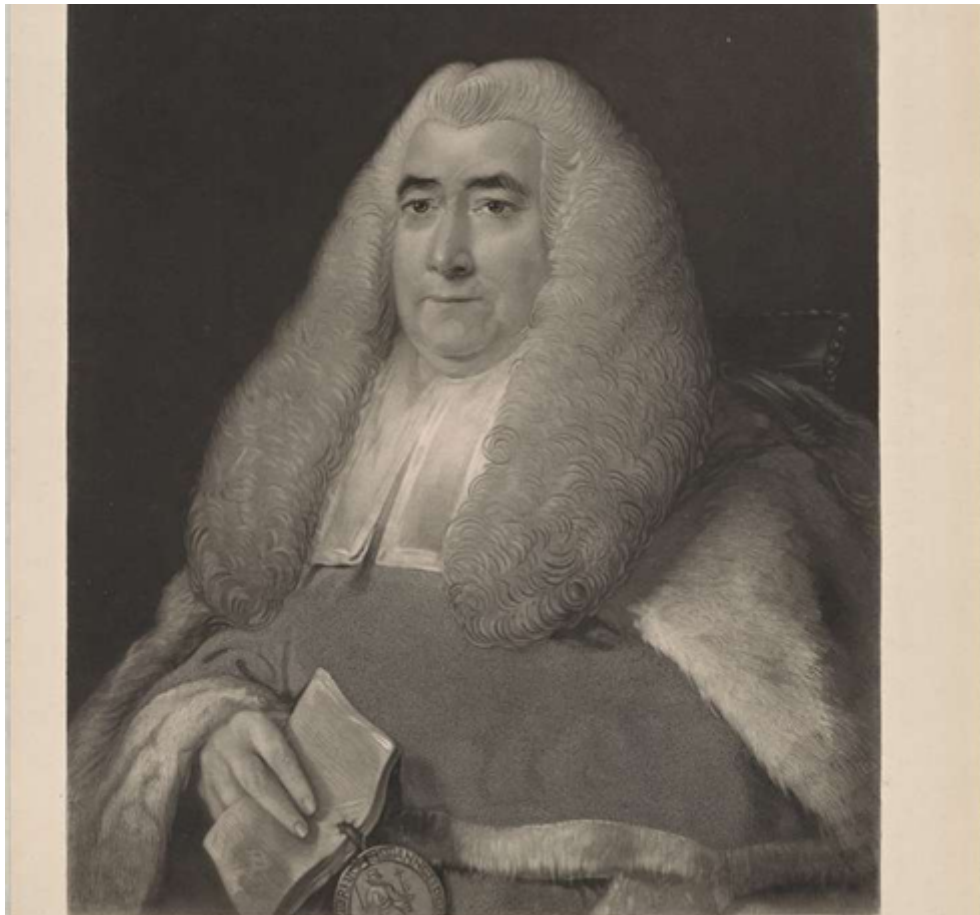

A TRANSFORMATIVE SQUARE

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Sir William Blackstone. Source: New York Public Library.

Although they were never neighbours, the two most famous lawyers of eighteenth-century England lived in adjacent houses in Lincoln's Inn Fields. At No 55 lived William Blackstone (1723-1780) between 1768 and 1779. While living there, he completed his *Commentaries on the Laws of England*. Most English law is common law: rather than written codes, court decisions regulate what is lawful and what is not. How, then,



Jean Baptiste van Loo, *William Murray, 1st Earl of Mansfield* (c 1737).
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could people know what the law was and how it developed? Blackstone answered that question in his *Commentaries* in four Books: *The Rights of Persons*; *The Rights of Things*; *Of Private Wrongs*; and *Of Public Wrongs*. His *Commentaries* became the standard work on the common law in England and in places that adopted English law, including the United States.

At No 56 lived William Murray (1705-1793), between 1739 and 1740 and 1755 and 1756. Here he entertained many friends “with elegant hospitality and genuine kindness”. A few days before his death in 1744, the poet Alexander Pope asked to be carried from Twickenham to Lincoln’s Inn Fields to dine with him. Murray became Lord Chief Justice in 1756 and gained the title of Baron Mansfield. Chief Justice Mansfield decided the famous *Somerset v Stewart* case (1772). James Somerset escaped from Stewart, the person who claimed him as a slave. Somerset refused to be shipped from England to Jamaica. Abolitionists supported Somerset’s legal case by claiming that he was unjustly imprisoned. Mansfield’s decision marked an important step in limiting the legality of slavery in



Detail of sculpture of Margaret MacDonald at Lincoln's Inn Fields by Richard Reginald. Source: Bengt Oberger.

England as part of the long course of abolition. In Mansfield's ruling, an enslaved person could not be removed from England against their will.

Lincoln's Inn Fields was also important in the fight for women's rights. Margaret MacDonald (1870-1911) lived with her family at No 56. Her husband, Ramsey later became the first Labour Prime Minister. Margaret MacDonald was a dedicated socialist. She was a student of politics under the tutelage of the suffragist campaigner, Millicent Fawcett (who lived in nearby Bloomsbury). She served on the executive of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, the leading suffragist organization. She is honoured with a statue and alcove seat inside Lincoln's Inn Fields.

While you're at Lincoln's Inn Fields ...

... visit the Sir John Soane's Museum. Entry is free. Soane was a prominent architect who had a wonderful collection of antiquities, furniture, sculptures, architectural models and paintings, including a model for a monument to William Murray.

About the author

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