

Profile: Robert Parker



Robert is a well-known figure in the publishing world, being both MD of the publishing division of the Royal Society of Chemistry (RSC) and the current Chair of the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers (ALPSP). He was born in Palmers Green, North London and his father worked for a non-ferrous metal company which provided metal for the central core of Jodrell Bank. His mother was South African and his parents met when his father was in the RAF during the war, posted to South Africa.

After studying for his A-levels, during which time he met his wife Rosemary (“we shared knee space in the lab in zoology lessons”, he told us), Robert went on to read Chemistry at King’s College London and he stayed on there to do his PhD. His PhD tutor was John Emsley – a writer of popular science – and it was John who fuelled Robert’s interest in science, journalism and publishing. After successfully completing his PhD he applied for jobs in science publishing. He actually applied to the RSC twice – but did not get interviewed the first time round. However, on his second attempt he did get interviewed and they offered him the job of assistant editor on the physical chemistry journals, *Journal of the Chemical Society*, *Faraday Transactions I* and *Faraday Transactions II*; *Faraday Discussions of the Chemical Society* and *Faraday Symposia of the Chemical Society*. He has been there ever since – now a total of 24 years. When quizzed

as to why he has stayed so long, Robert is characteristically pragmatic, saying that “every few years they offered me the next job up”. The upside of that, he says, is that when talking to new graduates starting in the RSC, he can honestly tell them he has pretty much done every job on the publishing side of the RSC.

When he started, the journal publishing division of the RSC was located in premises above a tailor’s shop in Savile Row. He recalls that the offices were very Dickensian. It was the only time in his life he had chilblains and he sat with his feet in a drawer while editing. Coincidentally, another young colleague who shared that office space at the time was Fytton Rowland – husband of one of your Eds! When the RSC moved out of those premises and relocated to Cambridge (some 20 years ago), Robert recalls that time as being “very challenging and difficult”. Only about 20% of the staff relocated and once in Cambridge it was very difficult to recruit good staff. At the same time, he and Rosemary had their first child, Holly, and Rosemary was also working as a roving accountant in the Thames Valley area. But they got through it and things began to improve.

The move to Cambridge was a huge catalyst for change for the RSC. In Savile Row, the entire publishing process had been paper based. In the new offices, electronic systems began to replace the outdated manual systems and the whole

publishing process became much more slick and professional. Staff were hired with new skills and Robert continued to be promoted through the ranks. His personal life also flourished and two new children, Alicia and Max, joined the Parker family. His children are now almost grown up. Holly, the eldest, has graduated in American Studies at Nottingham University. Alicia is reading Biological Sciences at Reading University and Max has done his AS exams and wants to go on to do Psychology.

We asked Robert what he saw as the biggest challenges facing the RSC – and indeed all learned society publishers – at the present time. He believes that all learned societies are, or should be, looking for the next “step change”. Internationalism is a huge issue. The RSC’s membership base is largely in the UK and Ireland, but they do have over 9,000 overseas members, and overseas activities are increasing rapidly with offices in Beijing, Shanghai, Philadelphia and soon, Bangalore. The Society’s publishing activity is truly international, with 85% of content and 90% of revenue coming from outside the UK. The RSC is working with African colleagues on a pan-Africa chemical network which currently has hubs in Addis Ababa and Nairobi. The aim is to work with African chemists to improve the chemistry infrastructure and research outputs. Teams of chemistry researchers from the UK visit Africa to encourage collaboration and run mini-conferences. The RSC has sent 15,000 tutorial textbooks to Africa, and digitized current and back-files of their journals are made freely available via PERI (part of the INASP initiative). They have also offered to digitize back-files of African chemistry journals and make them freely available.

Another big issue (for all publishers – and indeed librarians) is the huge rise in the amount of high quality journal articles being submitted. Submissions to the RSC are up 47% this year. They published 35% more articles last year and they will publish 30% more again this year. Rejection rates are stable, but Robert is adamant that quality is paramount and admits to being “thrilled” with the improved impact factors of the journals and the fact that the median impact factor of the programme is on a par with that of the American Chemical Society. However, he acknowledges that the growth in research is not being matched by money coming into the system – specifically,

funding to academic libraries. Business models for journal publishing are a massive issue and must be resolved if UK research is to continue to flourish, with competition from Brazil, Russia, India and China (the BRIC economies).

On the books front, output is also increasing – but once again with the focus being on quality. The RSC will publish 73 books in 2009 – mostly research monographs with a smattering of popular science – and the aim for 2010 is 120. Their strategy for e-books is also in place and about 600 books “of value” have been digitized from 1960 to the present. Although the Society has been approached by other vendors with a view to hosting their content, he is clear that they will “go their own way”. They are building a new platform for books and journals, to be launched in 2010.

Robert believes that in this networked age there is still a role for the learned society. They are creating social networks for subject disciplines and providing knowledge and expertise to support research and teaching. One of the RSC’s key objectives is to support teachers and they offer a range of services such as in-service training (RSC is the next largest provider of in-service training for teachers after the government), course materials, and curriculum input. The next generation of chemists is coming through as members and there is a thriving student members section, as well as a chemistry network for A-level students studying chemistry.

As mentioned above, Robert is currently the Chair of ALPSP, but he is handing over to Toby Green, OECD, at the end of 2009. Robert says he has really enjoyed working with Ian Russell and the team at ALPSP and he feels they achieve a lot for a small team. During his period as Chair he has worked with them on a new strategic plan and contributed to the internationalisation of the organization – in particular, the setting up of chapters in the US and in Australia and New Zealand. He has enjoyed the lobbying opportunities and believes that ALPSP has an effective voice and can make a difference for not-for-profit publishers.

In his spare time Robert is a keen biker – he owns a Honda VFR (and doesn’t own a car). He not only rides to work on his bike but also does overseas tours – he has been to Austria and Germany most recently and is off to Darmstadt shortly. As all good dads, he has spent a lot of time

supporting his children, and with two daughters who have both been GB rowers, he has spent a lot of time ferrying them around to training and regattas. He has also been a long-time school governor. Robert and Rosemary have always said that they would retire to the Cotswolds, and in preparation for that time, they recently bought a cottage in Stow-on-the-Wold. It has a courtyard garden and nearby there are lots of lovely restaurants and pubs. "It's just the right thing", he says. We're sure it is.



Watch out for Robert on his red Honda VFR

