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George Dession

William O. Douglas
Supreme Court of the United States

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GEORGE HATHAWAY DESSION



GEORGE DESSION

I was on the Yale Law Faculty in 1931 when George Dession was elected to it, and I often thought in later years that our vote that day was one of the wisest we ever cast. For George Dession, then young, inexperienced and shy, slowly matured, gained confidence and stature, and emerged as the one individual who at the time of his sudden and premature death was doing the most creative thinking in American criminal law. His contributions were varied. He brought to the classroom and seminar a keen analytical mind and a tolerant and reflective attitude. He was not the dogmatic teacher nor the task master. His mind was truly open and inquiring, as he pursued law through all aspects of human motivation. He contributed widely to legal literature, writing and lecturing extensively. He was found at international conferences on criminology, searching everywhere for more enlightenment in the field of crime and criminals. He served his nation and his state on many public service assignments. He added greatly to the work of the Committee that drafted the Federal Rules of Criminal Procedure for the Supreme Court.

George Dession early reached a fork in the road that was to lead to the high country he explored so thoroughly. That new track appeared when the Institute of Human Relations was founded at Yale. Both he and I were associated with the Institute in its early years. We were indeed the first in law who joined hands with faculties of other disciplines in pursuit of a common goal. George Dession's partnership with psychiatry was long and enduring. It started when he took elementary courses in anatomy and pathology so that he would better understand the impact of stresses and tensions on blood and tissue and the interrelation between the psyche and the body. His exploration of psychiatry and anthropology enriched the law, for it resulted in his own reeducation and in the redefinition of the whole set of values which he had inherited from conventional legal theory.

George Dession was an exciting associate in the days when the revolutionary influence of intellectual curiosity first reached the Yale Law School. He lived only a part of his expected span. But in those brief years he dispelled much dogma and reoriented the thinking of the specialists in criminology. He redefined "the bad man" in terms of mental and social disorders, of family and community responsibilities, of local and international tensions. His search was for techniques of rehabilitation and of prevention. His work, in other words, was on the positive side. And he more than any other of this generation realized that that search took one far afield from "the law" in the conventional sense. His unique contribution was the development of the multi-disciplined inquiry. He drew from law, anthropology, psychiatry, and public health. He demonstrated the use of all the techniques that throw light on the emotional crises that boil up into neighborhood crimes or

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international episodes. He was well on his way to important discoveries when his untimely death occurred.

DECEMBER 15, 1955.

WILLIAM O. DOUGLAS,
Associate Justice, Supreme Court of the United States

GEORGE DESSION

For twenty-five years George Dession taught Criminal Law at the Yale Law School. It was my privilege to work with him for the last five years of his life.

During his first year of teaching, George took advanced work in anatomy, psychiatry, and psychology in the Yale School of Medicine to prepare himself for the law school's program of discipline integration. Thus began a fruitful collaboration with the Medical School, and notably the department of psychiatry, which continued throughout his life. But his broad interests and inquiring mind took him into other fields, such as sociology and anthropology, as well. Although many have advocated interdisciplinary training in law schools, George proceeded to exemplify it in his own person. His courses, seminars and publications always transcended departmental lines. Still, he was no cloistered scholar. He gave himself generously to the public service.

His James McCormick Mitchell Lecture, which is published in this issue of the Review, is the culmination of his years of study and experience. At the time of his death he was busy translating the postulates and principles there expressed into a Correctional Code for the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

It is perhaps too soon to appraise the full impact of his work upon basic criminal law theory but his influence upon legal education can be indicated.

In still too many law schools there is a tendency to deny expansion to and even diminish the course hours devoted to criminal law. This is due to at least two factors. First, the view that a course in criminal law should be concerned chiefly with the traditional specific crimes. Second, the belief that graduates will not engage in the practice of criminal law. Indeed, they should not be encouraged to do so because of social disapproval and the hazardous financial returns. That these factors should be major determinants of law school curricula should be of deep concern to any educator. They were rejected by George Dession.