

**LALAGE BOWN (1927-2021)**  
**Adult educator: advocate for the right for access to  
education, women's literacy and decolonisation**

**Robert Hamilton**

Emeritus Professor Lalage Bown, OBE died in Shrewsbury hospital on 17 December 2021, aged 94, following a fall at home. An eminent women's literacy advocate, she dedicated her life's work to improving education for the disadvantaged, especially women, seeking to bring university opportunities to the widest possible sections of society. Lalage was immersed in a tradition which regarded adult education as a catalyst for significant social change. Her ideas were informed by a post-war world in which many believed that the kind of injustices suffered under colonial rule had to end. But, beyond this, in her radical way, she also saw the need to develop new inclusive, post-colonial approaches to education, including the reform of university curricula. She devoted her life to this mission, inspiring and challenging all she met - professionals and learners - across many countries in Africa and Europe.

**Background**

Daughter of Dorothy Ethel Watson and Arthur Mervyn Bown, Lalage Bown was born in Croydon on April 1, 1927. The oldest of four children, she was destined for a strong start in life. Before she was born, her mother had agreed to marry her father - on the condition that, if they had any daughters, they would be entitled to education opportunities equal to any sons, quite remarkable for the 1920s. Her given name derives from the Roman poet Horace who, in Ode XXII, writes in Latin, '*dulce ridentem Lalagen amabo dulce loquentem*', which in translation means 'I shall love Lalage, who laughs and talks so sweetly'. This seems particularly apposite given the great skills she demonstrated as an orator in her professional career.

Lalage grew up looking after her younger siblings while their parents lived and worked abroad. Lalage and her two brothers, Hugh and Mark, and her sister Jacqueline, lived in England, but their parents lived abroad because their father's work with the Indian Civil Service was based in Burma. The children lived in children's holiday homes and boarding schools. As the oldest, Lalage was responsible for keeping an eye on her younger brothers and sister, effectively bringing them up. Their mother would travel home by boat every summer, but their father had leave only every third year. They would speak to their parents for five minutes on the telephone each Christmas.

Lalage was educated at Wycombe High School for Girls (1939-42), Cheltenham Ladies College (1942-45) and Somerville College at the University of Oxford (1945-9), gaining an Honours Degree in Modern History (1948) followed by a Master of Arts (1949). At that time, she was one of just 600 female students at Oxford, among 6000 males. In common with all her generation, Lalage experienced the challenges of World War II. Aged just 20 she visited Germany in the immediate aftermath contributing to the Allies humanitarian and educational work. She was particularly impressed at Somerville by the diversity of her fellow students whose cohort included people from Denmark, France, Poland, Guyana and New Zealand, but undertaking post-graduate courses in adult education and economic development stimulated her lifelong interest in Africa. She left Oxford with a sense of responsibility to make good use of her privilege.

### **Pioneering adult education in Africa**

It is not surprising, therefore, that after her studies, Lalage applied in 1949 for a resident tutor post based at the Department of Extra-Mural Studies of University College of the Gold Coast (subsequently Ghana). As an African colleague said, she chose to serve overseas, leaving behind the comfort and serenity of her environment for the more challenging terrain of Africa. During her interview, she was asked "Now Miss Bown, supposing you were to get the job and you were in the jungle in a car and your car broke down, how do we know you wouldn't have a fit of hysterics?" She simply replied, "Well sir, if you don't give me the job, you'll never find out, will you?" She was given the job. It is perhaps ironic that, by her own admission, Lalage was the worst driver in the world and soon gave up after demolishing a gate on arrival at a friend's house in Ghana, as her host watched in horror from the house balcony. At just 22, Lalage travelled via Senegal to Ghana where she became involved in teaching African literature and arts and helped to create the first African folk high school.

Over a period of 30 years in Africa she became the first field resident tutor in the Extra-Mural Department at Makerere University College in Uganda, and held various positions at the University of Ibadan and Ahmadu Bello University in Nigeria, the University of Zambia and the University of Lagos. In Zambia, Lalage established a national extra-mural programme, emphasising the role of the university in promoting discussion of current issues, with special courses for trade unionists, politicians and the police, and made use of radio, television and theatre for public education. She also helped to set up the first systematic university training for adult educators in Africa. She was an activist who served as the founding Secretary of the African Adult Education Association and as an active participant at the building of the Nigerian National Council for Adult Education. For her role in these institutions, she received numerous awards and recognitions. A special issue of the journal, *Adult Education in Nigeria*, was dedicated to the celebration of her 70<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1997, when she was named the 'Mother of Adult Education in Africa'. Of most significance, she saw first-hand the effects of illiteracy and dedicated much of her career in Africa to helping adult women learn to read and write. Interviewed by Mary de Sousa in 2009 for the UNESCO Education Sector Newsletter, she said: "I was left with the huge conviction that even the simplest acquisition of literacy can have a profoundly empowering effect personally, socially and politically. When it comes to women, there is a huge change in their self-worth and confidence."

### **Early efforts to decolonise the curriculum**

Lalage was instrumental in supporting the 'Africanisation' of the curriculum. Speaking on BBC Radio4 'Woman's Hour', she described how, when she arrived in Africa, the students were required to study standard English texts such as William Wordsworth's 'daffodils poem'. She thought this was absurd and that they should be studying more relevant African texts. She suggested to her (mostly male) colleagues that more relevant material, by African authors about African life, would be more appropriate, but they said there was no material available in English. She bet them a bottle of beer that she could produce texts written in English by Africans over a period of 200 years. They laughed at her but within two weeks, she had found relevant letters, diaries and texts and won her bottle of beer. This eventually led to the publishing of her book in 1973 *Two Centuries of African English*, which became a much relied-upon resource for the African universities at the time. Among many other distinctions, she was the first organising secretary of the International Congress of Africanists. On a personal level, when in Nigeria, Lalage looked after five-year-old Nigerian twin girls. After six months, she had bonded so strongly with the girls, she asked if she could keep them on. There

were no formal adoption arrangements, but they became her daughters. Lalage fostered them long term and now the twins are over 60 years old!

### **Returning to the UK**

Lalage's work in Africa did not go unnoticed. In 1974, she became a Commonwealth Visiting Professor at Edinburgh University; and in 1975, was awarded an honorary doctorate from the Open University for services to the education of the underprivileged. She received the William Pearson Tolley Award from Syracuse University in 1975, the first woman to receive that award. She was then awarded an OBE (Order of the British Empire) in 1977. The honours and accolades continued throughout her life; Lalage received her sixth honorary doctorate (from the University of Chester) during a graduation ceremony in 2018. Lalage returned full-time to the UK as Visiting Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex in 1980. Whilst there, she assisted a colleague who was running a small independent adult education centre based in the Quaker meeting house in Brighton and embroiled in political struggles to defend learner-centred literacy work. Lalage arrived as ever a whirlwind of energy, advice and clarity of thought; radical, disciplined, inspiring and determined that the adult education centre should combine internationalism and the pursuit of social justice in its work. For the remainder of her life, whenever they met her, colleagues were inspired by her distinct combination of a challenge to be rigorous, coupled with encouragement and renewed motivation.

### **Glasgow University, Scotland**

In 1981 Lalage was appointed to the Department of Adult and Continuing Education at the University of Glasgow as Director and titular professor. All of those who had the chance to work with Lalage in Glasgow were privileged in a directly personal way. Under her leadership in the 1980s Glasgow University had the widest subject range of all continuing education departments in the UK, and the 5<sup>th</sup> highest enrolment figures. Close to Lalage's heart was the establishment in 1990 of an Equal Opportunities Training Unit with three members of staff. This unit provided training for the police and Glasgow District Council. Access to higher education programmes also flourished under her leadership, and three former access students were awarded higher degrees by the University in 1988. Lalage also maintained significant links with African nations. In 1986 she delivered a lecture at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, as part of its Faculty of Education Silver Jubilee celebrations. That same year a group of African adult educators visited the Department. Throughout her tenure at Glasgow, Lalage's reputation encouraged many African students to

undertake postgraduate work in the Department of Adult and Continuing Education. She was particularly proud of the growth in the numbers of students taking postgraduate courses in adult education. Given her belief in the importance of the relationship between theory and practice in adult education, the Diploma in Adult Education held particular significance for her. Many of the part-time postgraduate students were employed in work with ethnic minorities and low-income students. 1983 saw the first graduate from the MEd in Adult and Community Education. Lalage believed firmly in the maintenance of high academic standards in the discipline of adult education. She insisted that academic colleagues in the Department from other disciplines attend a module on the principles and practices of adult education.

On her retirement from the University of Glasgow in 1992 she was delighted that her successor was also a woman, at a time when c6% of the professoriate were women- celebrating in typical style over a glass of good Scotch in Glasgow's Central Railway Station and setting the stage for subsequent women in senior leadership roles. Lalage maintained her links with the University for the remainder of her life, including as a strong supporter of the Centre for Research & Development in Adult and Lifelong Learning (CRADALL). In the late 1990s, in line with her appetite to widen access to knowledge across international boundaries, she agreed to act as External Examiner for an innovative Masters in English and Educational Studies, which was partly delivered on site in the UAE. Unusually, in recognition of her distinctive contribution, Glasgow University awarded an honorary degree to one of its own Emeritus Professors.

Lalage received a D.Litt. in April 2002, and, also unusually, was invited to give the charge to the graduates. In a stirring address she stressed the importance of equality in learning. The graduates were spellbound as Lalage laid out her conviction that everyone had a right to knowledge, but that knowledge must not just be information but should include analysis, interpretation and critical appraisal. In support of adult education, community engagement and lifelong learning, she called on the University to strengthen its service to mature citizens who wanted access to some university knowledge, but not always necessarily a degree. She also highlighted the need for a better gender balance especially in postgraduate study. She looked forward in her address to the day when the University might have a female Principal. Finally, she drew from her long career in Africa to highlight the need for those in developing countries to have access to the knowledge community. Her message was, therefore, about equality and access between countries as well as within the UK. Again, unusually, this oration received a standing ovation.

## On-going engagement and other honours

Lalage continued to work to try and make a difference in people's lives all throughout her 'retirement'. In the 1990s, she pulled together her experiences on the effects of literacy on adult women into a ground-breaking report 'Preparing for the future: women, literacy and development: the impact of female literacy on human development and the participation of literate women in change.' She was also named a fellow of the Educational Institute of Scotland and a fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1991. In 2009 she was inducted into the International Hall of Fame for Adult and Continuing Education. She remained an active member of many boards, trusts, committees and councils concerned with higher education, adult education, literacy and community enrichment in Africa, the Commonwealth and the UK, including being life member of the African Adult Education Association, being joint deputy executive chair of the Council for Education in the Commonwealth from 1999 to 2006 and being Hon. Vice-President of the Townswomen's Guilds in the UK for the last 24 years.

To her friends and colleagues, Lalage appeared both phenomenal and indestructible. Just before her planned 90<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration in Glasgow in 2017, she fell and broke her hip. As she was wheeled into hospital in great pain, Lalage found the strength to chuckle when the young volunteer pushing her wheelchair said it 'made her day to meet a celebrity'. The indomitable Lalage came to Glasgow the following year to celebrate a belated 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. Among other commitments in recent years, she was an engaged patron of the *Adult Education 100 campaign*- celebrating and taking forward the ideals of the ground breaking 1919 British Government report on adult education. Lalage remained active in her local community in Shrewsbury and regularly recorded newspaper readings for the blind. At the age of 94 she enjoyed participating in a local campaign against a new development in her area but complained it got in the way of her academic work! She was a generous donor to appeals for public monuments in Shrewsbury, was Chair of the townships Residence association and was an active member of the local Rotary.

During the recent lockdown at her home in Shrewsbury, Lalage reflected in an interview on the fight against fascism during World War II and the current fight against the coronavirus. Describing both as 'struggles without boundaries' she recalled the fear of imminent death in WW II through bombing, of carrying a gas mask, and queuing with school-mates, each paying sixpence for the Red Cross just to smell a single grape-fruit. Demonstrating the sense of social justice, she displayed all of her life, Lalage observed 'the advantage then was that everyone had a basic equality. I never foresaw a time



when millions had to go to food banks'. She added that 'the greater social equality of the war years ('all in it together') resulted in welfare reforms, including, of course, the National Health Service''. Without it, she concluded, our present 'war' against the coronavirus would be unbelievably more frightening.

## **Legacy**

Professor Lalage Bown was an outstanding communicator: she wrote, edited or contributed to around 26 books and monographs plus around 86 articles. In her leisure time she enjoyed travel, reading and entertaining friends. She was living proof of the adage "If you never stop learning, you never grow old." One colleague said if he were to highlight one special characteristic of Lalage's among so many, it would be her open, friendly, and collaborative attitude to working with other people. He adds that she was not self-seeking or competitive but enjoyed bringing out the best in others- she was interested in and valued every contribution, yet if she disagreed with you, she would let you know in a straight way. Another colleague has one abiding memory of her formidable and impressive qualities. At Lalage's urging he went (with her) to a conference in Nigeria, her old stomping ground. The campus was sadly decaying, and things obviously in poor shape. The conference dinner was in a bizarre setting of military opulence, with a row of men sitting on the dais; in her after-dinner speech Lalage managed to combine perfect politeness with a blistering attack on their failure to maintain the place and the lack of educational opportunity. Her colleague was torn between admiration and fearful anxiety as he scanned their faces.

In the words of one of her African colleagues, Lalage was a trail blazer in the global Adult Education movement. Her commitment to, and insight about, democratic adult education was unbounded. She succeeded in giving Adult and Continuing Education a recognised profile as a major field of education policy in Europe, Africa and beyond. Lalage had a truly unique gift for people and engaging in the communities in which she found herself. She was a friend and mentor to countless people who loved and admired her. She fought the corner for adult education long after she left the University of Glasgow. Successive Principals received communications from her whenever the provision of courses for the general public came under internal scrutiny. She said she would rather argue with academic colleagues than have adult education funding 'earmarked' by government bureaucrats. She kept up the struggle through argument, and an unquenchable hope and vision that universities could be organised by dialogue. So many were enriched by having known her, even a little. She is survived by her two foster daughters Mrs Taiwo

Ogundare and Mrs Kehinde Akinyede, her brother Hugh Bown, her niece Rachel Dale and her nephew Jonathan Bown.