

REVIEWS

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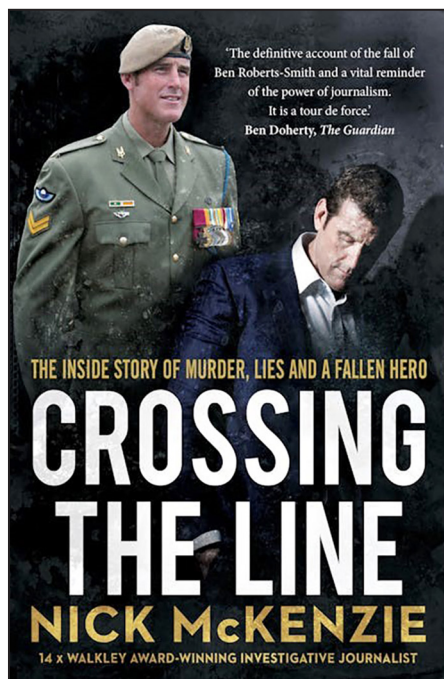
SAS exposé a masterclass in investigative journalism

Crossing The Line: The inside story of murder, lies and a fallen hero, by Nick McKenzie. Sydney: Hachette Australia. 2023. 454 pages. ISBN 9780733650437

I WILL forever remember choking on my morning coffee when I read *The Age* on 8 June 2018. Nick McKenzie and Chris Master's article detailing the alleged war crimes in Afghanistan of a highly decorated Australian war hero was confronting, to say the least. 'This is crazy brave,' I remember thinking. 'I really hope they've done their homework.'

Not surprisingly, they had. I say not surprisingly given that Masters comes out from the golden age of Australian investigative journalism in the 1980s; his reporting—along with that of the *Courier-Mail's* Phil Dichie—helped expose in the Joh Bielke-Petersen government and bring it down.

The opening of McKenzie's book,



Crossing The Line: The inside story of murder, lies and a fallen hero, makes one reflect on how Australian investigative journalism still manages to thrive, making crucial contributions to our liberal democracy and holding power to account.

To list a few of the past decade: McKenzie and team reporting on Melbourne's Crown Casino; ABC *Four Corners* and Louise Milligan, reporting on child abuse in the Catholic Church leading to the Royal Commission into institutional child abuse; *Crikey's* Amber Schultz reporting on the abuse of state guardianship; Nine's Adele Ferguson exposing malpractice in the banking and financial sector regarding financial advisory services.

These examples are even more impressive given the severe restrictions

on public interest and investigative journalism in Australia, where power elites employ ‘lawfare’ to smother public interest journalism.

However, McKenzie’s and Masters’ reporting efforts on Ben Roberts-Smith goes beyond any previous investigative journalism undertaking in Australia. McKenzie’s book, in forensic detail, tells the inside story of the Roberts Smith reporting project, reflecting the courage required to shed light on the nation-forming myth of the ANZAC legend and Australia’s infatuation with war heroes.

To dare to challenge the reputation of a living war hero is one of the greatest challenges in public interest journalism in Australia. We should all be deeply grateful to McKenzie and Masters for igniting a much-needed, respectful national discourse on our relationship with the ANZAC legend. This relationship is far from healthy as McKenzie’s book so clearly and eloquently illustrates.

Crossing The Line resonates strongly with me. I have deployed twice with UN peace-keeping forces in Cyprus and Lebanon, and although I’ve never witnessed the alleged savagery of Ben Roberts-Smith and some of his colleagues, I have seen his archetypes—the bullying, the lack of empathy, the harm caused to those deployed too many times into theatres of war.

The book outlines in detail how sections of the Australian power elite tried to stop the truth from being reported, including Brendon Nelson, the former defence minister and former

director of the Australian War Memorial; Kerry Stokes, the Seven West Media billionaire who bankrolled Roberts-Smith’s defamation case to the tune of tens of millions of dollars and, disappointingly, decorated investigative journalist Ross Coulthart, who was allegedly hired as a PR consultant to pressure *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* to not run the stories.

Roberts-Smith’s defenders corralled around him, knowing the Australian Defence Force—instigated Brereton inquiry into alleged war crimes in Afghanistan was ongoing. Surely this should have sparked some doubt in their support for the disgraced war hero, especially given the number of current and former SAS soldiers—in luding former SAS captain and current Liberal member in the House of Representative, Andrew Hastie—who spoke up about the problematic culture in the SAS.

I know from personal experience how incredibly strong the code of silence is within special forces units. The fact that McKenzie and Masters, from the first article, had numerous SAS sources indicated they were reporting the truth and had done due diligence in ensuring they could back these deeply serious claims.

Whatever happens next to Roberts-Smith (and this case still has a long way to run), the power elite that backed him and tried to stifle the truth should be held to account. Perhaps this will happen with each indictment we are bound to get from the Office of the Special Investigator acting on the Brereton report, which found there was credible evidence of 25 Australian

soldiers being involved in 39 murders of Afghans during their deployments to Afghanistan.


The current chair of the Australian War Memorial, Kim Beazley, has a major challenge in how the memorial deals with our, allegedly, disgraced war heroes, starting with the life-sized Ben Roberts-Smith portrait and exhibition.

The book is a complete page-turner and a master class in investigative journalism. Tracking down the name of the victim who was kicked off a cliff and then shot in the Darwan incident is crucial in humanising a killed Afghani civilian. His name was Ali Jan. The section where McKenzie describes his trip to Afghanistan to talk to Jan's wife, Bibi, is deeply moving.

Echoing McKenzie's words, we owe an immense debt of gratitude to the SAS soldiers past and present who stood up and told the truth. They are the real heroes. As Andrew Hastie pointed out, they may have saved the SAS.

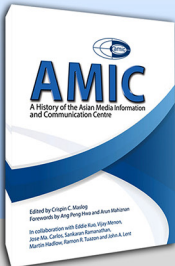
With McKenzie and Masters (and credit to both Fairfax Ltd and Nine Entertainment for backing the publications), they managed what no other liberal democracy has done to this extent so far—exposing the dirty and disgusting underbelly of war, which morally corrupts some of the people we deploy to fight in our name.

Nick McKenzie's book should be read by every Australian citizen. It will certainly be a set reading in the journalism courses I teach.




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