American patent law as we know it took shape near the end of the 19th Century. One of the pivotal events in the formation of patent law was the publication of William Callyhan Robinson's "The Law of Patents for Useful Inventions" in 1890. This work was regarded as the 'Bible' of patent law for generations thereafter. Yet there has been no examination of the circumstances leading to the publication of Robinson's work, nor his influence on the shape of modern patent law.

This article identifies the intellectual context of Robinson's work and how it shaped his system of patent law. First, Robinson was an arch-formalist who out-Langdelled Langdell in his commitment to law as a system deducible from fundamental axioms. Second, Robinson was a committed Catholic whose thinking shows deep influence from the essentially Aristotelian metaphysics developed by the medieval scholastics. Third, Robinson wrote at a time when the very existence of the patent system was under fervent attack from Western and agricultural interests, in opposition to Eastern and industrial ones. This article also shows how Robinson's intellectual system continues to influence patent law today. Not only particular doctrines, but also much of the intellectual foundations - and disputes - of current American patent law can be traced to their origins in Robinson's work.