

Book review: Litany of Lies

DAVID WEBER, The West Australian May 3, 2011, 9:42 am

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Avon Lovell reckons I'm a clueless journalist. He told me so after he stormed out of the Police Royal Commission in 2002. But I shouldn't feel too special. I was one of a group of reporters chasing him. Lovell called us all "clueless journalists", among other (less printable) names and suggestions.

None of us could work out why Lovell was doing everything he could to protect Tony Lewandowski, who'd finally revealed that he and Don Hancock stitched up the Mickelbergs over the 1982 Perth Mint gold swindle.

Lewandowski had been part of a largely successful attempt to ruin Lovell's writing career, and at one point, the besieged author strongly believed the errant copper even tried to kill him.

So how did Lovell end up going to bat for a man who tried to destroy him? It's a tortuous tale which makes for a compelling book.

I knew of the events depicted in *Litany of Lies* in some detail, having worked on various aspects of the story for the ABC over the past ten years. Yet Lovell had been immersed. He's had an intimate involvement with the Mickelberg's story, for decades.

His commitment, his deep level of research and personal sacrifices for the sake of the truths behind the convictions are without precedent in WA journalism, if not nationally.

It's still an astounding fact that the clearing of the Mickelbergs could only happen after the violent death of the former head of CIB, Don Hancock. And THAT happened because of the shooting murder of a bikie in The Goldfields on the night of October the first, 2000.

Lovell starts this book with the Gypsy Jokers riding down the road, on their way to Ora Banda. Some readers will bristle at the comparisons with the Anzacs. Others will be perturbed by the recurrent use of lyrics from the song *Bat Out Of Hell*, the Springsteen parody which was never meant to be taken seriously. Such frivolities soon pale against a backdrop of violence, retribution and abuse of the legal system.

The events surrounding the shooting of Gypsy Joker Billy Grierson are laid out in detail. The police investigation was ineffective, despite the bikies' agreement to co-operate. Don Hancock did not assist the investigating officers - the Gypsy Jokers came to believe he was the assassin and his properties were bombed.

This was only a precursor to the terrible act of revenge taken by Sid "Snot" Reid. The car bomb which killed Hancock also claimed the life of his friend Lou Lewis, who had no known quarrel with Reid, or the Jokers at large.

That was only one of Reid's deadly mistakes. If Reid had gone down "honourably", he would've pleaded guilty, copped a couple of decades in prison, and been "fully patched" in the eyes of the Jokers, and other bikies.

Instead, he cut a deal and tried to finger the sergeant-at-arms of the Kalgoorlie chapter, Graeme Slater. His self-interested campaign was destroyed in court and Slater walked. The end result is a poor one, from the perspective of whether justice was served. Reid got 15 years for murdering two men, using an indiscriminate means which could easily cost the lives of many others. He's in a prison somewhere in Australia with benefits not many people in his position are known to enjoy. He's also signed his own death warrant by doing the unthinkable and trying to sell out another bikie.

Yet it was Reid's act which led to Tony Lewandowski coming clean, and admitting he'd helped Hancock fit up Ray, Peter and Brian Mickelberg. Lewandowski claimed that Hancock had threatened him, so it was probably likely that as long as "The Silver Fox" was alive, Peter and Ray Mickelberg would've had their Mint swindle convictions hanging over them.

Hancock was known as "tough but fair". It's hard to see how he treated the Mickelbergs, or Lovell, fairly. Peter Mickelberg was assaulted by Hancock and Lewandowski while in custody. Ray Mickelberg lost a finger after being viciously beaten around the yard by an inmate at Fremantle prison while guards apparently looked the other way.

Lovell eventually found himself facing charges. He discovered his phone was being tapped AFTER the charges had been laid. People associated with the book *The Mickelberg Stitch* had their premises raided. Those who associated with Lovell received unwelcome attention from members of WA's finest.

Even though Lewandowski eventually confessed to the stitch, he maintained he still thought the Mickelbergs were guilty. This perspective crystallised a problem which has existed in the legal system since the advent of policing and courts in society. Some officers think it's enough to believe someone has done the crime. This supreme faith in their own experience and judgment leads them to work up some evidence, make an arrest, and get a confession (fabricating one if necessary).

This means ignoring possible alternatives. It also means doing everything to protect the original result. It also allows the true culprits to get away with it. The reality is that without real evidence, there should be no case. It's as simple as that.

Alongside the damning nature of the abuses of justice, and the murders, *Litany Of Lies* provides Lovell's account of the whys and wherefores of his behaviour once Lewandowski decided to spill the beans. The reader is left with a clearer understanding of why Lovell had him spirited away from the clutches of the Royal Commission, and why the author himself did not want to co-operate. Lovell is scathing of the way Lewandowski was handled by the DPP and the Gallop Government. He names names, including several politicians.

Litany Of Lies includes portions of Lovell's earlier works, but it's not a proper substitute for *The Mickelberg Stitch*, which is an Australian crime classic and remains essential reading.

Additionally, the WA Coroner's report into the deaths of Billy Grierson, Don Hancock and Lou Lewis is available online and should also be considered in full when reading *Litany Of Lies*.

In terms of design, the book is almost the complete opposite of the recent version of *The Mickelberg Stitch*. *Litany Of Lies* is made of heavy paper and is robust in a similar way to 1980s textbooks. On the minus side, there's no index, which is annoying for an account of such detail.

I'm tempted to say you should buy this book before it's taken off the shelves. Really, you should just read *Litany Of Lies* because it's important. Because, as they say, it was all done in your name.