

Foreword

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In November 2020, aged 93, Lalage Bown recorded a message for the students of Somerville College that I believe you can still find on our YouTube page. At that time we were at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, with all its attendant lockdowns, restrictions and dire prognostications.

The message Lalage recorded for us that November day captures perfectly who she was. Thinking nothing of her own situation, she devoted all her attention to the students themselves. She empathised with what they were going through, drew thoughtful analogies with her own postwar experiences at Somerville and used her mischievous sense of humour and endless kindness to comfort a group of young people clearly shaken to the core by the sudden and complete interruption of their lives.

These qualities are, of course, the same ones that made Lalage such a force for positive change in the world of adult education. Throughout her life from the day she left Somerville till those last days in Shrewsbury, she seems to have been guided by two unswerving beliefs: one, that learning and knowledge have an endless capacity to improve our lives; and, two, that everyone has a right to access those treasures throughout their lives, without fear or favour.

These twin beliefs, in learning and social justice, destined her for a unique and ground-breaking career. The touchstone of her legacy is perhaps the anthology she edited, *Two Centuries of African English*. This book encapsulates perfectly how her faith in people transcended the colonial and canonical dogma of the time, shedding much-needed light on a rich seam of African writing that has been valued by generations of learners.

Within the pages of this book, you will learn that Lalage was also a fearsome administrator, a fearless ally, a dazzling innovator and a true friend. In many ways, she feels quintessentially modern to us in 2023. In particular, the way she sought to divert attention away from herself and onto others, restoring agency and voice to those disenfranchised of those rights, feels particularly relevant. But I would argue that Lalage's outlook was essentially timeless: she was one of those people whose innate beliefs always guide them to find the right path, and do the right thing.

Here at Somerville, we count ourselves fortunate to have known her. I have no doubt there are thousands more people across the world – those who were touched by her teaching, innovations in pedagogy or loyal advocacy – who feel the same gratitude.

Happily, all those people who did not have the fortune to know Lalage personally or feel her influence can now read about her in this book. It is the record of a life well-lived and a legacy well-earned.