

Tribute to Bill Gray

Ruth Mantin

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Bill began working here, in its then guise of the West Sussex Institute of Higher Education (WSIHE), in 1981, four years before I did. We both worked in the Department of Religious Studies, later Study of Religions and Bill taught Theology in a time when Theology was part of Religious Studies, rather than, as now, the other way around.

I did, however, know him before I started working here because, as a local Secondary RE teacher, I attended the excellent Religious Studies conferences which were held here annually and got to know the Religious Studies team. Bill was actually instrumental in persuading me to apply for a job here – which, to my surprise, I got. I found the move from Secondary School teaching to working in Higher Education extremely scary and, as so many other people have testified in their tributes, Bill was characteristically kind and supportive in helping me make that transition. I quickly came to appreciate Bill's clever wit and wry sense of humour which so often cut through any perceived pretentiousness and to admire his strong commitment to social justice. He could express righteous anger in the face of injustice, there was always something of the rebel about him!

A colleague, who moved from being a student here to lecturer, also affirms Bill's qualities as a teacher and as a colleague. Bill was, he says, 'simply a legend'. As a student, this colleague was in awe of and inspired by Bill's theory modules in the third year of the late, lamented, Related Arts degree. This colleague also admired the way in which no-one could take off their glasses, put them back on or look over them as many times in one lecture whilst simultaneously looking so cool and intelligent!

When this colleague also became a lecturer here, he remembers how Bill attended one of his first sessions addressed to a very large lecture theatre of students. Bill sat quietly at the back. My colleague recalls that early attempt as something of a disaster because he felt it was pitched much too high for the students – we have all been there – but remembers how Bill made a point of coming over at the end to thank him and tell him how much he had enjoyed the lecture. This thoughtful encouragement was so typical of Bill.

My colleague also comments on the fact that although Bill was one of the most intelligent people he had ever known, he was still so easy to chat to about everyday things ... such as football –about which Bill was passionate although I'm afraid I was never any use as a participant in such conversations!

Another defining aspect of Bill's character was his passion and enthusiasm for scholarship and his own scholarship ranged over such a wide area as well as demonstrating such depth. As an

undergraduate, he studied French and German at Oxford, his studies into German linked with his interest in Theology and led him to focus on the work and influence of Gadamer and Heidegger in his doctoral studies in Edinburgh and Princeton.

Mark Mason (who is so sorry that he cannot be here) has told me a wonderful story he heard from Bill about his pilgrimage to visit the Heidegger's famous 'hut' retreat in the Black Forest. Apparently, Bill first received a very cold reception from Mrs Heidegger because she so strongly disliked the English but as soon as it became apparent that Bill was, in fact, Scottish, he was welcomed with open arms!

Lorna also tells many stories of other examples of Bill's dedication in devoting family holidays to destinations such as the home of Robert Louis Stevenson and many other such pilgrimages. Lorna has described the way in which Bill would take box loads of books on such expeditions – until she had to insist on a limit of 'only' fifteen!

When I first worked with him, Bill was fascinating, inspiring and challenging Religious Studies students by engaging them with the existential theology of Bultmann and encouraging them to cast adrift on a 'Sea of Faith' with Don Cupitt. Bill then moved effortlessly into the English department as well as teaching in Related Arts. Bill's love of language, interpretation, myth and literature culminated in his recognition as Professor of Literary History and Hermeneutics and in the founding of his beloved Sussex Centre for Folklore, Fairy Tales and Fantasy.

When the Study of Religions department closed in 2001, I moved over to the Bognor Campus and so did not get much chance to meet up with Bill. A few years later, however, I increased my involvement in Theology and began to spend more time on the Bishop Otter Campus. This brought more opportunities of bumping into Bill and having a chat. In doing so, it became obvious to me that, in the intervening years, Bill's life had changed.

Bill was very private about his personal life but, when talking to him, I got the impression that he had been, to echo C S Lewis, 'surprised by joy'! I learned that Bill had indeed met the love of his life and was living a life of joy – which seemed to be taking him by constant surprise. He delighted in telling me that now much of his life was also taken over by the dogs with whom he lived! His accounts acknowledged how unlikely this seemed for the Bill I knew in the Religious Studies days – but I have seen incontrovertible evidence that he really was absolutely devoted to these canine companions, Patsy and Hamish - who turned out to be so much bigger than I imagined from his description! Bill just seemed so happy.

On the last few occasions that I met him on the campus, he kept saying something along the lines of 'Why should I retire? I am so lucky to do what I love – why should I want to give it up?' It left me feeling that this was a conversation that he was obviously also having elsewhere, as I have since

learnt from Lorna, was indeed the case. Bill adored his work and was so dedicated and hardworking – but this incredible commitment took its toll.

It just seems such an especially cruel blow that someone, for whom language was so important, could be struck down and robbed of the power of speech.

The last time I saw Bill was at Lorna's PhD graduation. He was still able to convey the warmth, curiosity and enthusiasm which was so typical of him, even though he could not put that into words. I know, however, that, Lorna had a telepathic ability to interpret for others what Bill was communicating, reflecting the extraordinary closeness between them. Thanks to Lorna's dedicated efforts, Bill did significantly develop his powers to communicate– until he was then suffered the sudden and even more brutal assault of the second stroke. Throughout his illness Lorna tenaciously moved heaven and earth to ensure that Bill stayed at home. Right up until the very end, Lorna was with him and managed his care herself.

Bill was a marvellous, remarkable man and he will be so sorely missed. I know it is a cliché, but the University of Chichester really will never be the same without him.

Like so many others, I feel that I have lost someone whose friendship I treasure and who has always remained a source of inspiration. He has, however, left so many fabulous legacies and had such a powerful influence on so many people and I know that this will live on.

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