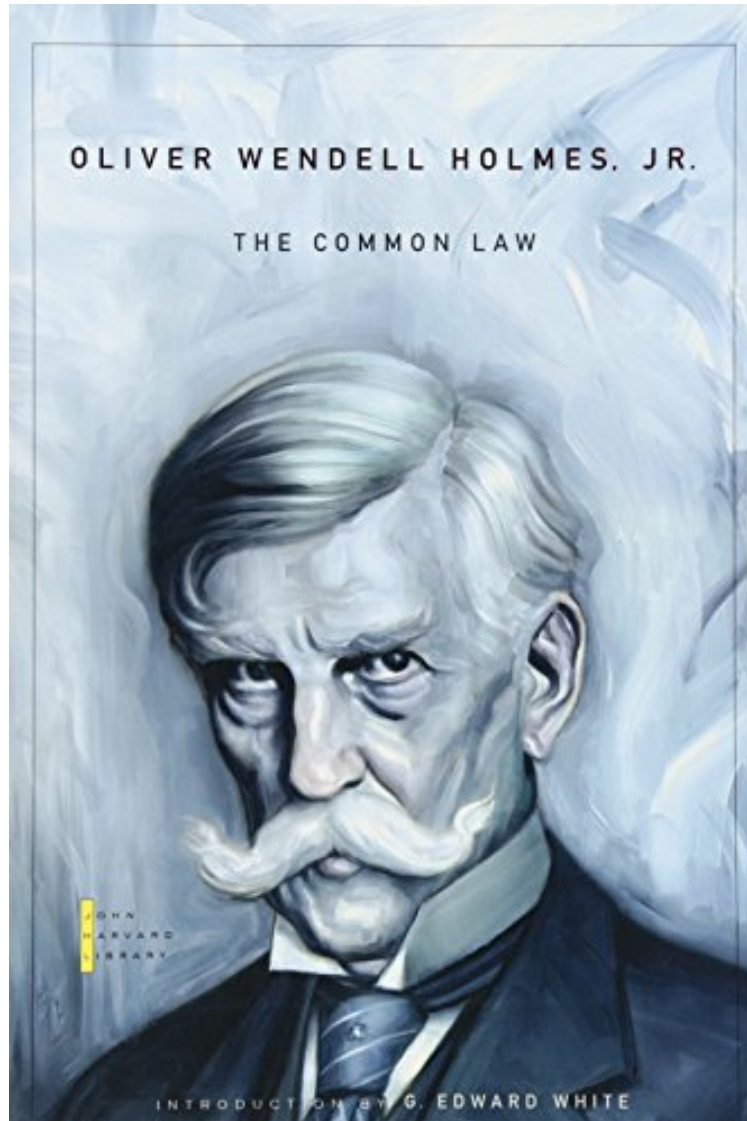


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## The Common Law (The John Harvard Library)

*Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.*  
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**Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. : The Common Law (The John Harvard Library)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Common Law (The John Harvard Library):

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. An Important Piece of Legal Scholarship Regrettably Rarely ReadBy Robert BoltonAlthough the opening paragraphs of Holmes' magnum opus, "The life of the law has not been logic; it has been experience," along with a few other bon mots throughout, have been the most readily quoted parts of the book, in the Common Law Holmes embarked on a new way of assessing how judges make decisions. Over the

course of twelve lectures, Holmes lays out his view that judges have slowly moved away from a purely superstitious and formalistic method of deciding cases to one which accounts for the broad array of social, economic, and political questions that face a culture, along with its legal ones. This theory gave birth to a new school of jurisprudence now referred to under the vague name of legal realism. Along with his advocacy for this theory, Holmes sought to add his own ideas on how to develop the law, such as interpreting a criminal defendant's state of mind to determine when his actions qualify as an attempt to commit a crime. The book itself is exceptionally dense and requires a significantly broad legal history background to fully appreciate its efforts. Holmes was among the first legal scholars to make use of the medieval English year books (something he regrettably receives little credit for) and the reader will encounter frequent citations to their pages. Early on he has some interesting comments about deodands and later on torts contracts. The scope of this work is made all the more impressive by the fact that he completed it shortly before his fortieth birthday. In addition to the original text, there is a useful introduction by Holmes' biographer G. Edward White and also the annotations Holmes made in his personal copy of the work. The only regrettable feature of this new edition is that it changes the numbering of the pages compared to prior editions, and hence makes cross-referencing of citations in other pieces of scholarship difficult. That said, the numbering is not so different that it is more than approximately a half-dozen pages off, so if you know what you are generally looking for, it is easily located. This is not a work meant to be read quickly, but if you are looking for the preeminent American legal publication of all time, look no further. 12 of 13 people found the following review helpful. Much mentioned; seldom read

By Ronald H. Clark

This is a new edition of the Harvard version of Justice Holmes' classic "The Common Law." It supercedes an earlier HUP edition published in 1963 which was edited by the esteemed Holmes scholar, Mark DeWolfe Howe. The original and continuing publisher of the official version of the book (first published in 1881) is Little, Brown. This edition is edited and has a fine brief introduction by Ted White, the current leading Holmes scholar, who teaches at the law school of the University of Virginia, and has written (among other books on the Justice) "Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes: Law and the Inner Self," certainly our finest and most interesting biography of the Justice. Like its predecessor HUP volume, this edition contains the important marginal notes that Holmes entered into his own copy of the book (now in the HLS library), which do not appear in the official Little, Brown editions. Also included is Howe's "Glossary of Legal Terms." Professor White has added an illuminating chronology of the Justice's life, a helpful short bibliography, as well as his perceptive 26-page introduction. The typography is far superior to the earlier HUP edition. The only problem I can recount is that this edition (as was the case with Howe's edition) does not contain facsimile pages, so that the reset pages do not match the Little, Brown page numbers. Almost all citations to the book found in the literature cite to the Little, Brown version--so this is somewhat a disadvantage. Unfortunately, not even Professor White's additions can make this an easy and readable book. I venture to suggest that very few of those who call themselves students of Holmes (including myself) have read much of the book. Moreover, having been published in 1881, it was long ago supplanted by more recent research in the field. Nonetheless, as White points out in his introduction, there are nuggets here for those interested in Holmes' view of the law, which in large measure sparked a few legal revolutions, including sociological jurisprudence and legal realism to name just two. This new edition makes this classic available in a reasonably-priced and pleasant format for those with the endurance to read it. 19 of 19 people found the following review helpful. The Philosophical Basis For Our Legal System

By Peter L. Swinford

This book is a little tedious for us non-lawyers, but it does illustrate some interesting points: Law emerged from the need to get away from revenge/feud dynamics. And it originated during times when most people couldn't write, so the issue of proving a case (such as in a agreement) is troublesome (especially in times when plagues and such could kill witnesses at any time). The world is a fuzzy set, and yet the law needs to set a finite set of rules in place, so exceptions constantly challenge. The needs of the state can supercede the issue of fairness, such as in the rule that "ignorance is no excuse". Judges are generally friends of the wealthy and not compatriots of the commoner. If a man has large debts, and dies, how can his children, who were not party to the agreements, be held liable via the estate? Many such questions arise and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. tries to address the fluid basis for our legal system.

Much more than an historical examination of liability, criminal law, torts, bail, possession and ownership, and contracts, *The Common Law* articulates the ideas and judicial theory of one of the greatest justices of the Supreme Court. G. Edward White reminds us why the book remains essential reading not only for law students but also for anyone interested in American history. The text published is, with occasional corrections of typographical errors, identical with that found in the first and all subsequent printings by Little, Brown.

About the Author G. Edward White is David and Mary Harrison Distinguished Professor of Law at the University of Virginia and the author of numerous books, including *Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. and Alger Hiss's Looking-Glass Wars*.