

A Tribute to Dr R. F. M. Immelman

Dr R. F. M. Immelman was the well-regarded Chief Librarian of the University of Cape Town (UCT) Library in the 1950s and 60s. He was also something of a scholar and wrote, compiled or edited a number of books relating to the history of South Africa. They include his *George McCall Theal: A Biographical Sketch* (Cape Town: Struik, 1964) which is about a significant early historian of the country.

Dr Immelman also very nearly wrote a history of the Molteno and its related families! As it is, he is the author of three pieces that appear on this website.

- *Sir John C. Molteno, 1814-1886: A Biographical Sketch*
- *The Molteno Family: Italian Origins and English Roots* (collected by P. A. Molteno and compiled by R.F.M. Immelman).
- *Hercules Crosse Jarvis (1803-1889) – A draft Biography* (from material collected by Percy Alport Molteno)

Sadly, none of these pieces nor his other work on the history of the Molteno, Murray and other related families ever saw the light of day. The drafts and all the work that went into them remain buried in six box files in Collection BC601 at the UCT Archives.

What happened, very briefly – and the details are now largely lost to sight – was this. Many members of the family were prolific letter, diary and reminiscence writers in the 19th and early decades of the 20th century. One in particular, Percy Molteno M.P., Sir John Charles Molteno's second son, went much further. He commissioned an Italian archivist in the 1890s to dredge up from the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan what he could find out about the earliest origins and history of the Molteno family right in Northern Italy from medieval times. Percy also wrote a lengthy, two-volume work on the political life of his father at the Cape, *The Life and Times of Sir J. C. Molteno K.C.M.G., First Premier of Cape Colony*. This was published in two volumes in 1900.

But the main work of collecting and looking after the wealth of written and visual material in the family was done by John Molteno's granddaughter, Kathleen Murray. She had become a successful fruit farmer in Elgin during the first half of the 20th century. Over the years she assiduously collected everything relating to the family she could lay her hands on. And when she died in 1984 at the age of 92, she donated the entire collection to the UCT Library where it now rests, carefully sorted and preserved, across several shelves of box files. At the same time, she left the sum of R4,000 to the Library which was intended 'to prepare and publish her history of the Murray/Molteno family'. The University refused the bequest on the grounds of its being wholly insufficient for the scale of the task requested.

Cousin Kathleen (as I knew her; she was my father's first cousin) wanted very much for the history of the family to be properly written up, as this abortive bequest shows. Indeed, some 30 years earlier, in the 1950s, she had made a more serious attempt to get the job done. She approached Dr Immelman and asked him to undertake the task, using her huge personal archive. The project, as sketched by Dr Immelman, was extremely ambitious. There were to be three volumes:

1. **Caroline Molteno's Journals (1968-76) and Reminiscences** -- Caroline being John Molteno's second eldest daughter and Kathleen Murray's mother, and a significant figure in her own right.

2. **A Biography of Hercules Jarvis** – He had lived in Cape Town almost from when the Cape first became a British colony in the early 1800s; became first Mayor of Cape Town; and was Sir John Molteno's political colleague and father-in-law – and hence the ancestor of the whole South African branch of the family.
3. **A composite volume comprising** a history of the Molteno family; a life of Sir John Charles Molteno; a short account of George Bower's family (John's grandfather); a selection of annotated family letters; and the family trees of the Molteno, Murray, Bower, Bristow and Anderson families.

Dr Immelman did a huge amount of work on the project. He sifted through and selected the most relevant of the materials Kathleen had gathered. He got Caroline Molteno's entire *Journal* typed up (some 200 pages), as well as quite a number of family letters. He developed a card index system. This comprised several hundred cards referring to each person in the family, and even significant places and topics. The cards systematised all the information he had garnered from Caroline's *Journal*. And he began to draft some of the text for Volumes 2 and 3, as well as a Foreword to Volume 3, dated August 1958.

But something went wrong. The conception of the volumes does not seem to have been well thought through. They looked set to omit so much of importance, including the political role played by John Molteno's son, James Molteno, before and during the Boer War. James later became Speaker of the old Cape Parliament and in 1910 of the Union of South Africa Parliament, and was knighted as his father had been. Dr Immelman's conception also overlooked the extraordinary life, political and personal, of John's eldest daughter, Betty Molteno. Nor, apparently, did it intend to cover the commercial and political career of another son, Percy Molteno, who had settled in Britain following his marriage to Bessie Currie. Nor did the three volumes intend to give any picture of the many farmers in the family who pioneered progressive farming in the Western Cape, the Karoo and East Griqualand.

There seems also to have been a considerable ambiguity as to who precisely would be credited as the author(s) of the work. At one stage it was provisionally entitled '*Chronicles of the Molteno Family*, edited by Kathleen Murray and R.F.M. Immelman'. Clearly, Dr Immelman was doing all the hard graft of both research and drafting. Despite this, there is a letter dated 14 February 1966 in which Kathleen writes: 'I have written a short, more personal life of Sir John Molteno to go with the family history I am writing.' But there is no trace of either of these texts in the UCT Archives.

What is certain is that Kathleen Murray and Dr Immelman eventually fell out. One member of the Library staff vividly recalls an occasion when Kathleen spoke quite rudely to him in front of his colleagues. The long and the short of it was that no book was ever fully drafted, let alone saw the light of day.

We must, however, be very grateful to the late Dr Immelman for the work he put into the project. And in particular for the three short pieces – I must stress that they are both only drafts, and fragments of the wider work – that he wrote and which are reproduced on this website.

Robert Molteno
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