

# Larry Erlbaum: He Did It His Way

January 01, 2007

If there is one thing to know about legendary publisher Lawrence Erlbaum, it's that he will not go quietly into retirement with what Webster's describes as "a song of great sweetness said to be sung by a dying swan." Rubber chicken, yes; swan song, no. Erlbaum will always exit cracking a joke. "Someone in this business cautioned me long ago: 'You have to watch your step. You kid around too much.'" But who's laughing now?

This past November, Erlbaum — "Larry" to all who know him — sold his publishing firm, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates (LEA), to Taylor & Francis, a subsidiary of the London-based global publishing giant, Informa. He had started the business at his kitchen table 33 years ago with "less than \$10,000."

Various news accounts pegged the sale at many millions, attributing it to Bloomberg News, "but even they got it wrong," Erlbaum says. He won't specify the amount but concedes, "I made an indecent amount of money." Not bad for a self-described "yeshiva boy" from Newark, New Jersey.

His grandfather, an orthodox Jew, immigrated to America from "the old country," a town "somewhere in Central Europe." Larry was properly bar-mitzvahed and went on to study pre-med. But he did it at a Lutheran institution, the now defunct Upsala College in East Orange, NJ.

An APS Charter Member and one of psychological science's most enduring friends, he has no degree beyond that. He took his Upsala baccalaureate to SUNY Upstate Medical University at Syracuse, but left after a year, "very, very unhappy" after discovering "I didn't like sick people."

Following a sojourn in Europe, he came home broke and moved in with a friend, sleeping on the floor. A job interview with Academic Press yielded a telegram — "I had no phone" — informing him "they didn't have a job for me. I wasn't that hot a number."

As it turned out, they reconsidered, because "they needed a body to do copyediting and production work and stuff like that. I had no intention whatsoever of staying there. I could see it was a dead-end job in a sense. I didn't think I had very much interest in publishing. The only reason I got there was because I was hungry."

His first book changed that. He noticed a photo in the book was rotated 180 degrees so he corrected it. The author wrote to thank him "for sparing him embarrassment" and the head of the editorial department saw the letter. He decided Larry was "a smart kid, a keeper," after all.

Larry's mentor at Academic was Kurt Jacoby, an unlikely Jewish former World War I Prussian army officer. "He taught me the business. I became his amanuensis. I followed him around, listened when he talked to authors. That's how I got my education in publishing."

Meanwhile, he was also freelancing on Wall Street, selling equities through other brokers. “Arbitrage was my specialty. I was knocking down a couple times my salary” from Academic. As Jacoby continued to be impressed, Erlbaum found himself head of international publishing, then psychology editor. One problem: “There were no psychology books at Academic Press.”

Then Jacoby died. Academic Press was sold to Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich (now Harcourt Trade Publishers). Erlbaum wanted out.

“I did not love the corporate BS,” he says. “I was not cut out for the corporate life.” He landed at V.H. Winston & Son and before long was a part owner and running its editorial department. Two years later his value system overtook him again. “I did not share the same axiological basis as the other partners,” he explains. “It became apparent we had different ideas. They were not at all unhappy to see me go.”

One of the books he handled at Winston was APS Past President Gordon Bower and John Anderson’s landmark work, *Human Associative Memory*. His lifelong love affair with psychological science was blossoming. (Years later, when *Human Associative Memory* went out of print, Erlbaum republished it under his own imprint.)

In 1973, he struck out on his own, launching LEA from his kitchen table in Potomac, Maryland. The next year, he moved to Hillsdale, New Jersey, and set up his fledgling company in his basement. Today that firm, based in Mahwah, New Jersey, reportedly has more than 100 employees and publishes more than 100 academic journals and 200 books a year.

“I didn’t agree with the people with whom I had been working,” he says. “I had learned from Jacoby how this business worked, most importantly the connection between publishing and the research you publish. I learned what I do best, the care and feeding of academics.”

What made him do it? “I don’t know. All I know is it was a lot of fun. There was a lot going on at the time. It’s something that needed doing. The cognitive revolution was going on. A new paradigm was in the air. There was a demand for getting out of the box and abandoning a lot of things that had been the basics of psychology.”

A friend from the earliest years, APS Fellow and former Board member R. Duncan Luce, recalls, “We talked a number of times as he was mulling over the idea of starting his own firm. It seemed pretty wild to think of a relatively inexperienced person starting from scratch in a world well populated by established publishers. Yet, he did, and he made it work. There is genius in that.”

“While money was, of course, a goal, it was equally important to him that his new firm would seek quality, and in practice he and the company did. Of course, he was delighted to have a best seller, but he did not hesitate to take books of quality that did not promise great sales.”

Another friend from way back when, former APS President Sandra Scarr, now owns and runs a Kona coffee plantation in Hawaii. She remembers the Hillsdale days: “Books were stacked in the hallways and extra bedrooms. His residence was the warehouse, and he was the distribution system.”

What was unique about Erlbaum’s firm was that he dared to defy convention. One of his first books was Leon J. Kamin’s controversial *The Science and Politics of IQ*. “Eighteen publishers had looked at it and

turned it down,” he says, because it ran counter to received wisdom that genetics accounted for at least 80 percent of intelligence test scores.

“I looked at it and said it’s a book that should be published,” Erlbaum recalls. “I thought it would help to create more dialog. I had a lot of threats and a lot of people pissed off at me, but it did very, very well. I made a buck on it.”

That, in a nutshell, is his approach to publishing. “If you want to be a publisher, you have to make money because you can’t publish the next book without bucks. But it’s more than about money. We’re not making shirts. What I would tell kids who came to work for me, we’re not shirt makers. Here’s somebody who spent eight years in primary school, four years in high school, four years in college, at least four more years in graduate school, God knows how many in post-doc. You are dealing with their intellectual lifeblood and sweat. You can’t treat this like you’d treat a piece of shirting material.”

He was just as thoughtful of his customers. At a conference when she was a graduate student, APS Fellow and former APS Secretary, Mahzarin Banaji approached Erlbaum with a proposal to sell books to graduate students for half price. She and a group of fellow students argued that the idea was good for them (for obvious reasons) and good for Erlbaum because it would create in the students “book buying behavior” that would continue once they became wealthy professors, able to pay full price. “Larry listened,” says Banaji, “pulled out a notebook, took our names and phone numbers and said ‘Good idea. Done.’ The following week we got a mock-up of a flyer titled GSBS (Graduate Student Book Service) with a slash through the original price and a new half price for students listed instead.”

“Those half-priced books remain my most precious ones, not just because they were great books, but because they are associated with the kindness and generosity of a man who took a hit to support the aspirations of a bunch of exuberant, if financially naive, students. What a mensch!”

“His business flourished,” says Jack McArdle, University of Southern California, because “he picked up on something that other people hadn’t done. For every two books he published, one had to sell. But the other could be anything. He could take other people’s ideas that he knew wouldn’t be profitable, and that was okay. Half his treasury are not big sellers, but they are very important books. He didn’t have to put up with the ones that didn’t sell, but in fact he encouraged them. Profit was not his main motive, serving the people was.”

“Every dinner we had, he’d say, ‘Jack, ask me how’s business.’ So I’d ask, ‘How’s business?’ He’d say, ‘You shouldn’t ask. Now that that’s covered, we can talk about something else.’”

Bower has known Erlbaum ever since the Academic Press years. “His joking, good humor, and generous spirit have made him a consummate friend to me, my wife, and my kids,” Bower says. “He’s attended the weddings of my children and was master of ceremonies at the festschrift in my honor. He continues to be one of my best friends.”

It is no surprise that the list of authors LEA has published reads like a “Who’s Who” of psychological science. “At a point when psychology was bursting out, he was one of the people who spread the word,” says APS Executive Director Alan Kraut.

Erlbaum not only befriended scientists, he also befriended what he calls “learned societies,” helping

guide them and their journals to solvency and financial success. “Learned societies have no memory,” he points out. “I’ve been trying to build ways that learned societies can perpetuate lessons that we all learn.”

For Bower, help from Erlbaum came in the form of making the Psychonomic Society’s journals economically viable. “I had the misfortune of chairing the publications committee” after the Society’s founder died, Bower recalls. “Like city natives who suddenly inherit a cow, we academics hadn’t a clue how to get milk out of the cow. We had zero knowledge of publishing scientific journals and, more importantly, not one iota of ‘business sense.’ Predictably, we proceeded to muck up a perfectly good business. That was when Larry took a more active role in consulting with the publication committee. We were eventually rescued by his good advice.”

For McArdle it was the Society of Multivariate Experimental Psychology’s journal that was “floundering” until Erlbaum took it over — an idea sparked during a card game with its managing editor. “Larry said he could publish it and publicize it, and we’d get half the cut. It was a gift. We went into it with trepidation. We’d never done anything like this before. But he’s quadrupled the circulation in 15 years.”

For APS Charter Member and Fellow George Mandler, it was launching what became the journal *Cognitive Psychology*, when Erlbaum was still with Academic Press. “Journal publishing was always a cash cow for academic publishers, with no money to its authors, a pittance to editors, and often a guaranteed circulation from a targeted audience,” Mandler points out. He discussed his views with Erlbaum before meeting with Academic’s editors, “especially that editors should share the profits. He urged me to pursue this approach, and it resulted in an interesting meeting in which my proposal shocked everyone there except Larry.”

From the Association’s beginnings, Erlbaum has also helped guide APS development. Kraut says Erlbaum has been “a close advisor to us on every kind of publishing issue” and an investment advisor as well. “He’s been our dollar-a-year consultant.”

As word of Erlbaum’s retirement from publishing spread, another publisher commented to him that “now the real Larry Erlbaum will come out,” setting to rest his “nice guy” image. So what kind of guy is he, really? Ask him:

“I have become a very mean and cantankerous old fellow,” Erlbaum says. “The first thing I did, I called Alan Kraut. I said, ‘Alan, I am doubling my fee. From now on you are paying me twice as much as you were paying me as an advisor.’”

Kraut confirms the conversation. “We now pay him \$2 a year. But we haven’t paid him in years. We probably owe him at least \$10 by now.”

Erlbaum’s crackling sense of humor is legendary. “I’m a fun-loving guy,” he says, “and I play hard.” That extends from tennis courts (McArdle says he has a powerful serve) to his epicurean appreciation for fine food and wine (“but he enjoys a pizza at a downtown bar, too,” says McArdle).

“I like living well,” agrees Erlbaum. “Always have. Mother wondered where I got all these aristocratic

airs from.”

Stories about Erlbaum usually involve meals — lunches, dinners, breakfasts — and ballet. Recalls APS Fellow Michael Lamb, University of Cambridge: “I could never find enough excuses to visit New York, and Larry never failed to find us tickets to the New York City Ballet or American Ballet Theatre, both then at their glorious best.”

APS Treasurer Roberta Klatzky, Carnegie Mellon University, harbors her own “vivid memory” of their first meeting, “though it’s probably wrong, the way memory works. I was at a psychological convention in Los Angeles, sporting (embarrassing to report) a fire-red afro and (more embarrassing to report) a floor-length caftan. Very 1970s. Larry was, no doubt, wearing a gorgeous suit with a pocket square that matched his tie. He never was 1970s.”

And as if to undermine his carefully cultivated reputation for bumptious behavior, Klatzky tells of his deep-seated kindness, in particular his “adoption” of Beauty Greenbird, a pet store’s Amazon parrot no one else seemed to want. “She’s not beautiful,” Klatzky remarks, “and of her intellect one can only say that her pin feathers don’t go up to her wingtips, but that parrot sure landed on her feet.”

Erlbaum takes exception: “Professor Klatzky and I disagree violently about the esthetic of Beauty Greenbird. This bird has got it made. This bird is smarter than me. This bird gets more of what it wants than anyone else, other than Doggie Ralph.” (Ralph Spugsy Erlbaum — his true name — is a Shi Tzu who “has great papers to show his lineage.”)

What’s next for the cantankerous connoisseur, bon vivant, and dapper gentleman ex-publisher? He plans to continue attending conferences and advising APS and other “learned societies,” but otherwise, “I am planning on spending as much time as I possibly can torturing my wife, Sylvia. I plan to spend a lot of time with [her]. We’re interested in doing a lot of things together.”

He says he also needs to figure out how to retire. “I’ve never been busier in my entire life. I offered the guy twice what he paid me to let me come back and run the company.”

Here’s how he sums up his achievements: “I’m this old guy who started this publishing company at a time when he was very, very fortunate that there were many opportunities. I was entrusted with a lot of things to do, and I did them.”

Not bad for a “yeshiva boy.”

## **Through His Friends’ Eyes...**

Here’s what some friends (all APS Fellows and/or Charter Members) are saying about Larry Erlbaum:

**Charles Brainerd, Cornell University:** “He has been the best of friends to experimental psychology for these many decades. If there is a single person who is more responsible than anyone else for the continuing visibility of the very best psychological science within the world of books, it is Larry. Our debt to him is enormous.”

**Roberta Klatzky, Carnegie Mellon University:** “We got in the habit of having breakfast together at meetings of the Psychonomic Society, where he regaled me with his upbringing as the ‘yeshiva boy.’

That segued to dinners at more expensive venues with our spouses, where of course, Larry wore a pocket square. Yeshiva boy or no, there is a Yiddish word that unquestionably applies to Larry: mensch, which connotes not just a man but a person of uncommon decency and integrity.”

**Michael Lamb, University of Cambridge:** “Many of the best meals I’ve enjoyed in the States were shared with Larry, who somehow found it worthwhile to dine with me at countless conferences, even as the joint projects we conceived and planned at those meals continued to elicit scant attention from their intended audiences! Not surprisingly, nearly 30 years of conversations and sensational meals are among the experiences I have missed most in the last several years. There’s never been another publisher like Larry. There never will be.”

**Elizabeth Loftus, University of California-Irvine:** “I proudly lay claim to the fact that I might span one of the longest periods of publishing with Larry. About 10 years ago, I wrote him complaining about potential defamation that he was about to publish. Larry sent me a response that was not all that I had hoped for, but was at least very comforting. ‘I think you are the target of the lunatic fringe. Maybe I am not impartial because of our knowing each other for so many years...but I honestly don’t see anything there except for ranting and raving. But I know how you may feel, from my own time as target number one for a different lunatic fringe.’”

**R. Duncan Luce, University of California-Irvine:** “One cannot but wonder what will happen to Larry’s standards once others take over. It is not easy to be optimistic in the current world of mega-publishers.”

**George Mandler, University of California-San Diego:** “In the 1950s-60s, the field of psychology benefited from one superb editor — Gordon Ierardi at John Wiley & Sons. On his retirement he was uniquely honored by authors, writers, and friends at a special dinner. I know of no better way to describe Larry than to say that he was Ierardi’s peer. Psychology is unlikely ever to know a publisher who cares more about our field and its practitioners.”

**Jack McArdle, University of Southern California:** “He allows psychologists to display their work in public in a way they never had an opportunity to do before. He published things other people wouldn’t think would be profitable. He’s got an excellent library that represents the best of scientific psychology. I think he’ll be receiving many lifetime achievement awards.”

**Sandra Scarr, Daily Fix Coffee, Hawaii:** “By valuing behavioral science research and by being honest and generous to its investigators, Larry Erlbaum became the leading book and journal publisher in our field. Hats off to Larry for his acumen. More importantly, he has the gratitude and respect of all of us who have published with him. How many publishers are genuinely loved? Larry is.”