



Rozenberg

There are two types of libel action: the cases I've covered as a reporter and the ones I wish I'd covered. Libel trials are the ultimate entertainment, much more exciting than you'd imagine from the wooden reconstructions sometimes served up on television. But just as no theatre-goer would climb onto the stage and start addressing the audience, those who enjoy watching libel cases should resist any temptation to take part. Libel is a spectator sport, not a path to instant riches – except, of course, for the lawyers.

The wretched fate that lies in wait for the ill-advised claimant is illustrated all too graphically in David Hooper's latest collection of libel cases, *Reputations Under Fire*. For some reason these unfortunates often seem to have been MPs or TV stars. I'm thinking not so much of Jonathan Aitken (Hooper quotes a school friend who had always expected Aitken would end up in either the Cabinet or in prison, but little imagined he would serve in both). I had in mind someone like David Ashby, the barrister and former Leicestershire MP whose unsuccessful libel action against the *Sunday Times* is described as "a classic example of needless self-destruction". To show the jury how he could not have taken part in homosexual acts, Ashby put on a grotesque mask with a long tube that he sometimes wore in bed to overcome sleep apnoea, a breathing difficulty. The artist's sketch of this elephant-like protuberance was considered too cruel to broadcast.

And then there was Gillian Taylforth. Hers was a story that required much delicacy in the telling, especially before the nine o'clock watershed. The *EastEnders* actress had parked her Range Rover in a lay-by off the A1 after her passenger Geoff Knights had suffered an attack of pancreatitis. He had loosened his trousers to lessen the pain and Taylforth was placing her hand on his stomach to find where it hurt. Or so she said: *The Sun* suggested otherwise. She sued, but at the last moment George Carman QC was able to produce a video recording showing how she had once behaved at a party. This fatally undermined her case: in Hooper's apt phrase, "Taylforth had blown it".

As a successful libel lawyer himself, Hooper resists the temptation to blow his own trumpet. He largely resists the temptation to borrow material from his previous book, *Public Scandal, Odium and Contempt*, first published in 1984: there have been so many good cases since then. He has occasionally been let down by his proof-reader: a few names are mis-typed. But for a book of more than 500 pages *Reputations under Fire* is remarkably topical. Though the *Hamilton v Fayed* libel action came too late for a detailed account, there is room at least for a summary and the outcome. There is a passing reference to David Irving's current libel case but not, understandably, the result: that's not expected until next month. And there's a handy smattering of law – though not too much to deter the general reader.

SooperHooper, as he calls himself in his emails, brings us contemporary history as viewed from Court 13. It's the next best thing to being there yourself.

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