

Roald Dahl

Shell Man Extraordinaire

Laura Westbury

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EDITORS NOTE

In this article Laura quotes from an interview Dahl did with Justin Wintle in 1974 (see 'Pied Pipers' published by Paddington Press in 1974), and from Dahl's autobiographies *Boy* (Jonathan Kate Ltd, 1984) and *Going Solo* (Jonathan Kate Ltd, 1986).

Certainly for English people the most famous ex-Shell man, who went on to greater things after a stint with the Company, is Roald Dahl. He is one of the best selling children's authors of all time, and his books have been translated into 39 languages. Six stories have been turned into films – twice already in the case of 'Charlie & the Chocolate Factory'.

Famous for his off-beat, macabre and even anarchic outlook (with children encouraged to turn against unjust authority), it might seem odd that Dahl chose to work for Shell for five years. He would even have worked longer had it not been for the outbreak of the Second World War. And who knows to what elevated rank he might then have risen?

In fact, looking at Dahl's background and formative years, joining Shell was a perfectly natural step. His father, Harald, was a wealthy Norwegian who founded a successful ship broking business, married a fellow Norwegian and settled in Cardiff. Harald died when Roald was only four years old, leaving Roald's mother Sophie with five children. It was Harald's wish that the children be educated in the English system, which he considered the best in the world.

So it was that Roald Dahl, named after the Polar explorer Roald Amundsen, went to Repton School in Derbyshire at 13. It was a well-known public school (that is, expensive and private), one of many such establishments that aimed to turn out well rounded English gentlemen. Dahl also returned every summer to Norway with his family and was well aware of a world beyond England.

Dahl did not shine academically at school and was bullied as a boy. He sought solace in books, enjoying particularly the old-fashioned adventure stories by R. Rider Haggard and G.A. Henty, where masculine heroes achieved great things in far-flung colonial outposts. The 1930s were the twilight years of the British Empire but young men still dreamed of heroic exploits. Dahl's strengths lay most in competitive sports; he played in the school football team and ended up captain of both the Fives and the squash teams.

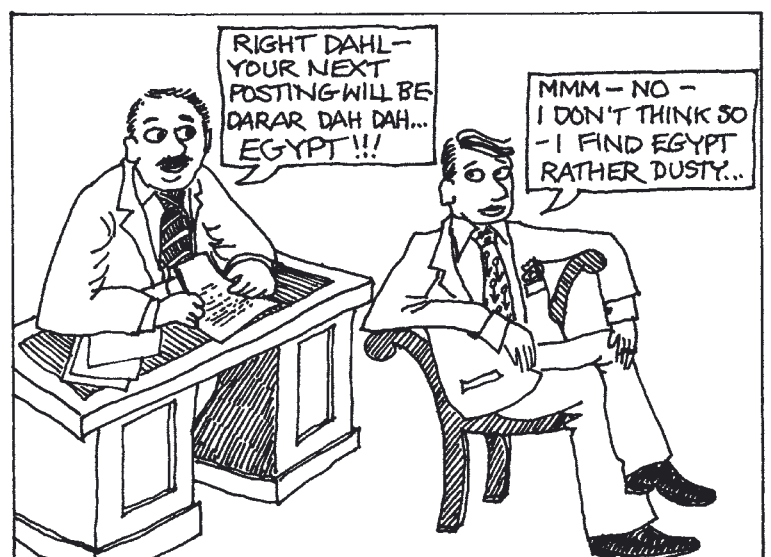
As the academic side of school had not been a great success, going to university did not appeal. In contrast, Shell offered a decent salary, scope for an ambitious man to rise up the corporate ladder, and above all, adventure in less developed corners of the world. Accustomed to the strict hierarchy and discipline of public school, Shell's rigid structure did not deter him. Shell, in turn would have appreciated his prowess in sport and his incipient

leadership qualities. But he still faced stiff competition to get the job: the eastern staff of Shell was regarded as the *crème de la crème*. Even Dahl's headmaster had said to him that nobody had a hope of getting in to Shell unless "he had been head of the school or head of the House".

After joining Shell in 1934, Dahl spent a further 4 years in England, first at the Shell Haven Refinery in Essex and then at the London Headquarters. He enjoyed the regular routine and good salary and even "doing very little original thinking." At last in 1938 Dahl was posted to Dar es Salaam, capital of the British colony of Tanganyika, now Tanzania, in East Africa.

In a 1974 interview with Justin Wintle, Dahl talked about joining Shell:

"My mother asked me if I wanted to go to Oxford or Cambridge—in those days you could get in without being particularly clever; but I said 'No, I want to travel.' So I interviewed and got a job with something called the Eastern Staff of the Shell Company – a good job. They train you for about two years, and then you get sent abroad—could be anywhere in the world. You wait your time until you get to the top of the list. When my turn came it was Egypt. I was summoned, but I said No sir, I don't want to go to Egypt'. 'Good heavens boy, it's the best area we've got. Why not?' I couldn't



DAHL'S SUPERVISOR RECOGNISED TROUBLE - TOO MUCH ORIGINAL THINKING - THIS CHAP WOULD SURELY NOT MAKE IT TO THE TOP...



The Shell house in Dar es Salaam where Dahl lived during his posting.

think of anything, so I just said, 'It's too dusty.' He let me off and the next fellow went. Then came East Africa, and I said 'Yes, Please.'...The boat stopped at Mombasa, and a man met me and said 'You get on board this other little boat', which is how I got to Dar es Salaam."

Dahl's book *Boy – Tales of Childhood* - describes his life up to this journey, and his book *Going Solo* continues the story. It is clear from *Going Solo* that Dahl's first foreign posting with Shell proved a seminal experience for him (which similarly is often the case even today for first time Shell expatriates). The posting was to last three years with no trips home. Dahl felt that the men and women he met, who kept the British Empire going, were a race of people that would never be seen again.

Gazing at Zanzibar, Dahl thought how lucky he was to be seeing such marvelous places; "free of charge and with a good job at the end of it all". He never forgot his first glimpse of Dar es Salaam, the vast blue-black lagoon rimmed with pale yellow sandy beaches and enormous palms and casuarina trees, and beyond them the jungle which he felt to be "almost certainly teeming with rhinos and lions and all manner of vicious beasts". He loved the journey, the arrival and indeed all of his time in Tanganyika.

Dahl was the youngest and most junior of the three young Englishmen who ran Shell in that vast territory. He had to supply customers who ran diamond and gold mines, sisal and cotton plantations and much more, with the right grades of lubricating and fuel oil for their machinery. "Not a great deal of intelligence or imagination was required but by gum you had to be fit and tough".

Sometimes he would take the Shell station wagon and go off on safari upcountry for a month visiting customers all over the country. Giraffes, elephants, hippos, zebras, antelopes and occasionally a pride of lions were all to be seen from the dirt roads. There were unpleasant encounters too with the dreaded black mamba snake.

In sizeable towns a British District Officer would reside. "Wherever there was a DO [District Office], the Shell man on safari was welcome to stay the night at his house". On one such visit Dahl witnessed the rescue of the cook's wife from the jaws of a lion; chased by the cook and shot at by the DO, the lion gently lay down his prey and then broke for cover. The cook's wife was unharmed although she did have to wash the saliva off her dress! Dahl's account of this in a Nairobi newspaper was his first published work.

Home for Dahl in Dar es Salaam was a "splendid large company house perched on the top of the cliffs outside Dar". Dahl shared the house with two other Shell men, and they were all "treated like princes". They had a cook, a gardener,

and a 'boy' or valet for each of them, living in quarters at the back of the house. Dahl formed a strong bond with his boy Mdisho who was later shocked to discover that Dahl would have no boy in the Army, "But do you know how to iron a shirt, bwana?". Dahl asked to be taught that secret before he left.

"One really was a long way from anywhere. Coconut palms and beaches and crazy things, selling oil to sisal planters and diamond miners, gold miners, and learning Swahili."

Few Africans spoke English at that time so Dahl had to learn Swahili. Once he passed his exams Shell gave him a bonus of £100, "a lot of money in those days when a case of whisky cost only twelve pounds". There was little else going on; he complained in a letter home to his mother that most evenings there was "bugger all to do except sweat".

In August 1939 with war looming, the 15 or so British men living in Dar es Salaam were ordered to leave their jobs and became temporary army officers. Issued with batons, belts, and "all sorts of secret instructions", each commanded a platoon of 25 Askaris – troops of the King's African Rifles, armed with rifles and a machine gun. To his horror Dahl was ordered to guard the only route out of Dar leading towards neutral territory, and to round up escaping Germans. Sure enough within hours of the formal announcement of War against Germany, a convoy of hundreds of Germans approached. With the loss of one life, Dahl and his troops captured them all and led them to Prison Camp.

Dahl writes about this period in *Going Solo*:

"In November 1939 when the war was two months old, I told the Shell Company that I wanted to join up and help in the fight against Bwana Hitler, and they released me with their blessing. In a wonderfully magnanimous gesture they told me that they would continue to pay my salary.... for as long as the war lasted and I remained alive." Then Dahl set off for a two day, 600 mile journey northwards.

Then Dahl set off for a two day, 600 mile journey northwards, across Tanzania up to Nairobi. After initial training with Tiger Moths he was sent to Baghdad.

Accepted for flight training with 16 other men of whom only three survived the war, Dahl himself suffered serious injuries including a fractured skull while crash landing [through no fault of his own] in the Libyan Desert in September 1940. Five months later he was back flying with his squadron, this time in Greece. He then shot down five enemy planes in five weeks before finally being invalided home.

Later transferred to Washington as Assistant Air Attaché, Dahl was interviewed by the novelist C.S Forrester and encouraged

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Kathleen Doyle-Linden

Kathleen has been living in The Hague for the past four years with her husband Andy and five year old son Marcus. As this edition went to print Kathleen and her family were in the midst of being relocated to Calgary, Canada, their next posting.

to write up his flying experiences. The resulting piece was sold to the Saturday Evening Post for \$1,000, a very substantial sum. This success propelled him into a serious writing career.

With the war over, Dahl found himself again officially on Shell's payroll.

"Then the war ended and I went to the Shell Company and told them I would like to try to go on being a writer. They thought I was crazy. But they gave me my provident fund—about a thousand quid—and off I went to Amersham, where my mother lived, and started writing pure fiction short stories. Most of these went to the New Yorker, which in those days was a fine magazine with an illustrious stable of short story writers like Salinger, Collier, Cheever, O'Hara and the rest..."

By the early 1960's Dahl was running out of plots for short stories and, enjoying telling stories to his own children, he decided to write a children's book. His first, 'James and The Giant Peach' was moderately successful, but it was with his second, 'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory' that he struck gold.

Inspired by memories of newly invented chocolate bars that Cadbury used to send to the boys at Repton for appraisal, Dahl's story of the nightmarish tour of a chocolate factory remains his best known work. In the first edition all the 3,000 factory workers, the Oompa-Loompas, are African Pygmies happy to escape the vicious animals of deepest darkest Africa and replace sacked white labourers. They are wonderful workers and live on a diet of chocolate – a pleasant change from their previous diet of disgusting green caterpillars. Sensitive to charges of racism, Dahl changed their description in later editions to hippyish white skinned dwarfs with long golden brown hair – but they still come from a land of thick jungles infested by dangerous beasts.

Naturally Dahl used experiences from his whole life to feed his vivid imagination – good to know that his expat years with Shell provided some useful material!

Going Solo and Boy provide witty and interesting accounts of Dahl's life. For further information the best web sites are www.roalddahlfans.com, and the official one, www.roalddahl.com.

Destinations will consider feature articles for future issues on other people who have gone on to interesting new careers after leaving Shell. If you have ideas on who we could profile, or would like to submit a story yourself, please let us know.

1. James and the Giant Peach was just about titled James and the Giant
2. Dahl wrote the screenplay for which James Bond movie?
3. What were his favourite chocolate bars?
4. What colour paper did he use for writing stories?
5. What was his favourite flower?
6. What languages did he speak?
7. Did he like chocolate cake or chocolate ice cream?
8. Where did he write the majority of his stories?
9. What manufacturing company, near his boarding school, brought samples for the boys to test?
10. While at boarding school, which way did he face when going to sleep?



1. Cherry 2. You Only Live Twice 3. Twix, Kit Kat, Rolos, Smarties, Flakes and Maltesers 4. Yellow 5. Orchid 6. English, Norwegian, Swahili 7. Neither 8. A hut at the end of his garden 9. Cadbury Chocolate Company brought chocolate bars for the boys to taste test 10. He faced his family, using the Bristol Channel as his guide.

So what's new,

I began, trying to take in the concept of supermarkets handing out money to their customers.

"You need one of these...and one of those," said the young man as he selected coins from the small pile I had spilt out on the counter. "I'm sorry," I muttered, "I've been living abroad - I need to get used to English money again." His look told me he suspected I'd just completed a lengthy term in prison. But I would have had no problem finding the right change, in Euros, to buy a bottle of orange juice in The Hague.

Later, as I paid for some groceries in a supermarket with my debit card, the sales assistant asked if I wanted cash back. "Cash back?" I asked. "What's that?" "Do you want any money?" she replied briskly (the queue behind me was getting long). "Oh, yes..." I began, trying to take in the concept of supermarkets handing out money to their customers. Was this munificence the result of huge profits - a windfall kindly passed on to regular customers? I had handed the girl my loyalty card (I've got a wallet full of them) so maybe that made me a worthy recipient of Mr Sainsbury's embarrassing excess of wealth. Later, a friend told me 'cashback' is just another way of accessing money - from your own bank account.

As well as experiencing perplexing incidents such as these, I feel a sea-change in attitudes and behaviour has taken place in the UK since we left 16 years ago. It's not that I'm a complete stranger to life in my own country - I visited many times during our years as expats, it's just that I have not had time to accustom myself gradually to developments.

Here are a few that I've noticed:

The casual use of what used to be a very rude word – but if aunty BBC doesn't blush when this word is used with abandon by celebrity chefs and wannabe apprentices of Alan Sugar, why should the public hold back?

People are less inhibited in general about what they say, and who hears it. On the train, I try to concentrate on my newspaper instead of listening in on the plans of the girl opposite as she talks on her mobile, but you get drawn in. Will Nick be at the pub? Does he fancy her, as her mates say, although he snogged Becky last week? And you can bet that the rest of the crowded carriage, heads bent to read or staring out of the window, are tuning in too (unless they are also talking loudly to their mobiles).

Warm summer days bring tables out on the pavement outside Cafe Havana or Bar Berlin (there's an enticing hint of decadent pre-revolutionary Cuba or louche 30's middle Europe in the names these days) and Britons cast off clothing and sensible footwear. Fake tans have improved, so the horror of lardy flesh on view is much reduced. Everywhere, men wear shorts, and judging by the anguished letters to the style sections of the newspapers, they are in a quandary about which shorts are acceptable with regard to colour, length, and bagginess,



Shop front, Cromer, Norfolk.

The newspapers' style gurus unanimously champion knee length, well-cut shorts (no lumpy cargo pockets) in some neutral colour, worn with leather loafers, and definitely no socks.

I'm pleased to note that British men, apart from those who belong to yacht clubs, pay no heed to this advice.

Sharon Montgomery

then?

and - crucial, this - what to wear on their feet whilst sporting shorts. The newspapers' style gurus unanimously champion knee length, well-cut shorts (no lumpy cargo pockets) in some neutral colour, worn with leather loafers, and definitely no socks. I'm pleased to note that British men, apart from those who belong to yacht clubs, pay no heed to this advice.

Young girls now greet each other rapturously, with hugs and shrieks; is this down to Monica, Joey and co and the long reign of 'Friends' on TV? Older folk still hold back though - my relatives keep a distance even when we haven't met for years, or else attempt cheek kissing (they've seen it on TV too) and someone's glasses get knocked off. We have a long way to go before we match the continentals, or even the Americans, for social ease.

This summer, England's finest were eliminated from the football World Cup; sadly nothing new. But the flags of St George were new, fluttering from windows or on the sides of cars, and causing debate among the chattering classes over whether they were a healthy symptom of national pride and support for 'our' team, or something more sinister. The English never used to put out the flag at any opportunity the way Americans do, unless they had strong nationalistic, or even racist, tendencies. The consensus this time, however, is that the flags were benign, if (to those who don't understand the passion inspired by football) a little inane.

In our street market there's now a French cheese seller and an olive stall. The olive man's 20 or so varieties are very popular, but, he says, "I could never have done this five years ago." We also have a hugely popular farmers' market every couple of weeks, at which local food producers can sell directly to us. TV cookery programmes have encouraged the British to take risks with their palates, but have not been so successful in getting them to actually cook. It's sad to see the onward march of the cook-chill cabinets in supermarkets, where you can pick up a different 'ready meal' for each member of the family. You can even buy ready-mashed potato and microwaveable ready-made omelettes. And as if that beloved British standby, baked beans on toast, were not easy enough to prepare, I hear an all-in-one pop it in your toaster version is being developed by those busy boffins who are trying to make our lives easier.

But there is hope, in the form of superchef Jamie Oliver, who is fighting a valiant battle to get us all to eat proper, home-cooked meals. His campaign to improve school dinners elevated him from cheeky but lovable boy-next-door to candidate for sainthood. Since I left, the UK seems to have acquired a trinity of popular saints, as Jamie takes his place alongside those other paragons, Princess Diana and Bob Geldof. Who knows, Bono of U2, who was still a bad boy of pop in 1990, may have achieved similar unimpeachable status within a year or two...



Market stall in Barnstaple, Devon.



Flower shop in Barnstaple, Devon.

A new opportunity

in Buenos Aires

Joan T. Eischen



- **Joan Eischen van Hasselt studied international business and is a commercial professional who has 24 years experience developing business for companies wanting to establish themselves in Latin America and Spain. She has made the transition from VP Sales & Distribution to ex-pat spouse and small entrepreneur. Joan comes from a long tradition of leaving places; her grandparents emigrated to the U.S. from Luxembourg and as a student she lived in Mexico, Colombia and Venezuela before returning back to South America after university. Joan and her husband Maarten like to sail and try to do as much sailing as they can in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where they are currently posted for Shell Global Solutions.**

We all know that moving is hard to do. Knowing that it is a temporary assignment can make it easier, and if it is a place you want to go, even better. Deciding what to take and what to leave behind never works perfectly because you always miss that one item you thought wasn't important. Our home in The Hague has been emptied out and rented to a stranger. The house that Maarten and I are living in here will never be "our home" but it is where we are living, making new friends and having new work experiences.

When I learned we would be moving to Buenos Aires, Argentina I had mixed feelings. My husband and I met in South America and the thought of going back was pleasantly nostalgic. What I didn't like was having to give up the sales development/training company I had started in Madrid, Spain, and my position as President with a volunteer organisation. It took me years and much hard work to arrive in these positions, although admittedly, the idea of a sabbatical was also appealing.

The sabbatical idea lasted for approximately one month. During my leisure time at home, I began to look at the industry magazines piling up on my husbands desk and found

one in particular that I liked that had nothing, or very little on Latin America. I contacted the publisher of World Energy Magazine in Houston, Texas and proposed a business plan to broaden the readership of their magazine in Latin America. At the same time Maarten verified with his boss that this would not be a conflict of interest for his responsibilities with Shell Global Solutions.

My business plan included all expenses paid with company approval, a good commission rate on advertising and subscription sales. It is not an ideal position, nor compensation for my experience, but what I have been able to do is work from home, which allows me to contact potential clients around my new social calendar. I am expanding the readership of World Energy Magazine for the owner, who otherwise would not have taken the time or expense to travel to the local companies, I have a great title, and I have been able to increase my contact base in Latin America. We are both able to benefit from my living in Buenos Aires.

Moving internationally can be an exciting opportunity for an accompanying partner to follow a dream or to do something completely different. It can be a time to consider a different career, work arrangement or work setting. You do, of course have to be more flexible, depending on where you are and how frequently you move, and obtaining your ideal occupation may not always be available.

Having just attended Jo Parfitt's portable careers seminar, Kathleen Doyle-Linden of Global Outpost summed up the opportunity nicely. "It may not be about changing your hat, but learning to tilt it in a different way". I agree.