Lalage Bown – 1927 – 2021: Emerita Professor, Honorary Senior Research Fellow in, and former Head of, Department of Adult and Continuing Education at the [University of Glasgow](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Glasgow)

On 4th July 2019 I was honoured to be able to interview Lalage Bown following a busy couple of days for us both, attending and presenting at the 2019 SCUTREA conference. It was very informal and just a grabbed moment while she waited in my office for a taxi to take her back to the station. She must have been tired but was generous to the last minute, as the taxi arrived, responding with grace and humour to my somewhat starstruck comments and queries. Listening to it again now, it is made doubly poignant by Lalage’s recent death on 17th December 2021 and the fact that it was the last face to face SCUTREA conference before the onslaught of Covid 19 early the following year. It feels like a sunlit memory from a more optimistic time, as Lalage reflected on her own memories of a very different Britain and her long evolution as an indomitable and passionate adult educator. Lalage was one of the warmest and most generous people I have met and possessed a formidable mind and astuteness about people which I will never forget. She always seemed lit from within to me.

In our interview, Lalage talked about her time at Oxford and her memories of being there with Tony Benn, Shirley Williams and Margaret Thatcher, who she was quite unimpressed by. She was very funny and almost mischievous. She also commented powerfully on how she had learned to be an adult educator just after the war and how much of this attention to teaching people to be adult educators as a profession has gone. She also spoke about the importance of the United Nations in creating infrastructures for democracy and peace.

I had the very highest regard for Lalage and, without wishing to be clichéd, she was a genuine inspiration to me and a touchstone for adult education as a pedagogy.  Here are some key extracts from the interview which give some insight into her thinking:

**On the** **importance of umbrella bodies**:

*“The fact that some of the old institutions still exist does help, like the WEA …but at the same time, a few years back there were all the new movements, feminist movements and all those I saw as being the roots of the new ones, but some of them have been quite ephemeral in different ways …And you see I do think one of the problems, you know one hates to see things ossify, but I really have come to the conclusion that you need some institutional umbrellas”.*

**Importance of action-based research and committed universities** - **inter-disciplinarity and applied research:**

*“a university’s job is not just teaching the elite, it’s the job of the universities to share its knowledge with everybody.  And the knowledge should be relevant to what people themselves are interested in… the knowledge is in the university but people of all kinds want and can use it… it seems to me they have the right to use it”.*

*“It’s all very well to have blue sky research if you’re trying to find out where a new planet is or something. But when you’re doing research, which really is barren… then it’s not going anywhere.  And they also don’t seem to be taught now to … any researcher that I was ever teaching, I always used to say, you’ve got at the end to say what happens next?  What’s your recommendations?”*

**Collective strength versus individual organisations - residential colleges**

*“My general assessment is that what happened certainly in West Germany, and it came from the whole of Germany before, was that having the folk high school movement, that was a national organisation with its own national budgeting… for the whole set-up, partly because they were influenced by the Scandinavian pattern.  And the point is therefore they were more able to fight because they were united but you’ve got one Fircroft, you’ve got one Tatton, you’ve got one somebody else and … they weren’t together”.*

**Importance of specialist adult education training, otherwise risking being ‘victims of amateurs’:**

*“I absolutely 100% believe that people should really fight for the idea that adult education is a profession, just like nursing or teaching.  And the idea that any person can go and teach in an adult class … and I’ve seen horrible things … And I think that’s forgotten, and that’s what’s happened and so people sitting in a department doing research, what are they doing it for?  They should be doing it to help enable people who are being trained to do it. I believe if I’m a professor of adult education, I have a duty to do research relevant to adult education because of my formation, I believe it should really have a left-wing bias, though I don’t say so. But also I believe I should myself be a practising teacher of adults… and I think that’s what’s gone”.*