

# NSS stalwart Bill McIlroy dies aged 85

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## William J. McIlroy (4 July 1928 – 22 August 2013)

With great sadness, we report the death of William (Bill) McIlroy on 22 August 2013, aged 85.

Bill devoted his adult life to the National Secular Society and allied causes. He served as the secretary of the NSS from 1963 to 1977 with a one year break. In the 1960s, Bill and the then president David Tribe were responsible for a resurgence of activity resulting in the NSS becoming nationally prominent, attracting eminent supporters such as writer Brigid Brophy and philosopher Margaret Knight, who made groundbreaking broadcasts on secularism.

David and Bill spearheaded major campaigns including Secular Education Week and campaigned successfully for reform of the law on stage censorship, Sunday observance, male homosexuality and abortion.

In 1989, Bill, along with Nicolas Walter, reformed The Committee Against Blasphemy Law to protest at the threat to Salman Rushdie over his book *The Satanic Verses*. The Committee issued a Statement Against Blasphemy Law signed by over 200 public figures. Bill had been secretary of the original Committee Against Blasphemy Law, which was founded in the late 1970s to protest the trial of the editor and publishers of *Gay News*.

Bill served on the NSS Council of Management for a few years in the early 2000s and was presented by the NSS with a lifetime achievement award in 2005.

He was editor of the *Freethinker* for around fourteen years in three stints spanning nearly a quarter of a century from 1970, and worked as a volunteer for a further decade.

Bill was born in Northern Ireland but left its religious sectarianism at the earliest opportunity. He lived in Coventry, London, Sheffield and Brighton. His wife Margaret died some years ago from multiple sclerosis. Bill had lived independently in Brighton for his last fifteen years, but was diagnosed with cancer around a year before his death.

In his final days he was cared for compassionately in Horsham, Sussex, by his daughters Helen and Ruth, who ensured he still had easy access to his many books on secularism. Pride of place went to biographies of NSS founder Charles Bradlaugh, a cherished booklet celebrating of the NSS's centenary in 1966, which he helped compile, and a book by pro-blasphemy campaigner Mary Whitehouse, who named Bill as a major thorn in her side.

Even in his last days he was reminiscing with visitors, writing to friends and colleagues at home and abroad on his fifty-year-old manual typewriter. Bill was a man of great integrity and humour but would not abide anyone he thought to be acting against the best interests of the organisations he supported, which included the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association. Right up until his death, Bill took a great interest in the NSS's current activities and pleasure in its successes. His ready wit, wise counsel and encyclopaedic knowledge, especially on historic matters, will be missed by his many friends and colleagues.

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