Interview with Professor Donald Anthony Low, AO (1927-2015) – historian and vice chancellor

Interview spoken by Belle Low (wife) September 2015, at Belle's home, and eulogy written by Adam Low (son of Professor Low) February 2015, from London.
Producer, Interviewer and Editor - Peter Stewart

Professor Low

Introductory remarks

In this interview, Emeritus Faculty talks with Belle Low, wife of the late Professor Anthony Low. Although the interview is a contribution to Emeritus Faculty’s Oral History Program, and would normally be spoken by the subject, sadly this is not the case here. Professor Low died in February 2015, as preparations were bring made for the interview.

Despite the personal tragedy of Professor Low’s death, his wife and loving companion Belle agreed to tell Anthony’s story for Emeritus Faculty, in her words. Moreover, and in a way that Belle believes would have pleased Anthony greatly, their son Adam Low (now a BBC broadcaster living in London) offered to Emeritus Faculty the text of a eulogy he delivered at his father’s funeral at St John’s Anglican Church, in Reid ACT, in February 2015.

The three family documents which result, plus reproductions of ANU’s commissioned portrait of Professor Low (by artist June Mendoza) and an informal family photograph of Belle and Anthony, provide moving detail of Professor Low as citizen and scholar, and one of this university’s eminent leaders. They reflect too how Anthony and Belle became such an effective team over their long working life together.

This presentation is part of the Oral History Program created by ANU's Emeritus Faculty, a voluntary but purposeful college of previous ANU staff (now more than 200 strong) who seek to continue as scholars and learners after their retirement. The program interviews are seen as a contribution to university and community understanding of the development of ANU over its past seven decades. Emeritus Faculty has a special interest in this period, since its membership, past and present, includes many people who, like Anthony and Belle Low, helped shape the university in its earlier years, to make it the pre-eminent university it is today. Emeritus Faculty has now recorded more than 30 such oral history interviews with previous ANU staff members.

Professor Low (Anthony as he was known to his family and to most British and African colleagues, Tony as he was happy to be known by many of his Australian friends and colleagues), was Vice Chancellor of the Australian National University (1975-82). Before that at ANU, he was Director of the Research School of Pacific Studies (1973-75), Professor of History (1964-72), and Fellow/Senior Fellow in History (1959-64). Beyond ANU Anthony was, among many other things, The Times of London’s correspondent in Uganda (1952-58), Founding Dean of African and Asian Studies at Sussex University (1964-69), and President of Clare College and Smuts Professor of History at Cambridge University (1987-94).

The stories told here by Belle and son Adam provide for members of Emeritus Faculty, and for ANU more generally, an outline of Professor Low's career and much of his life. Belle's words speak emphatically of Anthony’s character — a man who was, above all, ‘decent and honourable,’ in her words. Adam's eulogy illustrates a man brimming with the passion, intellect, and empathy of a consummate historian, political scientist, and scholar.

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Belle Low’s story

My husband, Anthony Low, was born on 22nd June 1927, in Nantial, a Himalayan hill station in India. His father,
Don't Philip Low, was an ordained Anglican minister, and his mother, Winifred Phoebe Low (nee Edmunds), a medical practitioner. Anthony had a younger sister, Ann, who would later also become a doctor. At the time of Anthony’s birth, his parents were working for the London Bible Society.

When Anthony was four years old, his family moved back to England, where his father then ministered a parish in Stoke-on-Trent. Anthony shared a private tutor with a doctor’s son until he was placed in a private primary school, Normansel, in Seafield, Sussex, run by relatives.

After Normansel, Anthony joined Haileybury College, where previously his father and uncle had been students.

As a child, Anthony suffered ear problems which required a double mastoid operation at age 12, a most painful operation at the best of times. All this meant he was unable to play sport, so he was made chief librarian at the school. Anthony put these seeming disadvantages to work, and he quickly learnt the joy of books and reading generally.

Anthony finished secondary schooling just as World War II was ending, winning a scholarship to Exeter College, Oxford, where he completed a BA in history.

He was then drafted into National Service, serving a year and a half with the 16/5th Lancers as a second lieutenant, in the Suez Canal Zone, a troubled region where British, French, and Arab forces were contending for control of territory, and the new nation of Israel was beginning its struggle for a place in the world.

In 1947, Anthony returned to Oxford to complete his MA, on Ugandan history. In this time, he was persuaded by the eminent historian Marjory Perham to join the newly created university in Uganda – Makerere College, which awarded University of London degrees. Students at Makerere College came from East Africa, mostly from the good mission schools. Perham advised Anthony that as a budding historian it was better to collect his research material where relevant events were happening.

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So, at age 22, my future husband found himself in Uganda. He lived with the Makerere College Principal for a year, and was then appointed Master of the Student Hall, where he took up residence.

In 1952, he visited Zanzibar, to work in the archives where the East African public records were kept. He stayed at the United Mission to Central Africa, attached to the Cathedral and built on the site of the earlier slave market.

During this three-week visit, Anthony and I met at a dinner in the Sisters’ Mess at the main hospital in Zanzibar, where I was nursing. The next day, he presented me with chocolates. I was delighted that I had impressed him! We married in Zanzibar a few months later, and returned together to live in Anthony’s residence at Makerere College.

In 1953 a serious political crisis erupted in Uganda, and the Kabaka (or Bugandan King) was exiled. The Australian historian Keith Hancock was appointed Independent Commissioner in Uganda, and asked to draft a new national Constitution.

Meanwhile, Anthony had been appointed African correspondent for The London Times, reporting to London among other things the meetings and discussions surrounding the constitutional crisis in Uganda.

Hancock produced a new Constitution and the Kabaka was reinstated, to resume as a constitutional monarch in Uganda.

For Anthony, these fraught and sometimes threatening events were stepping stones to his future as a university scholar. They also heralded important changes for us in our future as a family – our daughter Angela was born in 1953, and two years later our twins, Adam and Penny, all of them born in Uganda.

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In 1959, a letter came from Keith Hancock (by then living in Canberra) asking if Anthony would be interested in joining the Australian National University (then little more than a decade old) to establish Asian studies. Anthony saw it as a timely opportunity to move his research and teaching interests towards Asia, a new direction in a rapidly changing world. We talked about this new opportunity, as we always did, and would in future, and accepted Sir Keith’s offer. With our three small children in hand, we departed for Canberra.

So, in 1959 Anthony became the youngest and most junior member of staff in the History Department at ANU. The new department was located among the old Canberra Hospital buildings (on the south side of the campus, where much of Earth Sciences now stands, and where in those days Lake Burley Griffin was still but a notion in the minds of national planners). Anthony worked alongside Laurie Fitzharding, Bob Gollan and Geoff Bolton, with Keith Hancock as Head of Department. He spent several early months visiting the National Archives in India, catching up on his knowledge of that nation.

We lived in a house at 23 Lawson Crescent, Acton. The Hancocks lived next door, in a two-storey house in Liversidge St. I nursed Lady Hancock when she contracted cancer and was given six months to live by her physician, Dr John James. Sir Keith would often babysit our children in the evenings, while I looked after Theaden Hancock; Sir Keith became a great favourite of the Low children.
In these early years, Anthony was asked by the Master of University House, Professor Trendal, to become Bursar of the House. Anthony was left in charge when Trendal went on study leave, and we met many interesting people as a result.

In 1964, after five years at ANU, Asa Briggs (the eminent British historian, then on study leave at ANU) asked Anthony if he would come to Sussex University, in the UK, to initiate African and Asian Studies.

We left for Sussex in mid-1964, and Anthony became Foundation Dean of the School of African and Asian Studies.

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In 1967, Anthony visited two universities in the US: the University of California at Berkeley, and the University of Chicago. The children and I joined him at the end of the UK school year and we camped our way across America. The children spent a term at the Lab School in Hyde Park, Chicago. We later spent a second sabbatical year in Cambridge in 1971-72, at Clare Hall and Churchill College.

Then, late in 1972, Anthony was persuaded to return to ANU, to become Director of the Research School of Pacific Studies (Anthony would later declare it “the best job ever”).

In 1975 my husband was “hijacked” (as he said) into becoming Vice Chancellor at ANU, to help manage an immediate crisis in senior leadership at ANU. In fact, Anthony suggested that Peter Karmel, then a senior public servant, would be a better option as VC, but Peter was half way through his five-year term on Prime Minister Gough Whitlam’s Tertiary Education Commission. Anthony became the chosen one.

Although we had only recently bought a house in Garran, the university insisted that we move back to the ANU campus to live in the VC’s lake-side residence. We would be expected to do a good deal of entertaining as part of Anthony’s new position. I hosted many Friday dinner parties there, often with as many as a dozen guests. Anthony was always keen to mix people, including those from outside the university. And I agreed – such mixing of ‘town and gown’ made ANU a happier, more lively place. I think it did the same for ‘the town’.

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Seven years later, in 1982, Anthony’s tenancy as ANU Vice Chancellor came to an end. It had been an interesting experience for our family, as well as a challenge for Anthony. These years saw much agitation for change in academic life and teaching, and for student rights nation-wide. The turmoil of the times inspired us to make many new and firm friends in the university and in the city.

For my part, I had found many ways to become involved at ANU, and to take a pastoral role on and about the campus that ran nicely parallel with Anthony’s academic and management roles in the faculties and research schools. I became involved in the ANU Women’s Club and with the University House Ladies’ Drawing Room, and in town, with the YWCA Committee and a personal counselling group. I made time to meet, and often to help, wives and children of academic staff, often newly arrived from foreign lands – strangers in an adopted country, as we Lowes had often been during our travels. We knew how it felt.

In 1983 we returned to Cambridge, where Anthony had been appointed Smuts Professor of Commonwealth History at Churchill College.

Then, two years later, he was appointed President of Clare Hall at Cambridge, a postgraduate college for senior visitors and postgraduates.

Anthony also became:

- one of four Deputy Vice Chancellors of the University;
- a member of Cambridge University Press;
- Chairman of the Commonwealth Round Table;
- Chairman of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in London; and
- a member of the Haileybury College Council, his alma mater.

In other words, his active life continued!

In 1994 Anthony retired from university life and we returned to Canberra, to ANU and our daughters (who had remained in Australia when Anthony and I moved to Cambridge), and pleased to see again our old friends from Canberra and ANU. Our son Adam had meanwhile made England and the BBC his new home.

We also returned to St John’s Church, Reid, where we had established links in 1959, in our very first weeks in Canberra. In retirement, Anthony took his place as a rotating chairman of the Church Council.

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Although Anthony was proud of many things in his life as Vice Chancellor, and as Research School Director, and Professor at ANU, he took special pride in his annual Vice Chancellor’s Report to the University. These reports (which are still available in the ANU Library) ranged over all aspects of the university, not only its academic work and successes, but also the activities of those who made a very good university an exceptional one – the day-by-day contributions of academic staff and students, the work of librarians and accountants and technicians, the social and cultural interactions that strengthen community life. He often spoke publicly of friendship and collegiality, of music and drama, and sport, and the mutual inter-dependence of ‘town’ and ‘gown’. My husband saw ANU as a community of young and old, high flyers and beginners, a place for families and workers to feel comfortable and valued.

I always felt that Anthony, my husband and closest friend, was more than worthy of the great responsibility...
I always tell that Anthony, my husband and closest friend, was more than worthy of the great responsibility that was placed on him as a leader of ANU and its community.

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What I have said to this point about my husband’s life and times is too brief to provide more than a sketch of our life together.

Some of our friends have asked about me and my place in the Low family’s days and years, so let me modestly add a few things about my own life. My childhood was spent as part of a happy farming family, living with my parents and six siblings in Northumberland, in England. From childhood, my ambition was to become a school teacher, but World War II intervened in 1939 and the local nursing board recruited me to join the war effort as a trainee nurse. In these early and often fear-filled wartime years there was not time to observe all the niceties of instruction and examinations. So trainees were required to learn much of what was needed ‘on the job’. And so I became a nurse, then a trainee sister, then eventually a theatre sister, and then, over a decade of war and peace, a senior teaching sister, which satisfied some of my original deep desire to become a teacher. I hope I was good at both.

After the war, in 1948, with a close friend, I volunteered to work as a hospital sister in East Africa. I learned Swahili there, and also much about Arab culture, and for four years my teaching and nursing career prospered until in 1952, as I have already described, I was swept off my feet by a quietly spoken and modest but very intelligent young Englishman from Uganda.

That point in time might be thought of as the end of my career in nursing and teaching, but with our three children soon to come (including twins) I found another door opening – as a mother. I therefore continued to teach and learn, even as my children grew to adulthood and began making their own lives. Anthony and I met many fascinating people, themselves often teachers and students, as we moved back to England, then on to Australia, with many countries in between.

Anthony often reminded me, as he made his way in teaching and learning, that my own attitudes and experience were important in guiding him to success as a university scholar and administrator. As I’ve said earlier, Anthony and I always discussed any new opportunities, large or small, which he and we might have in mind for our lives, or offers of new positions he might fill, and where they might take us. We worked always as a team, trusting one another as to what would be best for our family and for those beyond for whom we had responsibility. We often reminded each other of the wonderful life we created together, including the lives of our talented children.

We both had but strong faith which guided us unerringly through our 62 years together. And I am bound by such transcendent thoughts to remember the personal aspects of our marriage and life together, and what a decent and honourable man I found in Zanzibar in 1952. And I am reminded too of the good fortune we had in securing across great distances the companionship and the love of our children – Angela in Africa, Adam in England, and Penny in Australia. In the same way we now share as a family, with Everlasting Gratitude, the memory of our father and husband.

Adam Low’s eulogy for his father

This lovely church of St John’s, Reid ACT, from which these words about my father are spoken, has been a special place for our family since the late 1950s. Who could have known when my father first came here as a newly appointed lecturer at the fledgling ANU that his funeral would take place here one day?

I’m sure that many sons would claim that their father was a remarkable man, but I think I have more cause than many. As well as being a wonderful father, he was passionate about his chosen field, modern history, and he achieved every possible accolade and position in his profession. How did this come about? What were the circumstances that created him?

The first clue comes with his birthplace - Nainital, a hill station in north India - in 1927, at the height, or perhaps the beginning of the decline, of the British Raj. His missionary father, Donald, ran the Bible Society in Allahabad, and the family lived over the office. The city’s most distinguished family was the Nehrus, and from his balcony the infant Anthony might well have witnessed some of the early demonstrations against British rule. When Jawaharlal Nehru became the first prime minister of an Independent India my father met him, and he knew and admired his daughter, Indira Gandhi. As a family India had always been in our vicinity, but my father brought it even closer.

His mother, Winifred, was one of the first generation of women in England to train to be doctors - and the church and the medical profession seem to have been our two main a sources of employment. When the family came back from India my grandfather was given a parish near Stoke-on-Trent in the industrial Potteries, which were then in the grip of the terrible Great Depression. Hunger marches and soup kitchens may have given my father his first glimpse of social inequality, and perhaps even inspired his later politics.

One of his mother’s cousins was an Olympic running medalist and also the headmaster of a preparatory school in Seaford on the Sussex coast called Normansl. When I went to see father last year in his exceptional care home, he told me that if he was ever able to write again he would like to say something about his time there. Despite being separated from his family at the age of eight, he was extremely happy at what was clearly an exceptional school. Each boy was allowed a small pet - he himself had two rabbits named Happy and Doc (after two of the dwarfs, he explained, in the story of Snow White); they each also had their own small patch of garden in which they could grow simple things like nasturtiums, and they went on nature walks every weekend on the South Downs which were covered in summer with wild flowers such as cowslips, orchids and...
Weekends on the South Coast, which were covered in summer with two flowers such as fuchsia, orange and brier roses. Most importantly he remembered how they listened to music most afternoons - Rachmaninov piano concertos, and works by Beethoven, Brahms and Tchaikovsky were played through a large speaker to the boys as they lay on mats in the school hall, the walls of which were decorated with reproductions of surprisingly modern paintings which changed every six months - he particularly loved Manet's little flute player and the swirling landscapes of Vincent van Gogh. His favourite subject was, of course, history, but it is striking that the things he remembered most happened outside the classroom. Throughout his life he placed a great value on music and the Arts, and this has been a huge influence on my sisters and myself.

So often we hear how illness can have a positive effect on those who suffer from it. As a boy my father was tormented by constant earache, the result of infected mastoids behind both his ears, and at the age of twelve he had to undergo a risky and very painful operation (dressing his wounds was so excruciating that they had to switch on the school Hoover to drown out his screams). As a result he was not allowed to play sports such as rugby and cricket, and instead spent his time in the library, particularly at his public school Haileybury (another link to India because the school was founded as a training college for East India Company civil servants). So he became a voracious reader, and remained so for the rest of his life. He told me recently how one day in the library at Haileybury he came across an article about JuJu in Nigeria that he found fascinating. When he was asked a few weeks later to write about 'The Wisdom of the Ages' for the Oxford University entrance exam he wrote about JuJu, and he was always convinced the examiners were so astonished that they gave him a scholarship (this is a good example of his rather sly sense of humour).

He arrived at Exeter College in 1945 but his time there was interrupted by eighteen months of National Service, which he spent in a cavalry regiment that now roved tanks in Egypt - his first foray into the continent whose history was to occupy him for so long. At Oxford he was a regular member of the Sunday club run by C.S Lewis, whose 'Mere Christianity' had a great impact on him, and as a student he developed an interest in the then largely unexplored field of African history. This led to a position at the University College at Makerere in Kampala, the capital of what was then the jewel in the crown of British East Africa. He was in Uganda at a crucial moment politically, and one which was to be significant for him in several ways. When he went to nearby Zanzibar to consult the records in the government archives, he met a strikingly attractive and independent English nursing sister, and fell head over heels in love (he sent his unsuspecting parents a telegram that read 'Engaged to Belle - letter follows'). When they were married six months later in Zanzibar cathedral the best man quipped 'While searching after some Old Relic, Perchance he met a Nurse Angelic'. That vision is sitting in the pew to my right, and they were very happily married for 62 years.

Another apparition came in the form of Sir Keith Hancock, the legendary father of Australian history, who had been asked to Uganda to sort out the crisis caused by the deposition of the Kabaka, the king of the Buganda. As the local stringer for The Times in London my father had a lot to do with Sir Keith's constitutional commission, and Keith in turn was clearly struck by the keen intelligence of this youthful historian. So much so that he invited him to join the history department at the Australian National University which he and other distinguished Australian academics were constructing in Canberra. This was a leap of faith on both their parts, and it is the reason I am standing here today.

We (by now there were three children, Angela, Penny and myself) arrived in Australia in June 1959, and remained here for the next four years. Through a contact of my Grandfather's my parents met the rector of St John's (he was later to become Bishop Arthur) who invited them to come to church here on their first weekend. They have been coming ever since. My sister Penny and I went to Primary School in what is now the Church Hall, my father was head of the Parish Council for many years, and his granddaughter Georgina now sings in the choir. My mother remembers a newly arrived American academic telling her how astonished he was when the Vice-Chancellor handed him is hymn-book.

Canberra was a parting of the ways in many respects. My father needed to become more than just an Africanist, and he embarked on a whole new field of study - India and the Indian Independence movement. This required him to spend periods of up to six months researching in the archives in Delhi - leaving my mother with three small children in an era before instant long distance telephony, let alone email. But it was a happy, sunlit time for us all. The Hancocks became our surrogate grandparents, and we spent many idyllic holidays at their beach house at Bawley Point. When a new job arrived in the form of the Deanship of the School of African and Asian Studies at the newly built University of Sussex we were all reluctant to move back to England, but the opportunity was too good to miss and my father relished it. The Institute of Development Studies he also helped to create at Sussex has become world-renowned, and counts South Africans Thabo Mbeki and Aliie Sachs amongst its alumni. We moved to Lewes, on the South Downs that my father knew from his days at Normans - but despite the attractions of England my sisters never settled there. It seemed grey and cold and crowded after Australia, and when my father was asked to head the School of Pacific Studies at the ANU they jumped at the chance to move back. Once again he had to broaden his range as a historian, and he developed close links with Papua New Guinea, where he served on the Council of the new University in Port Moresby. This was also a transformative time in Australian society, and, like many others, he enjoyed being part of a new era in the country's history.

His move into the Vice-Chancellor's chair in 1975 was unexpected, but it offered him a perfect challenge in his late forties and the novel experience of speaking with people like scientists and, of course, politicians. He and my mother were busier than ever in residence in Balmain Crescent, overlooking the majestic lake that had been just a paddock when we lived here in the 1950s. When his tenure came to an end they moved into University House, imagining that he would take up his old professorship, but a call came to say that his old friend Eric Stokes, the great historian of Empire, had died, and he was asked if he would fill the Smuts Chair of Commonwealth History at Cambridge University that Eric had vacated. Cambridge was an ideal place for him to return to the pleasures of teaching and writing, first at Churchill College, and then at Clare Hall, of which he became the President in 1983. A modern post-graduate college, Clare Hall attracts the finest international scholars, and beina the President was rather like running a miniature ANU. On my father's death
After his retirement from Cambridge, my parents decided to come back to Canberra to be with my two sisters and their families. My father doted on his three small grandchildren and adored being in their company. Retirement didn't mean the end of writing, nor of attending regular seminars at the ANU, but gradually he did this less and less. After their move to Goodwin Village in Ainslie he was very optimistic about the future, but sadly his illness overtook him and he spent the last eighteen months being looked after, wonderfully, in two care homes, Morling Lodge and Jindalee. He was honoured to have a major building (the Anthony Low Innovations Building) named after him at the ANU last year, and delighted that he was able to attend the naming ceremony in his wheelchair; he was more than happy to see his name and that of the building joined in the idea of creating the new.

Nothing I say can really do justice to my father and his achievement, but perhaps I can illuminate his character a little before I finish. He came from a generation which prized modesty and generosity and which did not regard gentleness as being unmanly. His humanity, humour, and genuine interest in others is something many people here will remember. Not easily angered he was appalled by injustice of any kind, and went out of his way to say so when required. As a father he took enormous pride in our comparatively modest achievements, and in those of his grandchildren. His generosity affected many people, and his kindness could take many forms. I find it quite extraordinary that despite being debilitated by his illness he waited until his three children were together again for the first time in ten years before finally leaving us. We were all with him in the hours before he died, and I cannot express how grateful we will always be to him for this. Which brings us back to St John’s, and how wonderful it is to know that the beautiful churchyard in which my sisters and I played as children will be his final resting place.

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Concluding remarks

In the interview recorded here, Belle Low spoke to Emeritus Faculty about her late husband Professor Anthony Low AO, previously Vice Chancellor of ANU and President of Clare College, Cambridge University. Professor Low spent his last seven months in Jindalee Aged Care Home, in Narrabundah, ACT, with Parkinson’s disease. Belle continues to live in Goodwin Village, Ainslie, ACT, where she and Anthony moved in 2012.

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Belle Low was interviewed in her home by Emeritus Faculty’s Peter Stewart, in September 2015. Copies of the audio file of this talk, plus text copies of her words and of the eulogy written by her son Adam Low, may be downloaded from the ANU Emeritus Faculty website: www.anu.edu.au/emeritus and go to Oral History Project.

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Image acknowledgment: Belle Low, black & white photograph of Belle and Anthony Low