

Legal commentaries continue to make an impact, 250 years on

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A four-volume work that has never been out of print for the past 250 years is still making an impact on the modern world's legal thinking.

A new and definitive edition of Sir William Blackstone's classic *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, which first appeared in 1765-69, early in the reign of George III, has been published this month by Oxford University Press.

The new [*Oxford Edition of Blackstone*](#) is the result of an international scholarly project led by Professor Wilfrid Prest, Professor Emeritus of History and of Law at the University of Adelaide.

"Blackstone's Commentaries helped to shape the laws that governed Britain and the British Empire in North America, the South Pacific and elsewhere. It became the basic reference work on [law](#) and parliamentary government in much of the western world, and is still a significant legal authority, especially in the USA," Professor Prest says.

"Blackstone's Commentaries were written in a literary form and style accessible to and much admired by lawyers and non-lawyers alike. In fact, they continued to be used in law schools well into the 20th century."

A team of volume editors, including Professor David Lemmings, Professor of History at the University of Adelaide, has been working over the past seven years to produce this new version, which is the 197th recorded edition of the influential law book.

"It has been an exceedingly painstaking task to produce this new edition. But we are quietly confident that our work will not need to be repeated for some time to come," Professor Prest says.

"Modern readers can now follow amendments Blackstone made to successive impressions of his uniquely influential text from its first publication. It is important both from a historical and legal perspective to be able to trace changes in Blackstone's views on such key topics as slavery, the transmission of law to colonies and the rights of their Indigenous populations, especially in the field of Indigenous land rights.

"Most readers today also need help to understand Blackstone's numerous classical, historical and literary allusions, as well as his Latin, Greek and Anglo-Saxon quotations, and cryptic footnote references. This is provided by extensive scholarly notes, together with editorial introductions which set the Commentaries in their historical context and analyse Blackstone's distinctive view of the common law," he says.

Over the past 250 years, translations of Blackstone's Commentaries have been made into French, German, Italian, Polish, Russian, Japanese, and most recently into simplified Chinese.

Provided by University of Adelaide

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