1952

Book Review: Civil Procedure of the Trial Court in Historical Perspective

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Recommended Citation
Book Review: Civil Procedure of the Trial Court in Historical Perspective, 47 Northwestern University Law Review 739 (1952)

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Book Reviews


Here is a procedure text which excites my wholehearted enthusiasm. Had I not known what to expect from its distinguished author, I should have been frightened by the title; it suggests a combination of two influences in procedure pedagogy—history and the broad survey—which despite their virtues nevertheless serve to kill off realistic knowledge of modern courts. But the book is what the title promises. It is present-day procedure seen in historical perspective and seen as a whole, but with the appropriate balance to avoid engulfment by either the temporal or the territorial sweep. And we are all indebted in consequence for a work which is at once scholarly and practical.

Careful study of this text impresses one the more with its range. This is not a large volume as legal texts go. Yet its scope is truly amazing. Part I is a brilliant, concise essay on procedural evolution from its early beginnings in Anglo-Saxon law and on the course of reform in both England and the United States. Part II, the larger portion of the book, deals with specific phases of the law of civil procedure; its twenty chapters range from "Conjoint Administration of Law and Equity," i.e., the union of law and equity, through the commencement of suit, joinder of parties, pleading, pre-trial and discovery, trial, the jury, and the judgment, down to execution of judgments and attachments. On each of these topics the treatment is far from cut and dried. The historical analysis, while succinct, is unusually stimulating in its orientation and in the perspective it gives to the modern principles. And the detailed exposition is not merely informative—it is that to a surprising degree; it is also critical and creative. With the author's background as an historian, one could well have expected the scholastic expert's usual nostalgia for the past. But on the contrary, the book is refreshing in its call for more and greater reform. Wholly admirable is the deft and sure way in which many a pleading icon is overthrown—the formal attack on the complaint (the "demurrer"), the "facts constituting the cause of action," the limitations on summary judgment, and all the other paralyzing dogmas of the past and, unfortunately, the present. A single example: "No chapter in the history of the American codes is more conspicuous for jejune dialectic than that relating to the present matter [the exclusion of inconsistent defenses]" (p. 181).

It is impossible in a short review to convey adequately the flavor of this skillful blending of the past and present with an eye on the future. Since his critique of the latest and most modern systems is especially intriguing, I shall discuss that as a means of savoring the whole. Worthy of note is the fact that the author has studied the original drafts for the Federal Rules, and in several instances expresses regret that these, or suggestions in them, did not prevail. They include such matters as the manner of instituting suit and the service of process and the original form of the rule for amendments to conform to the proof. Since I worked through all this and in general sympathize with the author's views and criticisms, I cannot avoid some melancholy thoughts of what might have been. But reflection tells me that this is not the entire story.
The goal of mythical perfection had to be tempered to minimize the strong resentment of lawyers who were not prepared for so extensive a change. Certain compromises were desirable to promote both the spirit and the fact of uniformity. In retrospect I do not think those were great or too high a price to pay for the very wide support the rules have had. This aspect I think the author has overlooked—perhaps intentionally—in his call for greater accomplishment. A view to further progress is certainly desirable despite—or possibly even to counterbalance—occasional retrogressive attacks on the rules, well illustrated by the recent Pacific Coast plea for a return to alleging the facts of the cause of action.\(^3\)

This particular issue might receive a bit more of our attention, since the author's critique of the present rule's caution well illustrates the point I would make. The rules represent essentially a middle position based on the best common-law precedents steadily in use in the more moderate and successful code states.\(^4\) What the Western lawyers want is none too clear; they rather seem to have been influenced by some indiscriminate criticisms looking to the stricter procedure of only a few states and even there not consistently applied.\(^5\) But their clamor does illustrate the shock of lawyers at what is feared, no matter how erroneously, to be new. One can imagine their horror at the author's reasoned and fairly persuasive conclusion (p. 193) that "[t]he solution, we think, is to be found in the frank and unqualified acceptance ... of the principle that, so far as regards the statement of facts, no more should be asked of a pleading than that it give adequate notice of the claim or defense." While I can see nothing but confusion in the Western proposal, I still do think there is much to be said for the fair compromise of the rules. The present rule is in line with traditional habits of most well-informed lawyers and has thus proved its practicability; the pleading it envisages does give a considerable amount of valuable information for the case itself, for selection of the mode of trial, and for recognition and enforcement of the principle of res judicata; and the rule's comparative leniency avoids undue burdens and waste.\(^6\). These advantages are to be weighed against the complete indefiniteness of the seemingly attractive

\(^1\) The Ninth Circuit Judicial Conference has proposed as an amendment to the provision of Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(a) that the complaint shall contain "a short and plain statement of the claim showing that the plaintiff is entitled to relief" the further words "which statement shall contain the facts constituting the cause of action." Rep. Judicial Conf. of the U. S. 23 (Sept. 22-24, 1952). I have discussed this proposition somewhat more fully in my forthcoming review of Vandebilt, Cases and Materials on Modern Procedure and Judicial Administration (1952), in 62 Yale L. J. ..... (1953).


\(^3\) See e.g., City of Loganport v. Kihn, 159 Ind. 68, 64 N.E. 595 (1902); Frosch v. Sears, Roebuck & Co., 124 Conn. 300, 199 Atl. 646 (1938); Terner v. Glickstein & Terner, Inc., 283 N.Y. 299, 28 N.E.2d 846 (1940); see also Clark, Cases on Modern Pleading cc. 2, 3 (1952).

monopoly and free enterprise. by george w. stocking and myron w. watkins. new york: twentieth century fund. 1951. pp. xv, 596. $4.00.

the plan of the twentieth century fund's impressive survey, monopoly and free enterprise, follows the pattern of many congressional committee reports. the bulk of the work was written by the research staff, headed by george w. stocking and myron w. watkins. their findings (chs. 1-15) provide a background for the report and recommendations of the fund's committee on cartels and monopoly (ch. 16). in view of the fact that the chairman and three other members of the committee have annotated the report with occasional notes of individual disagreement, it is fair to surmise that the synthesis of the committee's views was also prepared by the staff.

to appraise a committee report fairly, it is necessary to know something about the record on which the report is based—what witnesses were

5. see cases cited in clark, cases on modern pleading 400-404 (1952), and clark, experience under the amendments to the federal rules of civil procedure, in federal rules of civil procedure and new title 28, u. s. code judiciary and judicial procedure 1, 6, 14, 24 (west pub. co., rev. ed. 1952).

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1. the committee included the following members: james m. landis (chairman), a. s. goss, marion hedges, donald m. nelson, frank m. surface, jacob viner, and j. raymond walsh.