

Remembering Richard Mill-Owens, Q.C., S.C.

A Friend and a Mentor

Richard would not particularly have liked being referred to as a mentor even though he was exactly that to many of us. Of course he took the trouble of freely giving his time so that younger members of the Bar could benefit from his experience, but Richard would have regarded the description as a mentor somewhat grandiose if not just a little pretentious. You have to understand that he was an unassuming person, a man who believed his actions would do all the speaking that was both appropriate and necessary. If he really had to spell things out, one instantly knew that something serious and important was afoot. I did not have the honour to count him as one of my pupil masters but for me, Richard Mills-Owens taught me much and I, like many others, owe him so much. As Geoffrey Chaucer (a fellow Inner Temple member) might have put it, one does meet many fellow pilgrims along the way and wisdom comes by following their example. With Richard's passing, we have lost one of the Hong Kong Bar's dearest sons but his legacy will remain and this is what we should be celebrating as members of Temple Chambers.

Richard Mills-Owens was born on June 9, 1937 in the picturesque town of Carmarthen, the county town for Carmarthenshire, the oldest town in Wales and said to be the birthplace of Merlin. He was schooled in Beamont College, a Catholic public school near Windsor (which counted among its legal alumni the second Lord Russell of Killowen, our own Mr Justice Anthony Rogers VP and even Charles Laughton).

Not even 20 years of age, in 1955 Richard entered military service in the Royal Navy. As a Midshipman, he saw active service on board the *HMS Newfoundland*, a Colony-type Light Cruiser and flagship of the 4th Cruiser Squadron in the East Indies. On 1 November 1956 during the Suez War, *Newfoundland* sank the Egyptian frigate *Domiat* in the Red Sea. Richard was awarded a Campaign Medal. After the Suez Crisis, he joined the HMS Newcastle, a Southampton Class Town type Light Cruiser. This suited him as he wanted to be near his family in Hong Kong (his father was by then a puisne judge here). He completed his national service in 1957.

Richard then read law in Cambridge, at Christ's College, a college well known for its academic achievements having topped the Tompkins Table for many years and the alma mater of Milton and Darwin.

Many of Richard's biographical details are contained in the dedicated website accessible to friends and family. From them we can see that law was in his blood, Hong Kong was in his head and Wales was in his heart (the latter certainly manifested in his love of singing; he had a wonderfully rich baritone or bass voice). His father was Hugh Mills-Owens CBE who was one of the best judges in Hong Kong's legal history. After his military service in the Royal Navy and reading law at Cambridge followed by pupillage with Mr George Heskith of 7 New Square in Lincoln's Inn, Richard could not resist the pull of Hong Kong. Arriving in 1965, he knew it was to become home for the rest of his life.

He was admitted to the Hong Kong Bar that year, starting his practice in the Chambers of Brook Bernacchi QC. His practice prospered, taking silk in 1979. In 1977 Richard founded Temple Chambers and was the Head of Chambers for 20 years. He had illustrious pupils, among them Robert Ribeiro (now Mr Justice Ribeiro PJ), Ronny Tong SC and Raymond Faulkner SC. He served as Honorary Secretary of the Bar from 1972 to 1973 (under the chairmanship of Gerald de Basto QC). Richard retired from practice in 1999.

Richard Mills-Owens was a consummate barrister who fully respected the value of the Bar's "cab rank" principle. Although often and usually the first choice barrister in commercial, shipping and company disputes, he also practiced in other areas of the law. But whatever case came his way and however lucrative or not the brief may have been, he demanded of himself (and insisted of his juniors) that he, and everyone else, had to be properly prepared. The Bar is an unforgiving profession and reputations count for very little when a barrister faces the constant challenge of acting in the best interests of the client while at the same time discharging duties owed to the administration of justice. Thorough preparation is therefore key and here, Richard was meticulous to a fault. Little wonder he was known, among his other nicknames, as "Mr Preparation". However, he also possessed that other quality of a leader of the Bar – courage. As Bob Ribeiro reminds me, RMO (as he is popularly known) was brave. He was the leader you went to when the client had a difficult case or needed help in a hurry. He did not shirk challenges. He would not of course argue impossible or thoroughly bad points but he recognised the entitlement of every person to have proper legal representation and proper access to the courts (these are now after all express constitutional rights). It takes courage and an unwavering sense of fully understanding the duties owed to the administration of justice (which are in reality duties owed in the public interest) to practice law in the way Richard

did. For Richard, this was what the law and the practice of law meant. No fuss, no fanfare, no long speeches; for him, it was just a case of getting on with it and doing so with honour and dignity.

For all those who worked with him or saw him in action, he mentored us by his actions. He had no agenda other than the maintenance of the true values of the Bar: courage, skill, dignity; all of these qualities directed to representing one's client to the best of one's ability. It is little wonder that this was recognised by the Bar when in 2009 he was bestowed an Honorary Life Membership. At the EGM in which it was resolved he should be granted a Life Membership, the Chairman of the Bar (Russell Coleman SC) said that Richard was a shining example "of everything which any barrister today ought to aspire to be in their own career...having the deepest respect of everyone in the Judiciary, the Bar and amongst solicitors". I have myself tried to acquire many of the qualities needed of a lawyer from observing barristers like Richard.

That is the mentoring part of Richard. But he was above all a friend. I joined Temple Chambers in 1981 as a very fresh barrister and I immediately felt (as all new tenants did) that Richard specially looked after me. Not in the sense of ensuring I had enough work (he believed every barrister had to prove his or her worth on their own) but making sure that I realised there was more to life than just work. This was a side of Richard few people appreciated. Most people know him as a thoroughly dedicated professional (which he undoubtedly was) but he knew there was more to life than one's profession. Life is there to be enjoyed to the fullest and he took the time to make sure that everyone in Chambers appreciated this simple fact. Work is to be taken very seriously but so is one's leisure time; they are mutually complementary and equally important. I have been passing this simple message onto all my pupils,

colleagues and fellow judges throughout my career. It was clear Richard practiced what he advocated. I know of no one else who could nonchalantly walk around Chambers with a parrot on his shoulder, sometimes singing as well (not humming – Welshmen never hum)! He did this because it gave him pleasure. I thank Richard for this and other pieces of wisdom. This is what friends do for you: they show you how to make the most of your life and they improve it.

I save the best part of Richard for last. When he married Amy on 21 February 1997, he at last found the final piece to complete his happiness as a person and he was rewarded with everlasting love. This is all that matters at the end of the day for any of us and Richard had the great fortune to enjoy the most wonderful marriage.

I shall end here. I pass by his old room in Chambers everyday now. I miss my friend and mentor. I started by saying that Richard would not have liked being called a mentor but I do believe he would be chuckling in that rich deep voice with pride if he knew he will always be remembered as an honourable, valiant and thoroughly decent man, and more than that, a true friend. Please let us all remember him in this way.

Geoffrey Ma