

British Section

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## Sir Alcon Copisarow, 1920-2017

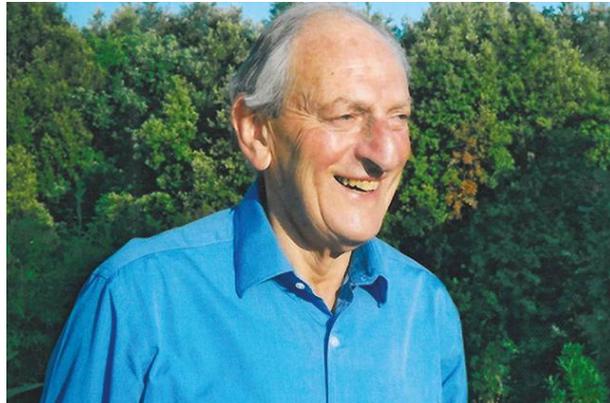


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Born in 1920 in Moss Side, Manchester, Alcon Copisarow's parents were Jewish émigrés from the Russian empire. His father became a noted research chemist. Sir Alcon had graduated in geology at Manchester University, punctuated by fire watching duties on the roof of the building during Luftwaffe air raids, but the Second World War pitched him headlong into a world where science, industry and government were mobilised in a common interest. After the war, as a scientist and civil servant, Sir Alcon was at the centre of efforts to forge a more productive, innovative nation, when it seemed that business and science had different agendas, never matching their level of wartime co-operation.

In addition to the University of Manchester, he was educated at Imperial College and the Sorbonne.

Alcon Copisarow witnessed many of the key events of the 20th century and played many important roles in shaping the course of British and international affairs. His aptitude took him from vital World War Two service from 1943 to 1947 as a Lieutenant in the Royal Navy engaged in the unfamiliar discipline of the application of radar technology, since as far as the Navy was concerned, he had a scientific discipline—and that was that. He had to adapt quickly. Then onward to the world of international diplomacy, successively as Scientific Counsellor at the British Embassy in Paris; as a Department of Scientific & Industrial Research Laboratory Director, in association with Appleton, Cockcroft and Blackett; and as Chief Scientific Officer.

In 1966, bringing his analytical skills to the arena of consultancy work, as the first non-American senior partner of McKinsey & Company he was entrusted with many complex and sensitive assignments: improving the efficiency of the Bank of England, reorganising the Californian aerospace industry and overhauling the administration of Hong Kong, to name but a few. He was the initiator of the Franks Committee which recommended the first British business schools.

*Making a connection with French engineering and science*

His vision and leadership were crucial to the genesis as co-founder and Chairman of Trustees of the Prince's Youth Business Trust and the Eden Project, orchestrating the work of engineers and technologists with others to help sustain the environment. Subsequently in the UK he was a Board Member of the British National Oil Corporation and British Leyland and held numerous other important positions. He was a Fellow of the IEE (now IET) and a Fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge. He was knighted in 1988.

When considering writing his memoirs, a publisher pointed out to him that it was *"no longer worth their while"*, except in the case of the famous, particularly young, celebrities. Despite this early setback, Sir Alcon found a publisher prepared to take them on and his memoirs, *'Unplanned Journey—from Moss Side to Eden'* were launched in October 2014, subsequently running to several reprints.

In his memoirs Sir Alcon relates meeting a vast range of important figures of the 20th century, from the Duke and Duchess of Windsor and Sir Winston Churchill, to science fiction writer Arthur C Clarke, Roald Dahl and Paul McCartney.

Sir Alcon could also plausibly claim to be the man who made Margaret Thatcher electable when, in 1977, she asked him to restructure Conservative Central Office. *"Our problem is organisation. I will deal with policy"*, the future Prime Minister told him.

Sir Alcon regularly expressed surprise that he was approached to take on prominent roles in areas of which he knew little. What his career demonstrated is how many opportunities are open to "T-shaped" people, with deep knowledge in one area, but the ability to work on a range of broader challenges. *"So many top jobs call for a leader who can orchestrate diverse talents a set career strategy would not survive. Young people who "stick to their last" risk missing opportunities. Rather, what I would aim to do is to equip myself not with a single spear, but with a quiver full of arrows and a number of potentially useful disciplines and experiences."*

For all his talents, though, Sir Alcon was wise enough to recognise that sometimes even a quiver full of arrows is not enough. *"I can think of a number of people, just as capable as me, if not more so, who died as unsung heroes."*

In his memoirs, Sir Alcon Copisarow said the four factors that contributed most to his life and work were his upbringing and education, being British, being Jewish and his long and happy marriage. He was married to Diana for 64 years—something he referred to as his *'great good fortune'*. The couple had four children.



Sir Alcon and Lady Diana



Sir Alcon and Chris Bakken III

He said of marriage, *"What is necessary is wider recognition that real effort is needed from the parties themselves, without expectation of instant results. They should think more about what they might contribute to the relationship rather than what they get out of it"*.

In 2015, the Sir Alcon Copisarow award was instituted by IESF, named after Sir Alcon in recognition of the important role he played in encouraging cooperation throughout his working life. The award was intended to recognise *'a professionally qualified engineer or scientist of any background who achieves distinction in the promotion of international collaboration and encouragement of innovation'*. Sir Alcon himself presented the inaugural silver medal to Christopher Bakken III for his work on the development of nuclear power in the UK.

Sir Alcon was the third Patron in the history of the CNISF/IESF British Section, taking up that role in 1992 and relinquishing it in 2013, to be succeeded by Professor (now Lord) Robert Mair.

Accompanied by Lady Diana, Sir Alcon was ever-present at AGMs and occasionally other CNISF/IESF gatherings over his term as Patron.

As CNISF Secretary, I first encountered Sir Alcon in 2001 and his wise counsel over the years was invaluable. We corresponded regularly and met from time to time until earlier this year, when the sharpness of his intellect and quick wit remained undimmed.

Following an interview upon the publishing of his memoirs in December 2014, the *Financial Times* dubbed him *'A McKinsey knight with a quiver full of arrows'*. An apt title.

Sir Alcon died at home on 2 August 2017.



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*The editor welcomes contributions on matters that relate to the objectives of the Société.  
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