

Foreword

This book tells the story of one family across six generations from the late 18th century to the present day. It starts with a single ancestor, Anthony Molteno, a young Milanese who settled in London and became a printseller in Pall Mall. Today there are several hundred people scattered across four continents who can trace their ancestry back to him. And as the generations have passed, there have emerged clusters of families, related to one another, but bearing new surnames. In this book, I focus therefore not only on Anthony's descendants who are still called Molteno, but also on Murrays, Andersons, Stanfords, Bissets and others.

The story of their lives is the main focus. But I also do something else. Each person's life in this huge family has been embedded, like everybody's, in the times they lived in. And what happens to them is often a graphic illustration of how the overwhelmingly big trends of history impact on each individual person's circumstances, sometimes loosely called 'fate'. It is this interface between the very large and the very small scale that fascinates me and that I try to bring out in this book.

I have always wanted to understand the world I live in. It came from growing up in apartheid South Africa in the 1950s and 60s. The country had become the archetype of a racism that refused to give way to history. My father was a lawyer involved from his twenties in the struggles of Black and Coloured South Africans to liberate the country, and he was infused with a belief in the rule of law and civil liberties. I witnessed him crucified, not to put it too strongly, by endless defeats at the hands of an Afrikaner nationalism that saw its future only in terms of entrenching itself at the expense of all other South Africans.

This desperate desire on my part to understand took a new turn when I went to teach at the University of Zambia. I now wanted to grasp an even larger canvas – the nature of European colonialism and what it had done to the consciousness, the economic circumstances and the lives of almost all humanity in the rest of the world. And then another thing happened to me. I became the editor of a small publishing house. Zed Books had been founded to publish books that both comprehended and supported the struggles of the marginalised majority of humanity – called variously the Third World, underdeveloped countries, the South, emerging markets (all misnomers in my view!). This work as a politically involved publisher led me to an understanding of even larger forces at work, including the emergence of modern capitalism itself.

How on earth, you may ask, does this relate to writing the story of the Molteno and related families? I came to realize that members of the family had written an abundance of letters, reminiscences, diaries and autobiography over two centuries. This wealth of personal detail opened up a new opportunity to 'understand', this time the interface between the macro and the micro. The historical epoch these relatives had lived through was nothing less than the making of the modern world. Members of the family saw the emergence of capitalism, the vast expansion of European empires (and then their sudden disintegration), people rushing to leave the countryside and live in cities, migration from continent to continent on an unprecedented scale, and a never ending avalanche of technological inventions. These huge transitions form the steel grid within which all of us live our lives. They imprint themselves on our minds. They shape our hopes and expectations, our

values, how we see reality. On occasion, they brutally interrupt what people are doing – the two world wars of the 20th century are the most obvious examples in this book. These forces constrain our possibilities. But also, as the modern world has made itself, they have opened up new opportunities – getting educated, moving to another country, new ways of earning a living, becoming liberated from old limitations and oppressions including religious persecution, gender inequality, racial discrimination, class exploitation.

The fascinating thing about telling the story of this family over two and a half centuries is that each generation has been a product of its time, but those times have been changing. The book is not, of course, the story of the making of the world we inhabit today. But in what happens to individuals over six generations of this family we continually see how history determines people's lives, and on occasion opens new opportunities.

There is another wholly different reason why I have written this book. I left South Africa at the age of twenty-two; I had had the good luck to get a grant to do post-graduate studies at a British university. I had never been out of the country before or lived away from home. Nor did I know that my departure would lead quite soon to the South African government removing my passport. I was not able to visit the country for the next two decades and I never saw my father again. This emotional rupture made a great impact on me. Finding out about my family, rescuing their writings and putting them on the Molteno Family website, and now writing this book has been for me a kind of completion of the circle of departure, exile and return.

The process has also given me a kind of rootedness, which I would like to share. There have been some very remarkable people in our family but most relatives today know nothing about them. There have also been others in the family who have suffered great travails or made big mistakes in their lives. From the experiences of both, I feel we can learn a lot. It may be a truism that human beings seldom learn from history. But writing history at least offers an opportunity to do so.

And it is worth stressing that this book is a work of history. As you will discover, I have documented everything meticulously. And avoided speculation! On the rare occasions when I have tried to peer beyond the limitations of evidence – frustratingly, there are times when the evidence peters out – I signal clearly that I am doing so!

Two other temptations I also guard against; they are particularly prevalent in family history. The first is romanticism. It is easy to be captured emotionally by some admirable but long dead relative and to paint a picture of them too uncritically. This I try to avoid.

The other temptation is nostalgia. I have lived in my head so long with family members in the 19th and early 20th centuries that it is easy to slide into thinking 'the good old days' were better than today's world. And it is true that there are things I admire about old Cape society – the valuing of a wide web of relatives, a pace of life that was much slower and more deliberate than today's world of air travel and *Twitter*, a familiarity with and love of Nature and the rural world, and much less preoccupation with consumerism. But it was also a world the middle classes built on a servant class. There was huge inequality in gender terms and an almost unconscious racism entrenched in the minds of almost all Europeans. An accurate portrayal of times past must not give way to sentiment.

How this book meshes with the Molteno Family Website

I have collected materials for this book, off and on, for 20 years. It gradually became clear that there was a huge amount of writing by members of the family – far more than could fit in the confines of a single volume. In addition, several books (one never published, others difficult to get hold of) have been written about particular members of the family. What's more, there is an accumulation of photographs going back to the mid 19th century. I therefore took the decision to digitise, illustrate and edit these writings so that they could be read by others. This involved building a rather large website to host it all, including more than 1,000 photos.¹

But a website has several limitations. It is still an unstable way of preserving things; a site can get hacked, or at some point a domain name or the host server subscription may accidentally not be renewed. In such cases, the site can just disappear. More importantly in relation to the Molteno family site, if one doesn't already know much about the family, it may be difficult to find one's way around all these individual pieces. And in any case, none of them give a sense of the family's history as a whole.

This is why I have now written this book. I must stress however that, if you want to get a flavour of a particular person's writing or personality or the times they lived in, much the best thing is to read what they themselves actually wrote. I therefore urge readers to see this book as complementary to the family website, and something that will help make sense of the rich volume of material to be found there.

My gratitude to everyone who has helped

The book, when published, will contain a full list of all those² -- family members, librarians and others – who have been of inestimable practical help and given me warm support over so many years. It would, quite simply, have been impossible without them. In that sense, both the book and the website are the product of a collective endeavour. That in itself is an expression of a rather remarkable family. I am infinitely grateful.

And there is one more thing to say. I have been touched by the warmth of welcome with which I have always been received by so many distant relations as I have travelled around South Africa, England and Scotland, and made contact by email further afield in Australia, Hawaii, Latin America and the United States. My explorations in the history of our family over so many years have been a never ending journey of discovery and new-found connectedness. What I never expected was that

¹ See <http://www.moltenofamily.net/>

² The Molteno Family website has a preliminary listing of those I wish to express my gratitude too. See <https://www.moltenofamily.net/my-debt-of-gratitude/>

following the family trail would take me not just back in time, but also into making friends with so many 'new' relations here and now. I hope that they will get some feeling of that joy – and feel happy to be a member of our far-flung family.

Robert Molteno

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