The Haldane Society mourns the passing of one of its Vice-Presidents, the great labour lawyer, Bill Wedderburn, who committed his life’s work to the advancement of the interests of the working class, writes John Hendy QC. His towering intellect, his brilliance as an academic lawyer, his profound knowledge of labour law, both here and abroad, his elegance as a writer, his inspirational teaching and his immense enthusiasm and energy were devoted to this end. But these immense gifts never masked his warmth, generosity and impish wit.

Bill’s partisanship could never be used against him because of the faultlessness of his legal analysis. His insight and breadth of vision as to the context, function and purpose of labour law was matched only by his immense command of the detail of it. Like Kahn-Freund before him, his exposition of the comparable law of other countries provided a tool for highlighting – at the same time – the universality of the role of labour law in moderating the endless struggle between capital and labour and also its national characteristics, moulded by history, economics and culture.

As an academic he produced an endless flow of some of the most insightful writings in the field of labour law. His chapter on ‘The Economic Torts’ in Clerk & Lindsell on Torts was the ultimate analysis for practitioners and judges of the intricacies of industrial action law in the UK, a chapter which he updated extensively in every new edition (with footnotes on many pages exceeding the length of the text). In contrast to the unsurpassed focus of that chapter is his lecture, given at the age of 80, ‘Labour Law 40 Years On’, subsequently published in the Industrial Law Journal at [2007] ILJ 397, which is a brilliant example of both the breadth and the depth of his analysis of the many facets of labour law, domestically and internationally, and its interplay with the events and forces of the world outside the courts.

It was The Worker and the Law, first published in 1965 and in many editions thereafter, that made his name throughout the labour movement. The book, in language accessible to all, is a masterpiece of exposition of a hideously complex legal subject. Eventually the law at work became too big for a single volume. Bill was never prepared to reduce its scope from ‘labour law’ to ‘employment law’ which meant disregarding collective aspects. In fact, he disparaged those who suggested that the law at work need no longer concern itself with collective labour relations.

Bill Wedderburn was born in Deptford – his team was Charlton Athletic FC – to parents who ran a scale-makers in New Cross. Educated at a local grammar school he got a scholarship to Cambridge. After national service in the RAF he taught at Clare College, Cambridge from 1952 to 1964 when he joined the London School of Economics. His chair was that of Cassel Professor of Commercial Law. It should not be overlooked that Bill’s brilliance as a lawyer did not confine him to labour law – he was the editor of the Modern Law Review for 17 years.

Labour law was the core of his work. At the LSE, over some 30 years, he established an academic base for labour law renowned throughout the world. He served on the editorial boards of a multitude of labour law publications. He was appointed a life peer in 1977, having been the chief architect of the Labour government’s trade union legislation of the 1970s. His principal role in the House of Lords was, as he saw it, to defend workers’ and trade union rights, a task which he consistently sought to fulfil until illness prevented him from doing so late last year. He had resigned the Labour whip, but not from the Party, in disgust at the worst excesses of New Labour but resumed the whip when Gordon Brown became Prime Minister.

Though called to the Bar in 1953 and made an honorary QC in 1990, he rarely appeared in court. However, he was junior counsel in several of the textbook strike cases of the 1960s including Torquay Hotel Co Ltd v Cousins [1969] 2 Ch 106. I had the honour to lead him on behalf of the National Union of Mineworkers in some of the crucial civil litigation of the miners’ strike of 1984-5. For both of us I think the high point of our court-room collaboration must be the case of Wilson and Palmer & ors v UK [2002] IRLR 568, the first successful trade union case before the European Court of Human Rights. He and I also worked together to establish the Institute of Employment Rights, a think-tank for the Labour Movement, in 1989 – of which he was the first President.

Bill leaves four children. His third wife, Frances to whom he had been married since 1969, was with him at the end.