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Book Review (reviewing James C. N. Paul et al., Federal Censorship: Obscenity in the Mail (1961))

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countries considerable statutory law has developed with respect to em-
employee inventions, in contrast to both the United States and England which
continue to rely largely upon private contract and the common law. Per-
haps most important of all, what can be done, if anything, in a world where
 technological effort and development have become supremely important,
to provide greater stimulus toward inventive effort and the prompt dis-
closure and maximum use of new ideas and information? In the past, we
have looked to the patent system to provide the necessary stimulus. It is
not at all clear, today, that this is sufficient—yet, we continue to go along
with a “trade secret” law that contributes little to, and, in many respects,
actually obstructs this public objective.7

One may surmise that, if the area of trade secrets continues to increase
in importance, such questions will more and more insistently present them-
selves. Sooner or later, they will have to be answered. And if the lessons of
history mean anything, either the courts must answer them, as they have
not done thus far, or the legislative bodies will do it for them. The “trade
secrets” area is, of course, no more immune to legislative response to
judicial action or inaction than are other fields. Congress has enacted laws
relating to trade secrets and secret data,8 and has seriously considered other
proposals in this and related fields.9

All these, as I say, are underlying considerations to which Mr. Turner
does not address himself. But they, after all, are another story and another
book. We should perhaps be content with the fact that the author has
taken on the somewhat narrower, though concededly no less difficult, area
to work in and has made a competent and useful contribution within that
area.

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FEDERAL CENSORSHIP: OBSCENITY IN THE MAIL. By James C. N. Paul and

This is in many ways an exemplary piece of contemporary legal scholar-
ship. It is a monograph on a single legal topic. The topic is rich in color
and interest and has social significance. And the study was planned as
one in depth, approaching the problem along several dimensions by paral-

(1958), excepting “trade secrets and names of customers” from the authority granted the
Commission to make information public; Pub. L. No. 87-813, 87th Cong., 2d Sess. (Oct.
15, 1962), giving copies of Census reports in company files a confidential status; cf. St.
9 E.g., S. 1728, 48th Cong., 1st Sess. (1883), a proposal for giving limited protection to
1270, 80th Cong., 1st Sess. (1947), a bill to protect music performers’ rights.
The legislative history yields perhaps the most refreshing materials in the book. There is fascinating material from Lord Lynhurst’s witty reactions to Lord Campbell’s Act in 1857, to the Calhoun debates in 1836 over proposals for postal censorship of abolitionist tracts, to the one-man lobby of Anthony Comstock, to the debate between Senator Cushing and Senator Smoot in 1930 over the obscenity provisions of the Tariff Act.

My own views on the law of obscenity have been set forth in the *Metaphysics of the Law of Obscenity*, 1960 *Supreme Court Rev.* 1; and *Obscenity and the Law*, 27 *Library Q.* 201 (1957); also in Book Review, 24 U. Chi. L. Rev. 769 (1957).

The book covers not only postal censorship but Customs as well. The authors, in their final recommendations, leave some role for federal administrative screening via Customs. See pp. 227-28; 235-37.

The most arresting of the authors’ ideas is the effort to treat obscenity as a relational concept depending on the audience and the manner of circulation. In developing this approach, the authors properly find great significance in the *Kinsey* case, United States v. Thirty-one Photographs, 156 F. Supp. 350 (S.D.N.Y. 1957). This sort of graduated “adults only” approach to the problem seems to me attractive in theory but probably “not worth the candle” in practice. See pp. 205-19.

study of these problems to date, this seems to be something of a pity. I had hoped to find the arguments on the legality of postal censorship vigorously marshalled and scrutinized; instead the relevant materials are scattered throughout the book and the conclusions are stated so quietly that unless one reads with care he may well miss the authors’ conclusions that postal censorship has probably been unconstitutional—as well as inadvertent from the viewpoint of Congress—for these many years, and should be abandoned in the future.8

Certainly some good points are slighted. There is little explicit wrestling with the anomaly of applying a national standard of “community sentiment” in this area, given the wide variety of sentiments in New York and Massachusetts, for example.9 And this without the use of the jury. Nor do we ever get a report from the interview materials on how the administrators themselves sought to solve this dilemma.

Again because they decide to stick with obscenity and ignore other forms of postal censorship,10 the authors do not confront the interesting fact that Congress has so rarely attempted to build from the rationale on which postal activity is said to be legally justified to any other form of censorship—although if the legal arguments are good at all they would give Congress far wider power over communications than it has thus far chosen to exercise. This seems to have been the point of the celebrated Esquire case11 which the book treats as primarily concerned with limiting the sanction of revocation of second-class mail privileges. The larger significance of the case, I think, lies in the obvious reluctance of the Court to permit postal censorship to be expanded beyond obscenity.

Nor does the book pay sufficient attention to the significance of the old precedent that the fourth amendment does apply to the postal power.12 This

8 See pp. 115-166.
7 See pp. 23, 28, 231. It is perhaps unfair to charge that the authors failed to anticipate the reaction of Mr. Chief Justice Warren and Justices Brennan and Douglas to the statutory construction problem in the very recent decision in Manuel Enterprises, Inc. v. Day, 370 U.S. 478 (1962). But it is striking that reading the book would never prepare one for the fact that, in 1962, three Justices of the United States Supreme Court would seriously and flatly hold that Congress had never authorized postal censorship. Further, it might be observed that the legislative history materials are arguably more fully and effectively handled in the opinions of both Justices Brennan and Clark than in the book—I think primarily this is the result of their being vigorously marshalled in the opinions.
8 See p. 227. The book also suggests a specific list of reforms if it is to be retained; see pp. 233-35.
9 In Manuel Enterprises, Inc. v. Day, 370 U.S. 478 (1962), it is refreshing to find that Mr. Justice Harlan did confront this problem squarely. He stated: “We think that the proper test under this federal statute, reaching as it does to all parts of the United States whose population reflects many different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, is a national standard of decency.” Id. at 488.
10 See p. xi.
12 Ex parte Jackson, 96 U.S. 727 (1877). As the authors carefully point out, this part of the opinion is dictum, but an unchallenged dictum. See pp. 22-23.
raises the puzzler of why then the first amendment does not equally apply; and, moreover, it illuminates on what a curious house of cards the postal censorship power has been built. Under this ruling the post office cannot administratively touch first-class mail; hence, the entire edifice of postal control rests on the fact of mail subsidies and on the permission given for that reason to the postal authorities to inspect second-class mail.

Finally, the intricate and mysterious legal issue of the status of prior restraints keyed to obscenity seems to me not to have been dealt with persistently enough. Are the precedents on movie censorship applicable to postal censorship?  

There are two other puzzles with the book that reflect the desire of Professors Paul and Schwartz to give their study a touch of sociological significance and perhaps suggest points of a more general reach. First, the authors decided to view the problem in historical perspective and to organize their exposition along chronological lines. As a study in the process of legal and social change I do not think the book comes off and I think it was a mistake to cast it in so ambitious a mold. The large time periods into which the basic exposition is divided struck me as highly arbitrary and lent themselves to such unfortunate subtitles as: “Part II. Development from 1930 to 1945: How Law and Censorship Responded to Social Change”; or again: “Part III. Post War Developments: Another Period of Evolution, 1946 to 1956.” Presumably it is this perspective, too, which produced sentences such as: “What was happening?—sober, intelligent, objective Americans wanted to know. Where were we going? Where should we be going?”

Moreover, this historical structure produces a very choppy and confusing sequence as the authors hop from tracing legal doctrine to tracing legislative history to tracing law in action over the four major time periods. I have rarely encountered a book which seems so much the victim of its basic plan of organization.

We are told in the introduction that the study involved considerable empirical research with interviews with officials, digging in old files, etc. And the reporting out of this effort to document the law in action looms large in exposition. It is for me the key puzzle of the book that I did not find the harvest from this empirical attack more rewarding. To a minor extent this may be the fault of the authors; they do not report their field work directly and with the professional empiricist’s touch. We never learn how this part of this study was designed, just who was interviewed, and just what the results from the interviews were. But the difficulties in their path must have been formidable. Presumably they could find little in the way

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13 The book suggests that the answer may be “no”; see p. 159. There is a dangerous tendency to handle constitutional issues by counting Justices—a practice that may have already rendered certain conclusions obsolete upon the appointments of Justices White and Goldberg.

14 P. 188.

15 Pp. xii-xv.
of existing records—their best material often seems to have come from cases that reached the courts and the official reports.

The topic appears in retrospect to have been against them too. It is not clear just how one would measure how much postal censorship there has been. And with a substantive criterion like obscenity it is not clear how one can profitably compare the law on the books with the law in action. The authors spend time and effort carefully collecting and describing for us particular instances of postal censorship; these items are, to be sure, colorful and amusing, but they do not tell us much since we do not know with what to compare them. Federal Censorship thus provides a major instance for consideration in estimating the kind of enlargement of insight the current movement toward sociological studies of legal phenomena is likely to give us.

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CRIMINAL LAW
INSTITUTE ON CRIMINAL INVESTIGATION. The Southwestern Law Enforcement Institute, Southwestern Legal Foundation, Dallas, Tex. Springfield, Ill.: Charles C Thomas. 1962. Pp. 140. $5.50.


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