

Obituary

PROFESSOR ROLAND OLIVER (1923–2014)

Roland Oliver, who died on 9 February 2014, was born at empire's zenith, on a houseboat in Srinagar, India in 1923; his career was to be shaped by decolonization and independence after 1945. After study at Cambridge (interrupted by wartime service at Bletchley Park, something of a *rite de passage* for a particular cohort of British intellectuals) he was appointed in 1948 to an entirely new position, a lectureship in 'East African Tribal History' at the School for Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). While that post was created in the brief moment of the second colonial occupation, the approach to history that it implied acquired new significance in the context of independence. It became an assertion of equality, an insistence that Africa had a history, as well as a future. Roland was far from radical in his politics—he was, self-consciously, the antithesis of Basil Davidson. Nor was he interested in—or very patient of—theory, and he spent little time on field research. Yet Roland understood the importance of demonstrating, in the face of considerable scepticism from some quarters, that African history was not simply the history of Europeans in Africa. He was by no means alone in this—the assertion of African agency, and of the depth of African history, has perhaps been the defining project of Africanist historical scholarship. But Roland's singular and enduring contribution was the creation of institutions through which to pursue that project. He was a founding editor of this journal, along with John Fage; one of the editors of the seminal *History of East Africa*, published by Oxford University Press; general editor (again with Fage) of *The Cambridge History of Africa*; a founding member of the African Studies Association of the UK; and he played a key role in the creation of the British Institute in Eastern Africa. Roland also created, and for many years presided over, the African History Seminar at SOAS, and with a series of collaborators, he produced a number of works—including *Africa in the Iron Age*, *The African Middle Ages*, *Africa since 1800*—intended as textbooks to encourage the teaching of African history. Roland was a formidable advocate for African history in the United Kingdom and internationally; the evidence of his work is all around us.