

Review of J H Phillips and J K Bowen, *Forensic Science and The Expert Witness*, Sydney: Law Book Company 1989. pp i-ix; 1-139.

\$29.50

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This in some ways curious little book is not without its proper place on the shelf.

I describe it as a little book for two reasons: the first and most obvious being that it really is a very small book in an area so vast. Comprising a mere 139 pages including indices it would sit comfortably alongside the Nutshell series.

More importantly perhaps, such a description highlights the fact that it makes no pretence to be a big book. The authors, one a Victorian Supreme Court judge and the other a practicing barrister, with an obvious extensive practical involvement as lawyers with the subject matter of their book, have deliberately set out to cover the field in short form which must then of necessity be summary in the extreme. I suspect that in the course of preparation they must often have become utterly frustrated by their self-imposed constraints.

Nevertheless, this very summary treatment of some topics can be quite deceptive. Rarely is any important aspect of any one of the numerous subjects covered not at least adverted to, and then both in context and accurately. When the treatment of each of the areas of forensic science covered is then supported by a useful listing of the "big books" on that particular topic, the book takes on the appearance of a very practical commentary upon an index and in that way I believe succeeds in its endeavour to cover the field.

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Subjects covered in the manner described include crime scene examination, continuity of exhibits, photographic evidence, forensic chemistry, forensic biology, firearms and toolmarks, fingerprints, document examination and, in the revised 1989 edition, something the authors describe as "genetic fingerprinting", which is of course the new and vital matter of DNA profiling.

I believe the treatment of this newest and most telling area could have been better; but yet again, nothing is wrong or overlooked so that the reader is at least introduced if not to all the answers certainly to all the questions.

There are some shortcomings other than those imposed by the very nature of the exercise undertaken.

All discussion of the practical aspects of the subjects and the practitioners thereof (the scientists) is almost exclusively - and I suspect unashamedly - limited to the state of Victoria. Any lawyer outside that state wishing to make practical use of the material in the book must first of all make considerable adaptations to fit the local scene. For example, the differences from Western Australia as to these practical matters are extensive. This of course does not affect the actual subject matter dealt with.

Furthermore, most of the practical illustrations which I take to be primarily from real cases could well have been left out. I found many of them to be rather fatuous and quite irritating. Again, however, the subject matter remains unaffected.

The book should be in every student library, and I would suggest, in the personal possession of every budding criminal barrister. One would not acquire it so much to use as to read.

It is not, and in fairness I repeat does not aspire to be, a text. It could no doubt be used by a beginner to impress a stipendiary magistrate, but if used at the next level of proceedings might get the same beginner into a lot of trouble.

One would not obtain it for its treatment on any one of its topics but for its treatment of so many it is well worth having.