

CONCERNING THE READING OF MANY BOOKS.

Blackstone or Kent, can there be a reasonable doubt that his knowledge on all or nearly all the subjects would have been ten or twenty fold? Mr. Warren tells, in his admirable work on "Law Studies," that he once asked one of the most eminent political writers of the day, one who had been, on several occasions, signally successful in attacking the opinions of lawyers in parliament, how it was that, not being a lawyer, he was completely *at home* on legal subjects. "Why," was the reply, "I *study* a book which you lawyers only talk about or look down upon, Blackstone's Commentaries."

It is a conceded fact in military science, that a few disciplined forces are far more efficient than a much larger number of undisciplined men, and the same is true in the law. A few books, thoroughly mastered, will furnish a knowledge that will make one stronger and better able to cope with difficulties, than any number of books but half understood or remembered; or, as the Germans put it—and none better understand practical education—"nothing is so prolific as a little known well." The old Latin proverb reminds us of this fact—*Cave ab homine unius libri*—beware of the man of one book. He will always be found to be a formidable antagonist. His intimate knowledge of one great author will saturate his mind with the excellencies of that author's genius, will shape and sharpen his faculties, and he will be like a man who sleeps with armor on, ready at the moment. While, of course, in the law it is impossible to be a "man of one book" literally, yet, in its spirit and true meaning, it is not only possible, but desirable; that is, to pursue one system, to choose a few authors and to be thorough in a limited sphere, rather than superficial in one more extended. Sir William Jones, it is said, *invariably* read through every year the works of Cicero; Demosthenes copied and re-copied the history of Thucydides eight times; Montesquieu was a constant student of Tacitus; Chatham read Barrow's sermons until he could repeat most of them from memory; Webster read Plutarch's lives every year. These are but few of the hundreds of worthy witnesses who have, by example, testified to the value of iteration and reiteration. Each had his particular object, and how well he accomplished it we know. If logic or style or diction can be thus best

acquired, so can the law. The student who shall take Blackstone or Kent and make that *his book*, who shall have it ever at hand, read, re-read, "marked and quoted;" who shall make incursions into other treatises and the reports, only to illustrate it and trace its doctrines, will have a more thorough, practical and comprehensive knowledge of the law than though he had gone through the entire curriculum of the law schools. In re-reading a book a man does not get precisely the same information that he did on the first reading, for the interval between the readings will call attention to a new order of facts, and, like the bits of glass in the kaleidoscope, they will assume new combinations and make new impressions.

There are very few legal text-books that should be read through, "from cover to cover." The others ought to be studied on particular topics in connection with the few aforesaid. It is a well-known fact that Dr. Johnson said he never read any book through but the Bible, yet Adam Smith said, "Johnson knew more books than any man alive." The secret of this is easily found in Boswell's remark: "He had a peculiar facility in seizing at once what was valuable in any book without submitting to the labor of perusing it from beginning to end."

This faculty of getting directly at what one desires in a book is of supreme value to the law student, and one which he can cultivate and greatly improve by confining his chief attention to a few books and using the others only as adjuncts. We are not speaking of the reports, for to them the student should constantly turn, but, as a rule, only in connection with the particular topic that he is pursuing in his text-book. He should carefully examine the authorities cited by his author and what later leading cases he can find on the subject, should master the facts and the reasons on which the decisions are based, and should then write out his results as a kind of annotation to his treatise. This process will make "every man his own author," will train his intellect, develop his reasoning powers, fix legal principles in his memory and make him a more thorough lawyer than any number of years' careless, half-interested, reading "by course," could do. He will have the substance instead of the shadow of real knowledge.—*Albany Law Journal*.