

Professor Anthony Low Eulogy - St Johns 19 February 2015

Matthew Neuhaus

I speak from the unique position of being both a son-in-law and a student of Donald Anthony Low, whose life we honour today. I speak primarily on his contribution to Africa and the Commonwealth, a passion we shared.

Anthony was born in Imperial India. But while a chronicler of Empire he was no Imperialist. Rather, like our present Queen, he was in fact a man who dedicated himself from a young age to the notion of Commonwealth partnership as the world emerged from the Age of Empires into the one of independent Afro-Asian states we know today.

He began writing both for the Times and for that quintessential Commonwealth academic organisation the Round Table in the 1950s in his twenties, recording from Uganda the winds of change then blowing across colonial Africa and was one of its younger members. Here in the antipodes in his later years he founded and chaired the Commonwealth Round Table of Australia with Hugh Craft, Tony Eggleton and others.

But the habits of imperialism die hard and he liked to think of these students in regiments of sepoy, in British Indian Army tradition. First there was the Makerere African Rifles, then the first ANU Regiment, then the Sussex Regiment, the second ANU Regiment, and finally the Cambridge Corps.

As he recalled at my wedding to Angela it was the tradition in those regiments for one of the young subalterns to marry the daughter of the Colonel and the Colonel was well pleased. No one could have appreciated the analogy more than me.

But while a man of tradition, valuing the best of the past, as all historians must be, he was a revolutionary forging new traditions. He and a whole post war generation of young historians like John Ballard and Terrence Ranger now all sadly passing on rebelled against Hugh Trevor Roper's taunt that there was no such thing as African history because of its lack of written records.

Using the techniques of anthropology and oral history as well as the records of missionaries and explorers to supplement official sources they forged a whole new body of history just in time for the new nations

then emerging. Friends of mine would scoff at the notion of his book "Buganda in Modern History" in the 1970s. But imagine how empowering it was for Bugandans to know they had a place in modern history. He returned to the Buganda theme in his last book "Fabrication of Empire " which while written at the age of 82 contained all the latest research from the intervening years.

His last public address was at ANU two years ago to the Conference of the African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific which honoured his role as its founding President in the 1980s. It was moving to hear him recall the debates that occurred around the sandpit of Makerere University in the 1950s where his young contemporaries, while keeping an eye on their little children, were teaching the first generation of African leaders. These students on his departure gave him the wooden shield to defend African history which rests on his coffin.

I was to benefit from the later stage of those debates in the postgraduate Africa Seminar at Cambridge in the mid 1980s with his late brother in law the anthropologist Malcolm Ruel, the doyen of economic imperialism David Fieldhouse and the Mau Mau expert John Lonsdale amongst so many others. Even his last week his interest continued as Angela read to him from David van Reybrouck's recent compelling history of the Congo - a country and river his son Adam had captured on film earlier in his own venture into the heart of darkness and to which I am accredited as Australia's first Ambassador.

As a supervisor Anthony was helpful, available and encouraging. Always an innovator, he was also one of the first to use a computer. His greatest strength though was the breadth of his knowledge and his dispassionate understanding of politics and governance.

Those who attended his lectures would range with him in the space of an hour from India to Ghana to Indonesia as he drew out the common experiences and philosophy that brought together Nehru, Sukarno, and Nkrumah in forming the Non-Aligned Movement and reshaping our world. A man of faith he also understood the power of ideas and values, good and bad, in international relations - that it is more than simple economic and political interests at play.

Not for him a narrow minded view of the world with a regional focus - rather he brought Africa to Australia and the Pacific to Britain building a sense of a truly interconnected world and finding the parallels of shared

history and heritage across continents. And always at the centre India many decades before others recognised its emerging power.

One body and ideal which brought this together for Anthony was the concept of the Commonwealth of Nations - and not just because he was Smuts Professor of Commonwealth History at Cambridge. Rather it was the global view and idea of partnership and equality it represented - a useful balance to the brutishness of simple power politics. No surprise then that one of his books was called "The Egalitarian Moment: Asia and Africa 1950-1980". And that egalitarianism too was what attracted him, in some ways a quintessential Brit, to Australia.

Deeply affected by being in Australia at the time of the Whitlam dismissal, but more aware than most of similar Constitutional crises across a diverse Commonwealth, he was inspired to write on the subject in two books he edited one on "Constitutional Heads of Government and Political Crises" in the Commonwealth and the other with David Butler titled "Sovereigns and Surrogates". His aim was to strengthen understanding of the stabilising role of tradition which the monarchy and its vice-regal representatives provided, as well as caution and give advice in handling politicians prepared to ride a coach and horses through constitutional precedent and process in the interests of power.

Ever by Anthony's side was the lively and hospitable Belle. All his students were welcomed to Sunday lunch at their home where the best young minds from Africa, Asia, UK and Australia met in lively discussion. Fellow students included old Etonians, Guards officers, glamorous Pakistanis, African radicals and prison graduates, and always new ideas were nurtured with gentle humour and wisdom.

All knew the experience of being included in a warm and generous family - I perhaps in time more than most. Typical was that care that crossed continents. In my case when I fell ill from a dormant African virus in Cambridge and had to return to Australia Anthony organised my final oral examination of the thesis on his next visit to Canberra.

Above all Anthony provided a brilliant example of consultative leadership which made him so highly sought after as a University Administrator and Chairman of many Committees which he brought masterfully to agreement and consensus. This attribute came out perhaps most strongly in his time as Vice-Chancellor at the Australian National

University and we are honoured to have the present Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor with us here today.

He was fond of arguing the value in developing countries of the "interstitial leader" - the leader who could balance different tribes and interests because he came from outside the dominant groups - like Nyerere in Tanzania, Gandhi in India or Kaunda in Zambia.

In many ways Anthony was himself the perfect interstitial figure. Born in India, intellectually formed in Oxford and Africa and equally comfortable and respected in Britain, the USA and Australia - no small achievement for a Pom in this society. He was an excellent example of mentorship and civilised leadership and opposed to the bullying and controlling styles of leadership which we too often see in our public and academic life.

in the modern parlance he had outstanding emotional intelligence to go with his high intelligence, and even in the physical indignities of his last years he maintained immense dignity. In a sense he defined the best of what a gentleman should be - and in a very most egalitarian of ways. Ironically perhaps for a chronicler of Empire but consistent with this ethic, he declined Imperial honours but was delighted to receive his Order of Australia.

Let me now conclude with some comments former students and colleagues.

From Professor Gordon Johnson, former President of Wolfson College "at Clare Hall they set such a good example of hospitality at a graduate college for Faith and me to admire and follow"

From Richard Bourne, former Chair of the Round Table and Guardian correspondent - "a marvellous and thoughtful supporter of the Commonwealth ideal in Britain and Australia".

From former High Court Justice Michael Kirby - "what an amazing career Tony Low had and what good company he always was".

From Dr Alex May, current Editor of the Round Table - "he was always so nice in his dealings with me as a lowly DPhil student when he was President of Clare Hall".

From Rev Professor Judith Brown, author of an outstanding study of Gandhi, whose PhD he examined in 1968 - "a man of great integrity and care for the people and places he studied".

From Professor Holger Bernt Hansen of the University of Copenhagen Centre for African Studies - "with Professor Low's death an epoch has come to an end in African studies and African history".

We may not see his like again but can best honour his memory by seeking to emulate the example he has set us. Thank you God for giving us Anthony Low.