

PROFESSOR GARY SLAPPER

A TRIBUTE

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Many readers of this journal either knew or knew of Professor Gary Slapper, not least because he was the co-founder and first editor of *The Journal of Commonwealth Law and Legal Education*. He sadly passed away on Sunday, 4 December 2016, leaving behind his wife Suzanne and three daughters, Hannah, Emily and Charlotte. He was 57.

The obituary published in *The Times* on 8 December 2016 described Professor Gary Slapper as ‘the man who brought the law to life’. Gary had been a columnist for *The Times* since 1992 and used his columns to great effect – to inform, enlighten, amuse and entertain. He was able to reach a wider public audience in ways that other lawyers – academic and practising – could not.

Professor Slapper — academic, educationalist, writer and Times columnist — was a one-off. Equally at home discussing the constitutional niceties of Brexit or the law of corporate liability as with popular culture — from *The Simpsons* to *Making a Murderer* — he was passionate about knowledge and endlessly curious. Unlike many, he wore his learning lightly, with great modesty.

(Gibb and Ames, 2016)



PROFESSOR GARY SLAPPER: THE LAW

Gary studied law at University College London (1980) before gaining a master's from UCL (1992) and a PhD in law from the London School of Economics (1995). His various roles included head of law at Elm Park Community College (1981-85), principal lecturer at Staffordshire University Law School (1990-1997), professor of law and head of law school at the Open University (1997-2011) and global professor and director of New York University in London (from 2011). He was a door tenant at 36 Bedford Row, as senior academic on the Bar Standards Board Training and Education Committee and visiting professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Gary had immeasurable talent and used his work, experience and expertise to fight against injustice and inequality. His passion for his subject was clear in all that he did. Challenging the traditional and pioneering new ways of engaging students and the wider public with the law he wrote both popular introductory texts (*How the Law Works* 2nd Edition, 2011), academic texts (*The English Legal System* with David Kelly; 17th Edition, 2016), specialist texts (*Blood in the Bank: Social and Legal Aspects of Death at Work* (1999) and *Organisational Prosecutions* (2001)) and, with his weird cases series, texts that engaged in looking at the law differently.

He acted as a consultant for television documentaries (Channel 4's History of English law and BBC's The Barristers) and drama series, was one of the first to adopt the combined approach of a text book and companion website (*English Law* 3rd Edition, 2010) and had

a regular column in *The Times*. His use of social media to question and engage is well known. Gary led the way where many followed.

One of his many stories he told about his work, life and career was that of the occasion when he wrote to the Open University (OU) to enquire about working there as a law lecturer. At the time the OU did not offer a law degree. When the university began to offer law some years later Gary applied and was appointed as the first law academic in the department. He subsequently became the OU's first professor of law and first head of the Law School.

His passion for law was clear for all to see and a conversation with Gary was always illuminating. He worked constantly to engage both students, colleagues and the wider public with law and was passionate about accessibility, social justice and public legal education. He enthused about the law

Although law is sometimes portrayed as a dull discipline pursued by ethically dubious practitioners, it is a spellbindingly vivid and varied subject which affects every part of human life [...] law permeates every cell of social life. Law governs everything from the embryo to exhumation. Law regulates the air we breathe, the food and drink that we consume, our travel, sexuality, family relationships, our property, sport, science, employment, education, and health, everything in fact from neighbour disputes to war....

(Slapper, 2012)

His passing leaves a large gap in academia, he informed, entertained, raised awareness of law (as 'a living instrument of instruction'), championed access to law and questioned ('if religious education is patched automatically into school timetables, why not law, rights and responsibilities') (Slapper, 2003). As one OU colleague wrote 'He was-and it still seems unbelievable to use the past tense – a public intellectual in the most genuine sense, instinctively living and breathing 'public engagement' and 'impact' (Tombs, 2016). His legacy will be the enduring impact of his work.

PROFESSOR GARY SLAPPER: THE MAN

At the funeral in December 2016, Gary's brother read out a piece written by their father. In it, Gary was described as his 'sun' [*sic*]. This image is recognisable to all who knew Gary: whenever he entered a room, he brought a lightness of heart, life and laughter. There was always a joke or funny story waiting to be told – quickly followed by his distinctive laugh. Gary was a raconteur who skillfully combined humour, erudition and truly encyclopedic knowledge. In the course of a conversation, Gary was effortlessly able to conjure a perfectly formed and fully referenced column on any subject – should the listener care to take dictation.

Gary cared passionately about unfairness, injustice, lack of access to opportunity and generally righting wrongs. He lived these concerns, rather than just voicing them. Those invited to the funeral were asked not to bring flowers, but to contribute to a charity of their choice – as ‘Gary was always helping people’. In particular, he was generous in his encouragement and support of colleagues and students alike in their application for advancement, scholarships, pupillages, training contracts and other roles.

At the memorial in March 2017, Gary was described in one of the eulogies as a deeply serious man who did not take himself seriously. The power of his intellect could so easily have intimidated others, but Gary was a wonderfully kind and humane man. He was long-practised in the art of self-deprecation – which he employed to great effect to put those around him at their ease. (Gary told many stories about his less than good sense of direction and ending up in places where he had not intended to be.)

At both the funeral and the memorial what was particularly striking was the extraordinary warmth, courage and dignity shown by Suzanne, Hannah, Emily and Charlotte. Our thoughts and best wishes remain with them. Gary is greatly missed: he was indeed a ‘one-off’ and ‘the man who brought the law to life’.

References

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