

# Obituaries

## Dr Ian Robertson

Scientist who used biotechnology to improve yield of farmers in Zimbabwe

**Dr Ian Robertson, biologist and academic. Born: 5 December 1938 in Udaipur, Rajasthan. Died: 2 August 2021 in Harare, Zimbabwe, aged 82**

**‘W**eneed to feed the country, guys.” That was the rallying cry of Ian Robertson, who grew up in Edinburgh and has died in Harare, Zimbabwe, at the age of 82.

He taught Plant Physiology and Molecular Biology at the University of Zimbabwe, where he worked on the development of disease-free, drought-resistant, high-yielding varieties of traditional crops such as cassava.

Hundreds of his students were trained in tissue culture. He set up a small business, Agri-Biotech, to employ former students and to provide high quality planting material for sweet potato, cassava and potato to small and commercial farmers throughout Zimbabwe.

When the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, at a time of harvest failure in the country, asked for 4.7 million cuttings of his virus-free sweet potato varieties, he gathered his team and members worked for three months and met the request.

Rungano Karimanzira, a retired Director at Zimbabwe's Ministry of Science and Technology, described Robertson as “a fearless scientist pushing a technology that had huge potential, against strong resistance. He was a lone voice in workshops, conferences and symposia.

“But he would not be intimidated, and the more our departmental staff interacted with him, the more we were convinced.”

A former student, Mashiri Zvarimwa, remembers “rocking up with Ian at the Ministry of Science and Technology to see the Min-



↑ Dr Ian Robertson was described as ‘a streetwise maverick’

Ngoni Kangara, who worked in Agri-Biotech for seven years, added: “His enthusiasm and energy were contagious. I, too, became a believer in the power of biotechnology to solve problems which farmers face, and I now have a doctorate in the subject.”

Robertson was born in 1938 in Udaipur, Rajasthan, where his father was a surgeon at a mission station. He trained in Botany at Edinburgh University, where he gained a doctorate in plant physiology.

He then spent ten years working with Moral Re-Armament (MRA), now known as Initiatives of Change. This took him to India where he worked with Rajmohan Gandhi, grandson of the Mahatma, who was bringing the moral challenge of his grandfather to bear on India's social problems.

It also took him to Zimbabwe in 1977 when the country was still Rhodesia, ruled by the minority white community, and where MRA was active in the struggle for a peaceful transition of power.

He accepted a position as a lecturer in the University of Rhodesia.

His wife, Valerie, a PhD microbiologist from England, took a parallel post in the Faculty of Medicine. From then on they devoted themselves to training a generation of Zimbabwean scientists, and never stopped.

Robertson is survived by Valerie, who continues her work as one of the country's experts in infectious diseases and infection prevention and control, their three children, Fiona, Megan and Neil, and five grandchildren.

**JOHN BOND**

ister without an appointment. After a few moments of negotiation, the receptionist would give in and we would see the Minister as soon as his current guest left his office.”

He described Robertson as “a streetwise maverick, passionate about biotech, out of whose training came dozens of top-drawer academics, PhDs, scientists, and business professionals.”

Robertson seized every chance to develop his students' expertise. In the early 1990s the University offered him an air ticket to attend a conference in South Africa.

He asked for the money

instead, and drove three of his students 1,300 miles to Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa, a two-day journey, finding accommodation with friends to avoid the apartheid regulations. At the conference, the students impressed the white South African scientists with their proficiency.

But proficiency was not Robertson's only aim. As another former student, Tawandaimba, wrote: “He taught me much more than tissue culture. He helped me find purpose in life. He taught me not to be selfish, but to better life for humanity.”