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The Edinburgh Legal History Blog

Blackstone Exhibition

Posted on 16/03/2015 by John Cairns

Sir William Blackstone (1723-1780) is one of the most important ever writers on law. He is up there with the Gods of Ulpian, Pothier and Savigny. His story is well known, so there is little need to rehearse it. Suffice it to say after education at Charterhouse and Oxford, he was called to the English bar, but spent time as administrator at Oxford before becoming the first Vinerian Professor of the Laws of England and subsequently becoming a judge. He is famous because of his *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, based on his Vinerian Lectures, the first volume of which appeared in 1765, 250 years ago.

The Yale Law Library, home to the world's largest collection of Blackstone's works, is marking the anniversary with an exhibition, "250 Years of Blackstone's Commentaries." The exhibition is curated by Wilfrid Prest of Adelaide and Michael Widener, the Rare Book Librarian at the Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School, and consists of more than 40 items, all from the Yale Law Library's collection, depicting the origins of the *Commentaries*, its remarkable success as a textbook, and its impact on both legal and popular culture. The items include a volume annotated by one of Blackstone's students, a legal treatise with Blackstone's own handwritten marginalia, the first English editions of the *Commentaries*, early Irish and American pirated editions, abridgments, teaching aids, student manuscripts, critiques, translations (into French, German, Italian, and Chinese), and a 1963 liquor advertisement.

The exhibition is on display through June 2, 2015, in the Rare Book Exhibition Gallery, located on Level L2 of the Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School (127 Wall Street, New Haven, CT). The exhibition will then travel to London, where it will be on view September through November 2015 at the library of the Honourable Society of the Middle Temple, which was Blackstone's Inn of Court. From December 2015 to February 2016 it will be at the Sir John Salmond Law Library, University of Adelaide.

In conjunction with the exhibition, the Yale Law Library will host a talk on April 17 by Cristina Martinez of Carleton University, who contributed "Blackstone as Draughtsman: Picturing the Law" to the collection edited by Prest, "Re-Interpreting Blackstone's Commentaries" (2014). Her talk will be accompanied by Mark Weiner's video, "Blackstone Goes Hollywood," which includes an interview with Prest.

If Blackstone's work is the best known work on the Anglo-American common law, the man himself remained in many ways obscure and enigmatic, until the major research programme directed by Wilf Prest at Adelaide started to explore his life, leading to an editions of his letters, a new biography, and several specialised volumes of research. This exhibition is the product of all this work.

[Blackstone 250 flyer1](#)

See <http://library.law.yale.edu/news/new-exhibit-250-years-blackstones-commentaries>

It is interesting to this blogger that one of the most famous portraits of Blackstone shows him in his gown as a Doctor of Civil Law.



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