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# The Pergamon

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## phenomenon

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### 1951–1991:

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### Robert Maxwell

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### and scientific

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### publishing

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**Brian Cox**

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*ABSTRACT: The author retired from Elsevier Science in 1998. His first employer in the book trade was Sir Basil Blackwell. He later worked for 31 years for Robert Maxwell at Headington Hill Hall, initially as subscription manager, and finally as a director of Pergamon Journals and Pergamon Press. In this memoir, he describes his personal experience of Maxwell, the man, and of Pergamon Press, the company he founded and ran.*



Brian Cox

## Introduction

International scientific, technical and medical publishing (known familiarly as STM since its practitioners formed the international association with that acronym in 1968) was effectively born in the wake of World War II. Before then, most English-language STM books and journals had been published by learned societies and were almost exclusively devoted to works published for their members. War-impelled research far outstripped the capacity of this genteel publishing industry. A new breed of publishers saw the commercial possibilities in a business that, they foresaw correctly, would set enviable standards of growth and profitability in the succeeding decades.

I began my working life as a bookseller with B.H. Blackwell of Oxford in 1951. Although I did not know it, the company to which I would be devoting more than 30 years of my professional life was also founded in that year. The founder was a Czech immigrant who had achieved an impressive command of the English language in the British army during the war and immediately after the war had acquired a background in print and publishing with the Allied Control Commission in Berlin. In 1960, fresh from completing my National Service in an infantry regiment, an experience not very relevant to a career in bookselling and publishing, I was at least able to understand Captain Robert Maxwell's rather autocratic management style. He had christened his company Pergamon Press after the city of Pergamon in Asia Minor. The colophon was a reproduction of a Greek coin from that city.

Although Pergamon was an upstart company, it sprang from a partnership between two venerable imprints – Butterworths (founded in 1818) and Springer (founded in 1842) – who together had established a company in 1948, principally to import

Springer Verlag publications into the UK. In an early example of a management buyout, Robert Maxwell, who had been the Butterworth/Springer manager, purchased the company in 1951 for £13,000. He also acquired the services of an Austrian, Doctor Paul Rosebaud, who had been with Springer Verlag and who became Editorial Director of Pergamon. I was hired as subscription manager and worked directly for Maxwell for 31 years until he sold Pergamon to Elsevier NV for £440 million.

### The early days

Maxwell was quite a different character in those early days from the much-hated tycoon he was to become. Pergamon was the child of his timing, vision and drive. His European provenance was an asset in a business that was becoming increasingly international, as indeed was to be demonstrated by Elsevier, which was a purely Dutch company in 1951 and which became the largest STM publisher in the world. Even some of the publishers started in the United States, which were to become famous STM imprints, such as Academic Press, Interscience or Plenum, were the brainchildren of European emigrants.

The international reach of STM publishing was already evident in the list of journals and books that Maxwell acquired in 1951. It consisted of six serials and two textbooks. Five of the six serials are still in the Pergamon list today. And one of the two textbooks, *Metallurgical Thermochemistry*, is still published by Reed Elsevier under the Butterworths imprint.

The secret of Pergamon's growth was the scientific journal. Most new Pergamon journal titles opened with the same three words: *International Journal of* . . . Over 40 such journals (incidentally a bibliographic nightmare for librarians) still appear in the Pergamon list.

Before I joined, Pergamon had been located in Fitzroy Square in London's West End. In 1959, it began to migrate to Headington Hill Hall, a stately country home which Robert Maxwell had adroitly rented from the City of Oxford. It had been built in the 1850s for the Morrell family, who had

been local brewers. During the war, it had been a military hospital. By 1959, it was in an advanced state of disrepair. Captain and Mrs Maxwell restored the building and moved into it with their rapidly growing family. Publishing staff shared parts of the Hall and also worked in the stable block and the huts which had been built in the grounds as part of the wartime hospital. Although I worked continuously in Headington Hill Hall for all my 31 years, I felt I worked in a succession of different businesses. Maxwell seemed to be omnipresent, eternally restless and unpredictable. But he had a profound effect on scientific publishing which the débâcle of the Maxwell Communications Corporation after his death has eclipsed from history.

No one could have called him a good delegator. He was quite capable of redrafting a telex message from me to a colleague in the New York office and then, on his visit to the United States a few days later, assisting that colleague in his reply to me. He had a magical way of cultivating large numbers of academic authors and editors, initially through his personal contacts and then maintaining these contacts through ghosted correspondence from other directors. Distinguished scholars who had seldom met Maxwell, but who received regular telephone calls from him and correspondence over his signature, regarded him as a confidant.

He had one habit in common with Sir Basil Blackwell, my first employer in the book trade. They both loved to sort the incoming mail as soon as it arrived and then to prowl round the office talking to staff at all levels. Neither of them had much use for formal meetings. Maxwell appeared to make all decisions personally, but frequently he consulted with those who would be required to carry out his decisions. He thus attained a level of rapport between directors and staff which many publishing managements favouring more formal meetings were unable to achieve.

His office at Headington Hill Hall was the largest room in the building, with the exception of the marble-floored entrance hall. His desk was placed diagonally in a corner at the maximum distance from the door. When you opened the door, you had to travel across an

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acre of carpet before coming face to face with him. If you knew the answer to his first question, you would be offered a chair and a cup of coffee. If not, you would be kept standing for the duration of the session. But these seemed minor foibles in the years (up until 1980) when Pergamon Press was Robert Maxwell's primary business interest. You felt you were at the centre of a world, and never left his office without the adrenaline running faster.

Maxwell's foibles often ran in the direction of operating economies. Pergamon in those days was a very profitable company, and one of the main reasons was that it was run on a shoestring. For example, all the office furniture – desks and cabinets – at Headington Hill Hall was made by one resident carpenter, who also designed Mrs Maxwell's kitchen in his spare time. He constructed desks with typewriters screwed to their undersides so that, when the typewriters were not in use, the working surfaces were available for writing, proof-reading or eating lunch. Maxwell loved to demonstrate this invention to visiting authors and editors. Members of staff knew exactly what to do when he said 'make your typewriter disappear'. On one occasion, however, he picked a new member of staff whose desk was not one of the latest design. Surrounded by a group of visitors, the hapless employee was suddenly commanded in that firm rich baritone to 'make your typewriter disappear'. Momentarily paralysed, he then picked up his typewriter and ran from the room.

My principal job was sales and fulfilment, and since the circulation of the journals grew by 5–10% each year during the 1960s, I could have expected to be popular with my employer. But quite often I was upbraided, not for failing to achieve targeted sales, but for exceeding the targets. Why had I set the targets so low? This is not a problem for journal publishers today, when it is hard to sell each year the same number of subscriptions as the previous year. Even with rapidly growing circulation, it was many years before a new journal began to make a contribution to profit. The secret of Pergamon's success was to publish a large number of journals, so that the established titles

could support the new ones during their formative years.

### The public company

Pergamon Press became a public company in 1964. In 1966, it won the Queen's Award for Industry for export performance. In the same year, a new office block and warehouse were built in the grounds of Headington Hill Hall and opened by the then Foreign Secretary, George Brown.

Maxwell was a Labour Party MP from 1964 to 1970. He was an energetic and effective constituency member for North Buckinghamshire, and both he and Mrs Maxwell had a devoted interest in the affairs of the area which was to become Milton Keynes. This was a diversion from his business interests, particularly since for much of the time he was at Westminster the government had a small overall majority in the House of Commons which required the constant presence of back-benchers. As Chairman of the House of Commons Catering Committee, however, he had an office from which he was able to conduct his business. Many commercial meetings were held there. When the Association of Subscription Agents asked for a meeting to talk about trade terms, they were invited to his office at the House of Commons.

Meanwhile, Pergamon's publishing programmes, while seldom departing from the STM subjects on which its reputation rested, became more and more ambitious. *The Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Physics*, consisting of nine volumes and four supplements, was published over ten years from 1961 to 1971. It was the first of many multi-volume encyclopaedias which the Pergamon staff proudly called Major Reference Works. Biotechnology, chemistry, education, engineering, entomology, linguistics, materials science, pharmacology and toxicology were all subjects of encyclopaedias ranging from six to twelve volumes each. *The International Encyclopaedia of Education* was awarded the Dartmouth Medal by the American Library Association as the best reference work of 1985. The Pergamon sales staff were always relieved to see an encyclopaedia in the annual sales budget, since republication

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Many Pergamon authors and editors appreciated Maxwell's support in their academic careers. This was not only a matter of personal cultivation. He provided them with kudos by publishing important but esoteric material which did not sell in large numbers. He also accepted for publication applied material that the learned societies did not consider, until much later, as proper for gentlemen of science, and made available attractive locations for regular editorial meetings.

In book publishing, certainly the most ambitious, even grandiose, project was *The Commonwealth and International Library of Science, Technology, Engineering and Liberal Studies*. Having begun in 1962, it achieved 1,000 titles by 1970.

An international editorial advisory board (with Sir Robert Robinson and Dean Athelstan Spillhaus as co-chairmen) expanded as the series grew and had the responsibility for selection of topics. The first book, Thwaites's *On Teaching Mathematics*, was timely since there was much controversy about the teaching of science and mathematics at that time. Lee and Inglis's *Science for Hairdressing Students* was widely used as a textbook at Further Education colleges throughout the world, while Johnson's *Urban Geography* was the first text in a new field of study. The print runs were initially 5,000–10,000 copies per title, but varied considerably. Titles were sold individually in bookshops, but the trade were encouraged to place standing orders by academic level and subject category so that they received new titles in their chosen fields immediately on publication.

When I joined Pergamon Press in 1960, the fulfilment and distribution records of the 59 journals then being published were maintained on 80-column ICT punch cards, with a separate tray of cards for each journal. Even if a library subscribed to all 59, we would be quite unaware of it. The cards were used both as the clerical record and as a means of producing despatch labels, invoices and renewal promotions. Each journal had four or five prices (one-year, two-year, direct, through agents, etc.) and

these had to be totalled at the end of the year by counting the packs of cards on a sorting machine and then adding up the totals on an adding machine. As a result, I retained the journal code numbers, prices and circulations in my head. Today the job is done by sophisticated computers, but we can never be sure that the data is totally accurate because no one understands the business in sufficient detail to argue against the records provided in this wonderful way. Pergamon was a pioneer in 1968 when we converted the separate records for each journal into a computer-based system that gave the addresses of subscribers and a potted record of all the journals taken by each subscriber.

Where would we have been without the US market? Nowhere. Even the exchange rate worked to our advantage. In 1951, when Pergamon was founded, the US dollar had already replaced sterling as the world currency and until the 1980s remained the benchmark against which all other currencies were measured. Costs and subscription rates grew as journals grew in size and frequency, but were incurred in pounds during many years when the pound fell in value against the dollar – a fact not immediately apparent to librarians in the United States, who were pleased with Pergamon's apparently stable prices. The exchange illusion was a major factor in Pergamon's profitability.

Such windfall profits were not the whole picture, however. Pergamon was a very 'hands-on' company. We worked long hours. Managers often performed more than one role. Fortunately, the increasing workload was largely covered by improvements in mainframe computers, without which the journal publishing industry could not have expanded at the rate it did.

When, after 40 years, the US dollar ceased to be the benchmark for world currency, and the true costs and prices of STM journals became apparent, Pergamon and other European journal publishers fell abruptly in the esteem of the US library market. Rising prices coincided with falling budgets. The truth came out that academic journals had never been inexpensive, simply because they sell in very small quantities.

An STM journal selling 2,000 copies around the world is the equivalent of a trade book bestseller. Most journals sell only in the hundreds.

The increases in prices of research journals, while library budgets have fallen, have unfortunately led to quarrels between librarians and publishers. Library subscribers have learned to purchase fewer journals and are now seeking electronic products to replace the print-on-paper journals which have served us so well for over 300 years. How will STM publishing develop given that most science is published in journals and almost all electronic journals are currently versions of print products? Can we now confidently forecast that print-on-paper will move to networked electronic products? Will electronic journals become established as the preferred method of publication, and how will we deal with peer review? The current demand for electronic products requires huge investment in the short term with no foreseeable profit since, while print-on-paper continues in parallel with electronic, production costs must rise.

Currently, leading STM journal publishers, including Academic Press, Elsevier Science, Taylor & Francis, Springer Verlag and John Wiley, offer electronic files of their academic journals. Will one of these be the model for the future? Publishers do not traditionally co-operate with their competitors, but the market for the 21st century requires large files of data by subject and may force publishers to join together in ever-larger groups by acquisition, merger or alliances.

### The bitter end

Maxwell's vision of electronic publishing was the key to his disastrous negotiations with Saul Steinberg of Leasco Data Processing. Pergamon scientific journals were to be mounted on Leasco computer installations and be published electronically. The talks broke down in acrimony and, at an extraordinary meeting of shareholders in London on 10 Oct. 1969, Leasco convinced the institutional shareholders that they (together with Leasco) should take control of Pergamon. Shareholders present at the meeting, many of whom were Pergamon employees, gave

overwhelming support to the Pergamon board of directors by a show of hands but, when postal votes were counted, Leasco gained control of the company and was to retain control for more than four years. During these years, books and journals already commissioned continued to be published, marketed and distributed by the management but few new projects were added. Neither Steinberg nor Maxwell held a controlling share and Leasco failed to introduce a publisher on the board of directors or, indeed, to develop the electronic concept which was ahead of the current technology at the time. Significantly, the ideas they had attempted to develop were not to be realized, by anyone, for a further 25 years.

At the end of this sterile period, with the support of a pressure group of academics whose co-operation as editors was essential to the Pergamon publishing programmes, Maxwell was able to reacquire his shares. Returning as Chairman on 1 Apr. 1974, he immediately promoted two pre-Leasco directors. Tom Clark, who had been with Pergamon since its founding, was reinstated as Deputy Chairman and Gilbert Richards was appointed Managing Director. For the next 20 years, each in turn was to act as Maxwell's alter ego, counterbalancing his brilliant, but often capricious, direction with sound advice and steady management. The recovery of Pergamon after the Leasco fiasco became an obsession with Maxwell. Both book and journal lists expanded. But his complete triumph over his adversaries created an overconfidence which was a seed of future disaster. For the remainder of his life he tried to play out again and again on a larger stage the manoeuvre which had restored his fortunes after he had been declared by a public body in 1973 to be 'not a person who can be relied on to exercise proper stewardship of a publicly quoted company'. The DTI report referred to the manner in which he had continued to direct what had become a publicly quoted company in 1964 as if it were still his own privately owned enterprise in the late 1960s.

By 1986, Pergamon, while still the jewel in the Maxwell crown, had become a subsidiary of the British Printing and Communications

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Corporation (later renamed Maxwell Communications Corporation) of which Maxwell was Chairman, Chief Executive and major shareholder. He moved his office to London and ultimately to the top floor of the *Daily Mirror*, which he acquired for £93m from the International Publishing Corporation in 1986.

In the end, he sold – probably had to sell – Pergamon to raise funds to save his publishing and newspaper enterprises in the United States and maintain the share value of the holding company. But not even the £440m. paid by Elsevier was sufficient to avoid disaster. Six months after the Elsevier acquisition, Maxwell was dead, falling from the deck of his yacht on 5 Nov. 1991. The collapse of his empire, which followed his death, destroyed his reputation. Biographies, after brief sketches of his youth in Czechoslovakia and his unassailable war record, in which he was commissioned in the field and won the Military Cross, concentrated on his decline and fall. His considerable contribution to the establishment and development of postwar international STM publishing was largely forgotten.

In the 40 years between its founding and its sale to Elsevier in 1991, Pergamon published over 7,000 monographs and reference works, and launched 700 journals, 418 of which were still current titles when the company was sold and 400 of which continue to this day to be sold under the Pergamon imprint within Reed Elsevier. Our journals expanded both in size and in frequency. Some were separated into several new titles.

Some were combined with other titles, changing their aims and scope. Some ceased publication. Of the 250 titles dropped over 40 years, very few disappeared. Many which for good intellectual and commercial reasons should have ceased publication were taken up by other publishers and given further leases of life.

Today the name over the door is Elsevier Science Limited, although the Pergamon imprint remains. Headington Hill Hall is now part of Oxford Brookes University. The bronze bust of Robert Maxwell in the hall has been replaced by a memorial to John Brookes, the first Principal of the Oxford College of Technology after whom the university was named. The Reed Elsevier amalgamation in Jan. 1993 united the scientific publishing programmes of Pergamon and Butterworths, which had given Robert Maxwell the launching pad for his remarkable enterprise. If only he could have been satisfied with Pergamon, there could have been a happy ending.

#### Note

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