

Dr. Tony O'Connor, 1939-2019

Anthony Michael O'Connor was born on 5 June 1939. After education at Trinity School in Croydon, he was admitted to St. Catharine's College, University of Cambridge in 1957, graduating three years later with an excellent BA degree in geography (first class in both Parts I and II). Having Spanish (and French), his initial plan was to undertake research in Latin America, but his advisor, B.H. Farmer, made him aware of opportunities in East Africa and so Tony spent the next two years investigating railways and economic development in Uganda for his PhD thesis. As a graduate student, he was based at Makerere University College, Kampala (1960-62), where he got to know many African students, including some who would acquire positions of political influence. He returned to Cambridge in 1962 to write up. With his doctorate completed in 1963, Tony lectured at Makerere before coming to UCL in 1967, initially as a lecturer and eventually becoming a Reader. He returned to Africa on numerous occasions, teaching at Ibadan, Nigeria (1972-3), Fourah Bay College, Sierra Leone (1974-75), the University of Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania (1978), and in other African universities. He retired from UCL in 2004.

At UCL, Tony lectured on the geography of tropical Africa and economic development. He also contributed on a voluntary basis to the MA African Studies programme at SOAS. Modest in personality but eminently approachable, Tony is remembered as a caring but demanding teacher who was unstinting with his time to advise and encourage students. He was not one to seek research grants and covered all his own fieldwork costs while on secondment - sometimes at the expense of his health and well-being. His enthusiasm for African research was shared freely and willingly with younger scholars, who greatly appreciated his wisdom and experience. Long before it became the vogue, Tony believed strongly in the capacity of African scholars to undertake the key research work on Africa and in the importance of European researchers taking a more subsidiary and modest role.

Tony's wife, Angela, recalls "his lifelong passion for improving understanding of Africa, and of the nature and extent of global poverty, which underpinned both his teaching and his research; and seeking ways to respond to global poverty drove his charitable and volunteer work. While Tony undertook substantive academic research work, he was at heart an educator. He devoted his working life to spreading knowledge, encouraging curiosity and thoughtfulness, and challenging assumptions".

Tony served as Secretary to the University of London Board of Studies in Geography (1981-84), was Deputy Chairman of the Standing Committee on University Studies of Africa (1984-88) and Secretary-General of the European Council on African Studies (1982-87). He was an Assessor in Geography for the Higher Education Funding Council for England (1994-95). After living in Sutton for decades, Tony and Angela moved to Mundeford in Dorset. For some years in retirement, Tony taught geography at the University of Bournemouth. On several occasions, he and Angela greatly enjoyed travelling to the Lebanon, Tunisia and California to visit their diplomat son and their grandchildren.

Dr. Tony O'Connor died on the morning of 24 June, after a long illness.

In addition to a range of articles and numerous encyclopaedia entries on African topics, Tony authored six books.

Railways and economic development in Uganda: a study in economic geography (1965).

An economic geography of East Africa (1966, 2nd edition 1971).

The geography of tropical Africa (1971, 2nd edition 1978).

Urbanization in tropical Africa: an annotated bibliography (1981).

The African city (1983, 2007).

Poverty in Africa: a geographical approach (1991).