

Christopher Hurst: a publisher in the world

By Michael Dwyer,
Created 2008-01-23 13:22

The death of a close and longstanding colleague is a singular form of bereavement. This at least is my experience in recalling the publisher [1] Christopher Hurst, with whom I worked for more than twenty years in a partnership it would be unjust to describe as merely a "working" one. It was more than that, and not just in terms of its longevity. It was akin perhaps to the "odd couple", which was how I sometimes characterised it to friends and other colleagues. While we never separated, even on a trial basis, there were many disagreements over important issues (such as which book to publish or cover design we preferred) and trivial ones too (did we need printed stationery, a clock on the office wall or a new typewriter ribbon?)

Above all, we remained colleagues and friends, while jealously guarding our divergent views about many subjects, for we shared an abiding passion - publishing books of the highest quality, especially in terms of their editing and production values. And what an extraordinary and deeply held passion it was: Christopher was incapable of boarding a plane or train, waiting for a haircut or to meet the bank manager, without a manuscript in his bag, pen to hand, ready to deploy his fierce and uncompromising intelligence for his author's benefit.

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Christopher was a brilliant editor: a man who saw nothing contradictory in spending weeks and in some cases months honing a manuscript that ultimately would be read by (at most) a few thousand people - and sometimes many fewer. The books bore the publisher's name, but the obsessive zeal with which he worked and reworked the text of a history of this or the politics of that was not motivated by ego. He had a strong sense [3] of who he was and his place in the world, but neither glory nor financial reward was what kept him going; in fact he had a natural aversion to what we in the trade of scholarly publishing laughingly call "bestsellers", and was always concerned lest "inadvertently", or in a fit of absent-mindedness, we acquired one, warning me several times each year how a wildly successful book could spell ruin for the firm.

Perhaps fortunately for both of us, we never put this adage to the test, and I soon realised he was far happier for his books to shine a little light in to a dark corner rather than to illuminate the horizon. As a consequence, when pitching a title that I wished to commission, or one of those I had been approached to publish, I generally did much better by playing down its likely impact on the literary pages and bestseller lists. When Christopher realised a book would do only moderately well, he retreated behind his pile of manuscripts in our palatial suite of rooms in London's King Street, looking marginally less worried than he had at the outset of our conversation.

openDemocracy authors whose work is also published by **C Hurst & Co** [4] include (with, in each case, their latest article):

Sumantra Bose, "**The partition evasion** [4]" (23 August 2007)

Yet he was always willing to accommodate change, albeit at a manageable pace, and had no time for tradition for its own sake. This often manifested itself in unexpected ways. For example, when fired by a new passion spurred by an overseas visit, a newspaper story, or a conversation with a trusted author, he might rush into the office of a morning and say: "Michael, we simply *have* to publish a book about how the Inuit are being harmed by Nato fighter-jets overflying Labrador" or, "Don't you think we ought to do something about the Central African Republic", or "Isn't it time we found someone to write a history of Sikkim"? (or Paraguay, or the Seychelles).

As may be imagined, I often greeted these outbursts with the greatest scepticism, and reacted as if I were the senior figure in the relationship, curbing the naive excesses of a junior member of staff. Such youthfulness of spirit, something he carried with him right to the very end, was a terribly endearing characteristic of Christopher's, something I continue to cherish.

The desire to publish a book about the Sri Lankan Tamils, the regime of Charles Taylor in Liberia, or Slovenia, bore out another trait of Christopher's, namely his extreme unpredictability. "Never a dull moment" is a cliché, but it was an entirely apt one when working with him. He had very few immovable opinions and though he was infuriating at times I never thought of him as stubborn. Again this realisation came about inadvertently. I forget the manuscript in question, except that after I had spent five minutes extolling its virtues, Christopher interrupted me and, with a wave of his hand, said: "Yes, yes, we must do the book; sign him up, sign him up". I had just persuaded him to commission a book that, a week beforehand, he had flatly refused even to consider. It was a tactic I turned to more than once, knowing that Christopher judged each case on its merits, and that his reactions reflected not just his mood [5] but also his sense of what publishers ought to be doing. The latter is a sentiment now almost entirely absent from the world of corporate publishing in Britain and America.

This led him to seek out books on topics that, at the time, filled some with horror; hence he published titles sympathetic to the Ulster Protestants, or to opponents of the regime in Beijing or in Hanoi, when many in the west still adored all that the People's Republic of China or the Socialist Republic of Vietnam stood for, irrespective of how their dissidents were treated. Christopher was unflinching in the face of the criticism that such publishing decisions occasionally generated; indeed it seemed only to spur him on.

I sometimes wondered whether there was something about his privileged upbringing (his father was surgeon to Britain's king) and education (Eton, Oxford, the army) that propelled him towards championing the most rarified of lost causes and embracing the "no-hopers" of international politics (the plight of the West Papuans, subject to Indonesian imperialism and neo-colonialism, exercised him greatly and did till the end of his life). In fact he had a very strong conviction that his serendipitous role as a publisher based in London obliged him to publish books of global concern, even though their readership might be miniscule.

Christopher Cramer, "**How to speak of war** [4]" (17 October 2006)

Faisal Devji, "**Muslim liberals: epistles of moderation** [4]" (18 October 2007)

Dejan Djokic, "**The assassination of Zoran Djindjic** [4]" (13 March 2003)

Bernd Fischer, "**Balkan strongmen: exit from history** [4]" (29 June 2007)

Antonio Giustozzi, "**The resurgence of the neo-Taliban** [4]" (14 December 2007) Gérard Prunier, "**Kenya: roots of crisis** [4]" (7 January 2008)

Carne Ross, "**Music in the Security Council** [4]" (26 February 2007)

Olivier Roy, "**Secularism confronts Islam** [4]" (25 October 2007)

Hence he published a chapter by Steve Biko when few outside South Africa had heard of the young radical; he embraced the idea of bringing to world attention the history of the Muslims of southeast Europe, the forgotten children of the Ottomans, before, during and after the outbreak of the most recent "Balkan war"; and he unerringly sought out dissidents in the Soviet bloc (Pyotr Grigorenko, Zdenek Mlynar) and the PRC (General Peng Dehuai) in order to publish their memoirs.

He was also indefatigable in pursuing books that would have deterred a larger publishing house. Translating several works from French (including the doyen of French Marxist historians of colonialism in Africa, Jean-Suret Canale) did not distract him from running a publishing company; neither did supervising the publication of Humphrey Fisher's translation of Gustav Nachtigal's four volumes of Saharan travels, this being one of the books closest to his heart.

It will soon be a year since Christopher died [6], on 20 April 2007. But the company he founded lives and - moderately, of course - thrives, while his relentless energy, dynamism and desire to get things done are missed by many of those who remember him.

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