

Mark Huband obituary

Nick Kotch

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Foreign correspondent respected for his work in west Africa and the Middle East who went on to write books and poems



Mark Huband in 2013, the year he published *Trading Secrets: Spies and Intelligence in an Age of Terror*. Photograph: Pako Mera/Alamy

Mark Huband, who has died aged 58 of pancreatitis and multiple organ failure, built a strong and lasting reputation over more than three decades as a foreign correspondent and business analyst, specialising in Africa and the Middle East.

He and I met when he arrived in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, in 1989 to take up the post of

the *Financial Times* stringer and I was working for *Reuters*. He hit the ground running and, despite his youth, he soon became a well-known figure among the foreign journalists, diplomats and business representatives covering the west African region. He was sharp, engaged and committed to the story, and went on to work as Africa correspondent for *the Guardian* and *the Observer* before returning to London. He did not look at events from a distance but always saw something of himself in others.

His first assignment was to Liberia, Ivory Coast's western neighbour, shortly after civil war had broken out there at the end of 1989. It was a baptism of fire. The country was devastated by long years of instability and sporadic fighting.

He was briefly captured by Charles Taylor's wig-wearing rebels, the NPFL (National Patriotic Front of Liberia) in April 1990, when they stopped the goods train he was travelling on and took him hostage, holding him for five days. It could have been the end of him but, probably impressed by this young journalist's bravery, or because Taylor saw no gain in harming him, his captors released

him.

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Undeterred, Huband went on to report on the closing years of Mobutu Sese Seko's reign in what was then Zaire, as the cold war came to an end, and about many of the conflicts that marked the 1990s and the contemporary history of the African continent, such as the clan wars in Somalia and the tragedy of the Rwandan genocide. In 1994 he was among the first western journalists to enter Kigali after the slaughter of between 800,000 to 1 million Tutsi.

He was based in Kenya for *the Guardian* and *Observer* from 1992 to 1995, Morocco (1995-96), for *the Times*, and Cairo as regional correspondent (1997-2000) for *the Financial Times*. When he returned to London after Egypt, he was instrumental in creating the International Economy section of the FT, and in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 he was appointed to oversee the coverage of al-Qaida.

This subsequently led to his appointment as the newspaper's first security correspondent. The insights he developed into these issues provided the basis for his later book *Trading Secrets: Spies and Intelligence in an Age of Terror* (2013), which was shortlisted in the Paddy Power political book awards.

Huband was a writer in the full sense of the word. The constant wish to tell the story from various angles led him to explore different genres. Beyond politics and conflicts, he was interested in human nature and the desire to understand why things happen and

not merely how they happen.

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His reporting led to a steady flow of factual and creative writing, from politics, essays and fiction to the poetry that later became his main focus. In addition to *Trading Secrets*, he wrote several well-received books, one focusing on the Liberian civil war, another a detailed study of sub-Saharan Africa in the post-cold war period, as well as four books on the Middle East and the Arab world.

Poetic pamphlets and collections of poems included *Agony: A Poem of Genocide* (2019) and *The Siege of Monrovia* (2017), which was shortlisted for the Live Canon first collection competition. In 2017 he wrote a memoir, *Skinny White Kids*, rooted both in the England of its time (the 70s), and the deeper journey of a boy who would later become a war correspondent. He was working on a new poetry collection at the time of his death.

Huband's departure from the FT in 2005 marked a big turning point in his life. He became an executive at a business intelligence company before co-founding and managing his own firm, Livingstone & Company, three years later. It provided bespoke risk assessment globally, for US, UK and west European multinational operators in sectors including mining, gas and oil, telecoms, financial services, construction, transport and legal.

Mark was born in Low Bentham, Yorkshire, the son of Ann (nee Greening), a secretary, and David Huband, a teacher. He grew up in Essex, attending Burnt Mill secondary school (now academy), Harlow, where his fa-

ther was head of English. Mark then studied medieval, modern and economic history at Manchester University and took a postgraduate diploma in journalism (1986) at Cardiff University.

In 2017 he stood as a parliamentary candidate for the Labour party in the Cotswolds and at the next general election, in 2019, he came a creditable second in Somerset North behind the incumbent Conservative MP, Jacob Rees-Mogg.

He and Marceline Guidy, who is from Ivory Coast, married in Paris in 1993. With their

two children, Olivier and Zara, they settled in the Cotswolds after 15 years criss-crossing the African continent. Mark was a passionate gardener and loved painting, making striking portraits of his son and daughter. He took up walking, played the guitar and recently covered 350km traversing the French Pyrenees on foot and alone, raising money for and awareness of pulmonary fibrosis. He is survived by Marceline and their children.

Mark Huband, journalist and writer, born 30 August 1963; died 6 November 2021