Adrian Room (1933-2011)

The name of Adrian Room is familiar to all onomasts; he was well known as a most prolific writer of popular reference books on many subjects, published by several publishers in America and the UK; but he was an intensely shy, private man. He never came to conferences, few scholars ever met him, but he was always polite, friendly and humorous with me when I saw him in Stamford. After I published his *The Street Names of England* (1992), he often generously gave me copies of his new publications. The news of his death is most unexpected, and I only heard it from the new owners of his house after making repeated attempts to telephone him.

Because of his privacy, I have little knowledge of his career or his life, and I have not been able to find out more (his books do not include personal profiles, his other publishers know less than I, his executor does not reply), but I would like to offer what I can because I do not think anyone else will be able to. He never married, and I know he had no brothers or sisters. He used to have a formal career in teaching: at Milton Abbey and at a short-lived private school called Anglo-American College in the 1960s, then lecturing in Russian for the Ministry of Defence (he always seemed to have a military-like, dapper appearance). He received a commission to work on a multi-volume Russian encyclopedia and it was that experience which inspired him to take up a new career in the 1970s as a self-employed writer of popular reference works, with a strong bias towards books on names. He was very clever at identifying a gap in the market, selling the idea to a publisher, and then delivering a text which met the specification, on time, and impeccably typeset so it just flowed into the publisher's computer with none of the excessive time-wasting that many authors cause. In this respect, he was a publisher's dream.

His books were always balanced, highly intelligent accounts of the subject of the title, with good introductions and excellent biblio-graphies; they contain far more than the majority of popular reference books published today. He was a very skilled popularist who brought reliable information on complex subjects to a large audience.

I once introduced Adrian to Joyce Miles. She immediately asked him "How *do* you do it?" He had three methods which ensured that he always got the job done. One was that he never started a book until he had a publisher willing to take it, so publication was always assured—when I approached him to commission *Street Names of England*, he told me he'd been trying for years to get a publisher interested in a proposed *Street Names of the World* (!). Another was that he relied heavily on published sources of information, rather than doing pioneer research at manuscript level (though he did write many letters of enquiry); and, finally, he never allowed himself to be bogged down with difficult entries. If an explanation could not be found or discerned, the entry was omitted altogether. So, the works were finished on time and the entries were always of good quality. In contrast to many other writers of popular reference books, he always cited his sources in a bibliography.

His great *Encyclopedia of Corporate Names Worldwide* (2002) was probably his most original, or unique, work, because it was compiled after extensive correspondence with archivists and executives in businesses around the world, so it drew on previously unpublished memories.

His knowledge and reputation earned him the fantastic commission to re-edit *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* for the 15th edition of 1995 and the subsequent Millennium Edition. He was delighted with the large set fee he earned, but it was a vast undertaking for him. He had previously written, for Cassell, the 1992 *Brewer's Dictionary of Names* (I was pleased to help with a pile of Amstrad-to-Windows disc conversions for him at the time), and he contributed to the enormous 2002 *Oxford Names Companion*.

There seemed no subject too daunting for him to take on if he had a publisher ready. One of his first place-name books was *Place-Names of the World* (1974, revised 2005), and he also contributed *Place-Names of Russia and the Former Soviet Union* (1996), *African Place-names* (1994, 2008), *Dictionary of Irish Place-Names* (1988, 1994), *Placenames of France* (2004), the cosmic *Dictionary of Astronomical Names* (1988) and the more reflective *An Alphabetical Guide to the Language of Name Studies* (1996). He also covered *Nicknames of*

Places (2006) and *The Pronunciation of Place-Names: a Worldwide Dictionary* (2007).

He wrote several popular works on first names, and even an early book on *Pet Names* (1979, new version *The Naming of Animals*, 1993). His works on pseudonyms went through several versions, from *Naming Names* in 1981 to the *Dictionary of Pseudonyms* (1989, 1998).

Some of his earlier titles were rather quirky approaches to words, such as *Room's Dictionary of Confusibles* (1979), *Room's Dictionary of Distinguishables* (1981), the *Dictionary of Contrasting Pairs* (1988), the *Dictionary of Cryptic Crossword Clues* (1983) and *The Dictionary of True Etymologies* (1988).

Other works he authored were *Room's Classical Dictionary* (1983, revised as *Who's Who in Classical Mythology*, 2003), and the three *Dictionary of Art Titles* (2000), *Dictionary of Music Titles* (2000), and *Literally Entitled* (2008), which covered the names of well-known works of art, music and literature. The *Dictionary of Coin Names* (1987) and the recent *Dictionary of Sports and Games Terminology* (2010) further expanded his range. He wrote *The Guinness Book of Numbers* (1989). As far as music was concerned, I know he played the piano very well and he had a broad knowledge of classical music. Adrian Room seemed to write about everything.

We were in contact perhaps two or three times a year since I moved away from Stamford and he always sounded enthusiastic for the latest book he was working on, but also very interested in my own endeavours as a publisher. He lived alone and, as far as I know, had few friends and no family. His death has gone unnoticed by the media, and I do not know what the circumstances were or what has happened to his archive and his books. I feel a great sadness that this has happened without my knowing, and without any public notice. Adrian Room was a very nice man, and I miss him.

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