

When the personal is political

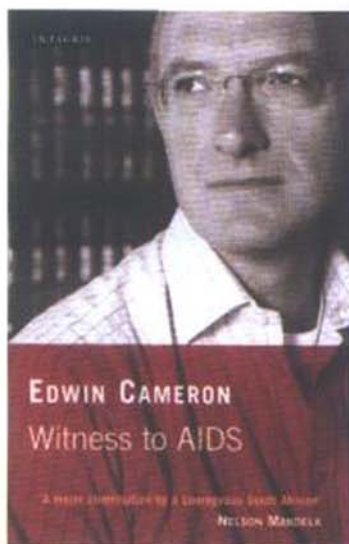
Martin Meredith reads an account of the social and political impact of HIV/AIDS

Witness to AIDS

Edwin Cameron

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When Edwin Cameron, a High Court judge in South Africa, decided in 1999 to disclose publicly that he was ill with AIDS, he expected an adverse reaction. The stigma attached to AIDS in South Africa was so strong that no public official had hitherto admitted to having the disease. A few months before, a 36-year-old woman, Gugu Dlamini, who had told a Zulu-language radio station that she was HIV-positive, was accused by neighbours of bringing shame on her community and was stoned and stabbed to death.

It was in part her murder that propelled Cameron into making his own disclosure. As a judge, he led a privileged lifestyle, well able to afford the expensive anti-retroviral drugs that kept AIDS at bay and which allowed him to lead a normal life. 'Unlike Gugu, I had the best medical care. I had life', Cameron writes. 'If Gugu could speak out, how could I not?'

To Cameron's surprise, the public reaction was overwhelmingly sympathetic. The media, politicians and fellow judges all praised his courage. Cameron himself experienced a profound sense of liberation. 'I knew that I had freed myself of a vast burden – that of unnecessary secrecy.' He resolved to speak out on AIDS at every available opportunity and joined other campaigners demanding government support for making the drugs that had saved him more widely available.

What he did not anticipate was the lengths to which South Africa's president, Thabo Mbeki, would go to obstruct the AIDS-prevention campaign. Soon after taking office in 1999, Mbeki, a rank amateur in medical matters, threw in his lot with a small clique of maverick scientists who questioned whether HIV existed at all, argued that the AIDS industry was no more than a conspiracy by pharmaceutical

companies to profit from the misery of Africa's poor, and insisted that anti-retroviral drugs were in fact toxic, more lethal than the disease they were supposed to be treating.

By blocking government support, Mbeki ensured not only that South Africa was exposed to the fastest-growing HIV epidemic in the world, but that the stigma attached to AIDS remained as prevalent as before. As Cameron writes: 'Stigma is perhaps the greatest dread of those who live with AIDS and HIV – greater to many than the fear of a disfiguring, agonising and protracted death.'

A Rhodes Scholar (Keble 1976), Cameron tells the story of both his own travail and South Africa's wider plight with the kind of admirable honesty that he urges others to adopt. **Martin Meredith** is an independent author, biographer and historian and was a research fellow at St Antony's between 1982 and 1988. His latest book is *The State of Africa* (Free Press, 2005).