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The Trial of Peter Zenger by Vincent Buranelli

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Book Reviews

THE TRIAL OF PETER ZENGER by VINCENT BURANELLI. New York University Press, 1957, 151 pages, \$3.75.

A book or article today on the trial and acquittal of John Peter Zenger in 1735 in the City of New York for the seditious libel of Governor Cosby is not a new thing. In fact, one of the pleasing features of Mr. Buranelli's little tome is a valuable bibliography on the subject, ranging from accounts of the trial itself, through source materials, histories of the period, biographies of the defendant and other indirectly relevant works. But like many other important historical events and significant men, a constant re-evaluation and retelling of their stories are of great worth to us, rising above mere reiteration. We do not complain when a new life of Lincoln or a new History of the English People appears, if the author brings to it a fresh approach and a new insight.

The very least that may be said of Mr. Buranelli's efforts is that he has done just that. He is not a lawyer, but he appreciates the law involved. He sees what perhaps many lawyers writing of the case would not see — the social and political aspects which lie behind the legal fencing between Andrew Hamilton, — the "Philadelphia Lawyer" — and James Delancey, the hand-picked chief justice of the inept and tyrannical Governor Cosby. Mr. Buranelli is a professional radio newswriter, but his book does not become because of that a mere diatribe for unlicensed freedom of the press. He is well aware that "right" was not all on the side of the Governor's critics. One of the attributes of this little book is its fairness to both sides, its insight into motives, and the impact of the results.

The book is divided into two principal parts, an Introduction and The Trial, with three short appendices on Zenger's own paper's coverage of the trial, his "Lawyers on the Behavior of his Judges," and James Alexander on the Freedom of the Press. (Zenger was really only a printer, Alexander being the author of the diatribes for which Zenger was indicted. Zenger never would publicly admit who were the authors of the barbs which so hurt Cosby's tender hide.)

The work may be summed up in this way: it is interesting and instructive to those of us who are lawyers, to any sincere publicist who is aware of his duties and obligations as a supplier of public news and information, and to the layman who respects both the Law and the freedom which it is the Law's duty to preserve.

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