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George Dession

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IN MEMORIAM GEORGE H. DESSION

working together in close harmony. For us as lawyers, however, and to the legislators in whatever country, it is imperative to pay full heed to Dession's final exhortation not to place the whole burden on the psychiatrist, but to provide for him the tools required; i.e., "a civilized Code of Correction."

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GEORGE DESSION

George Dession died at an age when most men are just beginning to reach the height of a distinguished academic career and much can still be expected of them. But he had already made a mature contribution to the field of criminal law and criminal science, and his balanced and sober judgment was valued by all his colleagues.

He recognised the importance of criminal law as a dogmatic discipline, but he was no less convinced that in order to prevent its becoming sterile, it must be seen in relation to the changing needs of society. The working of the machinery of justice, the treatment of offenders, experiments in penal institutions were all to him matters which deserved careful investigation and a prominent place in the curriculum of a legal training. But his disciplined mind held him from any excess.

When giving evidence before the Royal Commission on capital punishment, on the vexed question of criminal liability in relation to mental disorders, he advocated that the law should be widened, but was nevertheless firmly convinced that such cases should be covered by a clear legal formula and the final determination should rest with the courts. Or again, when expounding the desirability of indeterminate sentences for purposes of correction or protection, he was anxious that every safeguard should be evolved to preserve a proper balance between the interests of society and the freedom of the individual.

The address which he delivered before the Conference of Comparative Law convened by Professor Hamson in Cambridge gave rise to much thought with regard to the legal position of the accused. On that occasion many of my Cambridge colleagues made his acquaintance for the first time, and were deeply impressed by the breadth and analytical bent of his mind.

He took a genuine interest in the work of others and was always ready to

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help them. Nothing gave him greater pleasure than to see another man making a contribution to the study to which his own contribution had been so valuable.

It was my privilege to enjoy his hospitality at Yale and to reciprocate it at Cambridge. His simplicity and informality made him one of the most delightful companions and his death has bereaved me, and many others, of a very dear friend.

LEON RADZINOWICZ

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GEORGE DESSION

Some people you remember best for the brilliance or profundity of the work they did. Some you remember in a more personal but still intellectual way for their off-the-top charm or their wit or their wisdom. But some you remember for their sheer human-ness as human beings—and of such was George Dession.

I knew George for more than a quarter-century—first as a fellow student, then as a faculty colleague, always as a friend. He was always shy and hated being shy and tried to hide it. The deliberately slow, studied speech, the deliberately long, loping stride, the uncontrollably quick smile of a kindly Satan—these gave him away. It was not his mental sparkle that won people to him. It was not even his uncommonly courteous and genuine concern with what others had to say. It was rather the vastly appealing just-below-the-surface vulnerability, that made him seem a sort of Peck's Bad Boy, out of France by way of Brooklyn, play-acting at being a brain.

For years around Yale, George's absent-mindedness—which is a synonym for single-minded concentration on the important—was so legendary that it became impossible to tell the true from the apocryphal. There was the time when he finished his criminal law lectures for the term, waited with hesitant expectation for the student applause that comes (whether spontaneously or merely politely) at the end of every course, and then walked sadly out of a silent room, wondering if he was really that bad—only to learn later that the course had another day to go. There was the time when he bought an attractive lady a drink in the club-car of the train to New York and hoped, before he loped off in Grand Central, that he might some day run into her again—only to be told that she was the wife of a new colleague, at whose home George had had dinner a couple of evenings before. There are scores of such tales.