

Memories of a Soulmate: A tribute to Robert Shell

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Sandy Shell (née Rohwoldt)
sctshell@gmail.com



Robert Shell, the acclaimed historian of Cape slavery, was born and grew up in South Africa due to the kind of unjust coincidence that he spent his adult life fighting. His father Heinrich (Heinz) Schelowsky, born in Hamburg in 1902, worked for many years as a journalist in China before docking in Cape Town on his way home in 1933. Waiting for the ship that would take him home, Heinz made his way to Cape Town's German Club. There he found a telegram from his mother. It read: "Never come back to Germany STOP Hitler has been elected Chancellor STOP". So Heinz remained in Cape Town. Regrettably, he spent much of World War II interned, his only offence being German-born. Released at war's end, he returned to Cape Town where he met Louie Bosman, twenty years his junior. They fell in love, married and, on 13 February 1949, Louie gave birth to their only child, Robert Carl-Heinz Schelowsky. In the aftermath of the war years, Heinz Schelowsky changed

their surname to Shell.

Robert Shell grew up in and around Cape Town and attended the South African College High School (SACS). After his father died unexpectedly when Robert was 12, he and his mother remained in Tamboerskloof where his mother ran a boarding house. When Louie remarried, the family moved to Kommetjie where she and Robert's step-father ran the old Kommetjie Hotel. Robert fished for crayfish and helped out part-time in the hotel bar.

Robert's political awareness developed early. Good friend, Martin Plaut, in his obituary published earlier this year, recalled the first time he met Robert. It was at the University of Cape Town before Robert had enrolled as a student. "We were together at the 'sit-in' in 1968, protesting against UCT's refusal to appoint Archie Mafeje. In a way Rob never stopped protesting".¹

Robert enrolled at UCT in 1970, graduating BA Honours (History) in 1974 under the guiding eye of Christopher Saunders. The title of his Honours thesis was "The Establishment and Spread of Islam at the Cape from the beginning of Company Rule to 1838". The history of Islam at the Cape, alongside the history of slavery at the Cape, would thereafter dominate his research and writing.

Robert proceeded to Rochester University in New York State, drawn by the scholarship of both Professor Stanley Engerman, the leading proponent of the application of quantitative methodology in the context of history – cliometrics, and Professor Eugene Genovese, a leading scholar with revolutionary perspectives on slavery. He graduated MA in American History there in 1976.

In 1978, Robert entered Yale University as a doctoral candidate under the supervision of Professor Leonard Thompson. He was awarded his PhD in 1986, with a thesis that is still in high demand by scholars of Cape slavery: "Slavery at the Cape of Good Hope: 1680-1731". He was immediately offered a two-year contract as Visiting Lecturer in African History at the University of California, Santa Barbara. From the sunshine of Santa Barbara he moved in 1988 to the icy winter of the University of Oswego in New York State as Visiting Professor of African History for a period of six months. Robert then accepted the position of Assistant Professor of African History Princeton

¹ M Plaut, "Robert Shell: My friend", *Martin Plaut: Word Press* (available at <https://martinplaut.wordpress.com/2015/02/04/robert-shell-my-friend/>).

University, headed by Professor Robert Tignor. He held this position for eight years.

All this time Robert had been working on what today remains a classic on Cape slavery: *Children of bondage: A social history of the slave society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652-1838* (Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 1994). He was determined that this work should also be published in South Africa at an affordable price, especially for the descendants of the slaves whose lives he had described so memorably. The University of Witwatersrand paperback edition was published in June/July 1995 and was launched in Cape Town and Grahamstown in June/July 1995.

The launch in Grahamstown took place in the Rhodes University Library during the National Arts Festival in July 1995. I remember standing inside the Library entrance as Robert walked through the open double doors, bobbing his head slightly to avoid the lintel, as was his habit given his impressive height of 2.06m. He was wearing his favourite hound's-tooth jacket and his familiar, boyish grin of delight.

We had first met in Grahamstown five years earlier, thanks to invitations to Sunday lunch from Rodney Davenport (then Professor of History at Rhodes) and his wife Betty. At the time, we were both committed to existing relationships, but the foundations of our lifelong research relationship and unique friendship were laid that sunny Sunday.

Robert always loved to tell the convincing and hilarious story that he won me in a game of poker. It is true that I agreed to join in that fateful poker game along with our mutual friend Rob Gordon. We played under classic, almost filmic, circumstances: green baize cloth over a circular dining table, low-slung, shaded light over the table, a bottle of something and clouds of smoke from the cigarettes we all puffed heavily that night. It is equally true that, as a total novice, I lost the game decisively, and that Rob Gordon also threw in his hand. Robert never tired of telling this story with enormous relish and laughter, in which his different audiences over the years always joined with great glee. He was spectacularly good-looking, a truly beautiful man, blessed with extraordinary humour and charisma. He was also impossibly tall, so that not only intellectually but physically he always stood out in a crowd. One of the things that people found so attractive about him was that his intellectual interests were extraordinarily wide, as was his circle of friends. He was laudably open-minded as well as both emotionally and intellectually

generous.

Robert always had a highly original take which showed both in his scholarship and in life. This emerged even when writing a letter of condolence to me after a double family tragedy in September 1994. His letter arrived in the post, penned in his exquisite script in red ink. He wrote that he had heard what had happened and could scarcely believe something so terrible could have occurred. He concluded: "God must have been asleep at the switch". I read his letter and burst out laughing. That was his gift: to see and say things so freshly. Of all the hundreds of communications I received during those dark days, his was the only one that made me laugh as it touched my heart. I think that was probably the moment I fell in love with him though it was only in 1995 that our friendship blossomed into romance.

By the time Robert accepted a position as Senior Lecturer and Head of Department of History at Rhodes University (East London campus) we were ready to consider the possibility of a life together. We discovered "Smiling Waters", an idyllic smallholding at Kidd's Beach, south-west of East London. Our boundaries were a nature reserve, a farm, a lagoon and the Indian Ocean only a short walk away as our frontage. The smallholding boasted orchards of guavas and macadamia nuts, pawpaw and other fruit trees, as well as plentiful strawberries and vegetables. We were blissfully happy there.

At Rhodes, Robert was awarded one of only three Population Research Units in the country by the National Research Foundation. The United Nations funded the equipping of a full computer lab for his demography students. Robert's innovative and pioneering research into the regional and national impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, then running rampant and uncontrolled throughout the country, began in earnest.

In 1997, Robert was invited (with his partner), to attend a conference in Jerusalem led by Nehemiah Levtzion and Randell Pouwels. The purpose of the conference was to bring together specialists in the history of Islam in different areas of Africa, to contribute towards a major scholarly publication. Robert was selected to cover Islam in southern Africa. I had a long overdue research trip to Jerusalem that had been planned for over three years, so this was an ideal opportunity to meet my promised obligations as well. Within three years, the award-winning *The History of Islam in Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000) appeared on the bookshelves of all African studies libraries. Robert contributed the substantial chapter entitled: "Islam in

Southern Africa, 1652-1998”.

But Robert was never one to keep quiet when he perceived acts of injustice and his brave stance led to a difficult time in our lives when, disgracefully, Rhodes University hounded the whistle-blower. As Bryan Rostron wrote in an obituary published earlier this year:²

Following claims that white administrators at the East London campus were being appointed while several black academics were retrenched in the name of cost cutting, Dr Shell was one of three academics chosen to produce a report. Shell wrote a personal appraisal alleging, among other transgressions, “both nepotism and cronyism” at the East London campus. He faxed his findings to the vice-Principal. This led to an acrimonious dispute and the eventual firing of Shell on a technicality, provoking an international academic uproar. Senior colleagues from Rhodes University, including the Professor of History, protested vehemently on his behalf, as did prominent historians all over the world, particularly from the United States and the United Kingdom. In South Africa Professor Herman Giliomee, then Professor of Political Studies at Cape Town University, wrote directly to the Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes, stating: “I wish to protest against Rob Shell’s dismissal. My perception is that Rhodes has acted out of all proportion to the misdemeanour, and that its action will cast a pall over academic freedom in South Africa and the job security academics need if they wish to expose the flaws of institutions. This action will also damage Rhodes’s name for many years to come.” The controversy took a heavy toll on Shell, deeply disillusioned with a lack of tolerance for dissent in post-apartheid academe. Some of his colleagues claimed there had been a disinformation campaign of dirty tricks from the university. His car was also vandalised. A firm offer of a Professorship at Stellenbosch was shamefully cancelled at the very last minute. It was a dark hour for South African scholarship.

Amidst this turmoil, we married in a quiet ceremony on 10 August 2000 in Grahamstown. Even before the University’s disciplinary proceedings wound their way to their unhappy conclusion, the University of the Western Cape contacted Robert asking if he would be interested in applying for an upcoming vacancy in their Department of Statistics. We had no idea if he would be successful in his application or not but were gratified by this bold act of support from a fellow academic institution. There was also strong support from the University of Cape Town when their Academic Freedom Committee offered material assistance towards our legal fees which we received with gratitude.

The UWC application was successful and we moved, with light hearts, to the Mother City. For Robert it was a welcome home-coming; for me a return

² B Rostron, “Slavery scholar more feted abroad”, *Business Day*, 2 March 2015.

to my academic alma mater. In September 2001, Robert was appointed Professor of African Historical Demography in the Department of Statistics for a period of five years. At the end of this contract period, he was appointed Extraordinary Professor of African Historical Demography, a position he held until his death.

Unexpectedly, Robert was awarded the Nelson Mandela Chair in African Studies at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi in July 2003. This appointment was for a period of six months during which he delivered a series of lectures on African History to his students, all doctoral candidates. We forged good friendships and those six months in India changed our *Weltanschauung* for ever.

In 2007, Robert was approached by the Mauritian government to act as Commissioner for their own proposed Commission of Truth and Justice. We had fruitful talks with then Prime Minister Dr Navin Ramgoolam but unfortunately he was not directly involved with the administration of the Commission. Thus many of the important issues discussed between the Prime Minister and Robert as Commissioner could not or would not be implemented. Even the name of the Commission itself was in contention. Robert wished to incorporate the concept of Reconciliation (in the spirit of Archbishop Desmond Tutu and in keeping with South Africa's own Truth and Reconciliation Commission) and was supported strongly on this point by the Prime Minister. But this appeal fell on deaf ears. Research data, promised while the ink was still wet on the contract, and assured in terms of the powers of the Commissioner, was denied to Robert when the Commission's work finally began. Doors that had been promised would be open were slammed shut. Crucial data and the results of previously commissioned research were kept under lock and key. In the middle of all this, Robert suffered a serious heart attack in December 2008. Combined with the intransigence of those with a different agenda, this resulted in his withdrawal from the project. It was an opportunity for Mauritius sadly lost.

He never recovered fully from that heart attack and never again played squash, a game at which he excelled. He was a quarter-finalist in the US Open (Squash) in 1988. He particularly enjoyed his games with Professor Robert Tignor at Princeton, Bobby Evans in Grahamstown/Sevenfountains and Leslie Selbourne from the Statistics Department at UWC. Ironically, only five days before his initial cancer diagnosis in September 2014, he received a clean bill of health from his cardiologist, who went so far as to tell him he could

go out and buy a new squash racquet and get back onto the court – with the proviso that he played only with “rabbits”, like his wife.

Throughout July and August 2014, Robert complained about a persistent pain in his back. We thought it was muscular, probably the result of hauling his heavy Honda GoldWing motorbike up onto its stand. But none of the usual unguents and massage helped. Eventually our GP’s locum recommended an examination by a series of specialists. Within days, we were informed that he had stage 4 lung cancer which had metastasised throughout his body, including his spine. He was told he had 3-12 months to live (but closer to 3, warned our mercifully straight-talking physician).

Robert died at our home in the Gardens on the night of 3 February 2015, ten days shy of his sixty-sixth birthday. We had twenty wonderful and extraordinary years together, packed with boundless enthusiasm, fun and energy. He had what one obituary referred to as “an unstuffy brio and an uproarious laugh”. We laughed a lot.

We were partners, husband and wife, lovers, friends, playmates, researchers, scholars (he a seasoned, brilliant scholar, me an earnest novice). We found each other relatively late in life and that made us value every single moment of our time together. We were consummate soulmates.

The generosity of Robert’s scholarship was legendary, as was the enthusiasm and encouragement that he imparted to his students, and to colleagues and researchers locally and around the world. He devoted four decades of his scholarly life to the history of the old Slave Lodge in Adderley Street, promoting it as a fitting memorial to what Robert called, ‘murdered memories’. His aim was to make as much information readily available to the people of the Cape, in particular to enable the descendants of slaves to recover and reclaim their past and true identity. To this end he published his accessible, affordable e-book *From Diaspora to Diorama* – more than 9,500 pages of primary and secondary sources relating to the history of the Lodge and its inhabitants across the centuries.

Ironically, the day after Robert’s death the Western Cape Department of Cultural Affairs contacted me saying that as Robert had been nominated for a Ministerial award, would he be attending the awards ceremony the following Monday evening in the Baxter Theatre? I had to tell them that, sadly, Robert had died only hours before their call. I asked if I could represent Robert

instead. The Ministerial awards were the final item on the programme, the acme of the ceremony. Robert was awarded (posthumously) a Ministerial Award for Lifetime Achievement for his unique scholarship dedicated to the people of the Cape. It was with a great sense of pride that I received this award on his behalf. I only wish he had lived to know about this official tribute to his lifelong dedication and scholarship.