

NEWS

Appreciation

Professor William Morrison (Bill) Gordon MA, LLB, PhD (Aberd), Hon LLD (Aberd) FRSE (1933–2012)

Professor David Carey Miller, Emeritus Professor of Property Law at the University of Aberdeen, offers a personal appreciation of the life of Professor William Morrison Gordon.

Professor Bill Gordon who died on 1 September 2012 made an exceptional contribution to Scots law through writings which will rank with the great works of the past by jurists such as Bell, Rankine and Gloag.

A graduate of Aberdeen University, Bill spent the greater part of his working life (1969–1999) as Douglas Professor of Civil Law at Glasgow. But while he was an accomplished Romanist — with all the linguistic skills that demands — his greatest legacy is in works on the legal history and land law of Scotland. In a rare accolade, a selection of writings, representing his academic career, was reprinted in 2007 as *Roman Law, Scots Law and Legal History*. The volume could hardly be a stronger endorsement of the relationship between legal scholarship and the development of the living law, which Bill Gordon's work was all about. In the preface Bill gives a clue to the genesis of this remarkable scope of interest in acknowledging three sources of influence at Aberdeen: two teachers, renowned Romanist David Daube and T B (Tom) Smith — increasingly recognised as the spirit of the modern revival of Scots law — and “an old-style apprenticeship with Messrs A C Morrison and Richards”. Elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1995 one can hardly think of an individual contribution closer to the Royal Charter purpose of “advancement of learning and useful knowledge”.

Born in Inverurie in 1933, Bill attended Inverurie Academy and Robert Gordon College before Aberdeen University. A fellow pupil of Gordons still speaks of the shock and chagrin of his classmates when they realised that this newcomer from Inverurie surpassed their ability in classics. His PhD thesis became the brilliant monograph on *traditio* published in 1970 by the Aberdeen University Press. Outstanding accomplishments as a scholar made him an obvious candidate for an Aberdeen honorary degree. The award in 2005 was a memorable occasion and one which Bill clearly cherished. The laureation address, emphasised the breadth of the contribution honoured: “...

to the solicitors, advocates, sheriffs and judges of Scotland, W M Gordon is a household name, the author of *Scottish Land Law*, a monumental work of huge influence and importance ... to scholars of Roman law and legal historians far and wide, he is an internationally known and noted figure ...” Only recently Bill produced a detailed supplement to Vol 1 of the third edition of *Scottish Land Law*; in its more than 20 year development this work is a bridge between the feudal era and the much changed 21st century property law.

A large part of Bill's contribution was service to others in the profession; he always found time to assist younger colleagues. An extended period as Literary Director of the Stair Society can be singled out as a major contribution to Scottish legal history.

Bill was a keen and accomplished golfer and a longstanding member at Hilton Park. For some 40 years we both played regularly in the Glasgow v Aberdeen University Senate match. In this period Bill played some 30 times. His early record is a remarkable one; starting in 1971, he played 22 times without missing a match and won all but three of these encounters. Bill was very happy to represent Aberdeen in the Royal Troon leg of the centenary match in 2009 so as to balance the numbers. We joked about his losing — by a small margin — on that occasion, after winning in the Royal Aberdeen leg representing Glasgow!

Despite his many achievements, Bill Gordon was naturally understated and modest. He was a most affable person, always delighted to be in the company of friends and colleagues. On a visit to Cape Town he was the very popular senior figure in a large group of South African and Scottish private law specialists. The camaraderie even took him on an exhausting ascent of Table Mountain.

The Church was an integral part of Bill's life. He was an elder of Jordanhill Parish Church for more than 40 years and also served as Session Clerk. Above all, it should be said, Bill was a family man; a loving husband of many years to his wife Isabella and a devoted father and grandfather.

DAVID CAREY MILLER