

## Preface

One of the most celebrated works in the Anglo-American legal tradition, William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765–69), is currently attracting renewed attention. Of course the *Commentaries* no longer dominate legal education and studies as once they did, especially in North America during the century after their first publication. But Blackstone continues to be regularly cited in courts on both sides of the Atlantic, and elsewhere throughout the common law world. His *Commentaries* provide constitutional, cultural, intellectual and legal historians with a remarkably comprehensive account of the roles of law, lawyers and the courts in the imperial superpower that was England on the cusp of the industrial revolution. But they also retain some contemporary relevance, and not only for their literary qualities; indeed the sustained impact of Blackstone's work, long after its first publication, is a further reason why the author and his book can still repay further study.

This volume had its origins in a symposium on 'William Blackstone: Life, Thought, Influence' held over two hot Adelaide days in December 2007. That Antipodean setting was in one respect highly ironic, since the metropolitan capital of South Australia is the outcome of a nineteenth-century venture in systematic colonisation specifically endorsed by Jeremy Bentham, Blackstone's former student and life-long critic. Yet the diversity and quality of the papers presented, and the liveliness of discussion, could leave no doubt that both the *Commentaries on the Laws of England* and their author continue to hold the attention of scholars from many parts of the world.

Most of the following essays were presented in draft on that occasion, and subsequently revised for publication. Ian Doolittle, John Emerson and myself were participants, but wrote our contributions after the event, while those by John Baker and Mary Sokol were kindly prepared in response to specific editorial requests. The four parts into which this book is divided (not very rigorously or exclusively) broadly follow the plan of the symposium, with the addition of the final coda on sources. Needless to say, the aim has not been to provide an encyclopaedic coverage, but rather to touch upon some main themes: the life and character of Blackstone himself, the nature and sources of his jurisprudence as expounded in the *Commentaries*, and the influence of his great book, both within and beyond his native shores.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge subventions from research funds provided by the University of Adelaide's Faculty of the Humanities and Social Sciences and the Faculty of the Professions, which made it possible to hold

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the Blackstone symposium and also assisted in the protracted process of converting conference papers into book chapters. Numerous friends and colleagues generously supported the enterprise in various ways; I am especially grateful for the expert advice of all those who acted as anonymous referees. In the final stages of putting the book together, Cecile Storey played a crucial role as copyeditor. The office staff of the School of History and Politics and the Law School gave invaluable support throughout. While a particular debt of gratitude is owed to Mary Sokol and John Baker for their willingness to contribute at relatively short notice, I should like to thank all my fellow-contributors, as well as the superbly efficient production team from Hart Publishing, for their generally patient and prompt responses to editorial demands and importunities.

*Wilfrid Prest*

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