

BOOK REVIEWS

THE POLICE AND THE PUBLIC. By D. Chappell and P. R. Wilson. University of Queensland Press. 1969. Pp. x, 214. \$3.95.

POLICE KILLINGS IN AUSTRALIA. By R. W. Harding. Penguin Books. 1970. Pp. 266. \$1.20.

There is a bitter joke circulating in Melbourne (in May, 1970) that we have the best police force money can buy. Whether there is any substance in the allegations of bribery which have been made at the Kaye abortion inquiry remains to be seen, but meanwhile it can scarcely be doubted that public confidence in the Victoria Police is not at its highest. The survey by Chappel and Wilson of the attitudes of the public and the police towards each other in Australia and New Zealand is an informative, readable and timely source of reference on the more general problem of which present attitudes in Victoria are a particular instance. It makes abundantly clear that there really is a problem.

In a sense the most telling point the book makes arises from a defect. The authors base their survey *inter alia* on a representative sample of policemen themselves. The defect is that the sample is incomplete. The reason is instructive. When permission was sought to interview a cross-section of policemen in the Australian States, permission was refused outright in Victoria and Western Australia on the ground that the survey might embarrass the police. In New South Wales no decision had been reached on the request after two years (page 58). The Commissioner of the Australian Capital Territory Police Force had previously taken a similar position in relation to a preliminary pilot study in the A.C.T. (page 57).

It is difficult to comment with restraint on such an attitude to a scholarly enterprise directed at tackling a problem which is not only as important to the police themselves as to the community at large, but also is a problem which the Australasian police forces as a whole have conspicuously failed to tackle on their own account. It may be, although one is bound to doubt it, that the senior police officers in

New South Wales, Victoria, Western Australia and the A.C.T. who refused to co-operate will be influenced to modify their attitude in future by the content of this book. For one of the surprises it turns up is that energetic and intelligently based public relations programmes are being operated by the New Zealand and South Australian police and appear, as one would expect, to be producing encouraging results. Co-operation with a survey of this kind is, of course, good public relations in itself even if the information it makes available is not flattering to the police. Not the least reason in the present instance is that the authors, whilst showing no tendency to mute their criticisms or gloss over unpalatable facts, take care to state the case they are making at any particular point with moderation and fairness and with regard for the police point of view.

The survey is introduced by an account of the historical development of the Australasian police forces. From this the origins of the traditional belief that police in this part of the world are regarded with suspicion and dislike become all too clear. It comes as no surprise to the reader to be told that the quality of the police during the nineteenth century was frequently scandalously poor. The use of low calibre personnel to enforce unpopular and sometimes stupid decisions by the powers that be is an excellent means of minimising respect for the police. It was given full reign in the Australian colonies.

After this introduction the survey proceeds on two bases, skilfully interwoven with each other. The first is the recording of much straightforward but illuminating factual information about Australasian police forces. This covers all kinds of things, including basic standards of recruitment, training, pay, promotion, numbers, opportunities for further education, resignations, attitudes to their work, and duties bringing the police particularly into situations of conflict with the public. It helps one to think sensibly about the police simply to have this information available.

The second basis of the survey is even more interesting and is the heart of the book. This is the investigation, not merely of what the police and the public actually think of each other, but also of what each believes the other thinks, and the effect thereof. As an inducement to readers of this review to go further and read the book, the reviewer refrains from summarising or reproducing any of the results arrived at. Suffice it to say that the mode of inquiry appears to be valid and reliable in relation to the results obtained and that, as one would expect, attitudes vary as between different areas of contact between police and public.

This is a timely and competent piece of work which depresses the reader by the situation it reveals but encourages him by the evidence it advances of actual and possible change for the better.

Harding's book is quite different but no less good. His object is to arouse public disquiet about the manner in which policemen resort to fatal force in carrying out their public duties, particularly the duty to arrest. His method is to examine in detail, chiefly by reference to transcripts of coroners' inquests, a number of cases in recent years in which people have been killed by policemen. The form of presentation is to set out the facts as apparently accepted by the coroner and then to subject this version of events to critical scrutiny by reference to the evidence which was given, to evidence which was not given but ought to have been, and to rational analysis. There can be no question that the author has succeeded in presenting an overwhelming case for public disquiet.

The book is not entirely faultless. Opinions will differ on matters of detail but this reviewer's opinion is that now and then the author betrays too clearly by an over-acid choice of vocabulary or an excessive preoccupation with dubious minutiae where his sympathies lie. Not that he makes any secret of where his sympathies lie, but the impression occasionally is that he has a sense of regret at not being able to wrap the case up against the police quite as tightly as he would have liked. But it must be stressed that this is a very minor and occasional impression and certainly does not extend to the book as a whole. As a whole the case presented is entirely convincing and is argued with restraint, clarity and fairness.

Among the other positive virtues of this publication are the following. It opens with an account of the law relating to arrest which is a model of concise lucidity and has a utility going far beyond its connection with the rest of the book. This reviewer knows of no other such account of the law of arrest in this country and welcomes its appearance in readily accessible form. There are set out in Appendix I extracts from standing police instructions in New South Wales and Victoria relating to the use of firearms which are not otherwise easily obtainable. They are not easily obtainable because (page 29, footnote 27) these police forces regard their standing instructions as secret documents. This attitude is indefensible and the author performs a public service in ignoring it.

The style in which the book is written is clear and easy to read, imparting indeed at times quite a sense of excitement as some sordid drama or other unfolds, goodies, baddies and all. There is a com-

mendable refusal to lapse into police English, so that for example (page 53) beer is drunk and not consumed. The conclusions reached are expressed (for example, page 80) with studious moderation, although in this reviewer's opinion the author when disagreeing with the coroner leans over too far backward in his constantly reiterated insistence that the coroner is in the best position to assess the evidence. It is obvious from the police-dominated surroundings in which the coroner usually holds his inquest (a point which the author makes with emphasis on more than one occasion) and from the frequency with which evidence appears to be withheld or doctored that he is not necessarily in the best position.

Above all there is an admirable absence of apprehension in the author about saying exactly what he means when he disapproves. A minor instance is (page 121) where he refers to four of the *dramatis personae* (not policemen) as 'young oafs'. More important examples are where he makes direct and serious assertions of police misconduct. It is another public service that these should be published without evasion or circumlocution. They include (pages 139-141) direct assertions of organised police involvement in crime in Sydney and (pages 117-118) an apparently indisputable case of organised police perjury in order to secure a criminal conviction. Not the least scandalous aspect of police behaviour revealed is the disciplinary action taken by the police themselves. Leaving aside the dubious reliability of any inquiry into their own conduct by the police, there is (page 140) the revelation that if police are suspected of involvement in organised crime in a given district the 'standard device' is to transfer them to another district. The reviewer finds himself beyond comment. After this it comes as no surprise to read (page 167) that one policeman had been 'an inadequate aggressive psychopath with alcoholic tendencies' (his psychiatrist's finding) for three years before leaving the force. He was subsequently shot dead by his former colleagues whilst creating a dangerous situation in a public place with a shotgun. Actually this case (Delaney, pages 167-171) struck the reviewer as the weakest in the collection from the author's point of view. It is hard to believe that it was unreasonable to shoot Delaney under the circumstances.

Other particularly interesting passages are an analysis of the self-defence situation (page 164), where the author suggests that all policemen tend to react in the same way because the instinct to defend oneself overrides other strengths or weaknesses of character, and a discussion (pages 187 and following) of the trend back to private

police forces in the form of watching companies. The dangers of this latter development are obvious, notwithstanding the tendency of the police, once they get used to the phenomenon, to co-operate with the private guards (page 189).

A minor defect of the book, which has importance not only in the case of an overseas reader but also makes things slightly obscure even for many Australian readers, is that the author identifies localities with strict postal accuracy (apart from the postcode) but usually fails to indicate in a more popular sense where they are. The first example is on page 53, where one is plunged into references to Richmond and Abbotsford without any indication being given that these are inner suburbs of a large metropolis, Melbourne. In fact it is not even stated in that instance that the action is in Victoria. Neither is the term 'Grand Final Day' explained. If the reader does not happen to know these minor facts, and he may well not if he does not live in Melbourne (and in the case of some of the newer suburbs he may not know even if he does live in Melbourne), he becomes afflicted with a sense of not belonging to the same in-group as the author and therefore missing some of the significance of the location. Other random examples are on pages 83 and 121, but it is a general fault.

There is an obscurity of a different kind on page 154. It is said that a certain breaking and entering expert specialised in stealing the keys of premises into which he wished to break from the trousers of their sleeping owner. If he could not get in without the keys, it is not clear to the reviewer how he could get at the trousers in the first place. On page 190 a nightwatchman is credited with the name Greene Frank Robert. This looks like a minor lapse into officialese from Frank Robert Greene. These trivial possibilities of improvement in no way detract from the very considerable merits of this book, the appearance of which is altogether to be welcomed.

Both books reviewed are of first rate public importance. The amount of influence they have will be a direct measure of the quality of the society in which we live. The subject matter, especially of Harding's book, invites a biased response from all those (and there appear to be too many) who prefer sweeping a problem under the rug to dealing with it. A common reaction to soundly based criticism of the police is to point out that they have many merits and usually do a difficult job with distinction. The implication is that the critic is presenting a biased view himself by concentrating only on undesirable aspects of police behaviour. But this is a red herring. Provided the critic states clearly the purpose and scope of his inquiry, and

handles his material fairly within those limits, the police have nothing to complain about. The real difficulty with inquiries of this kind, which is at the same time their great merit, is that they direct attention to some of our basic social insecurities. Thereby they frighten people. The prospect of a corrupt or undisciplined police force is indeed a frightening one. Hence there are always some who succumb to the temptation to discredit the evidence rather than cope with it. This natural, if unfortunate, response in the present case in some quarters should not be allowed to obscure the great value to our society of the two books under review. They easily pass any legitimate test of fairness and lack of bias. The work which has gone into them is a public service of high value.

COLIN HOWARD

