Dalhousie Law School never forgot A. W. Brian Simpson. He was a young visiting professor at the Halifax, Nova Scotia, school "for an all-too-short period" in the 1960s, and then went on to become one of the world's leading historians of the common law and a distinguished scholar of human rights law. Since 1987 he's been a member of the Law School faculty and is the Charles F. and Edith J. Clyne Professor of Law.

Last May, Dalhousie asked him back to deliver the commencement address and to receive an honorary Doctor of Laws degree. The citation accompanying conferral of his honorary degree noted his many accomplishments — like the book he has written on common law and human rights, being a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences as well as the British Academy, getting an honorary D.Litt. from the University of Ghana, appointment as an Honorary Queen's Counsel, even becoming an Honorary Deputy District Attorney of Denver City, Colorado — but also fondly recalled his impact as a visiting professor at Dalhousie:

"Even at this early stage of his career, Professor Simpson’s lectures on legal history and jurisprudence were an inspiration to his students, and gained the admiration of the school’s then-small faculty. A student of his at the time stated that ‘Brian Simpson brought with him an academic intellectual approach that had a great impact on the development of many of us at the law school. He was inspiring and exceedingly witty. He spent much time with his students, prodding us into examining issues from a variety of perspectives.’”

The citation went on to cite his impact at Michigan:

“The esteem in which Professor Simpson is held by students is just as much in evidence today at the University of Michigan Law School. His keen good humor, encyclopedic knowledge, and great stories attract large numbers to his classes. Professor Simpson’s popularity also extends far beyond the classroom. He has been known to assist student fundraising causes by auctioning off gourmet dinners — which he cooks himself. Leaders of the Student Funded Fellowships Program recently honored Professor Simpson’s support by establishing the ‘A.W.B. Simpson Award’ and making him its first recipient.”

For his part, Simpson used his commencement address — with a nod to Star Wars — to encourage graduates to choose “the good side” over “the dark side.” He explained that people in the legal profession have a duty to ensure that power is not exercised arbitrarily, and noted that Canadian lawyers now have in their Charter of Rights and Freedoms a powerful tool to employ against indiscriminate use of power.

His talk also included historical references, poetry, and examples of his trademark humor. He noted, for example, that Sir Thomas More was the only lawyer he knows of to be granted sainthood.

Simpson also received an honorary degree from Kent University this year.