prophetically entitled '1984') it was decided that the company should focus on the publishing of reference materials and he became Group Reference Publisher which included responsibility for sales and marketing. He then became Managing Director of the Academic & General Division (all books in science, humanities, reference, and music and all journals and paperbacks). In the mid 1980s OUP chalked up a number of 'firsts' in electronic publishing the most notable of which was probably the e-version of the Oxford English Dictionary. In 1988 the post of CEO became vacant when George Richardson left. Richard applied but did not get the job; it went to Sir Roger Elliott. Richard does tell the tale that subsequently he applied for Elliott's post of Professor of Physics on the grounds that if Elliott could do the OUP job with no publishing experience he could be a Professor of Physics given his school 'A' level.

After this incident, he moved on from OUP to join Paul Hamlyn on the board of Octopus Publishing which evolved into Reed International Books of which he became Chief Executive in 1992. He was also a Director of Book Club Associates and Butterworth. Mergers and acquisitions were prevalent even then, and after a couple of years Reed and Elsevier merged. It became clear that Elsevier did not have much enthusiasm for books

and Richard offered to buy the books division but that did not materialise. So once again he upped sticks moving to Current Science to join Vitek Tracz and developing BioMedNet in 1996. Ironically this was sold to Elsevier in October 1997. Immediately after the sale Richard moved to his current post of CEO of Macmillan. He describes the company as "big in small markets and small in big markets". His management style has evolved through the years and he believes in "letting managers manage", acknowledging that the company is short on official policies. "The strength of our publishing business is in small units" he says, describing it as a "flotilla strategy". Above all Richard welcomes the diversity in Macmillan where one minute he can be negotiating with Jeffrey Archer for a book and the next making decisions relating to 'Nature'.

For a man who says "publishing is my life" it is unclear how he finds the energy, enthusiasm and space for anything else. But space there is and in abundance. His list of outside interests and hobbies could fill another page. Although his children are all grown up he is still close to them and they are all in London. He and his wife have a place in France and through the activities of his property company in Watford he describes himself as "somewhat over-propriety". He has a life long interest in cricket and still plays for The Baldons Cricket Club at Marsh Baldon (check his batting stats at www.baldonscricket.co.uk). He sits on the management Board of Wisden Cricket and is involved in a cricket website www.cricinfo.com. Another passion is his involvement with the educational charity Common Purpose www.commonpurpose.org.uk which aims to help citizens understand how the world works, how their cities work and how they can teach leadership in the community. The charity is expanding and now has offices in some 60 cities in the UK and overseas, turning over some £5 million worth of business.

And finally we come to the legendary poker games! Due to fears of litigation your editors cannot publish much detail on this topic! Suffice it to say that they started in 1976 after a party in Woodstock, when Richard and Peter Ashby retired with a group to the pub for refreshment. They continued in Mexico City and Zwolle, picking up international participants and still take place to this day. Those of you out there in the industry know who you are...