

Bill Gray Tribute

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The tributes we have heard from Clive, from Andrew, and from Ruth testify to a man of serious academic scholarship, collegiality, dedication, and the vision to pursue academic excellence that resulted in the setting up of the Sussex Centre for Folklore, Fairy Tales and Fantasy – for Bill, such a humble and self-effacing man, you could tell that this was what he'd been working towards throughout his career and what he saw as his main achievement here at Chichester. All of us here, and so many who worked with him far longer than I did, will have warm memories of his kindness and support – it's an honour to pay tribute to the man I came to work closely with for several years.

Bill was the first academic I got to know when I joined the University as a new and rather nervous associate lecturer. He invited me to be involved with the Mervyn Peake centenary conference here in July 2011; before I had formally begun teaching. 'Professor Gray?' I asked thinking I recognised him from his mugshot on the University website, – 'Just Bill', he said; 'You must be Miles, I think we'll have plenty in common' – and so it turned out. Not only did we share interests, it seemed that Bill had a story – or at least a gentle aside – about almost every author or critic I was working on or teaching. He often said he could get from any subject to Robert Louis Stevenson in two moves, well, I think he did himself a disservice as he was able to draw on such a wealth of knowledge that dropping in to his office you lost at least part of the morning or afternoon; he was never too busy and the generosity with his time was not just reserved for a few as so many would testify. But you had to ask the right questions to get him to talk about himself; he was always far too interested in listening and exchanging knowledge than talking about his own work or achievements. I remember one student asking him why he knew so much about Lewis Carroll's accommodation at Christ Church – to be told 'oh well, you see' – gesturing to the slide – 'I was based just over here for a bit' – typical Bill, just a small comment to make you want to know more.

I was honoured to be asked to teach with him on his module 'Other Worlds: Fantasy Literature for Children of All Ages' – 'Well we have to let the mature students know they can sign up' was his explanation with a smile. Those thinking it was going to be a rather laid-back affair, the 'Potter module' as it became known around campus, were startled to find that Week 1 consisted of studying Kant and German Romanticism 'before we get on to the real meaty stuff'. His most important lesson for me was you don't have to be text heavy to have academic rigour – 'leave that for the seminar; excite them first' was his way in. And it worked. The module was, and remains, one of the most popular – our first year working together we had over 60 sign up, more than half the year group. It was not uncommon to find that not only did Bill attract postgraduates and doctoral students to Chichester, but even younger students who wanted to study on the BA so they could specialise in his area of expertise; quite remarkable.

He continued to read and research widely even after the Sussex Centre was inaugurated, and his bookshelves in the office were a testament to his interdisciplinarity. When I noticed an Iris Murdoch novel on his shelves he said 'I wondered how long you'd take to notice; and then pointed upwards to another 10 or so on the shelf above; 'she's out of fashion for now, but she'll not be out of favour for long' – I think that chat lasted at least two hours as we worked out he'd read all 26 at least once. For inspiration I looked back through my old emails from Bill – by chance the final one was in response to my suggestion of setting up the Research centre; as always he saw the merit in new developments; he was thrilled when I was able to let him know it was going ahead. Visiting him after his first stroke, although he wasn't able to express himself as he wanted he was fully alert and wanted to hear about the news from the department, how his students were doing, and how I was – he didn't want the focus to be on him. And this, for many of us, is our lasting memory of the man – a true scholar who ranged across a variety of disciplines but, more importantly, devoted to people rather than any form of metric. His legacy will continue to inspire scholars world-wide, but I think he'd be happiest knowing that his former students, and colleagues, held him in the highest regard.