

BOOK REVIEW

MEN AND BOOKS FAMOUS IN THE LAW

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This small volume traces in the broadest outline the lives of a few law writers, and more especially the story of their legal writings, the inception, production, and vicissitudes of works which for the most part have become classics in legal literature. It contains chapters on Cowell's Interpreter, Lord Coke and the Reports, Littleton and Coke upon Littleton, Blackstone and his Commentaries, James Kent and his Commentaries, Edward Livingston and his System of Penal Law, and Henry Wheaton, together with an appendix containing bibliographical suggestions. The book is also illustrated with portraits of the writers who are the subjects of the chapters. The chapters which deal with American authors seem on the whole better than those which deal with English authors. One might question the selection of authors and books, yet criticism is disarmed at the outset, for Mr. Hicks frankly admits that "out of the hundreds of authors and books that might have been considered, the selection of these few has been made almost at random – because they happened to be of special interest to the author" (p. 7).

Indeed to measure adequately the function of the book requires an appreciation of what the author has consciously undertaken. In Mr. Hicks's own words, "no pretense is made of giving an adequate picture of the contents of the books. That would require a technical presentation which would defeat the end sought. Nor is a complete picture of the authors of the books given. The studies are merely impressionistic sketches of men and books famous in the law, with glimpses here and there of the events and people of the time in

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which the books were written, published, and read” (p. 7). It seems to be assumed that the present methods of legal instruction are producing a body of lawyers who, while more scientific than their predecessors, are becoming progressively ignorant in the classics of their profession. “The figures of the great lawyers and commentators treated of in this volume, so vivid and outstanding to law students of an earlier day, are becoming shadowy and indistinct to the students and the lawyers of this generation” (p. 11). The purpose of the book is to inspire students to know more of the makers of the great law books, to the end that much of educational value may be gained from a study of the men and books that have influenced to a marked degree Anglo-American legal development. The author goes further and maintains that law books have a human appeal and should be a part of the general knowledge of every cultured person. The book, therefore, is directed to two essentially different classes of readers. The attempt is worthy of praise; its success is open to question. The chapters are too sketchy to give any real sense of satisfaction to a reader trained in the law. Even a student of law is worthy of more substantial mental diet. Sketchy as the chapters are they are not calculated to appeal to the general reader. The book is too much of the commentary and too little of the informative, and the commentary is upon matter of which the lay reader is usually ignorant. One might go further and take issue with Mr. Hicks on his fundamental proposition that law books have a universal human appeal. The law itself is catholic; its subject matter embraces all human activities, touches all the social relations, but it does not follow that books about the law have a general human interest. It is to be feared that Bracton, Glanvill, Littleton, Coke, and even Blackstone will continue to be of interest almost solely to the historian. ❶