

DONALD ANTHONY LOW AO

1927–2015

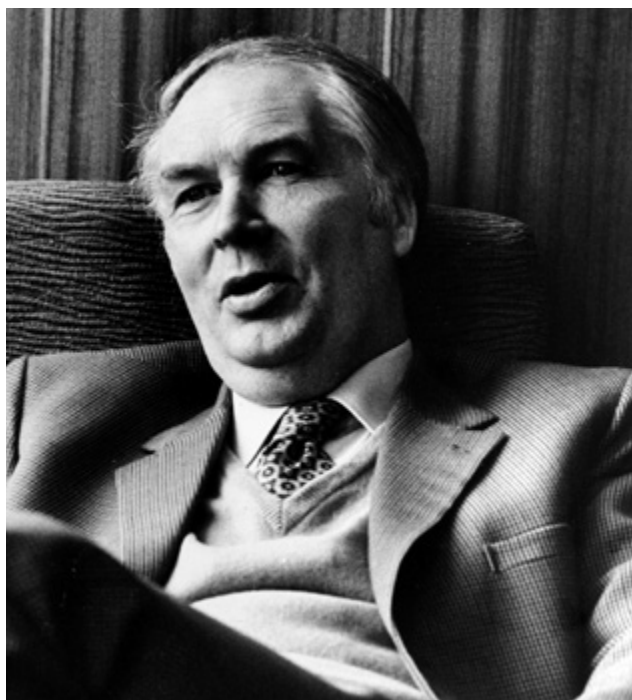


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Had Anthony Low lived in an earlier era of the British Empire he may well have risen to be a great imperial proconsul, perhaps even Viceroy of India (or at least an African Governor). Born to a British mission family in the beautiful Indian Hill Station of Nainital (his father ran the Bible Society, while his mother was a British-trained medical doctor), he was sent to that most prestigious of English public schools supplying officers for the British armed service colonial corps. This was Haileybury, which had grown out of the historic British India College of 1806 (and later incorporated the Imperial Services and United Services Colleges), with its fierce motto of ‘Fear God, Honour the King’. Haileybury could claim Rudyard Kipling among its luminous alumni, as well as an extraordinary number of military leaders, with an astonishing seventeen alumni having been awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery (and three even rarer George Cross winners). Many other graduates became leaders in the imperial and colonial services, personifying the ‘Thin Red Line’ that ruled an Empire. Anthony Low may have taken a civil road less travelled for Haileyburians – as an academic leader (Eminent Professor and Vice-Chancellor), having excelled in history – but he proudly recognised his personal debt to his school as Council

Member (1984–94), and later as Life Governor. With his commanding style and presence, upright bearing and voice of authority, he reflected an educational culture that championed strong leadership qualities involving the ‘useful’ life of service and academic achievement.

After Haileybury, Anthony Low went up to Oxford in 1945 as an undergraduate (Exeter College), interrupted by 18 months of national service in the 17th Lancers. He later undertook a doctorate (D. Phil). Having become fascinated with African history at Oxford, he resolved to work in colonial Africa – not as member of the imperial administrative corps, but as a lecturer at the new Makerere University College in Kampala, Uganda. The young D. A. Low was soon to become one of its academic stars, as well as developing a public profile as the East African Correspondent of *The Times* of London (1952–8). Through local explorations in Bugandan history, he was indeed to become one of the pioneers of African history as a subject in its own right. His major studies of *Buganda and British Overrule 1900–1955* (1960), *Buganda in Modern History* (1971), plus a rich documentary collection under the title of *The Mind of Buganda* (1971), are still in use today, alongside chapters in *The Oxford History of East Africa* (1976), and a standard entry on ‘The History of Uganda’ in the 15th Edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

Here was a rich corpus of pioneering research and imaginative analysis of the famous and complex Bugandan Kingdoms. Low gave attention to both the dynamics of power among the many chiefdoms as British ‘over-rule’, along with an analysis of the intricate roles of religion and culture in an African society where local values included the presence of both Islam and Christianity. The young academic’s early research papers had followed traditional themes – ‘British public opinion and the Ugandan Question’ (1954), ‘The British and the Buganda’ (1956) – but that quite soon changed, to a greater internal focus on Africa and Africans: ‘Religion and Society in Buganda’ (1957), ‘The composition of the Buganda Lukiko’ (1959), ‘Political Parties in Uganda, 1949–62’ (1962), and ‘The Advent of Populism in Buganda’ (1964). His intellectual horizons also expanded boldly to recognise the era of change across the great continent with his notable paper on ‘Studying the Transformation of Africa’ in the mid-1960s.

Having first approached African history from a metropolitan perspective of empire, Low now began to give voice and agency to Africans and their own society. And as he came to see Africa from the inside, so too he reconceptualised his sense of Empire, which he now perceived as being significantly shaped by indigenous forces. In later reviewing the multi-volume *Oxford History of the British Empire*, he was to praise its range, but also to ask aloud why a much greater agency had not been given to the colonial peoples swept up within the Pax Britannica. In his own writings he evolved a general model of British colonial expansion, first through a key article – ‘Lion Rampant’, in the *Journal of Commonwealth Political Studies* – which then grew into a major comparative imperial study of the same name (1973), along with a plethora of research papers on African imperialism. My own favourite is ‘Warbands and Ground-Level Imperialism in Uganda, 1870–1900’, which he published from the Australian National University (ANU) in 1975. He drew together his theory about tropical empire in his final monograph for Cambridge University Press half a century later in 2009: *Fabrication of Empire: The British and the Uganda Kingdoms, 1890–1902*. Uganda had become for him a remarkable laboratory for dissecting empire and history. The ideologies of conquest and rule were contextualised in relation to indigenous cultures – which included traditional authorities and new social classes, ancient traditions and beliefs experiencing transformation. Within the local he had found the global.

The road from Africa to Asia in his scholarship was to be winding but relatively short. While in Uganda, and through his work as a stringer for *The Times*, Low fortuitously came to know the famous Australian historian W. K. Hancock KBE FAHA, who was then leading a commission of enquiry over the deposition of the Kabaka of the Buganda. Hancock was impressed with the young scholar and facilitated a research fellowship at the ANU (1959–64). From that base, Anthony Low then secured a major appointment at the innovative University of Sussex as founding Dean of the School of African and Asian Studies. He then became Director of the Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences at Sussex; which in turn allowed him to return to Australia in 1973 as Director of the ANU’s new Research School of Pacific Studies. The significance of these professional movements amounted to more than a study in the remarkable empire-network of Commonwealth universities. In the Foreword to *Lion Rampant* (1974), he modestly traced his intellectual journey with an acknowledgement ‘to Makerere College, Uganda, which gave me the opportunity to develop an interest in Africa; to the Australian National University which enabled me to take an interest in India; and to the University of Sussex which allowed me to attempt to combine the two’.

He was of course to do more than that. He was never to engage in facile comparative essays, but rather to embed an awareness of patterns and practices within works of detailed research and analysis. His arrival in South Asian history was accordingly through issues and archives. Two edited volumes caught the academic explorer in action: *Soundings in Modern South Asian History* (1968), soon to be followed by *Government Archives in South Asia: A Guide to National and State Archives in Ceylon, India and Pakistan* (1969). Scholarly works followed around Anthony Low’s fascination with imperial power and local social formations, traditional elites and the new nationalist forces. A collected volume of 1977 reflected his interest in a contested modernity – *Congress and the Raj: Facets of the Indian Struggle, 1917–47* (1977) – as did a significant paper the following year on the traditional elites of the sub-continent in an innovative volume on *People, Princes and Paramount Power: Society and Politics in the Indian Princely States*, edited by Robin Jeffrey FAHA (1978). Works of enduring significance were to be developed over the next few decades. The ‘Centenary’ of the Indian Congress movement was marked with a major collected volume of essays (1988), with his finest South Asian monograph coming in the next decade: *Britain and Indian Nationalism: The Imprint of Ambiguity, 1929–42* (1997).

If historians can reasonably be divided into ‘splitters’ and ‘clumpers’, then Anthony Low was essentially a subtle ‘splitter’. He wished to defy the inevitabilities sometimes given to writing about the past; and he also forensically dissected given forces – such as ‘nationalists’ and ‘nationalism’ – to reveal their complex underlying construction. ‘Ambiguity’ was a favourite word in pointing to the contingent and accidental (even ironic) in the turn of historical events. Above all, that ‘the unwary have allowed themselves to be trapped into supposing that the processes of decolonisation turned principally upon imperialists’ decisions’. For while that ‘was often the surface appearance’, it is ‘an egregious error to suggest that this unfolded within some imperialist vacuum; worse that imperial rulers were always Olympian masters of their empire’s fate’ (‘Britain and India in the early 1930s’, in *Imperialisms*, ed. by Deryck M. Schreuder FAHA, University of Sydney, 1991, p. 134). From that perspective the mature scholar was also of course ready to paint on the broad canvas of ‘European expansion’ when appropriate, using his deep knowledge of Asia and Africa in synoptic volumes on *The Eclipse of Empire* (1991), and *The Egalitarian Moment: Asia and Africa, 1950–1980* (1996).

If the name of Anthony Low was alone associated with his formal CV of publications, this would just point to part of a much larger ‘informal empire’ of personal influence and presence. Professor Robin Jeffrey – one of his luminous students – has said that Anthony Low perhaps had two

'families'. One was in the loving home of 'Belle' (Isabel Smails, a nurse already working in Zanzibar when he did his east African researches, and whom he married in September 1952) and their three children (two daughters and a son). The other was the huge cohort of graduate research students (possibly over 50) that he supervised and mentored, before they in turn made exceptional contributions to modern history – notably that of South Asia. He dedicated his 1997 study (on *Britain and Indian Nationalism*) in a cryptic way to 'The Four Regiments' – his affectionate recognition of his far-flung groupings of post-graduate students, the 'Regiments of Sepoys' – 'In very deep gratitude... for all they have given me'. Others again had the benefit of his exceptional generosity in reading draft papers, in commenting on whole book manuscripts, and in examiner's reports on doctoral dissertations. He had a shrewd eye for talent and gave momentum to careers of distinction: for example, in 1980 he brought Ranajit Guha to a research fellowship at ANU, so providing a secure base for the flowering of the famed radical push of 'Subaltern Studies' in the literature of India and of imperial theory more generally.

I first met Anthony Low in 1976 when I was a young Visiting Fellow in the Research School of Social Sciences and writing my study of *The Scramble for Southern Africa* (1980). It was suggested that I make an appointment to meet the Vice-Chancellor, something which gave me some apprehension – until I heard that it was none other than a 'Professor D. A. Low'. I duly presented myself on the top floor of the executive building where I was genially welcomed by an elegant and imposing, grey-suited figure, with deeply resonant voice and aura of authority. We certainly 'talked empire', but also the challenges being faced by universities in the turbulent decade on campuses throughout the Western world of the 1970s. He was then engaged in both healing such staff and student divisions while also calling for the University to 'get its house in order' in an era of increasing government oversight.

As a Haileybury graduate he boldly led from the front, being personally highly visible on campus, and directly engaged with the university community through open meetings, faculty lunches and public speeches. He promoted external reviews towards 'a new order' at ANU, and coupled this with the initiation of new research centres. (The Innovations Building at ANU was rightly to carry his name.) Morale lifted and institutional confidence revived. He extended that service to the region when he became a member of the Council of the new University of Papua New Guinea. Many staff proudly saw him as very much a 'university man', with strong academic values, who challenged government. But the public tide was also eventually to turn towards a new utilitarianism in national policy. As the historians

of ANU have commented: increasingly Anthony Low's 'international perspective and networks were less valuable than they might have been in earlier decades, when the University was seeking to make its mark in the academic world. Now it was more important to know how the system worked in nearby government departments and in Parliament House on the other side of the lake' (S. G. Foster and Margaret M. Varghese, *The Making of the Australian National University*, ANU E-Press, 1990, pp. 305–6).

At the end of the traditional seven-year Vice-Chancellor term of office at ANU, Anthony Low was elected to the Smuts Chair in Commonwealth History at Cambridge University (1983–94) – a vacancy created by the unexpected death of the famous imperial and Indian scholar, Professor Eric Stokes. Anthony Low accordingly missed the Dawkins Revolution in higher education that brought 'massification' to the Australian 'system'. Instead, he could again entirely devote his creative talents to research leadership in overseas history at Cambridge, while also becoming the President of a famous graduate institution, Clare Hall (1987–94). That was to be his last formal appointment. With Belle and family he then retired to Canberra and continued research and writing. He became an Officer of the Order of Australia in 2005. In 2009 many of us gathered in University House to celebrate the publication of *Fabrication of Empire* by Cambridge University Press.

Anthony Low was legendary for acts of surprising kindness. Mine came in 1997. I was deeply involved as a Vice-Chancellor in university challenges when I suddenly received a copy of his latest book, with this typical inscription:

Deryck – With warm regards and a symbol that there is life after death for Vice-Chancellors! – Anthony

While we have said farewell to Anthony Low, the scholarly works of D. A. Low will long exist to inform and engage all those of us who wish to know more intimately about Africa, India and Empire in modern history.

DERYCK SCHREUDER FAHA