

Obituary: Former NSS president Terry Sanderson

Posted: Mon, 13th Jun 2022 by [Keith Porteous Wood](#)

An obituary to Terry Sanderson, who died on June 12th 2022, by his civil partner Keith Porteous Wood.

I regret to inform you of Terry's death, at the age of 75. He died peacefully and, as he wished, at the home we have shared so happily for forty years. He bore his illness with characteristic fortitude and dignity.

Terry was born in Maltby, a poor working class mining village in South Yorkshire. His loving family were entirely supportive of him as a gay man (which they first discovered from the local newspaper), and – later – of us as partners.

His rich and varied life was devoted to serving others and fighting injustice. Almost his entire working life was spent helping adults with learning difficulties, or campaigning for gay rights and secularism, our dual passions.

Not long after homosexuality was decriminalised, he bravely set up a mail order book business, called Essentially Gay, from his tiny bedroom in the very macho Maltby to help those who were isolated and unable to obtain information and support. He even imported books from the US, which despite being entirely innocent, were frequently impounded by cruelly homophobic custom officials on both sides of the Atlantic.

His talents as an incisive and provocative writer and journalist were put to so many uses in the service of gay rights and secularism. Some of his books are shown [here](#) but over the decades he wrote many more, especially gay self-help books, which ran into numerous editions. Hardly a month went by without readers of these books thanking him movingly for having transformed their lives.

He made his monthly *Mediawatch* columns in *Gay Times*, a campaigning platform to challenge the inhumane treatment of gay people in the media, which he continued uninterrupted for a quarter of a century – necessitating him reading every newspaper. This was reinforced by his frequent complaints to, and fierce battles with, media regulators. It all helped to create the hugely more compassionate coverage we enjoy in this country today. These hundreds of columns have become social history and are [also the subject of a book](#). They are being curated by the [Queer Britain museum](#) and are searchable [here](#).

Terry played a leading role for nearly 25 years in developing the National Secular Society, and was its [president](#) for 11 years. His skills as a journalist and writer were put to good use compiling articles, news releases and the popular weekly *NSS Newsline*, which he founded.

But there was another, delightful, side of Terry; he was popular, well-liked, and had a wide circle of friends. And he was humble; he never sought out praise or recognition.

He loved music and was a devotee of Marlene Dietrich and had a wicked sense of humour. He wrote humorous books and even plays. He was always searching for outstanding historic cinema clips. The best of each year's crop were screened every Christmas in a popular benefit show for the Cinema Museum.

Terry declared at the end of April on Facebook that he was placing himself "in the hands of the angels, i.e. the Macmillan nurses." Macmillan Cancer Support, Marie Curie and paramedics have indeed provided selfless care of the highest order, as have the palliative care specialist nurses associated with the Meadow House Hospice (which also provides care in the community) in Ealing, west London. We cannot thank them enough. We are similarly grateful for the wonderful care and world-class treatment Terry received at the Charing Cross Hospital, Hammersmith, west London.

Terry updated his [autobiography](#) to include references to his experience with cancer. Disclosing his terminal illness provoked a flood of touching tributes. Most people do not live to hear their eulogies; but he (and I) have drawn great comfort from them. Two are shown below:

From Human Rights activist Peter Tatchell:

I am so sad to hear about your diagnosis. My thoughts are with you at this difficult time.

I want you to know how much I admire and appreciate the magnificent contribution you have made over so many decades, from Gay Times Media Watch [monthly column for 25 years](#) to [How To be A Happy Homosexual](#), your superb work that transformed the National Secular Society into such an effective and influential organisation - and much more.

After you are gone, your legacy will remain.

We are much indebted to you - and Keith.

Your personal and human rights partnership of nearly five decades has been inspirational.

I am so proud to have known you both and your amazing efforts for LGBT+ and other human rights.

You will be remembered always with love and affection.

From Sir Ian McKellen:

25 years ago when I was discovering the delights of coming out, Terry's journalism and books were an eye-opener – always rational and indignant, effortlessly on the high moral ground. I hope he is proud of his influence on the legal and social changes which his reporting encouraged.

All the best and more, as the days go by.

Thank you to everyone else who sent us tributes for your kind words.

As Terry concluded his final Facebook post:

"Goodbye – and try to be kind to each other."

Terence Arthur Sanderson

17 November 1946, Maltby, S. Yorkshire

– 12 June 2022, London

You may wish to contribute in Terry's memory to [Cancer Research](#), [Macmillan Cancer Support](#), [Marie Curie](#), [LNWH Charity – Meadow House Hospice](#) and/or [Charing Cross Hospital](#).

Keith Porteous Wood

Keith Porteous Wood is the president (and former executive director) of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not represent the views of the NSS.

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