
David Lehman
Book Reviews


Lord McNair in these three volumes traces the British practice of international law from the Seventeenth to the early Twentieth Centuries through the law reports or "opinions" of Crown legal advisors. With the exception of the subject of "Treaties"—covered in the author's Law of Treaties: British Practice and Opinions (1938)—the author has presented a "representative selection" of reports which cover the entire field of public international law. For the student of international law these previously unpublished reports provide valuable background for such well known and controversial cases as Mortensen v. Peters,1 Regina v. Anderson,2 The Araunah,3 The Creole,4 the Trent affair,5 the Alabama,6 The Charkieh7 and others. Although many of the reports are only of historical interest, they represent in their full scope the contemporary position of Great Britain on questions of international law.

Outside of multipartite treaties, the practice of governments is the main source of international law. In a majority of the cases, the advice of legal officers determines the action a nation takes on international issues. The author is careful to point out, however, that the opinions of legal advisors are not the law but expressions of beliefs as to what the law is. As a source of the law, therefore, reports of this kind offer a certain objectivity with respect to the law which, as the author states, "resemble judgements, not the arguments of the pleader."

1. VIII Sess. Cas. 83 (High Court of Justiciary, Scotland, 1906).
5. 7 Moore, International Law Digest 768, § 1265 (1906).
7. L.R. 4 A. & E. 59 (1873); Fenwick, Cases 38 (1873); 42 L.J.: Ad. 70, 29 L.T. 404, 22 W.R. 63, 2 Asp. M.C. 121 (1873).
This collection of reports illustrates particularly well two misconceptions of the role of legal principles in international relations. To those who underestimate the importance of law in the relations between states, it points out the reliance of foreign offices on legal principles in their day to day conduct of international affairs. This is to say that in those matters that do not conflict with the vital interest of states, which constitute the great bulk of the business of foreign offices, legal principles can and do determine national action. To those who overemphasize the role of law, the author is careful to warn that the advice given by legal officers is not heeded on all occasions. On those international issues where law conflicts with policy, legal principles may be shaped to fit policy or disregarded altogether. Objectivity in defining the law in a decentralized international order is difficult at best, even for the dispassionate British legal officer.

Lord McNair has provided in this work an invaluable addition to the printed sources of international law.

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This work is a valuable addition to the series of readings in selected areas of the law which have been sponsored by the Association of American Law Schools through the years.

The busy trial lawyer, appellate counsel, judge, student and law professor, will find this work a convenient source book for trial admissibility questions, and in the preparation of briefs on critical evidentiary issues. It is no overstatement to say its value to the practitioner will be unique.

The objectives of the publication are manifold. Some of them have been succinctly noted by Dean Mason Ladd:

"For the benefit of the legal profession, as well as to assist law students and teachers to make better use of periodical references, the Association of American Law Schools is making available Selected Writings on the Law of Evidence

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