# Robin Murray: Memories and Legacy

In the manic days of an expiring, soon-to-be abolished Greater London Council, Robin Murray used his considerable clout and knack for outstanding visionary thought - he made wildly exciting ideas sound so obvious and easy - to channel funds into a new venture, to be dedicated to exploring ways to trade for mutual benefit through two new entities called Third World Information Network and Twin Trading.

Robin Murray founded Twin and Twin Trading in 1985, and initiated them with a series question-think-and-act workshops attended by like-minded men (it has to be said), and activists from around the world - Mozambique, Senegal, South Africa to name a few. All were hard at work challenging and attempting to find dignified liberation and economic survival in the face of the emerging neo-liberal onslaught. Once mocked as “Ken Livingstone’s foreign policy department”, the four-year forward funding was a license to go out and make a difference. Twin was a network from day one in a “pre-network era”. Later the acronym alone would stand as the name, as the world and our concepts of first, second, third worlds changed around us and the ideas of networking, matrix methodologies and the greater efficiencies of non-hierarchical forms and trust-based forms of organisation took hold. My first job at Twin was “Information and Network Officer” - can’t have been many of those around. Commonplace today, Robin opted for the then highly unusual interlinked structure of non-profit and for-profit companies, with a ‘self-perpetuating oligarchy’ to run them and keep them ‘true’.

This exemplified his strategic awareness of the importance and meaning of organisation formation, of form following content. This would play out again and again in the multiple, innovative and catalytic initiatives dreamed up and rolled out at the Twins: Cafedirect, Divine Chocolate and, later, Liberation Nuts.

Robin contributed in ways that cannot be measured to the unique governance of the embryonic Twins. He was the first to back the workers’ decision, led by then Director Richard Day , to capitalise our grant and earn money: a highly a-typical position for “lefties”. While we struggled a little over the use of the word “profit” versus “surplus” (with Michael Barratt Brown never quite able to use the former), it was a statement of our intention to live on beyond the grant, and be successful on our own terms politically, but viable.

As Director and worker for 14 years at the Twins (and active on many Boards and governance structures since), from Robin I learned many tools to support and defend social enterprises and the brave people in them. I have used these the world over. From Robin I learned the incredible and simple importance of taking good minutes. Robin’s attention to detail and his indivisible incorporation of the micro to the macro, and the relationship of our decisions to our values and principles was a critical factor in Twin’s and my evolution, particularly in moments of strife. He was meticulous and sometimes ruthless in holding people to account, socialising the ideas and decision making process, providing succour to those fighting within organisations - our own and our network - to sustain the vital commitments made in the face of opposition or retrenchment.

Robin was an adventurer. Twin was his ship. As Twin grew, its trading and ventures spun off, he delighted in the successes and, it is worth saying, in the failures. He saw opposition and crisis as opportunity. “When you are sunk, in a deep hole,” he would say in the many such moments along the way, “you have to do the hard work to decide which way you want to be facing when you climb out.” I cannot tell you how many times I have quoted this guidance! Robin’s day-to-day take on alternative business never strayed from the realities (and horrible dilemmas and challenges presented) but wove into these realities a search for and appreciation of a different feel and purpose. Robin was an economist with a fascination for numbers, but I doubt many in his profession would look not just at the credibility of the quantified outcomes, but at the very ‘aesthetic’ of a business plan. This was Robin’s way of testing the ‘rightness’ and ‘justice’ of a proposal and its implementation: its beauty. For Robin, failure to support and show solidarity to allies and comrades was ugly.

Robin, was supported and also challenged - something he relished - by a host of incredible minds and hearts around our Board table - Michael Barratt Brown, Teodor Shanin, Vela Pillay, Peter Robbins, Sandy Balfour to name but a few. He was particularly prescient about the dangers of mainstreaming Fair Trade, during the roll out of the modest and values-driven Stichting Max Havelaar in the Netherlands then led by Bert Beekman, into a series of national certification schemes for Fairtrade with a supranational oversight body. He foresaw the structural limitations, the co-optation, and the future defeats and warned against the surrendering the alternative economic nature of our project; in the words of Richard Day, our purpose was being “in but against the market”.

Twin’s early entry into the domain of branding and intellectual property with the launch of Cafedirect and Divine superseded the certification model Robin argued, adding and sharing equity value which otherwise accrued only to brand owners. He saw this as the source, in a postmodern economy, of a far greater leveraging power (with the increasing dominance of retailers and potential for connectivity with consumers) than other traditional capitalist and anti-capitalist mechanisms for control of pricing. Through trial and practice we realised that transformation/processing and working up the value chain - an early premise of economic development and even industrial strategy - could seldom deliver power or income to the weakest players in a global market. Yet Robin was one of the first, with Michael Barratt Brown, to see from the Twin experiment that alternative trade praxis generates new forms of change, dialectically, by opposition, by example, and, even more simply, competitively. Would or could Cadbury’s have switched to Fairtrade if we hadn’t created the sourcing conditions (the largest FT certified coop in the world) and challenged them head on in the supermarket shelves. Did Robin predict the ‘ditching’ of the label and co-optation of the messages we have seen (Sainsbury, Cadbury, Marks & Spencer) - yes he did. This was exciting for Robin, but we remain with imperfect solutions to this challenge.

As Director of Twin for more than a decade, I experienced the friendship, care and presence of Robin as a more or less permanent tutorial or post-doctoral viva! Challenging, supporting, and sometimes admiring: no business books or professional self-improvement courses for me from Robin. “I think you will like this,” Robin would say, dropping a copy of Le Roy Ladurie’s “Montaillou” on my desk (A portrait of life in a medieval village, an exposition of the universal and permanent role of beliefs and resistance in daily life, and a book sometimes subtitled “the promised land of error”). And, to Robin’s patient and generous tutelage, I must add here of course, Michael Barratt Brown (Reform and Realities, Zed, Short Changed: Africa and World Trade, Pluto Books) and Teodor Shanin (Peasants and Peasant Societies, The Awkward Class, The Idea of Progress).

Together Robin and I conceived of and produced a series of papers [circa 1998], funded by the Department of International Development. We organised debates on these key concerns and insights gleaned from our practical work: on branding, on IP, on Fairtrade Certification structures, the uneven bargaining power of producers, asymmetrical access to information, and on what alternative multinationals should look like. These ideas were all ahead of the curve, typifying that amazing place Robin occupied in his life - active, passionate and determined in the here and now, constantly squeezing lessons from life to prepare for and mould the future. We have come far since then, and we are surrounded with multinationals that are ethical and committed to sustainability. This needs to be challenged and reshaped. The Pluto Educational Trust, of which I am a Founding Trustee together with Roger Van Zwanenberg, and which owns Pluto Journals (and 41% of Pluto Books), is preparing the launch a new *Journal of Fair Trade* in June 2018, to reclaim the best practices and values that contribute to mutuality and fairness in trade. Its companion, being launched this July, is the Fair Trade Initiative, a membership based organisation, with a network and website providing a forum and funnel for new work, ideas and outspoken debate. Robin’s Fair Trade papers are a model for where and how the Fair Trade Initiative and the Journal of Fair Trade aim to engage. In his honour, we will include these papers, and would welcome support to comment, and add and update these over the first few volumes. For more information about the Journal of Fair Trade and the Fair Trade Initiative email ptiffen@plutoeducationaltrust.org or Redfstrivens@plutojournals.com. To join the Initiative and for details on paying by PayPal, click here.

Robin Murray was an inspired and inspiring man. We are less supported and affirmed now he is not with us. I wish he were here, but I am sure our works and continued resistance would please him greatly."

Pauline Tiffen, editor in chief of the *Journal of Fair Trade* and former director at TWIN (1986-2000)

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