Book Review. Maestro, M. T., Voltaire and Beccaria as Reformers of Criminal Law

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Book Reviews


The above monograph is a study of the influence of two great 18th century intellectuals on the reform of the criminal law. Since it deals especially with the continental reform movement, it supplements the better known contemporary English history. The chief thesis is that Beccaria's book supplied Voltaire with special knowledge to implement the latter's battle against brutality and fanaticism in the treatment of accused and convicted persons. Voltaire added little to Beccaria's stock of ideas in this field, and while he generally agreed with his criticism of the prevailing law and procedure, he never took as rigorous a stand against the death penalty, nor against the use of torture as did Beccaria. But Voltaire was the outstanding publicist of the new liberal era, and Mr. Maestro credits the victory of Beccaria's ideas in the criminal law of continental Europe largely to Voltaire's advocacy.

It can hardly be stated that the author has adequately met the challenge of the momentous problems raised by his subject. His most important contribution is the description of Voltaire's activities in criminal law reform. This is set forth in a matter-of-fact manner, and the author nowhere probes deeply into the many important potentialities of what he narrates. An appended bibliography will be helpful to anyone interested in the 18th and 19th century criminal law reform. Understanding of that period and that history is essential to adequate knowledge of our own law. Many of the problems which agitate us were warmly debated then. Until the rise of the current dictatorships, the 18th century history of criminal law seemed to many, a curious, even irrelevant, sort of experience. We ought to know better now; and, though one may not hope for uniformity on such issues, certainly it would seem almost axiomatic that at least the specialists in this field would feel impelled to probe carefully into the illuminating 18th century literature on criminal law and its reform. Mr. Maestro's book will be a helpful guide to many important sources, and it is a welcome addition to the literature for that reason.

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Mr. Fink's survey of the field of social work is a well organized and readable volume. Following a highly condensed history of philanthropy during the past three hundred years, major emphasis is given to the practice of social case work in various settings. The concluding chapters present an analysis of social group work and community organization. Both the structure of the book and the textual material serve to define the limits of case work practice in relation to social work as a whole and at the same time to point up its basic importance. Each chapter, except the historical introduction, is followed by a case history or description of the process of social work in operation. They serve principally to enrich the