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How watchdogs turn over the rocks

Journalism: Investigation and Research, edited by Stephen Tanner.
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366 pp. ISBN 0 7339 9931 X.



IT WAS a muggy Port Moresby night in February 1997. Mary Louise O'Callaghan felt the bitter-sweet sensation of a remarkable story developing out of her investigations.

It was a foreign correspondent's dream, she was about to break the news that the Papua New Guinean Government – in secret and without consulting Canberra or its allies – had hired foreign mercenaries in a desperate attempt to resolve the bloody and drawn-out Bougainville conflict.

As the Solomon Islands-based correspondent for *The Australian* pieced the jigsaw puzzle together, Sandline International parked the world's largest cargo plane, an AN-

124, in the middle of the international tarmac at Port Jackson's airport. The facts were emerging.

Her investigation led to an extraordinary scoop that won her a gold Walkley Award, the pinnacle of Australian journalism peer recognition, and led to a book, *Enemies Within* (1999). Her rival in PNG, veteran ABC correspondent Sean Dorney, also wrote a book about his own parallel inquiries, *The Sandline Affair* (1998), which ironically 'scooped' O'Callaghan's book.

For some time there has been a need for a 'how to' style of book on investigative journalism in the region. Amanda Cropp wrote *Digging*

Deeper (1997), a book published by the New Zealand Journalists Training Organisation (NZJTO) for the New Zealand market. But the Australian and Pacific markets remained something of a gap.

Now Stephen Tanner, a senior lecturer in journalism at Western Australia's Murdoch University and former investigative journalist, has produced a book for the wannabees.

Tanner, whose doctorate examined media treatment of political corruption and who wrote about 'Watchdog or an attack dog?' in the book *Ethics and Political Practice* (1998), has gathered an impressive range of contributors to this educational and industry text.

The book is intended as an investigative journalism wannabee's companion – 'from the outset it was unashamedly to be a teaching resource'. The late Professor Clem Lloyd, a contributor and in many respects the driving force behind the book. He died before *Journalism: Investigation and Research* was completed.

Back in 1998, Lloyd had bemoaned the fact that 'no single book, which gives a good intro into research investigation in the Australian journalistic context' had been published. Now he has got his wish.

Tanner sets out his objective in the introduction (p ix) when he declares:

For many years investigative journalism has been regarded as a stand-alone form of journalism. It is often regarded as the pinnacle of journalism, the round reserved for the best and the brightest, those who have proven themselves in other areas to be dogged and inquisitive, those who have solid research skills and are prepared to turn over the rocks under which many of the genuinely important (as opposed to flash-in-the-pan) stories can be found. Because of this, investigative journalists have been regarded as society's watchdogs, although reporters generally have claimed this mantle as well.

The book is divided into three parts: development and current attitudes; understanding the tools; and finally honing the skills and avoiding the traps. Tanner has gathered 32 contributors for this volume, some being investigative journalists themselves while others bring particular expertise as academics, historians and researchers.

In the first part Clem Lloyd provides an account of the historical roots of investigative journalism, Walkley Award-winners Nance Haxton poses questions over 'the death of investigative journalism', and *Canberra Times* editor-in-chief Jack Waterford outlines some of the dilemmas for the editor's chair. One of the appealing characteristics of this book is the re-

current 'at the coalface' case study section. First up, another Walkley Award winner, *Geraldton Guardian* editor and political journalist Chris Johnson, writes about conflicts of interest – shares and politics.

In part two, University of Queensland journalism librarian and columnist Belinda Weaver reports on the computer as an essential tool (her 2003 book was reviewed in *PJR* v 10:1, pp 219-221). Former Journalism Education Association president Kerry Green writes on database journalism, Margaret Simmons on using public records and Rod Kirkpatrick on historical documents as a resource, and Matthew Ricketson and Rick Snell debate how Freedom of Information laws are threatened by governments and underused by journalists. Murray Goot contributes a very useful chapter on reporting the polls.

At the coal face chapters outline how FOI reveals hospital shortcomings and the Franklin River 'spy flight'.

The final part on honing the skills has an excellent chapter on interviewing techniques by Steve McIlwaine and Leo Bowman, fleshed out with a commentary (Nigel McCarthy) on investigative interviews for television. Other chapters include Mark Pearson on the legal process, current JEA president Suellen Tapsall and Gail Phillips

on investigative journalism and ethics, and David Conley's 'crafting the story'.

At the coalface includes working as a team on an international story – an exposé on how a third of the world's cigarette exports vanish and end up on the black market, justice and the police beat and unravelling the Crown Casino saga.

Each chapter has useful discussion points, such as ABC China correspondent Tom O'Byrne's piece on 'parachuting for news' (p 287): lists the key issues a foreign correspondent needs to consider when preparing a story that his or her domestic counterpart is unlikely to face. Or study articles covering the first days of US troops landing in Afghanistan (or Iraq). What insights do the articles reveal about the resourcefulness of foreign correspondents?

While some may see the book as primarily for Australian journalists (true), in fact much of it is equally applicable to New Zealand or even to the Pacific. Conley's selling the story idea (p 333) and project planning and information-management strategies (p 335) are among the many useful examples that can be applied anywhere.

As *Broken Lives* author Estelle Blackburn's concluding chapter notes (p 355), investigation is hard work: 'it

can involve sleepless nights, nightmares, fear, loss of savings, loss of relationships, hatred and nastiness, ethical worries, wrongful accusations, frustrations, relentless pressure, heartache, tears.'

But, she adds, it certainly has its rewards. And Tanner's book is a major contribution to appreciating the rewards. Better investigative journalism can make a difference in society.

References

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An identity story without end

***New Faces, Old Fears*, directed by John Bates and Manying Ip, Documentary New Zealand, TV One.**

AT ONE point in this timely documentary 87-year-old Doris Chung, who has lived all her life in New Zealand recalls what it was like to visit China for the first time: 'Here they call us foreigners and there they call us foreigners.' She looked nonplussed at a conundrum with no easy answer.

The issue of identity, both cultural and ethnic, has come to the fore for the significant minority of New Zealanders who are of Chinese descent since the freeing up of immigration regulation in 1987 led to a new influx of settlers. More than 80,000 ethnic Chinese and 20,000 Korean people have decided to call New Zealand home, triggering a several hundredfold rise in the population of New Zealanders with Asian ancestry.

While sparked by economic need,

