Frederick Henry Lawson
1897–1983

Frederick Henry were Lawson's baptismal names, but he was universally known as Harry and the name suited the terrier-like enthusiasm, quickness of intelligence and lack of false dignity which characterized him to the end. He was the first occupant of the first permanent chair of Comparative Law in the United Kingdom and contributed decisively to the establishment and definition of the subject in this country. One of the most fertile, perceptive and stimulating legal writers of his generation, he was able in the course of his long life both to make the methods of thought of the Civil lawyer intelligible to his Common law counterpart and also (and perhaps to an even greater extent) to cast an original light on many aspects of the Common law itself.

Lawson was born at Leeds on 14 July 1897, the only child of a wool merchant of the same names. He was educated at Leeds Grammar School, where he was on the classical side in the sixth form, and it was in classics that, like many other able Yorkshire grammar school boys, he won a Hastings Exhibition (and later an honorary scholarship) at the Queen's College, Oxford in 1915 and was also awarded an Akroyd Scholarship. He had always, however, wanted to be a historian and most of his outside reading as a schoolboy had been in history. When, therefore, at the end of the war (in which he saw commissioned service in an anti-aircraft regiment) he returned to Queen's he shifted to Modern History, retaining, as he afterwards put it, enough Latin and Greek for future use. Having obtained a First after two years he turned to Law and only one year later was again placed in the first class. (When, 45 years later, he wrote The Oxford Law School, 1850–1965, he recalled with affection tutorials with Holdsworth, then in his last year as a tutor at St John's, before succeeding to the Vinerian Chair). He was called to the Bar by Gray's Inn in 1923 and read for a time in chambers with the well-known Chancery junior Wilfred Hunt, but he was determined on an academic career and soon returned to
Oxford. Tutorial fellowships in law were then rare, however, and he was 33 before he finally became established, when the retirement of Sir John Miles from his tutorial fellowship left a vacancy at Merton. The intervening seven years were spent in a succession of short-term positions. (He sat the All Souls fellowship examination three times, but, as he used wryly to put it, joined the distinguished company of those who were not elected.)

His first lecturership was at University College and this, though it lasted for only a year, had an important consequence. For C. K. Allen, then the law tutor at that college, suggested that Lawson should join with the history tutor, David Keir, in producing for the first time a case-book on constitutional law. The result was ‘Keir and Lawson’, which went through six editions between 1928 and 1979. The book was directed mainly to the Law School, but also to those reading History. For, as Lawson later said,1 ‘English constitutional law was then for both of us the backbone of the History School’. Lawson’s interest here also echoed the teaching of Holdsworth.

Constitutional law, including what came to be called Administrative Law, remained one of Lawson’s central concerns, though to a diminishing extent as he grew older (he was assisted in the sixth edition of the casebook, after the death of Keir, by D. J. Bentley). His first publication was indeed a radical rewriting of the relevant part of Stephen’s Commentaries on the Laws of England. This eventually, after two further editions, appeared as an independent book, with the collaboration of D. J. Bentley, as Constitutional and Administrative Law (1961). Lawson also assisted Holdsworth in the editing of the long chapter on Constitutional Law in the 2nd edition of Halsbury’s Laws of England, a chapter of which he was the chief editor in the subsequent two editions. He was also influential in less visible ways. Over the years he had a large correspondence with Crown officers when he was consulted by them on problems of public law or when he wrote with queries of his own. (It was because he pointed out that the President of the Board of Trade had for 23 years been sitting unlawfully in the House of Commons that The President of the Board of Trade Act 1932 was passed.) In 1956 he submitted a powerful criticism of English administrative law to the Franks Committee on Administrative Tribunals and Enquiries and shortly afterwards was the first to publish a proposal for the adoption of the institution of the Ombudsman. Perhaps his most original contribution in this field is his article on Dicey Revisited,2 which brings

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1 This, and other autobiographical statements in what follows, are derived from a brief account included in Essays in Memory of Professor F. H. Lawson, ed. Peter Wallington & Robert M. Merkin (1986), pp. 11–12.
together his qualities as an administrative lawyer, a comparatist and a historian. He argues that most of the criticisms of Dicey’s attack on French droit administratif fail to take account of the state of French law when Dicey was writing.

In 1975 Merton College offered a temporary Research Fellowship in Roman law and Lawson was elected (combining this position with lectureships at, successively, Christ Church and Corpus Christi College). At the suggestion of Sir John Miles he decided to make a study of Byzantine Law and for this purpose spent a year at Göttingen. This had two consequences. The most immediate was the publication of two valuable articles, one a scholarly exposition of the nature of the Basilica,¹ and the other (in German) a careful criticism of Heimbach’s edition, based on an examination of parts of the principal manuscript.² These publications more than justified Miles’s belief in him, but Byzantine law was much too cramped and unoriginal a subject for Lawson’s wide-ranging and mercurial mind and he never returned to it. It was therefore the second consequence of his stay at Göttingen which was permanently important in his life. He was introduced in seminars to comparative work on the English law of contract and this stimulated in him a desire, as he put it, to take a broad view of the law.

With his election to a tutorial fellowship at Merton in 1930 Lawson achieved stability and with his marriage three years later to Elspeth Webster the serene course of his life was set. As was then the practice, he taught a very wide range of subjects and this, though it curtailed his published work, undoubtedly helped him to take that broad view of the law on which he had determined in Göttingen and to cultivate that unencumbered grasp of principle which marked his subsequent books and articles. He was also, in 1931, elected to the All Souls Readership in Roman Law in succession to H. F. Jolowicz. This called for a considerable amount of lecturing and though, as he himself put it, he never became a real specialist in the subject, Roman law was at least the starting-point of much of his writing. His last article indeed, published in the year before his death, was a study of institutional writing from Gaius to the present day.

Though he wrote a great deal, talk was Lawson’s characteristic medium. In talk, whether in a tutorial or in a common room conversation, he would reveal an astonishing range of the most diverse interests and information. Professor Richard Cobb recalled in The Times the experience of Merton historians in the second half of the 1930s who attended his

tutorials on Constitutional Law cases for Pass Moderations. ‘These, held in his house in Kybald Street, always began at 9 a.m. and invariably lasted till 1 p.m. In the first hour there might indeed be a predictable point of departure: the Ship Money case, or Regina versus the Liverpool Water Board; but Harry would soon be heading down a sideline or a succession of sidelines, as we went through, at the speed of an express, Yorkshire Regionalism, what was written, in golden letters, on the inside of the dome of Leeds County Hall, the family relationships of Victorian men and women of letters, or of American Supreme Court judges: “As you know, Justice Humphreys married the niece of Chief Justice Holmes”. We did not know, but we felt flattered ... The sheer unpredictability of the four-hour journey was part of the ever-renewed charm of these amazing tutorials, given by Harry standing up and smoking cigarette after cigarette until, on the stroke of one from Merton clock, Mrs Lawson would appear, saying, in her Scottish accent, as if it were time to call a stop to the fun: “Harry, come along now, it’s time for your lunch” and he would follow her down a corridor, still talking ... His curiosity was inexhaustible and remained so all his long and generous life; and it extended to the most improbable subjects. His availability to former pupils was equally limitless. The information that he imparted, with as much enjoyment to himself as to his listeners, was of great interest ... I have never listened to anyone with so much enjoyment and profit’.

The same was true of his conversation, though one had to be agile to keep up with the kaleidoscope: Professor R. F. V. Heuston has written somewhere of the endearing Lawsonian habit of beginning the next subject but one before the current one is finished’. But talk was also a means of sorting out his ideas or indeed of causing new ones to enter his mind. This was especially true of his lectures. He would return from a lecture to first year students, for example, and say that he had been telling them about an idea which had occurred to him as he spoke; and what did one think of it? It would often consist of what he called ‘taking a section through’ a subject or an institution, in other words approaching it from an altogether unconventional angle and asking unconventional questions about it.

His books or articles would also sometimes begin as talk, not because they were lectures but because he would dictate the first draft and then correct it. His book on The Law of Property took shape in this way. He would walk around the large table in his room in Brasenose, while a secretary took down his words on his ancient typewriter (surely the smallest ever made before the advent of the portable). The conversational style of much of his writing gives it its simplicity and lucidity.

Tutorial teaching, for one so prodigal of his hours, left little time for
large-scale writing beyond what has already been mentioned, but the seedbed for his later books and articles was being laid down. In the years immediately after 1945 he collaborated with C. H. S. Fifoot, his opposite number as All Souls Reader in English Law, in a series of seminars devoted to a comparison of particular aspects of English law and Roman and modern Civil law. These attracted a number of the able and mature men from Britain and the Commonwealth who were returning from the war. For the combination of Lawson’s fertile, unconventional, questioning mind and wide range of learning with Fifoot’s sardonic, witty command of English case-law provided an unusually stimulating challenge. Out of one of these seminars there grew Lawson’s article on *The Passing of Property and Risk in Sale of Goods,* which, by a comparison with Roman law and modern Civil law, elucidated the meaning and practical working of the Sale of Goods Act’s concepts of risk, property as between buyer and seller, and title.

A little earlier he had published his seminal article on *The Duty of Care in Negligence.* This grew out of the edition of the Digest title on the *lex Aquilia,* together with other relevant ancient texts, which he was preparing and which appeared in 1950 as *Negligence in the Civil Law.* This followed the (peculiarly English) tradition of commentaries on individual Digest titles, but departed from it most noticeably by including passages from modern codes and extensive extracts from the leading French cases and related doctrinal writings. What amounted to a series of essays on the modern law was woven into the systematic account of the Roman law contained in the Introduction. The book was thus the first published attempt in the Common law world to produce a teaching instrument for Comparative Law. It suffered from the disadvantage that the treatment of the modern law was no more than incidental to the exposition of the Roman law and in any event universities were slow to include any modern Civil law in their syllabuses. Moreover, the connexion between the problems which agitation the Romans and those which are the main concern of modern Civil lawyers is tenuous and there was therefore a discontinuity between the two aspects of the book. Its main use in fact was in the teaching of Roman law from a comparative standpoint and for this purpose it was a lively, stimulating instrument. The commentary on the texts did not attempt to incorporate the most advanced continental scholarship (and from a pragmatic teaching point of view this was sensible), but it took every advantage of the challenge of the complex casuistry which marks this part of the law.

Thirty years later the emphasis of the teaching in British universities

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had changed. The study of Roman law, particularly at the Digest level, was in steep decline and the modern Civil law was attracting much more attention. Lawson therefore undertook a new edition in collaboration with B. S. Markesinis, under the title *Tortious Liability for Unintentional Harm in the Common Law and the Civil Law* (2 vols, 1982). This amounted to a new (and much larger) book, the greater part of which was the work of his collaborator. Whereas the main focus of the original book had been on Roman law, the emphasis now was on modern French and German law. An updated version of the original systematic account of the Roman law survived, but the commentary on the texts (now only in translation) was omitted, the main source material being extensive extracts from German and French cases. In a sense therefore the new book marked the success of Lawson’s original opening to the modern law, but with only a token acknowledgement of his constantly recurring theme of the connexion between the modern law and Roman law. As has already been said, however, this was probably inevitable in the case of the *lex Aquilia*.

All this, however, is to anticipate. *Negligence in the Civil Law* was largely completed before Lawson’s election to the new chair of Comparative Law at Oxford in 1948. His election, which set him free from the preoccupations of tutorial teaching, marked the beginning of the long and productive second phase of his life. It also made him a Fellow of Brasenose College. Being, as the obituary notice in *The Times* said, ‘a fundamentally unassuming, even diffident, man, with a good sense of the obligations of corporate life, and the rare virtue of a complete absence of malice, he was universally liked. His wide range of interests and his astonishing memory for strangely assorted facts made him amusing and stimulating both as a conversationalist and as an interviewer of candidates for fellowships’.

As Professor he was free from tutorial teaching, but he was in the unusual position that his subject was prescribed for no examination in the University and therefore, though he had a succession of graduate students, mainly from overseas, he had no obvious audience for lectures. There were seminars, particularly, every now and then, a highly regarded one with K. C. Wheare (joined by others from time to time) on ‘Drafting a British Constitution’, and informal meetings in his room in Brasenose to take advantage of the presence of a visitor, such as, for one term, a class on Sale with Arthur Sutherland of Harvard Law School. (In the very early years the frail figure of Martin Wolff, remembered with admiration by those who heard his lectures in Berlin before 1933, was persuaded to take part in such meetings.) And sometimes the more perceptive third year lawyers at Brasenose would be sent one evening a week to be talked to, no doubt in a style which Professor Cobb would have found familiar, and thus to emerge with wider horizons. But his public lectures were mainly on Roman law.
(which then occupied a much larger place in the syllabus than it does now).

One of the familiar consequences of being a successful innovator is that in later years one’s ideas are taken for granted. This has been true of Lawson. As the proponent of a new subject (and one which some weighty opinion regarded as lightweight and practised only by those not capable of tough, ‘black-letter’ law), he not infrequently spoke at large about how it should develop. Forty years after his election to the chair, when the subject is widely accepted and practised, many of his ideas seem commonplace. He did not favour an approach which was confined to the comparisons of whole systems. As he put it,7 ‘attempts to compare one law as a whole with another law as a whole are not only very difficult but apt to be dangerously misleading. Legal systems do not add up in that way. Yet the general study of a foreign legal system is a necessary part of the work of a comparative lawyer; for he cannot hope to handle even a small part of a foreign law for purposes of comparison unless he has at the back of his mind a picture of that law as a whole. Personally I still hanker after the universal, but I know that the only way that I can approach it is by swinging backwards and forwards between general studies in which comparison plays a very small part and the comparative treatment of detailed problems. The comparative study of law is only a step to higher things.’

Again, he insisted that the significant differences between Common law and Civil law were not to be found in their particular rules, but in their conceptual apparatus and their methods of thought. It was the way in which a given system formulated its questions that interested him, not the answers (which were often in broad substance the same). ‘Legal concepts’ he said,8 ‘are the tools with which the lawyer does his most creative work, and it seems absurd that comparative lawyers should neglect precisely this part of legal science’. He liked to say that Comparative law should equip a student to use the index of a foreign law book. For the index would reflect the system’s conceptual structure and a grasp of that structure was one of the things which Comparative law should give to a student. And he would also say that Comparative law should enable a student to take a detached view of his own system.

It was not only, however, concepts and doctrines which interested him. He was very far from wishing to live in Thering’s heaven of juristic concepts. One of the objects of the ‘taking of a section’ through a subject which has been mentioned above was certainly to reveal its structure, but another was to see how it worked and what purposes it served. ‘I think that

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law has suffered because few attempts have been made to describe it on any but orthodox and commonplace lines. From the practitioner's point of view there is, of course, much to be gained from uniformity of treatment and, above all, uniformity of order, for he knows where to look for the answers to his problems. From the academic point of view, on the other hand, it is worthwhile from time to time to see whether the law changes its shape when looked at from a different direction.'

His writings reflect all these interests. Three years after his election to the Chair, he gave the third series of Hamlyn Lectures, on The Rational Strength of English Law. In them he set out 'to correct an opinion widespread not only among laymen but among lawyers that English law is essentially disorderly and irrational. It is, I think, peculiarly incumbent on me as a comparative lawyer to undertake this task because there is a general impression that foreign law, especially the various systems which operate on the Continent of Europe, is very different from English law in this respect, being essentially neat and rational. I hope to show not only that foreign law does not invariably have these characteristics, but also that there is at the heart of English law a very strong element of rationality and that it is by no means a mere accumulation of separate rules laid down by statutes, regulations or the successive judgments of the courts'. This claim appeared most paradoxical in relation to the law of property, which many English lawyers and certainly nearly all foreign observers would have said was an impenetrable thicket of feudal survivals. And yet it was here that Lawson's claim was most successfully made out. The book demonstrated his gift, rare among lawyers, for the fruitful generalization and his courageous readiness to use it in an area generally regarded as highly technical.

He returned to this subject in what is probably his most original book, Introduction to the Law of Property (1958), the first volume in the Clarendon Law Series. Apart from occasional recourse to Roman law to illuminate by contrast the English, this is a book devoted entirely to making intelligible in a modern context the English law. And yet it could hardly have been written by anyone without that 'detached view', mentioned above, which comes from familiarity with other systems. The law of property, he said, had a well-deserved reputation as one of the most difficult parts of English law, but this was because its general philosophy and purpose were obscured by the historical bias traditionally found in the teaching of the subject. This bias resulted in undue emphasis being given to exceptions and inconsistencies which were often historical survivals and which, though they must in the end be grasped, should not be allowed to distract attention from the clear patterns of the law. He therefore broke away altogether from the traditional, historical approach and looked at the
subject from the point of view of its conceptual structure and, even more importantly, of its functions in modern economic life. This was Lawson at his best, taking a section through a familiar subject and giving it, even for the expert, a new appearance. And all this was done within a small compass: the book was not more than 100,000 words long. On the other hand, the book was least successful in achieving Lawson’s original purpose, expressed in the title, of providing an introduction for the beginner, who would then go on to the standard books. It was too difficult for most beginners, but for the better student who had made his way to an understanding of the traditional expositions, Lawson’s book could come as a revelation. A second edition, in collaboration with Professor B. A. Rudden, appeared in 1982.

In an earlier book, *A Common Lawyer Looks at the Civil Law* (1955), originally delivered as the Cooley Lectures at the University of Michigan, he set out to make the Civil law intelligible to the Common lawyer. His starting-point, as always, was Roman law, but from there he proceeded, by a characteristic combination of broad historical sweeps and sensitive conceptual analysis, to a discursive account of the main institutions of the Civil law. Reference has already been made to Lawson’s gift for generalization and it is well exemplified in this book. He points, for example, to the Roman lawyers’ lack of interest in generalization, or at least in making their generalizations express, and then goes on, in one of the five lectures, to present what he entitles ‘The Advance Beyond Roman Law’ in terms of a series of generalizations which the Romans failed to make, but which were made by their successors. Again, he liked to say, and says in these lectures, that Roman law was a law of movement in the sense that ‘little of the law in the books is concerned to describe what is; everywhere the question is how does a particular legal situation come into existence and how will it disappear?’.

Lawson also had a gift for editing other men’s works. Apart from the works on constitutional law which have been referred to above, mention should be made of Buckland and McNair’s *Roman Law and Common Law*, to which he added a number of characteristic excurses expressing his own ideas, and Amos and Walton’s *Introduction to French Law*, in two editions of which he joined with A. E. Anton and L. Neville Brown. He also did much editing of journals. He was joint Editor of the *Journal of Comparative Legislation and International Law* from 1948 until it ceased to publish in 1952 and from then until 1956 of its successor the *International and Comparative Law Quarterly*. From 1955 to 1961 he edited the *Journal of the Society of Public Teachers of Law*. To all these (and to other periodicals) he contributed many notes and reviews. He was indeed an incisive reviewer and was capable on occasion of much more severe
criticism than might have been expected from one so charitable and unwilling to wound. This was another aspect of his enthusiasm for examining, which he maintained until quite late in life and which was motivated by his delight in detecting and encouraging quality wherever he found it.

All through these years and right up to the year before his death there was a steady flow of articles. Most of these were collected in 1977 in the two volumes of his Selected Essays, entitled respectively Many Laws and The Comparison.

He had a remarkable gift for languages and was always attempting to master some new one. He would assure those less adventurous than himself that it was really quite easy ‘if you take a run at it’. This ease in other languages and his uncomplicated friendliness made him much-liked on the continent, where he was a familiar figure at meetings of lawyers. He was for a time the Secretary-General of the International Association of Legal Science and a member of the International Social Science Council. For the International Encyclopaedia of Comparative Law he was Chief Editor of the volume on Property. He had honorary doctorates from Frankfurt, Ghent, Glasgow, Lancaster, Louvain and Paris and was elected a member of the Accademia dei Lincei.

He was also a frequent visitor to the United States. He had friends among Americans whom he had taught at Oxford and he held visiting appointments at law schools over there during periods of sabbatical leave. For a number of years he took part in a summer school for judges at the New York University Law School and this gave rise to an extensive correspondence with these ‘pupils’. But over and above all this, the extent and variety of America, both geographically and socially, fascinated him and he had a great liking for Americans. He accumulated a remarkable collection of those books on the individual states of the union which were one of the by-products of the New Deal.

The prospect of the opening of the new Bodleian Law Library (which eventually took place in 1964) prompted a proposal that a history of the School in modern times should be written and Lawson was invited to write it. The book suffered various delays, but it was eventually published in 1968 under the title The Oxford Law School 1850–1965. (The opening date was determined by the fact that it was in that year that the Final Honour School of Law and Modern History was created; until then there had been for a great many years virtually no teaching of law at Oxford.) Lawson was ideally suited for the task by reason of his historical bent, of his vast accumulation of information and of the fact that he had been an active member of the faculty for the last 40 years of his period. He did, however, voice his regret that the generation before his had not thought to record
their share in and knowledge of the earlier period. For lack of this, he said in his Preface, much unrecorded knowledge of persons and policies had disappeared. If the writing of this book had been further postponed, 'the lore of yet another generation would have been lost, together with what they remembered hearing from their predecessors. For the history of an academic institution cannot profitably be written merely from books or other documents; tradition and even gossip, however imperfectly preserved, must play their part.' He himself, we may add, was an unrivalled repository of lore, tradition, gossip and anecdote. His gossip, however, was never malicious, nor were his anecdotes mere jokes. And he took vast pains to explore the written records and to tap the memory of colleagues. The result is a fascinating account of policies and personalities (though inevitably it loses some of its liveliness as it comes to those then still alive). Moreover, as he himself recognized in the Preface, the moment of publication was more significant than had been expected when the book was first thought of, nearly a decade earlier. For radical changes had been made in the curriculum shortly before the book was published and the size of the Faculty was growing fast. What had been intended as a celebration of the new library marked in fact the end of an era and the emergence of what was in many ways a new School. One of the features of the new School was the inclusion of Comparative Law in the syllabus.

By this time, however, Lawson had left Oxford. His tenure of the Chair came to an end in 1964, but that was very far from the end of his active life. For the next 13 years Elspeth and he settled in Lancaster, where he characteristically found an opportunity to teach in the newly emerging university. (He also taught part-time for some years at the University of Manchester, travelling down by train and staying overnight.) It was not until near the end of his time at Lancaster that the law school was founded (with advice and assistance from him), but that, it need hardly be said, was no obstacle to Harry's being busily engaged in teaching a wide variety of courses. He would talk to European History students about the Dreyfus case, to students of French about the differences between the French and English legal systems, or, as Professor S. Hussey remembers, to students of literature on the trial sequence in Camus' L'Étranger, comparing contemporary legal procedure with its fictional treatment. And, when the Business School established itself, he taught the law necessary for the accountants' qualification. Teaching was only part of his activities in these years. There were new editions of books and the flow of articles continued, only slightly abated. The principal new book was Remedies of English Law (1972; 2nd edn, with H. Teff, 1980). This again was a breaking of new ground, taking a section through a number of subjects. It was not then customary to separate off remedies and to treat them independently of the
substantive law, though now, 20 years later, courses on Remedies are not uncommon. Lawson’s book was the first to attempt to provide a survey of the whole field of the means of redress. Like all Lawson’s best work, it is a conspectus, not a catalogue, elementary without being superficial. It has the courage to simplify in order to generalize and the insight to make clear the functions of what he is dealing with. It is a book on English law and the references to modern Civil law or to Roman law are tangential and brief, but it could not have been written by anyone without Lawson’s easy familiarity with foreign systems.

In 1977, when he was 80, Harry returned to his native Yorkshire (though in the unfamiliar guise of Teesside) where Elspeth and he could be near their son. Lancaster conferred on him an honorary Doctorate of Laws and set up an annual Lawson Lecture. As Professor Hussey records, the honorary degree ‘was certainly one of the most popular the University has given and at one of the best attended ceremonies’.

After leaving Lancaster he was far from idle. There were new editions of four of his books in the last four years of his life, and articles and reviews. It was on Teesside that he died on 15 May 1983.

BARRY NICHOLAS

Note. Obituary notices and other appreciations were published in: The Times, 17 and (Professor Cobb) 28 May 1983; Revue internationale de droit comparé, 35 (1983), 593-6; Oxford Journal of Legal Studies, 4 (1984), 153, reprinted in Essays in Memory of Professor F. H. Lawson (above, n. 1), together with an appreciation by Professor S. Hussey of his time at Lancaster, from which quotations appear above. The same volume of Essays contains a bibliography of his writings, extending to 264 items.