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Arthur Leff as a Lexicographer

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One of the many tragic aspects of Arthur Leff's untimely death was that he did not live to finish the law dictionary he had set himself the task of writing. As the part he finished demonstrates, it would have been one of the great law books. I know that I would not and could not have written it, and neither, I suspect, could most of the legal scholars I know.

Arthur was truly a polymath, disinclined to specialize in any field of law. He was interested not only in contracts and commercial law, which he wrote about and taught brilliantly, but (for example) in torts (his wonderful book, *Selling and Swindling*, was largely devoted to the tort of deceit), constitutional law, criminal law and even corporations. Thus, he was qualified to put together a law dictionary in the same way that Samuel Johnson was qualified to write a dictionary of the English language. And, like Johnson, he could insert the occasional wry and witty definition which makes a dictionary not a dry-as-dust reference work, but a thing that can be read for pleasure. No legal lexicographer save Arthur Leff would have included in his definition of the letter "B", "another frequent participant in legal hypotheticals, with a tendency toward victimization, as in 'A hits B.'"

Arthur made good use of his extensive knowledge of fraud, swindling, and confidence games. (Another great pity is that he did not live to write a biography of Charles Ponzi, who in 1919 ran the most famous of all Ponzi Schemes and gave his name to an ancient swindle.) See, for example, his definition of "belly stiff," a term previously unknown to me. He could also write concise and brilliant essays in legal history—see, *e.g.*,

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“benefit of clergy”—and terse, comprehensive, and comprehensible descriptions of complex legal concepts.

As I read Arthur’s typescript, I realized fully, from the few jewels which he had lived to create, what a resplendent treasure the law lost when he had not time enough to finish his magnum opus.