

The town becomes a city: three accounts of Eric Edgar Cooke's murderous reign

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Eric Edgar Cooke is remembered as Perth's, and Western Australia's, most notorious serial killer. From the mid-1950s Cooke engaged in a prolonged series of break-ins, thefts, violent attacks and eventually murders that ended only with his arrest in August 1963. In this time he was responsible for causing serious physical injury to over 20 people, many in their own homes, and eight were killed. Cooke was an opportunist murderer. Unlike most serial killers he had no obvious *modus operandi*—his murders including the running down of a pedestrian; a stabbing; a bludgeoning with a hatchet; a strangulation, and four shootings. It was because of this bizarre aspect of his crimes that police and the public took some time to realise they had a serial killer in their midst.

Many of Cooke's crimes occurred in Perth's well-to-do western suburbs, and in his most notorious outrage he went on a shooting spree in the beachside suburb of Cottesloe and riverside Nedlands in the early hours of January 27th 1963. In a series of four incidents, unrelated except for Cooke's involvement, five people were shot and three killed. It was at this point that the killer was dubbed 'The Nedlands Monster' and Perth went into a state of shock and fear.

Not only are the Cooke murders infamous because of their scale and oddity, but for other reasons they have lingered in the memory of West Australians. Firstly, Cooke was the last person to be executed in the state, and therefore his name is resurrected whenever capital punishment is a topic of conversation or political debate. Secondly, two murders that Cooke committed and to which he confessed resulted in other men being convicted, spending lengthy time in gaol, and fighting for decades to establish their innocence. These were the cases of John Button (convicted of the running down killing of his girlfriend Rosemary Anderson) and Daryl Beamish (convicted of the hatchet murder of Cottesloe woman Jillian Brewer). The cases of Button and Beamish and their quests for justice dragged on for some fifty years, only concluding in June 2011 when the state government made an ex-gratia compensation payment in favour of Beamish.

Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, is the memory that several generations of Western Australians have of Perth being a different city before and after the Cooke murders. The old normal wasn't the new normal. Somehow Perth seemed deeply changed by these events, and as historian Geoffrey Bolton has written of Cooke, 'his impact on the collective imagination of the people of Perth was apparently profound' (163).

In the narrative of Perth's development the Cooke murders are often used to mark a loss of innocence. The city had been slow to come by its myth of an innocent 'golden age'. The colony's nineteenth century origins were tainted with the harshness of first settlement, dispossession and convict labour—not exactly fertile ground manufacturing myths of innocence—and the first half of the 20th century was hardly

more conducive, being dominated by two major wars separated by a protracted depression. Effectively, however, the Second World War reset the clock on innocence as humanity recoiled from the horror of near-global warfare and the unprecedented evils of the Holocaust and the use of nuclear weapons against non-combatants. As with many communities Western Australians craved a return to normality, and as they busied themselves with postwar recovery they enjoyed an extended period of political and social stability.

Perth in the early 1960s had a population of about half a million and was at a stage in its development that has often been compared to that of ‘a big country town’ (Seddon 76). While in hindsight the city’s interests at the time might be seen as somewhat provincial it was, nonetheless, a good time for Perth residents. The city’s economy expanding on the back of a prolonged period of agricultural prosperity, and the sense of well-being was enhanced by a series of events that highlighted Perth’s ambition to be seen as a modern, international metropolis. These included the completion of the Narrows Bridge and Kwinana Freeway in late 1959; the coming of television in the same year with the opening of a local studio of the Seven Network; the arrival of commercial jet travel in 1961; the hosting of the Empire and Commonwealth Games in late 1962 with the associated development of major new civic facilities; a visit by Queen Elizabeth in early 1963; and the international attention gained later that year when astronaut John Glenn overflew Perth and dubbed it the ‘city of light’. To Perth residents these events seemed to indicate that Perth was overcoming its notorious isolation and finding a place as a modern city capable of attracting global interest.

Robert Drewe, who as a boy and young man lived in the riverside suburbs of Dalkieth and Nedlands, later recalled the willing embrace of modernity among the city’s upper middle-class as they made the most of post-war opportunities.

Dalkieth people prided themselves on living respectable and modern suburban lives. Modernity was as important as respectability. They lived in the immediate present. The past, as I’d heard it described all my life, went back only as far as the war. (216)

George Seddon, from his own privileged position in Nedlands at The University of Western Australia—with its gravitational pull of wealth and influence as the city’s only university—made a similar point about the rise and rise of middle-class aspiration.

With a few exceptions, our students at The University of Western Australia lived in a timeless present, with no sense of the past (the past was not ‘discovered’ until the seventies). Equally, there was little concern for the future. As it was, so it would effortlessly be. The Faculty of Arts functioned substantially as a finishing school for the young ladies of Peppermint Grove who thus had the benefit of a ‘free university’. (76)

Seddon is one of many who has referred to the 1950s and ‘60s as Perth’s ‘Age of Innocence’ (51, 76), describing it as ‘a complacent, very pleasant, non-industrial middle

class city' (51), where 'Evil was something you read about' (77). It was into this agreeable, ambitious and perhaps even slightly smug world of Perth's well-off western suburbs that Eric Edgar Cooke unleashed random murder.

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Despite the considerable impact of the Cooke murders a literary response was slow in coming. The now well-established market for 'true crime' writing was almost non-existent at the time, and even some formal histories of Perth written in the aftermath of the murders, such as Tom Stannage's *The People of Perth* and Jenny Gregory's *City of Light* (both, it should be noted, published by the Perth City Council) managed to overlook Eric Edgar Cooke entirely. A substantial historical account of Cooke's crime spree was not written until Estelle Blackburn's *Broken Lives* (1998). Blackburn's book came between two others that drew heavily on these same events, but in different genres—Tim Winton's novel *Cloudstreet* (1991) and Robert Drewe's memoir *The Shark Net* (2000). The subject shared by these three books is, however, more than simply the Cooke murders, in that they also take the transformation of Perth as their subject, narrating the city at a crucial moment in its development when one traumatic series of events became permanently embedded as a marker of the transition from a town to a city.

Broken Lives was centrally concerned with the case of John Button and was written in an attempt to establish his innocence. Button had been sentenced to ten years in gaol and served five, but after two previous failed appeals he still stood convicted of the murder of Rosemary Anderson. One of the strategies Blackburn used for establishing Button's innocence was to accumulate the detail of Cooke's many offences, recording for the first time the scale and range of his criminality.

At one level, Blackburn's analysis of Cooke's impact on the city was quite pedestrian and failed to rise above the clichés relied upon by many Perth residents as they recall this period.

The small city ... [that] had ways of a friendly, easy going big country town where people left their doors unlocked and their car keys in the ignition of open cars. They trusted each other. He turned it into a city of suspicion and terror. For the first time people started locking the doors of their homes and cars, stopped going out at night and slept with guns or any weapons they could find under their pillows. (4)

What Blackburn lacks in analytical insight however, she compensates for with her research and descriptive powers. In particular *Broken Lives* is extremely effective in backgrounding the many incidents and numerous lives that were affected by Cooke, and Blackburn is adept at concisely rendering the texture of the lives the people of Perth led at the time. At one level these lives that can seem quite remote from those lived fifty years later, but we recognise in them the various socio-cultural changes that were shaping Perth as it adjusted from a period of scarcity to post-war prosperity and

enhanced personal opportunity. These changes included the population movement from the country to the town; the influx of postwar migration; the tentative suburban expansion that was nudging the city beyond its established boundaries; the growing desire for higher education that made Perth's only university a focus for middle-class ambition; and the emerging fault lines between classes and suburbs that were slowly fracturing the city's egalitarian ideal. Blackburn portrays 1950s and '60s Perth as a optimistic and sundrenched land of innocent good times and conservative middle-class values, while also hinting at the stresses that were emerging in a society that increasingly placed a high value on social and financial advancement. It is a vision of the changing face of Perth that had been expressed at the time by poet and journalist Victor Courtney in his 1962 memoir *Perth—and All This!* While praising the 'wonderful march of modernity' Courtney also noted that 'Perth may have lost something on the march' (320):

Perth has lost some of that close family feeling the city once had. I think it has developed among a section of its people a class consciousness that would have been laughed out of existence forty or fifty years ago. Too many people have got rich too quickly ... New suburbs have risen in Perth and in some of them the Joneses make lavish display of their newly acquired wealth and ... mortgage everything but their immortal souls ... Perth has gathered unto itself a new elite ... founded on the ability to make money, own fine houses, and follow a pattern of gilded mediocrity. (321-22)

It was from these emerging differences in class and access to the benefits of post-war prosperity that Blackburn fashioned a motive for Cooke's criminality. Whereas he had previously been seen as a man who killed and maimed on a whim, or in his own words 'Because I wanted to hurt someone', Blackburn took the story deeper. She described Cooke's broken family home, his drunken and violent father, his small physical stature and hare lip that saw him bullied at school and work, the blue collar jobs, the drift into petty crime, the early marriage, the seven children by the time he was thirty, and the working class house in the working class suburb. She also recounted how despite these disadvantages Cooke believed himself to be a man gifted with charm and style. His dress was dapper, his appearance neat, he loved the company of women and desired an abundant social life. But so much of what he wanted to be, or to become, was denied him—he was from the 'wrong side of the tracks', economically disadvantaged and with a social ambition that was ill-matched to his physical appearance.

According to Blackburn's account, Cooke found in the well-off western suburbs a window into the life he might have lived and people he could despise for their wealth, their social ease, and their education. Ultimately, he also found a reason to kill. As Blackburn writes of Cooke's attack in Dalkieth on university student Shirley McLeod:

Eric Edgar Cooke stood in the hallway ... She was quite alone. She was young and attractive. Bitterness overwhelmed him as he thought of the happy life she must have, living in the big house in a well-to-do suburb, with

wealthy parents, lots of friends, a good social life, lots of opportunity, everything she wanted. Everything he didn't have. How he hated her and all of her sort. (277-8)

Cooke's urge to kill is described by Blackburn as a desire for 'revenge against the happy, beautiful people' (161), both for the insults they had directed towards him and their lifestyle that he envied. In this way Cooke's murderous deeds are represented as a repellent manifestation of class-based hatred in a city that prided itself on its lack of class distinction. Here was an appalling reminder, even as Perth enjoyed the fruits of modernisation and economic and social advancement, of the evil that could be unleashed in the most unlikely circumstances. Perth, Blackburn informs the reader one final time, was 'vastly changed' by the Cooke murders and 'would never be the same again ... No longer would people enjoy the safety of a big country town where everyone could be trusted. Perth had grown up to be a city of suspicion and locked doors' (305).

Tim Winton had previously included the Cooke murders in *Cloudstreet*, a novel that prefigures Blackburn's focus on class and social distinction as an element in the murders. *Cloudstreet* provides an account of Perth's social development from the end of the war until 1964, and in climaxing as it does with the deeds of the 'Nedlands Monster' it both accounts for and subverts the myths of innocence attached to this period.

In a dense, episodic novel, the narrative centres on two working class families, the Lambs and the Pickles, both of whom move from the country and end up sharing a sprawling house in the suburb of West Leederville. Winton's evocation of the period is based on a nostalgic version of Perth's age of innocence. It is a world in which despite their differences the Lambs and Pickles rub along in their own way, recalling a time when communities seemed closer, lives were lived more openly and more generously, and where domestic dysfunction is apparent but is somehow rendered as comparatively benign and even endearing. The reader is also reminded, however, of the loss and suffering that underpins this age of 'innocence', in particular through the 'haunting' of the house by an Indigenous spirit.

In addition to the house the novel's other critical setting is the Swan River, which establishes a presence that is both captivating and menacing as it wends its way through the lives of most of the characters in one way or another. The river also serves to physically unite the people of Perth at a time when most suburbs were strung along its banks. In doing so it connects the working class suburbs such as West Leederville with the privileged enclave of Nedlands and Dalkieth that surround the university, which in turn serves as a marker of established wealth and authority. It is also the river that brings the Perth people together in other ways, with all classes gravitating to its banks for recreation. The novel both commences and concludes with scenes of the Lambs and Pickles picnicking together on the Nedlands riverbank, beneath the university, as they make rare incursions into middle-class territory.

It is Quick Lamb and his brother Fish, the latter mentally damaged after a near drowning, who eventually emerge as the focus of the novel. Quick's life has also been changed forever by his brother's near death—he has developed into a melancholy and

introverted young man, given to a certain brooding darkness and prone to seeing life as a Manichean battle between good and evil. He also develops an awareness of his separation and difference from those born to the well-to-do riverside suburbs.

Cars swept round Mounts Bay Road beneath Mount Eliza where Kings Park presided over the town. With an easterly rushing in his ears he often watched the toffs picnicking by the university. He saw their sporty little cars, their jingling bicycles, and he wondered what they were, these university people. They came into the shop now and then, stopping for some forgotten thing for a picnic hamper, or seeking out icecream ... Quick looked into their faces and wanted to know how they could bear so much school. (138)

This world of educated privilege is one into which Quick's wife-to-be, Rose Pickles, drifts through her affair with university man and budding poet Toby Raven. At their first meeting Rose sums up Toby in terms of their class difference—'You're a reporter, you went to uni, your parents live in Nedlands and you've tried to teach yourself to talk like one of us' (285). Toby embodies both aspects of the riverside suburbs from which Rose and Quick are excluded; the social life of the wealthy, and the intellectual life of the university. He also represents the emergence of a class new to Perth—the younger generation of established money whose social advantage is married to intellectual affectation and the street credibility associated with the emerging global youth culture. Toby's is a world where mink mixes with duffel coats, and he introduces Rose to Italian food, sparkling wine, to clubs and balls, to jazz, to Camus and Lawrence, and to sex.

It is also Toby who describes to Rose—as they drive along the riverside to the university—a vision of Perth as 'One of the world's strangest towns' that is on the brink of outgrowing its countrified adolescence, with a darkness waiting to be unleashed.

Perth is the biggest country town in the world trying to be a city. The most isolated country town in the world trying to be the most cut off city in the world, trying desperately to hit the big time... There's something nesting here, something horrible. Ambition, Rose. It squeezes us into corners and turns out ugly shapes. (289)

It is not until the novel is well advanced that one of those 'ugly shapes' emerges in the form of the 'Nedlands Monster' and at this point the plot takes a decidedly sinister turn.

And then the vile hot easterly blows them into summer proper, into a dry night-time madness ... [A] small man creeps through the back lanes between bin and gate and bloating fences itching with an inexplicable hatred ... hating you, every one of you as you sleep moaning and turning beneath your sheet behind your flywire, past you as you sleep open on verandahs and on

back lawns in the countrified manner you cling to. Oh, what hurt and malevolence glows in that shambling shape of a man ... rolling wherever the hot headachy desert wind blows him: West Perth, Dalkieth, Shenton Park, Subiaco, Mosman Park ... Against his chest he carries a rifle. (363)

If Perth is the 'big country town that wants so much to be a city' (364), then it is the Nedlands Monster who will fulfill that ambition.

Quick works as a policeman involved in the hunt for the murderer. Like the Monster he also stalks the back lanes of the western suburbs at night as he searches for clues and feels first-hand the fear that is shaking the town from its complacency and changing it forever.

The town is in a frenzy down there. This is what it means to be a city, they say, locking their doors and stifling behind their windows. On the streets at night no one moves. No one goes out. There's a murderer out there and no one knows what he wants, where he is, who he is, and why he kills. This is Perth. Western Australia, whose ambition knows no limit. And the streets are empty. (365)

Winton, through the character of Quick, recognises in the Nedlands Monster the social exclusion that underpins his murderous passion. Quick knows this instinctively because he recognises some of it himself, some of what it is to be outside certain types of society and opportunities, where ambition can be thwarted and repressed until it manifests as that same need for 'revenge' described by Blackburn.

You have to be a winner. Even the short and ugly and deformed, they have to win sometimes. He's winning, beating them all. A little truckdriving bloke with no schooling, he's killing them in their beds and they're losing at last. (372)

Quick is present when the killer is finally caught and immediately recognises the banality of evil—that the 'Monster' is in fact the distorted face of the city's ambition.

Him. Already they're bundling him into a paddywagon, disappointed at the size of him, the hopeless look of him ambushed and frightened and suddenly not winning. He's just a frustrated man with a hare lip who's gone back to his lifetime of losing, and the pathetic sight of him robs the detectives of the feeling they'd expected. The Nedlands Monster, the man who made the town a city ... Him! (381)

In this moment, as Quick recognises some of his own feelings of ordinariness and exclusion in the Monster, he also becomes the only person who has some empathy for this serial killer. As the rest of the town goes crazy with celebration and the desire for revenge, Quick realises that he lives in a far more complex moral world than he had

previously understood, and that ‘I could’ve turned out angry and cold like *him*. I can see how that evil little bugger might’ve just turned, like a pot of milk’ (402).

Quick’s association with the Monster is underlined in a scene when he pulls a drowned boy from the river. In an incident based on the drowning death of Cooke’s eldest son, Michael, which occurred while Cooke was in Fremantle awaiting execution, the drowned child turns out to be none-other than the Monster’s son. Quick has been in this situation before, having pulled Fish from the river years before.

The poor bastard, he thought, the poor, poor bastard, sitting there in Freo gaol waiting for the hangman, with this news heading his way in a few minutes time. (398)

The connection between Quick and Cooke is played out to the novel’s conclusion. Quick and Rose’s son Harry is born on the day the Monster is captured, and months later, on the day he is executed, Fish Lamb finally does drown, at a family picnic on the banks of the Swan River, on the grounds of the university.

If *Cloudstreet* provided a view of post-war Perth and the Cooke murders from a working class perspective, a world apart from the university-centred enclave in Nedlands and Dalkieth, then Robert Drewe’s memoir *The Shark Net* views these same times and events from within that other, privileged world.

The book commences with the arrival of the Drewe family to Perth in 1950 when Robert is six years old. Robert’s father is an ambitious executive for rubber goods and sportswear manufacturer Dunlop, who settles his family in Dalkieth where they become active in the suburb’s upper-middle class social networks. The Drewes move in a status-conscious world of company dinners, private schools, youth clubs, the university, and summers at Rottnest. The river again looms large in *The Shark Net*, but whereas for the Lambs and Pickles in *Cloudstreet* it was an exotic place for prawning and swimming, for the Drewes and their neighbours it is about the yachting season in their own backyard.

For the young Robert this should be an idyllic childhood, and at times the reflective author looking back on his younger self can glimpse the potentially perfect childhood space he enjoyed. But Robert is an anxious child, tormented by a series of hardly credible threats. Most of these are pseudo-anxieties gleaned from the safe but nonetheless phobic world of the 1950s—spiders, argentine ants, sparrows, polio and sharks, and a peculiarly Perth disease called ‘boiling brain’. But there are other, more real dangers abroad in this tantalisingly ideal yet compromised world—the growing awareness of his parents’ troubled and occasionally violent marriage; the knowledge of Dalkieth’s dark history including past murders; and finally an indiscriminate murderer bringing death to his suburb. And Drewe finds himself drawn close to the murders that are terrorising the city. A weapon used in a murder is stolen from the house of one friend, and another friend John Sturkey is shot and killed while sleeping on a Nedlands verandah. Moreover Drewe knows Edgar Eric Cooke, who is working as a driver for Dunlop and makes frequent deliveries to the Drewe house.

Young Robert's introduction to Cooke is narrated in order to emphasise the social distinctions between the Drewes and their delivery driver. Cooke comes to the back door which is the entry used by 'tradesmen and children' (108), and Robert immediately notes his small stature, harelip and distorted voice. Their conversation is about beaches, with Cooke labeling Drewe's preference of North Cottesloe a beach for 'snobs from Nedlands' (117), and Drewe recognising Cooke's choice of Scarborough as the beach preferred by delinquent juveniles and motorbike gangs. But the offences suffered by Cooke are more than just those associated with suburban class distinctions, they are also personal. In a series of three vignettes spread across the book—each with the heading 'Saturday Night Boy'—Drewe sketches in the same troubled background highlighted by Blackburn, and notes the personal slights Cooke endures at the hands of those 'Nedlands and Dalkieth and Cottesloe girls with their smooth, bare shoulders, those tanned, snobbish shoulders always turned to his face' (45).

Drewe recounts how he commenced work with the *West Australian* as a cadet reporter, and because of his familiarity with the elite western suburbs was chosen as the social rounds-man to report the various parties and gatherings of the city's wealthy. Cooke's beat therefore becomes his, and *The Shark Net* narrates the fear that grips these suburbs as the murder toll rises, with Drewe himself implicated in that Cooke apparently uses the social pages of the *West* to identify houses that are empty as owners travel overseas or attend social events. In turn Drewe also recalls the impact on these suburbs as the 'murders immediately changed the spirit of the place', and 'an eerie feeling hung over the coastal suburbs and over the beaches at Cottesloe and North Cottesloe' (236).

The Shark Net describes not only Perth's coming of age and loss of innocence, but also that of Drewe himself. At eighteen he discovers that his girlfriend is pregnant, and he has to come to terms with telling his parents, organising a hurried wedding and preparing for fatherhood. Soon after his mother dies unexpectedly in her mid-40s and Drewe himself is left wondering if he too isn't a 'murderer'—that the shame that this unplanned pregnancy had brought to this most aspirational of families wasn't the cause of her sudden death. In this way Drewe finds himself in a situation similar to that of Quick Lamb, feeling some sort of unwanted empathy with the serial killer. Drewe, in his role as a journalist, encounters Cooke in the courtroom during his trial:

Suddenly I felt him staring at me. I'd been avoiding his eyes, hoping he wouldn't recognise me, but a moment later he winked. I winked back, then I felt a hot wave of embarrassment that quickly turned into anger at myself ... I should have ignored the wink ... but in the split-second I weighed up my response, I decided he was in such deep shit that it would be uncharitable and somehow treacherous not to wink back. (11)

Soon after Cooke's execution Drewe, just turned 21, has the opportunity to return to Melbourne after some fourteen years in Perth. He leaves transformed—part of a 'young couple, with a small, sand-coloured boy, hurrying across the coastal plain, and

into the desert' (358), and he leaves behind sharks, spiders, boiling brain, serial killers and the very changed city of Perth.

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Broken Lives, *Cloudstreet* and *The Shark Net* offer perspectives in three different genres on the one series of events. Read as a piece they stitch together a tapestry of the place and time of their setting, revealing a lot about Perth as it was, and as it has become. Indeed they pinpoint Perth at a crucial juncture in the process of its 'becoming', whereby the city's changing character—its evolution from a town to a city—would be forever associated with one series of unexpected and traumatic events. And if one effect of the murderous events these books describe was to unite Perth in a state of fear, then another was to reveal something of the underlying fault lines of wealth, class and status that were beginning to disrupt the formerly stable social base of this notionally egalitarian city. Blackburn, Winton and Drewe not only describe Perth as being changed by the Cooke murders, but also the extent to which Eric Edgar Cooke was a distillation of forces at work as the colonial town finally gave way to the contemporary city.

The three texts have of course all been written with the benefit of considerable hindsight—it is only with hindsight that we can recognise what seem to have been 'innocent' times and thereby nurture the associated myths, and it requires even further hindsight in order to understand how tenuous those myths are. To the people of Perth in the early 1960s modernisation, social advancement and increased international exposure (and even what we might now call globalisation) were eagerly embraced for their manifold benefits, including their potential to ease Perth's isolation and to help it take a place alongside Sydney and Melbourne as 'real cities'. In that moment of optimistic transition Cooke's murderous spree was seen as an aberration, something that happened in spite of economic progress, enhanced personal wealth and the steady march of modernity. In different ways, however, Blackburn, Winton and Drewe all suggest something different—that Cooke was in part a creation of those same forces, a reminder of the fragility of innocence and the price paid in transforming the town into a city.

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