D A Low (1927-2015)

A Tribute
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Donald Anthony Low, who passed away in February 2015, could write with ease about African history as he could about South Asia. A distinguished historian, teacher and an excellent administrator, Low was a mentor to some of the finest historians of our times.

Professor Donald Anthony Low (widely known as Anthony or D A Low), Emeritus Smuts Professor of Commonwealth History at the University of Cambridge, passed away in Canberra on 12 February 2015, due to age-related ailments. In his death, the profession of history-writing has lost a distinguished chronicler of modern India and the erstwhile British Empire, a fine comparativist who could write with ease about Africa as he could about South Asia, a superb mentor and teacher to scores of historians and, not the least, a scholar-administrator par excellence.

Born on 22 June 1927 to Canon Donald and Winifred Low in Naini Tal, Low came from a family, which had strong connections to India as clerics and medical professionals. His father worked for the Bible Society in Allahabad and the family lived in the Civil Lines—not too far from the home of the Nehrus and the Saprus—where “from his balcony the infant Anthony might well have witnessed some of the early demonstrations against British rule” (Low 2015). The family returned to England in the midst of the Great Depression, with “hunger marches and soup kitchens” giving perhaps Low “his first glimpse of social inequality” (Low 2015). After a brief stint as a boarder in a prep school in East Sussex, Low joined Haileybury College, set up by the East India Company in the early 19th century as a training establishment for colonial administrators.

Chronicler sans Nostalgia

Although imperial connections criss-crossed Low’s early life, he spent much of his professional career chronicling the end of Empire. Yet his writings and reflections, unlike that of many of his generation, were singularly devoid of imperial pride or nostalgia. After finishing school in 1944 Low joined Exeter College in Oxford, finishing his BA in 1948 and MA in 1952. While at Oxford he developed an interest in the then largely unexplored field of African history and began his doctoral research on “The British and Uganda 1862-1900” under Dame Margery Perham and was subsequently awarded a DPhil in 1957. Alongside he
began teaching in 1951 as a lecturer at Makerere College, Kampala, beginning an academic career that came to span four continents.

He taught in Uganda till 1958 and was, for much of this period, the East Africa correspondent for the London Times. His dispatches were based on a ringside view of rising Ugandan aspirations and he reported on momentous events involving the Kabaka, the King of Buganda, his dramatic exile and subsequent reinstatement.

Low’s African experience proved formative, plunging him into themes which were to dominate much of his later professional life: the workings of colonial rule, the imperatives for decolonisation, the complex challenges faced by new nations in Africa and Asia and, not the least, the larger canvas of the Commonwealth. In all this, Low was

Forging new traditions. He and a post war generation of young historians like John Ballard and Terence Ranger... 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 (Neuhas 2015).

Two significant events of those years came to shape Low’s life. First, he met his life partner, Isobel Smail (“Belle”) who was then working as an English nursing sister in nearby Zanzibar, where he had travelled for archival research. They wed at the Zanzibar Cathedral in 1952 and were “very happily married for 62 years” (Low 2015). Second, Low came in contact with Keith Hancock, the legendary Australian historian, who led a constitutional commission to deal with the crisis in Uganda caused by the deposition of the Kabaka. In 1959 Low was asked by Hancock to join the Australian National University (ANU) and to diversify his repertoire to include South Asian history. He took up the challenge, arriving in June 1959 with a young family in Canberra. He embarked on “a whole new field of study—India and the Indian Independence movement” which required him to spend long periods researching in Indian archives “in an era before instant long distance telephoning let alone email” (Low 2015).

However, in 1964, Lord Asa Briggs invited Low to join the newly established University of Sussex as the inaugural Dean of its School of African and Asian Studies. This was an opportunity “too good to miss” and he “relished it,” as it enabled Low to combine his African and Asian interests. He returned to the ANU in Canberra in 1973 to become director of its Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies and subsequently the University’s Vice Chancellor, between the years 1975 and 1982. With his ANU colleague A L Basham, Low was largely responsible for introducing South Asian studies to Australian academia. Ian Copland, an Australian historian of South Asia, notes:
Looking back, it can fairly be said that Low was a principal driving force behind the mushrooming of Australian scholarship (on India, particularly) during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, a period we now think of as something of a golden age in the evolution of our field (Copland 2015).

Global History

In 1983 Low was elected to the Smuts Professorship of Commonwealth History at the University of Cambridge, and then in 1987 to the Presidency of Clare Hall, positions he held till 1994. Together with his colleague David Fieldhouse, he ran a vigorous seminar series on Imperial and Commonwealth History, which pretty much served as a platform to explore an interconnected, shared past across continents, what in present-day terms would be called “global history.” He also lobbied with University authorities to change the title of the chair to which he had been elected from the “Smuts Professorship of the History of the British Commonwealth” to “Smuts Professorship of Commonwealth History.”

While in England, Low was drawn into a number of administrative roles: for several years as Deputy Vice Chancellor of the University of Cambridge, as Chair of the Board of Governors of the School of African and Asian Studies in London, as well as of Haileybury College. He also played a key role in getting started the ‘British Documents on the End of Empire’ project, working with the Public Records Office, the British Academy and the Leverhulme Trust, to publish documents relating to decolonisation in Africa, the West Asia, Southeast Asia, the Caribbean and the Pacific, a superb sequel to the Transfer of Power in India volumes, edited by Nicholas Mansergh.

Upon retirement from Cambridge, Low based himself in Canberra but continued to speak, publish and engage with scholars. His most recent book Fabrication of Empire: The British and the Uganda Kingdoms, 1890–1902 was published when he was 82.

A Diverse Repertoire


Low’s writings in the field of South Asian and African history have been wide-ranging. However, key themes may be delineated from his corpus of work: the inner workings of Empire, its social engineering, its collaborative ties with indigenous elites, its confrontations with nationalist leaders, the dilemmas experienced in the process of decolonisation and, not
the least, the political structures which emerged within the new nations of Africa and Asia. Although his concerns were largely of a political historian, his writings were always nuanced as they considered questions of power, political legitimacy and authority, rural aspirations and the complex ground realities of colonial and postcolonial societies.

In the historiography of modern South Asian history, Low’s contributions would unarguably be regarded as singularly critical. His two edited works *Soundings in Modern South Asian History* (1968) and *Congress and the Raj* (1977), together with his former student and colleague Ravinder Kumar, edited *Essays in Gandhian Politics: The Rowlatt Satyagraha of 1919* (1971), in the words of Rajat Kanta Ray (2005), “formed a sort of trilogy” with the volumes becoming “milestones in the study of popular politics in modern Indian historiography.” These provided nuanced, empirically grounded accounts of the emergence of popular politics in the Gandhian era, which were set in different regional and local contexts. Collectively, they marked a decisive break from the elite theory of Indian nationalism of the “Cambridge school” led by J A Gallagher and Anil Seal. The Low–Kumar volumes signalled a definitive “turn towards popular politics” and some of their essays anticipated the intellectual agendas which the Subaltern school later came to signpost in the 1980s. At least three of Low’s former research students, David Arnold, David Hardiman and Dipesh Chakrabarty, became members of the Subaltern Studies “collective.”

Low’s own writings on 20th century Indian history analysed in great depth the ambiguous relationship between Indian nationalism and the Raj (Reeves 2002b). In a number of essays he examined many of the key episodes of this relationship. Two of his essays dealt with the Raj’s response to Gandhi’s Non-cooperation movement of 1920–22 and the Civil Disobedience campaigns of 1930–34, the latter suppressed with a regime which Low unhesitatingly described as “Civil Martial Law.” He wrote substantial essays on many of the critical events which shaped the Congress-Raj dynamic: the Congress’ *Purna Swaraj* decision of 1929, the Gandhi–Irwin Pact of 1931, Nehru’s turn towards socialism in 1936, Congress’ dilemmas during its time in provincial office during 1937-39 and the Cripps Mission of 1942. Crafted elegantly and drawing upon rich archival materials, these essays remain indispensable to any student of nationalist politics during the Gandhian era.

**Teacher and Mentor**

One of Low’s enduring contributions to the field of South Asian history arises from his role as a teacher, research supervisor and mentor. Peter Reeves, one of Low’s earliest students, recalled that he approached the supervisor’s role with “patience and perceptiveness, insight and imagination” (Reeves 2002a). Robin Jeffrey recalled that as a supervisor Low was “kindly, critical, careful, immensely conscientious, always constructive” (Jeffrey 2015).

Low supervised successive generations of graduate students with their doctoral projects which included, among others, Ravinder Kumar on social history of Western India, John Broomfield on bhadralok in Bengal, Peter Reeves on landlords of Uttar Pradesh, David
Arnold on Congress politics in Tamil Nadu, James Manor on princely rule in Mysore, David Hardiman on Patidars of Gujarat, Robin Jeffrey on Congress politics in Travancore, Brij Lal on Indians in Fiji, Imran Ali on canal colonies in Punjab, Stephen Henningham on landlords in Bihar, Andrew Major on Sikh rule in Punjab, Dipesh Chakrabarty on jute mill workers in Bengal, Vinita Damodaran on Congress and peasant politics in Bihar, Tan Tai Yong on civil-military relations in Punjab, David Lowe on Colombo Plan and the Commonwealth, Medha Kudaisya on Marwaris in Calcutta, Swarna Aiyar on Partition violence and Gyanesh Kudaisya on state and region-making in Uttar Pradesh.

Those who knew Low shall remember him for his academic leadership, marked by a deep sense of fair play and a collegial and egalitarian style, his wonderful mentoring of younger historians, not the least, his ability to keep up his prolific publications output, while shouldering heavy administrative responsibilities. Both Clare Hall in Cambridge and the ANU in Canberra commemorated Low in his lifetime by naming buildings after him, a singular honour for any historian.

Since his passing away, Low’s many qualities have been warmly recalled. Judith Brown, the distinguished biographer of Gandhi and Oxford-based historian, described him as “a man of great integrity and care for the people and places he studied” (Neuhas 2015). Ian Copland (2015) noted that Low will be “remembered... by all who those had the privilege of knowing him as an unfailingly approachable, unassuming and generous human being.” His son Adam, a film-maker associated with the BBC, recalled:

He came from a generation which prized modesty and... did not regard gentleness as being unmanly. His humanity, humour, and genuine interest in others is something many people ... will remember. Not easily angered he was appalled by injustice of any kind (Low 2015).

Dipesh Chakrabarty, one of his former students, described him as “the ‘gentle colossus’ of South Asian studies.”

Note

1 Personal communication, 12 February 2015.

References


Reeves, Peter (2002a): “Introduction” Special Issue, South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies, Volume 25, No 2, “Society, Realm and Nation in Colonial and Postcolonial South Asia: Essays Presented to Professor Anthony Low.”