

OBITUARIES

Robert Molteno, 11 January 1943–31 January 2022

Robert Molteno worked part-time as the publications officer of the International African Institute (IAI) from 2005 to 2008. The Institute, now approaching its centenary, publishes a few academic books annually as well as the leading quarterly journal *Africa*. Robert maintained and strengthened its operations for a few years before retiring, after which he continued to serve on the Institute's Board of Trustees. One of his most important contributions to the Institute's work was the African Arguments book series, co-published by Zed Books and the IAI, which is still a vibrant series, promoting books on Africa of topical interest to broad international audiences.

Before his employment at the IAI, Robert was the chief editor at Zed Books for more than twenty-five years. Robert was asked by Zed's founder, Roger van Zwanenberg, to read a manuscript that Zed was considering. Roger's colleague Mike Pallis travelled to Sussex, where the Moltenos were living after they had left Zambia precipitately. His wife Marion was teaching in Eastbourne, and Robert stayed at home with the children, who were very young. On his return, Mike told Roger that not only had the task been performed with aplomb, but also that he might have found a candidate to become the press's editor whom they had been seeking. I suppose that what had impressed Mike was the quality of Robert's engagement with the manuscript and with the task he had been asked to do.

The Moltenos moved to London and Robert indeed became Zed's editor. The company was very small, and in those early days each person had to learn all aspects of publishing: book production, financing, marketing, publicity – there were a lot of tasks to get on top of. An important task was seeking co-publishing arrangements, perhaps in the country, or at least the continent, with which the book was concerned. That was another task at which Robert became adept.

I met Robert in autumn 1978. I had typeset a book for Zed and he brought me the proofs for correction. Some years later, I was looking for work and approached Zed. We remembered each other well. By then the company had grown to ten or a dozen people, with finance, marketing, publicity and production departments in addition to Robert and another editor.

For my first task, he sat me down at his own desk with some proofs that needed urgent checking, a job that was likely to take some time. There was no one else there, and he settled himself on the other side of the room and started talking. I turned round in some surprise: he was chatting warmly, directly, highly communicatively, economically, to the point, to a Dictaphone. He was writing letters. Some were short – 'Your letter arrived. Thank you. My warm regards' – but most were substantial, responsive, moving a conversation on. He might suggest modifying a line of argument; splitting a

chapter into two; or that the author should write an overarching introduction or concluding summary. In a couple of hours, he had written sixty letters.

He had lively contact with a vast network of people, each of whom came vividly to my mind's eye as I was eavesdropping, which convinced me that each was vividly in his mind's eye as he addressed the machine in front of him. As I got to know the company better and saw the correspondence in the files, it was clear that those authors and others with whom Robert kept in such assiduous contact had felt the same: they were looked after, kept in touch with. Writing is a solitary business, and it was palpable in so many authors' correspondence that they knew that someone was, as it were, holding the other end of the rope. Robert was midwife in these ways, I once calculated, to about a thousand books.

Now I turn to Robert as a colleague. Zed functioned as a workers' co-op. It was owned and run, together, by the people who worked there. Decisions on what to publish were taken by consensus. Robert, as chief editor, convened the editorial meetings, in which he was always articulate, clear, fluent. And that includes when he was undecided and didn't know what to think; he would step back and explore contrary arguments. It clarified everyone's thinking and kept matters on the move. His concentration, his focus and his intelligence were always an enormous gift – and that gift was given by him to us, his colleagues. That is the principal quality that I valued in Robert and will remember him for: his articulacy. He sought to explain, including to himself, just what was before us; with authors in their work, and with his colleagues regarding decisions that we needed to take, he always sought explicitness.

I think of those years of our shared working life with huge gratitude, and I mean gratitude to Robert.

I was thunderstruck when I heard that Robert had died. He went out like a light. Deeply shocking but perhaps fitting – because he lived like a light.

Ralph Smith