

The Coroner

By Derrick Hand & Janet Fife-Yeomans
ABC Books, 2004



To walk a mile in the shoes of a coroner is an exhausting journey. The late night phone calls, urgent inspections of disaster scenes, painstaking investigations and lengthy court hearings mean this is not a job for the faint-hearted. Then there's death, the central fact of coronial life. Death is the focus of most coronial inquests. This book could have been a depressing litany of tragedy and horror.

It's not. Instead Derrick Hand and Janet Fife-Yeomans have produced a very readable behind the scenes account of Hand's time as a coroner.

Hand spent 47 years in the New South Wales court system. He began as a clerk in his home town at the Forbes Court of Petty Sessions and climbed the ladder of opportunity to become the Westmead coroner in 1984. In 1988 he became deputy state coroner in the new Office of State Coroner, second in charge to Kevin Waller. He was appointed state coroner in 1995, and retired in 2000 at the end of the lengthy inquest into the Thredbo landslide.

Hand's account ends with Thredbo and begins on a January day in 1980 when the body of Frank Nugan was found in the bush near Lithgow slumped over the wheel of his Mercedes, grasping a rifle, a gun wound to the head. Rumours that the Nugan Hand Bank was a CIA front did not prevent Hand from reaching a finding of suicide. But then someone claimed to have seen Nugan in 1981 in a Las Vegas casino. Perhaps that person saw Elvis and flying pigs as well. The body was exhumed and dental records confirmed that it was Nugan. Kevin Waller reached the same finding as Hand.

There are many other fascinating stories in this book, which reads like a social history of criminal justice in New South Wales over the last quarter of a century.

I remember prosecuting Daryl Suckling for social security fraud at Goulburn District Court in 1991. Prior to the hearing I knew little about this diminutive man who seemed harmless enough. But there was great relief for some authorities when he pleaded guilty and was sentenced to a period of imprisonment, because it was believed he had committed a string of crimes on women in western New South Wales, including rape, abduction and murder. Some regarded him as a sort of outback Hannibal Lechter. In 1990 Hand remanded

Suckling in custody for the murder of Jodie Larcombe after an inquest. However, the following year the NSW DPP no-billed the case because of insufficient evidence. Hand regarded the gaol term for fraud as a twist similar to locking up Al Capone for tax fraud. More evidence emerged after his release and Suckling was finally brought to justice for the murder of Larcombe in 1996, when he received a life sentence.

Harry Bailey (who sent so many patients into a deep sleep at Chelmsford Hospital), John Glover (the North Shore 'granny killer') and Wade Frankum (the perpetrator of the Strathfield Massacre) are some of the more infamous identities Hand encountered during his coronial years. There are the victims of crime and disaster as well, of course. It's impossible to imagine how tough Hand's job must have been at times. He was watching the footy on television one winter Saturday when he was called out to inspect the devastation wrought by Frankum inside Strathfield Plaza. There were seven victims in situ, including Frankum. An eighth died later.

Occasionally we see a lighter side to these tragedies. In 1997, when first alerted by his daughter to the death of Michael Hutchence, which he later investigated, Hand had to ask who Hutchence was. My guess is that he was the only person in Sydney who didn't know the answer to that question.

But the beady eye of the coroner dominates this narrative. It fell to Hand to preside over the investigation into Anita Cobby's murder in February 1986. Soon after the arrests the inquest became a committal. Hand describes his feelings during that hearing thus:

there were times I would look at the three Murphy brothers sitting there with their friends in the dock and wonder how people came to such violence. However, I couldn't allow myself to start imagining what had turned them into a family who could do this or how you would feel if it was your three sons. In this case, as in all the others that came before me, I was only concerned with the evidence that I heard - and the evidence was overwhelming.

Grissom in CSI could have uttered that last sentence. Yet there's reassurance in it because Hand dealt ably with some of the most confronting situations the real world has to offer. And what a world it is.

Reviewed by Chris O'Donnell