

Criminal Law, by Peter Gillies, Sydney, Law Book Co., 1985, pp. i-lviii, 1-668 (paper back or hardbound).

This new textbook provides a clear, skilled and orthodox account of the substantive criminal law applicable in New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria. As a book aimed primarily at the student market, it seeks more to outline and describe the law than to risk preoccupation with the theoretical problems which underlie it. How successful the book is as an instructional aid depends on whether one believes that it is enough to offer a descriptive interpretation of the law without also revealing the darker complexities of the subject. Many believe that it is. My own preference is for a work more in the style of Glanville Williams' *Textbook of Criminal Law*, which tries steadfastly to induce a state of constructive discontent. But even so luminous a work as Williams' *Textbook* is limited by its medium of transmission. In an age of computerisation, the textbook may be obsolescent.

The textbook has to cope with several limitations. Most conspicuously, the scope of material is restricted, the cardinal rule of book publishing being that volume is determined by critical mass, meaning conveniently throwable weight. Secondly, the content presented is uniform, the diverse interests and differing abilities of readers being hit or missed by summaries, tiered discussion (as in Williams' *Textbook*), footnotes, flowcharts (as in Oxley-Oxland's *Principles of Criminal Law in New South Wales*) and other Caxtonian devices. Thirdly, material printed in textbooks usually dates rapidly, a problem only partly overcome by means of loose-leaf servicing, annotation, or tear-out. These limitations are hardly confined to short, introductory texts; the most ambitious and voluminous attempts to transcend the medium (e.g., Wigmore's *Evidence*; Arkin's *Business Crime*) are in essentially the same bind.

Consider, by contrast, that model of the modern master manual, the Selexitron, a computerised data processing system reputedly invented for lawyers by Woody Allen. The core of the Selexitron is an extensive, multi-authored, poly-functioned and constantly up-dated data bank from which subscribers can quickly withdraw information, by retrieval via a terminal or from optical storage devices used on a micro-computer. The Selexitron can be used in conjunction with existing legal data banks of case law and legislation (e.g., CLAWS) but its main purpose is to locate works of legal creation in the universe of ideas by providing extensive commentaries, argument generators, illustrious examples, and mind-blowing reflections. Another prime feature of the Selexitron is the ability it confers on any user to select that range of supplementary material which is likely to be pertinent to his or her particular interests or needs (impertinent material is available only on the black market). The search and retrieval techniques available for the selection of pertinent material are of course the epitome of sophistication and user-friendliness; it is said that these techniques emulate the artificial intelligence procedures pioneered in the closed reserve of our library.

A major advantage of the Selexitron lies in its capacity to provide greater access to the vast amount of useful material beyond the reach of textbooks. Unlike *Halsbury*, textbooks are hardly subject to a ban on the citation of contemporary books and periodical literature, but nonetheless are cramped by the conventional expectations and spatial limitations of the medium. Even in relation to case law, the usual focus of attention, the textbook leaves much to be desired. Take Bray's *Principles of Discovery*, a text from the last century recently exhumed and reprinted in New South Wales. Without denying the respect due to any victim of necrophilia, the treatment of particular cases in this tome is often wispy and hence frustrating for anyone who lacks the power to communicate with the author. The Selexitron, as conceived by its inventor, avoids any such wisps. The system is intended to make full use of the experience and resources of a wide group of living, interacting, on-line commentators, and to allow the inclusion of a wide range of material prepared by them. This material includes the following:

- (1) detailed analyses of cases and statutes;
- (2) comprehensive references to available legal commentaries and, at least for central issues, summaries or original text of the full spectrum of viewpoints emerging from those commentaries;
- (3) references to and summaries of useful material from other disciplines (e.g., economic, philosophical, historical, political perspectives);
- (4) references to instructive comparative material;
- (5) sample arguments (e.g., the argument of Dr. J. J. Bray, Q.C. in *Howe*); and
- (6) sample jury directions (as suggested by the approach taken in *McManus* by Street, C.J.; and recollect Dixon, J. in *Porter*).

Contributions from users would also be encouraged and, subject to editorial supervision, incorporated in the core data bank. For knowledge monopolists, shrinking violets, or those who fail to make the editorial grade, the Selexitron comes equipped with a personalised, top security, and free-field data base which can be popped up or down at will.

Another major advantage of the Selexitron is its ability to cater for the different interests and abilities of users. A full menu of instructional aids is available, at the touch of a single keystroke. Of these aids, the most versatile is an outline and text processor, entitled *Flex*, which enables the user to expand or contract chunks of information to whatever size desired. Any given case, statute or commentary can be reduced to a few poignant headings, distended to the grossest of conceivable academic, judicial or legislative proportions, or drawn back at any desired angle. Here we see an approach reminiscent of the nice triple-tiered discussion used in Williams' *Textbook* but enhanced greatly by the infinitely various capability of the computer to reshape the body of knowledge by the removal or addition of silicon. This remarkable property can be fully exploited on the Selexitron by means of various more specialised programs; these include *Incubate* (Erno Rubik's logical judgment writer and educational game, based on the deep structures of *Viro* and *He Kaw Teh*),

and *Despicon* (a program for converting legal text into Desperanto, the machine language of the Critical Legal Studies Movement).

This is not the place to canvas the technical difficulties of design and application that arise but almost certainly these are surmountable. Perhaps the greatest obstacle is the extent of the co-operative endeavour needed to make the Selexitronic Age happen. Lawyers traditionally have shown a strongly individualistic streak whereas effective information systems require the assiduous pooling of talent and expertise. However, the potential of the electric desk is such that even this obstacle may be overcome. Hopefully, the profession's vast collective intelligence will become more easily shared.

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