

His Honour Judge Graham Boal KC obituary

Clubbable barrister who defended Jeremy Thorpe and became a judge at the Old Bailey but faced his greatest trial in battling alcoholism

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Boal in 1996, the year he was made a judge

In 1999 Graham Boal, at the time an Old Bailey judge, delivered an after-dinner speech to the Criminal Bar Association.

In an attempt to make the point that New Labour was appointing judges for reasons of political correctness, he told a joke that was widely seen as racist, sexist and homophobic. Amid the ensuing uproar, he was reprimanded by Lord Irvine, then lord chancellor, and obliged publicly to apologise.

“For a long time after that speech, if a case I was trying was reported in the press, the report would always end with ‘Judge Boal is the judge who . . .’”, he wrote in his autobiography, *A Drink at the Bar: A Memoir of Crime, Justice and Overcoming Personal Demons*.

“One day, sitting at the breakfast table with Lizzie [Boal’s wife] and Thomas [his son], I read a report that did not end with those words, and remarked upon it. Thomas retorted: ‘It’s all very well for you, but I’ll have to read it again in your obituary.’”

And so he shall, but Boal’s son had a point. That unfortunate episode, which Boal deeply regretted, eclipsed an otherwise remarkable life that he described, somewhat euphemistically, as “swings and roundabouts”.

During a legal career that spanned four decades, he was an extremely successful criminal barrister who rose to the distinguished position of first senior treasury counsel and later became a popular, if mildly eccentric, judge who had Test match scores passed to him on Post-it Notes during trials. He participated in many of the most notorious criminal trials of the late 20th century, including those of the Liberal Party leader Jeremy Thorpe and the IRA’s Balcombe Street Gang. He was also instrumental in overturning the conviction of the “Birmingham Six” on terrorism charges.

But Boal was also, by his own admission, an alcoholic depressive who attempted suicide and underwent extensive treatment before turning teetotal for all but a single day of his last 29 years. He described those very different sorts of trials with brave and painful honesty in his memoir, and in later life became an active supporter of an addiction charity.



Boal aided the successful defence of Jeremy Thorpe

A jocular, clubbable, convivial man, he was for good measure the founder of the Old Bailey Judges Golfing Society, a member of the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) and a lifelong supporter of Arsenal FC. As “president for eternity” of the golfing society, he devised a truly hideous blazer and tie combining the colours of the MCC, the Garrick Club and the Royal West Norfolk Golf Club in his beloved adopted county.

John Graham Boal was born in Torquay in 1943. His father was a surgeon in the Royal Navy, his mother a first officer in the Women’s Royal Naval Reserve. He grew up at Eastbourne College, where his father served as the school doctor until he died when Boal was only 14. His interest in the law had begun a year earlier, when an Eastbourne GP, John Bodkins Adams, was charged with murdering elderly women who had left him money in their wills.

Adams had allegedly forged the signatures of other local doctors, including Boal’s father, to secure the lethal drugs and faced the death penalty if convicted.

In the event he was acquitted, but Boal saw him in court and was instantly hooked: “From then on there was nothing else I wanted to do in life.”

He read law at King’s College London, earning a modest 2:2, joined Gray’s Inn and was called to the Bar in 1966. He served his pupillage in the chambers of William Howard QC at 3 King’s Bench Walk. Soon he was prosecuting or defending minor cases in the magistrates’ courts of London, Hertfordshire and Essex, occasionally amusing himself by challenging opposing barristers to insert improbable words into their submissions.

He once met the Kray twins while defending one of their accomplices at Bow Street magistrates’ court in central London. “They appeared quite small and insignificant,” he recalled.

By the mid-1970s he was regularly prosecuting cases at the Old Bailey, and began drinking heavily to cope with the stress of the big criminal trials there. He also met Elizabeth East at a dinner party, and married her at Gray’s Inn Chapel in 1978, but not before he had been convicted of drink-driving after hitting a police car while returning home from her flat one night. He was fined £30 and disqualified from driving for a year.

Thomas, their only child, is now chief culture officer at What3words, the global location identifier.

In 1977 Boal served as junior counsel in the successful prosecution of the Balcombe Street gang, which had been terrorising London and the home counties. When the four men were released in 1999 under the Good Friday agreement Boal said he felt “physically sick”.

In 1979 he served as junior counsel to George Carman in what was dubbed “the trial of the century”. Together they defended Jeremy Thorpe against charges that the Liberal leader had conspired to murder Norman Scott, his former lover. Night after night they drank copious amounts of whisky as they plotted their tactics, and eventually secured Thorpe’s acquittal by undermining the credibility of key witnesses.

Carman and Boal subsequently co-operated on two other big cases. They defended the board of Kagan Textiles Limited, a company owned by Harold Wilson’s crooked friend Joseph Kagan: the board was exonerated when Kagan pleaded guilty to tax fraud. They also secured a second inquest for the family of “God’s banker”, Roberto Calvi, the chairman of Italy’s Vatican-linked Banco Ambrosiano who was found hanging beneath Blackfriars Bridge in what had been initially ruled a suicide. The second jury returned an open verdict.

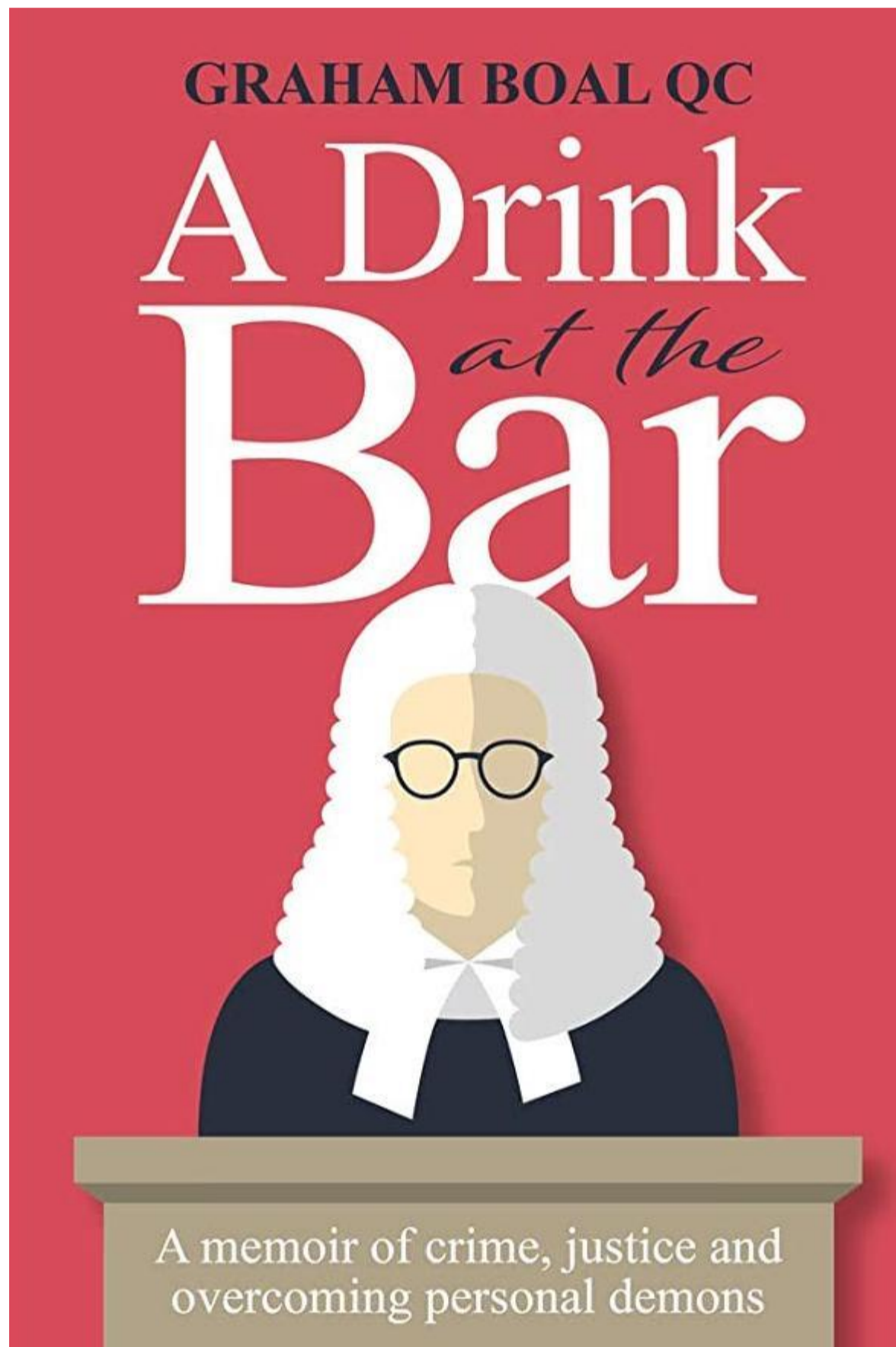
Boal described the diminutive Carman as a “flawed genius” of whose dubious methods he sometimes strongly disapproved, and probably an alcoholic. That was, however, what he was himself becoming.

Outwardly he continued to flourish. He served as vice-chairman of the Criminal Bar Association, and was appointed senior treasury counsel in 1985. He prosecuted terrorists, rapists and corrupt policemen, and advised the director of public prosecutions on cases including the 1987 King’s Cross Tube fire and the 1989 sinking of the Marchioness pleasure boat in the Thames. He defended, albeit unsuccessfully, Jack Lyons, one of the so-called Guinness Four led by Ernest Saunders who had engaged in a notorious share-trading fraud. Boal used the fee from the case to buy a holiday cottage in the Norfolk village of Thornham.

In 1990 he oversaw an official investigation of the 1975 convictions of six men who had been accused of bombing two Birmingham pubs, and advised that the convictions of the “Birmingham Six” were unsatisfactory. They were eventually overturned by the Court of Appeal.

Privately, Boal was being treated for depression, for which he routinely “self-medicated” with excessive alcohol. He stressed in his memoir that he was never drunk on duty, but in 1993 he was admitted to the Priory Hospital in Roehampton, where he was diagnosed as an alcoholic depressive and underwent several weeks of treatment. He vowed never to drink again.

On his release he took silk and resumed his career as a criminal barrister until, in 1996, he was appointed an Old Bailey judge. He travelled to work by Tube and enjoyed the services of a court shorthand writer who had opened the bowling for the West Indies women’s cricket team. He described the next seven years as “one of the happiest times of my life”, his misjudged speech of 1999 notwithstanding.



His 2021 memoir was an attempt to help others with addiction

Then, in 2003, Boal’s marriage broke down. He called it a “devastating personal catastrophe” and sank ever deeper into depression until, in 2005, he attempted suicide.

He took an overdose of pills washed down with a glass of whisky, the only alcohol he had drunk since 1993. “It was a serious attempt, not a cry for help,” he later wrote. “I felt that there was not a flicker of light at the end of the tunnel, that there was nothing to live for.”

He survived, having been found by friends the following day, but he realised he could no longer hear murder cases involving marriage break-ups with the necessary objectivity, and retired from the bench.

The following year his wife returned to him and they slowly rebuilt their marriage to the point, Boal said, that “we were happier than we ever were before”.

In retirement he did much to help other addicts, becoming a trustee of the Westminster Drug Project, counselling people face-to-face and raising £25,000 through a parachute jump. He wrote his memoir during the Covid lockdowns of 2020 in the hope that it would encourage other victims of addiction.

The memoir ended: “If someone reads this book and recognises in themselves — or in a colleague or a loved one — the symptoms I have described, leading to that person seeking assistance from one of the many support systems available, then the writing of this memoir will have been worthwhile.”

Graham Boal KC, Old Bailey judge, was born on October 24, 1943. He died of throat cancer on December 30, 2022, aged 79