Miller(ed) in St Andrews

Kimberley-Joy Knight and John Hudson

Over the years, staff and students at the University of St Andrews have been fortunate enough to hear some of William I. Miller’s insightful, innovative and, occasionally, incendiary, research. Typical was an address given at the ‘Emotions in the Courtroom’ symposium, held on 3–4 May 2015, from which some of the contributions to this volume emerged. Because he had been far ahead of the recent ‘emotional turn’ scholarship, with his publications on emotions in the sagas and studies on disgust, humiliation and shame, Bill needed a little cajoling to revisit ‘a tired-out subject, which didn’t have much energy in the first place’. By the end of the symposium—and with only one enraged formal complaint about him presented to the organisers—Bill was wholly converted to the enterprise, remarking that ‘there was not one bad paper’ and that ‘everyone’s time could not have been better spent’. In his own discussion of fear and anger in high-stakes lawsuits in the Icelandic sagas, Miller explained how swelling, fainting and bleeding could all be read as expressions of vengeance and can give vital clues as to inner emotional states. These are topics that have often been covered in his papers in St Andrews, each time with a different twist, new and fascinating insights and an unfailingly captivated audience.

Post paper, Bill is famed as a kind of pied piper, leading his willing audience to a nearby watering hole to continue the discussion. The time spent listening to the post-paper paper often passes so quickly and with so many drinks that the participants are known to feel rather ‘Millered’ the next morning.

Bill first came to St Andrews in the mid-1990s. It was just after his fiftieth birthday and he was complaining of being old, and of never previously having had a birthday that made him feel old. He came partly in search of beer, and the quest for Burton ale and latterly Timothy Taylor Landlord was undertaken with characteristic dedication (his latter-day preference for Landlord shows, in the eyes of anyone from Yorkshire, another of Bill’s qualities, his willingness to modify his views when persistently confronted with clear evidence). He was also coming to visit Rob Bartlett, whom he had first met while Rob was employed at the University of Chicago. Visits recurred, as did the giving of papers which typically were loved by 95 percent of the audience and loathed by 5 percent, and which contained typical Miller aperçus: for example, that the discovery of the individual took place not in the twelfth century but during bouts of insomnia by anyone who has ever had difficulty sleeping. In the mid-2000s Bill
had a six-month stay in St Andrews as holder of a highly prestigious Carnegie Centenary professorship; this was just after his sixtieth birthday and he was complaining of being old, and of never previously having had a birthday that made him feel old. Since then he has been a regular visitor for three weeks each year, as an Honorary Professor in, first, the School of History and, most recently, the Institute of Legal and Constitutional Research.

Bill’s activities at St Andrews have been many and various. One extraordinarily privileged class of Honours students were taught a class on Courtroom Dramas by Bill and his old friend Steve White, with the supposed teacher John Hudson as another fortunate observer. He has also offered reading groups, most often on sagas. It has often been the case that a reading group dedicated to covering several chapters of a text will only get through a few lines. One instance of this was Hrafnkel’s saga, where Bill delighted in every detail, explaining with great understanding and wit the depths and complexities of the text. He has given numerous lectures, seminars, and other papers, always punctuated by frolics and detours, normally involving his motorcycle and his difficult relationship with speed limits.

Most of all he has talked with, talked to, and drunk beers with generations of St Andrews PhD students. For those in the ‘early career’ phase, Bill’s St Andrews seminar papers have always been an occasion. Along with the guarantee of learning plenty about saga episodes involving exploding bodies and bloody axes, there is also the hope of a diversion into anecdote territory. The real prizes come for those who stick around after the paper and follow the speaker to the Central Bar or Whey Pat (the latter pub rivalling even Ann Arbor’s Grizzly Peak in his affections), where the anecdotes fly thick and fast. Sometimes these address the early career phases of august members of the School of History, but more often than not they involve Bill’s own follies and escapades.

In 2016 Bill narrated a re-enactment of the trial of the first Scottish Protestant martyr, Patrick Hamilton, before a sold-out crowd in St Andrews’s Byre Theatre, an event which has recently received a prestigious national award. His contribution was the more remarkable as it came shortly after his seventieth birthday, and he was complaining of being old, and of never previously having had a birthday that made him feel old. And his activities have stretched beyond St Andrews, notably to collaborations with historians in Madrid and beyond. His official position was ‘Visiting Scholar’, though he functioned as much as court jester, or perhaps, as he would prefer, Lear’s Fool. Only a bicycle accident in Ann Arbor prevented his 100 percent attendance record for events in appealing European locations; the symptoms that his family were told to look out for during his convalescence are reproduced below as Appendix A.

Bill is not simply a fascinating, fun and friendly annual visitor to St Andrews, but he has come to be so much part of the furniture that he is often asked to