

Book Reviews

The Families of Mark Militano, Graeme Jensen and Jedd Houghton and the Flemington/Kensington Community Legal Centre: Police Shootings in Victoria 1987–1989, Fitzroy Legal Service, Melbourne (1992)

On the cover of *Police Shootings* are eleven crosses to mark the deaths of those shot by Victorian police between 1987 and 1989. The book is unusual. It is written primarily by the mothers, sisters and in some cases the lovers of those who died. Much of the text consists of direct quotes from these women. The book is also tendentious in the best sense of that word. It is argumentative and challenging. It demands answers.

Indeed despite the fact that the Victorian coroner has been investigating these deaths since 1989 and had still not released his report by Christmas 1992, the families of these men felt that they had been unable to have their side of the story told. Their knowledge of those who died and their knowledge of police practices was invalidated by the process which privileged particular forms of institutional knowledge. It appeared that neither the justice system through the coronial process nor the media were interested in what the families of these men had to say.

During the period between 1987 and 1989 there was a rapid increase in the number of people who were victims of police shootings. The shootings were also relatively localised in that four of the eleven men who were killed lived or had family ties in Flemington, a working class suburb of inner Melbourne. Indeed Gary Abdallah, Graeme Jensen and Jedd Houghton were killed within six months of each other.

Some of the killings need to be understood in the context of the deaths of two police in Walsh Street South Yarra on 12 October 1988. These two police were ambushed and killed about thirteen hours after police had shot and killed Graeme Jensen. One police theory was that these deaths were a payback for Jensen's death. Four weeks later Jedd Houghton, a friend of Jensen, was killed by Special Operations Squad police in Bendigo. He was publicly referred to as the "trigger man" in the Walsh Street killings. Houghton's girlfriend Kim Cameron who was with Houghton at the time of his death maintained that he was asleep on the bed when he was shot. Elizabeth Houghton, Jedd's mother, heard of her son's death through a news bulletin. She states, "No one came to my home to tell me. The police never sent a priest, a social worker, anyone". It was a common complaint among the others mentioned in the book that there was inadequate attention given to the families of victims in terms of support or explanations as to what had occurred. For those who are familiar with the reports from the Royal commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, such insensitivity and cavalier treatment are indeed common after a death in custody. Indeed such insensitivity and at times provocation extended after the deaths. At Houghton's funeral there was a police van and a video was made of people who attended. Plainclothes police went to Mark Militano's funeral looking for people.

Gary Abdallah was killed by detectives on 9 April 1989. He was an associate of Jensen and a friend of Jedd Houghton. Gary was arrested in his car and then taken back to his flat. He was shot at seven times from a range of six feet. The two officers involved in Abdallah's shooting refused to give evidence at the coronial inquest. Prior to Gary's death there had been rumours that he would be killed as a payback for the Walsh Street murders. As a result of these rumours Gary Abdallah went with his solicitor to the St Kilda Road police station where he was told that his fears were "ridiculous". In addition at the time Abdallah was arrested and shot he was reporting three times a week to Coburg police as part of his bail conditions. Inevitably the question arises as to whether the death of Gary Abdallah was a planned execution.

After the killings many in the local community were the subject of police raids. There were complaints of excessive force, threats, damage to property and assaults. Fay Spears, the sister of Graeme Jensen writes, "In my case, the first raid was the day after my brother's funeral. My sister and I woke to find the bed surrounded by men, one at the end of my bed with a gun pointed straight at my head. After they had left we found they had stolen articles from my home. Amongst those items were the funeral book. The search warrant police had said 'firearms'".

The book raises many issues including the broad question of accountability and the role of coronial inquiries. In most cases police involved in the deaths declined to give evidence at the coronial inquiries including the two Armed Holdup Squad members who shot Graeme Jensen and the two Special Operations Squad members who killed Jedd Houghton. While reading the book I was often reminded of the Royal Commission Inquiry into the killing of David Gundy by the NSW SWOS. There were many similar features including the fact that senior police were willing to make public statements within hours of a shooting which justified the actions of those involved. The issue of media reporting and nature of links between police and the media were also of importance. In one example from *Police Shootings in Victoria*, Gary Abdallah was directly linked to the Walsh Street killings by the Melbourne *Sun*. The inspector in charge of the Walsh Street investigations later denied before the coroner that police were trying to link Abdallah with the killings and that the *Sun* report was a fabrication. Interestingly, though, the *Sun* reporter responsible for the story has now found a position as the deputy director of the Police Media Liaison Unit.

There are many other issues raised in the book relating to the use of intimidation and death threats by police, the role of informers, the planting of evidence, public safety during police operations and the contamination of the scenes of police shootings. The book also gives some insight into the connection between Kensington/Flemington Legal Centre and the community which it supports. It is commendable that the legal service has been able to provide such a level of emotional, intellectual and political support as well as legal representation to the family members of those who were killed.

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