

It was conceived in the skies over Ethiopia, delivered 12 weeks later in London, and celebrated in the company of friends. It is in front of me as I write and I am inordinately pleased with it, for I am blind to its imperfections. It is my book, *African Deadlines*: "Twenty-two years in the long grass of central Africa without a break". I published it myself, and few things have given me greater pleasure.

I am the first to admit that it is not what might be called a proper book, the sort you will see on the shelves at Hatchards, though at first glance it would be indistinguishable from the rest.

Some will say that it is an act of vanity. They are right, I suppose, but that does not spoil my delight in my creation, for it was tremendous fun - not least because I did not have to deal with a publisher or an agent (*pace* the wonderful Gina Pollinger and her husband Murray) or their secretaries.

And I am writing about it not to plug my idiosyncratic collection of travel pieces, columns, and articles about Africa from the FT and elsewhere, for I have no copies left.

My purpose is to show that you too can produce your own book, whether a history of your club, your grandfather's colonial reminiscence, or to mark your parents' golden wedding. In my case, I was three months away from turning 50, torn between a desire to pretend it wasn't happening and a wish to celebrate my good fortune. But as my flight rumbled through the African night I decided to confront a landmark in my life.

Three months later the result was *African Deadlines*. It cost me a little more than £2,000, although I recovered a good part of that for I sold 150 or so at £10 each, giving away the rest as complimentary copies.

Whether the contents are worth the price is not for me to judge. But as a hardback, containing 300-odd pages with illustrations, a dust jacket, and stitched, not glued (so it lies open without having to be pulled apart), I was astonished at the value I got for my money.

Now for the technical information. Let my computer-competent friend, Hans Georgeson, who between leaving Oxford and joining a bank helped me put the book together, take up the tale.

The book, says Hans, was assembled largely on a basic lap-top computer (Toshiba T200SX), using standard software programmes - in this case Windows 3.1 and Microsoft Word 6. With the exception of the dustjacket and full-page photographs, the whole book was typeset and put on computer disks.

Photographs were reproduced by the FT's picture desk, using a scanner to covert the images to com-



Self help for the author in you

puter files. Most readers will not have access to such equipment, but for a small extra fee - around £5 a photograph - Intype*, the London typesetting company who produced my book, can do it for you.

The images and the dustjacket were treated as separate documents and put on to separate computer disks. The quality is that of newspaper pictures, which is perfectly adequate but can be improved at some expense. The computer disks were then delivered to Mark Masingham at Intype, and he and his colleagues did the rest.

The work can be made easier by using desk-top computers that are faster and more powerful, not to mention the host of programs that are designed specifically for desk-top publishing. These have the drawback that you either have to know the programs or learn them.

Draft copies of the text were printed out on a standard Hewlett Packard Laser Jet printer, but in the end, you are never sure how it will all turn out until the book arrives from the printer.

Finally, to get an ISBN (International standardised book number) code for the book, you have to register as a publisher. For this, simply telephone the agency's office in London (0171-836 8911), and return the short form they will send you. The service is free and the agency provides details of your book to a variety of outlets.

I toyed with the idea of turning it into a commercial venture, and although I decided against it, the figures suggested that it might be feasible. A run of 2,500 copies would have cost just under £3 a book. Post and packaging would have added a couple of pounds and a part-time secretary would work out at a further couple of pounds per book. Sell about 900 at £10 a copy, and I would break even. Sell the lot, and I would make several thousand pounds.

But that requires promotion, reviews, and above all distribution, which is where publishers and agents come in. Although I have ordered another 100 copies for private distribution, I suspect a profit driven print run is a pipedream.

No matter. I have my book. The words that first took shape on my computer screen over Ethiopia are now, to my abiding pleasure, between covers. So are you sitting comfortably? Then let me begin: "It is 27 years since I arrived in Edinburgh on a raw, windy dark October afternoon and yearned for Africa... I live in London now, but my heart is in Africa. When I return it is to a companion of a lifetime who has survived my other loves, and I am taken into an embrace of sounds and scents and shapes which tell me that I am home..."

Michael Holman

■ Intype, London 0181-947 7863