

## BOOK REVIEW

RON LANSING,

*Skylarks and Lecterns : A Law School Charter*

(1986) Huddleston-Brown Publishers Inc., Port Washington N.Y.

Price not available.

I suppose that I ought to explain, or justify, why I should be reviewing a novel in a scholarly journal. First, I was Visiting Professor and Senior Fullbright Scholar at Northwestern School of Law at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon, in the first half of 1986, and a permanent faculty member was the author of *Skylarks and Lecterns*, Professor Ronald B. Lansing. Second, during the course of our professional association, I discovered that Ron and I had many academic interests in common, especially we had the shared view that much of modern legal inquiry and, in particular, writing was unimaginative, and Ron Lansing's address to the Editors of American Law Reviews ('The Creative Bridge Between Authors and Editors' (1986) 45 *Maryland L.R.* 241) amply demonstrates his commitment to that philosophy.

Ron Lansing's novel, *Skylarks and Lecterns*, corroborates my appreciation of his other writings (apart from the *Maryland L.R.* piece, *supra*,) there is, 'The Motherless Calf, Aborted Cow Theory of Cause' (1984) 15 *Environmental Law* 1, in which I also take enormous pleasure for its wit and insight. In short, *Skylarks and Lecterns* is a joy. It is wholly different from *The Paperchase* (1971) by John Jay Osborn, which provided the basis of a (too?) successful film and television series, and the wholly autobiographical *One L* (1977) by Scott Turow which are both unashamedly situated at the Harvard Law School. *Skylarks and Lecterns* describes a semester at the Welden Hall School of Law of Litchfield College which, the author is at pains to point out, does not, together with its denizens, exist.

The novel is divided into 60 (LX) articles which individually refer to particular incidents in the life of the law school and each is wittily and concisely labelled. (E.g. *Article XV*, 'Student Counselling: "Tailoring and Mending"'; *Article LIV*, 'Academic Dismissal: "Sandpapering the Lion's Tail"'; *Article LVII*, 'Computerized Record: "A Bit on a Byte"'). Some of us will be more aware of particular aspects of the authors description than others, but there will be few law teachers, especially those who have spent some time in North America, who will not have directly encountered a fair few of Ron Lansing's sixty articles.

*Skylarks and Lecterns* is loosely based round the career of an entering student called Daniel Stocles, although Stocles is by no means a dominant character — other students, administrators and faculty members operate independently of, though tangentially to, him. Daniel's career is compared with that of other students, in particular in relation to faculty members. Stocles is an almost ideal entrant — a graduate of a good college with an adequate LSAT — although some admittees, and potential admittees, are less so. Stocles does deservedly well, although other students do not, for one reason or another.

There are some wonderful passages in *Skylarks and Lecterns*, note of which should be taken by every tertiary administrator. I particularly enjoyed the detailed minutes of the Faculty meeting regarding whether it was necessary for such a meeting to have a quorum ('Professor Meigert then admonished the Librarian in words this Secretary refuses to report'). However, in many respects, the most interesting parts, for an Australian reader, are those concerned with the day to day business of the law school. No law teacher is wholly confident of his or her own teaching methods and, in consequence, is very much less confident of those of his or her colleagues. Ron Lansing displays the ways in which the personalities of the teachers themselves influence the way in which they teach. Thus, in a Torts class, one Professor informs a student, '... this is not church, Mr. Stocles, this is law school'. There is also the role-playing legal theoretician, Professor Doe (known, for some unknown reason as 'The Professor') who is delightfully encapsulated in the following terms: 'He was no administrator, so he seldom attended faculty or committee meetings; he was no grader, so he usually upset the grading scale; he was no scholar, so he defied publication traditions; he was no specialist, so he often eclipsed and sullied the specialty work of colleagues; he was no advocate, so he was untrappable; he was no loyal professionalist, so he strayed often from the law discipline to other worlds of knowledge; yet, in spite of it all, he was targeted by admirers as "The Professor"'. Among his peers, he was a difficult man to like.' Other charmingly and wittily created characters include an intradepartmental memoranda specialist whose reply to a memorandum on dogs on campus is a masterpiece of its kind (It must be said that the dog problem is not wholly unknown at Professor Lansing's own place of work). There is the first year legal writing instructor who attempts every possible method of teaching but quite spectacularly fails with all of them (as a legal writing instructor, he was a good basketballer!).

Situations occur which are not unknown to law school administrators in the United States and elsewhere. In *Skylarks and Lecterns*, the problem concerns a discrepancy, which proves not to be very accidental, between a student's mark appearing on a Professor's list and that appearing on a computer printout. The computer, for once, must be exonerated! On the other hand, there are aspects of American law school life which have no counterparts in, say Australia and Britain. Generally,

the Placement Office is unknown outside North America and, in *Skylarks and Lecterns*, the visit of a leading law firm to Welden Hall provides the memorandum specialist with a fine opportunity to exercise his special talents.

The publishers' note states that *Skylarks and Lecterns* has various facets: 'For lawyers, it will be a nostalgia; for law students, a diary; for prospective law applicants, an agenda; for educators a study lesson; for the citizen reader [it] is a tuition free ride to a schooling in law'. For once, such a blurb is quite justified. As an amateur educational sociologist, I have read many novels, often thinly disguised autobiographies, about educational institutions (There is, notably, a school joke, just as there are army and prison jokes) and many have made, in fact, effective points, particularly about the English private school system. However, there are none which have covered the spectrum of scholastic and administrative endeavour as has Ron Lansing in *Skylarks and Lecterns*.

I unhesitatingly recommend it to all of those to whom the publishers seek to direct it and to everyone else interested in education (legal or otherwise). It is a tribute to Ron Lansing's creativity that I only recognised (or thought I recognised) one character !

Frank Bates\*

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\* Professor of Law, University of Newcastle (N.S.W.). Formerly Reader in Law, University of Tasmania and Senior Fulbright Scholar and Visiting Professor of Law, Northwestern School of Law of Lewis and Clark College, Portland, Oregon, U.S.A.