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## Obituary

### Alan Mercer (1931–2014) – A founding editor of EJOR



Emeritus Professor Alan Mercer of Lancaster University died on July 9, following a stroke, a month short of his 83rd birthday. Alan, Bernhard Tilanus and Hans-Jurgen Zimmermann, were founding editors of the *European Journal of Operational Research* (EJOR) in 1975, and continued as editors together until they resigned in 1998. It was expected that the tripartite editorship would only last a year or two, before reverting to a single editor. It is a testament to all three that their relationship, indeed friendship, lasted for so long and achieved so much.

EJOR was first proposed at the first Association of European Operational Research Societies (EURO) Council Meeting held on 30 January 1975. A committee (G. Kreweras, B. Roy, C.B. Tilanus, and H.-J. Zimmermann) was formed to investigate the desirability of such a venture. Following their recommendations, on 8 May 1975 the Council decided that EJOR should be launched. It was considered important for a native-English speaker to be involved in editing a European journal, and the Secretary of EURO and former President of the Operational Research Society (ORS), Roger Eddison, invited Alan to take on the task. A motivating factor

behind his acceptance was the rejection of a paper he had submitted to an American marketing journal, “for such silly, wrong reasons that it was difficult to believe that the referees had read the paper”. Alan had concluded that US journals were extremely reluctant to publish papers by authors from elsewhere. In deciding that he would never again submit a paper to a US journal, he determined that he would work to develop strong European competitors.

On 2nd October 1975, he first met Bernhard Tilanus and Hans Zimmermann in Amsterdam to sign an agreement with North-Holland, later to be Elsevier Science, for their joint editorship of EJOR. Its basis was that the publisher would reimburse the expenses of the editors, who would give their time freely. The next year was spent in putting together the editorial systems and in persuading leading international researchers to submit papers. Thus the first issue appeared in January 1977, consisting of six papers. Six issues containing a total of 400–500 pages were published in that and each of the following two years. Alan was particularly pleased that a significant paper by Abe Charnes and Bill Cooper on Goal Programming was published in the first issue.

In 1980, EJOR became a monthly journal and special issues, with eminent guest editors invited by Bernhard, were introduced. By 1981, the twelve issues totalled 1200 pages and included highly rated survey papers, for which Alan was responsible. The intention was that they should be an expression of the author's opinions with no more than thirty references, rather than the traditional long list with a little interconnecting narrative, though not all the survey papers followed those guidelines. Such was the success of EJOR that by 1989 it had become the world's largest OR journal, appearing eighteen times per year with a total of 2400 pages.

By now, EJOR papers were well regarded for tenure and promotion in the very best US universities. The Journal's growth of good submissions was unstoppable, so that the number of issues was increased to twenty-four in 1992 and the number of pages per annum reached 5500 in 1998, with a typical year containing papers from authors based in thirty or more countries. Working without sub-editors in order to have differential acceptance criteria and thereby personally influence the shape of OR's development, resulted in Alan reading about 15,000 referee's reports.

Alan's university retirement was due in the summer of 1998. It had always been assumed that the Editors would resign one at a time, but when the editors were considering the future in Hans's home around Easter 1996, it soon became apparent that what had started as three separate editors had evolved into one editorial team of close friends. Consequently, they decided to resign *en bloc*, but undertook to search for a new team, which Elsevier could recommend to EURO. For almost two years, advice was sought in

confidence, culminating in lengthy discussions with each of the short-listed candidates. Hence Roman Slowinski, Jacques Teghem and Jyrki Wallenius became the Editors in 1999, although the Journal's contents consisted of previously accepted papers for some time.

At the Brussels EURO Conference in July 1998, Bernhard, Hans and Alan each received a specially introduced EURO Pass in Gold, in recognition of their achievement.

Alan was born on 22 August, 1931 in Stocksbridge, Yorkshire. He won an open scholarship to study mathematics at Sidney Sussex, Cambridge, from 1950. In his first year in Cambridge he asked the University Appointments Board what a mathematician could do for a living. No answer was given and he was told to return the next year, when he was asked what class of degree he had been awarded in Part 1. Although that was a First, the only career suggestions forthcoming were banking or insurance. Disillusioned, he followed two students in the year ahead of him and decided to stay on to take the Diploma in Mathematical Statistics, which included the first research Alan undertook: a statistical analysis of the counts on bull semen.

In 1954 he joined the Field Investigation Group of the National Coal Board, and thus began his operational research career. In 1956, he moved to the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment at Aldermaston, where, based in the Theoretical Physics Division, he had two roles. One was to lead a team developing Monte Carlo methods for weapon design, and thus he was one of a small team directly responsible for Britain's first hydrogen bomb. The other was as operational research/statistical consultant to the whole Establishment. In this capacity he continued the stochastic processes work upon which Fuchs, the atom spy, had been working at the time of his arrest, and he was responsible for the statistical work on the detection of underground nuclear explosions. During his Aldermaston period, he wrote his Ph.D. thesis 'Some Stochastic Processes Analysed by the Method of Supplementary Variable'.

In 1962, he joined Armour & Co. Ltd as the senior manager responsible for OR, statistics and data processing. Within eight months of joining the company, he had determined the company's data processing needs, ordered the computer and taken delivery of it, had a computer room built, recruited and trained systems analysts and programmers who in turn had programmed and implemented an ordering, inventory control and accounts receivable system.

In 1964, he started the OR Department at Lancaster University with Pat Rivett and Mike Simpson. As students needed to be taught about the application of OR to marketing and distribution problems he decided to work in these areas. Soon after arriving in Lancaster, he carried out his first private consultancy, when Allied Breweries asked him to install state-of-the-art quality control in its Burton-on-Trent brewery. After completing the work, he persuaded the company to start its own OR group with Lancaster's first PhD as its head.

In 1965 he began a long term relationship with Tilcon, the pre-mix concrete supplier, visiting its Planning Director each month to discuss the company's problems and performing calculations between visits. He showed that large agitator trucks were not cost-effective, so that none were introduced to the UK. Another long term relationship started in 1976 with Burton's Biscuits, which only ended, after 23 years, on his retirement. Other companies with which Alan was involved included Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI), Gallaher, Unilever, Mars, and International Computers (ICL).

Alan stated that his most interesting study was carried out for Anheuser-Busch in about 1984 on the future of the pub. Alan's presentation was made to Mr. Busch in Munich, alongside that of an American bank, as the US company considered whether to buy a UK brewer, many of which owned a large number of pubs.

For several years in the early 70s, he advised the Turkish government on the introduction of OR to that country. A Unit

had been set up on the Middle East Technical University campus in Ankara, staffed by extremely bright young graduates. Alan made regular visits of a week or two, during which he worked on industrial projects, including days spent in companies. Several of the graduates subsequently studied in Lancaster.

In 1982, Alan started a three-year term as Chairman of Lancaster's School of Management and Organisational Sciences and set about moving it, against much opposition, from a grouping of self-centred, largely autonomous departments to the integrated Lancaster University Management School (LUMS) that continues to flourish. When Head of Department Mike Simpson died suddenly in July 1983, Alan was appointed as his successor, a role he undertook until 1992. Alan focussed on improving the research output of the Department, and as LUMS' Associate Dean, responsible for research, led the School's 1992 Research Assessment Exercise submission. The resulting top rating established LUMS' reputation, and as LUMS was such a large part of the University the School's rating significantly contributed to Lancaster's elevation into the top ten research rated UK universities.

After retirement in 1998, he continued to visit the University every week until all his doctoral students had obtained their degrees, lectured to the MSc course for a decade and chaired almost all the PhD vivas until his wife became ill in 2010. Alan's last visit to the Department was in September 2013, to take part in a day of celebration of 50 years since Pat Rivett's appointment. He gave a typical, lengthy, speech, full of forthright opinions, which several alumni regarded as spellbinding. Alan commented on a photo taken at the event that it was "significant for two reasons. First, it includes the words Lancaster University, to which I devoted most of my life. Second, it is likely to be the last photo of me."

Alan joined the Operational Research Society (ORS) in 1954, and became a Council Member in 1969. Becoming editor of *EJOR* in 1975 left him with little time for ORS activities, although he chaired the 1998 Annual Conference which was held in Lancaster. The Society appointed him as Companion of Operational Research in 2010.

Outside the University and OR, Alan had many important appointments, including significant roles for research councils, membership of the government's Retail Logistics Task Force, membership of the Board of the Central Lancashire Development Corporation (CLDC), and Chairman of the Warrington & Runcorn Development Corporation (WRDC), appointed to that position by Margaret Thatcher. At the first CLDC Board meeting, he was appointed to be its representative on the Whitley Council for New Towns Staff, which negotiated pay and conditions of service. He became the vice-chairman, before being elected chairman in 1979 until the WRDC was dissolved in 1989. New Towns staff had better redundancy terms than any other public servants as a result of Alan's negotiations with Michael Heseltine.

Alan was highly innovative, with a wide range of interests. He had a forthright style that many will remember. Nevertheless, he made a huge contribution to OR in Europe, through his editorship of *EJOR*, and in the UK, through his development of the Lancaster OR Department. He leaves a widow, Iris, two sons, Nicholas and Jonathan, and three grandchildren.

Graham Rand \*

*Department of Management Science,  
Lancaster University Management School,  
Lancaster LA1 4YX, United Kingdom*

\* Tel.: +44 01524 593849.

E-mail address: [g.rand@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:g.rand@lancaster.ac.uk)

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