

REVIEWS

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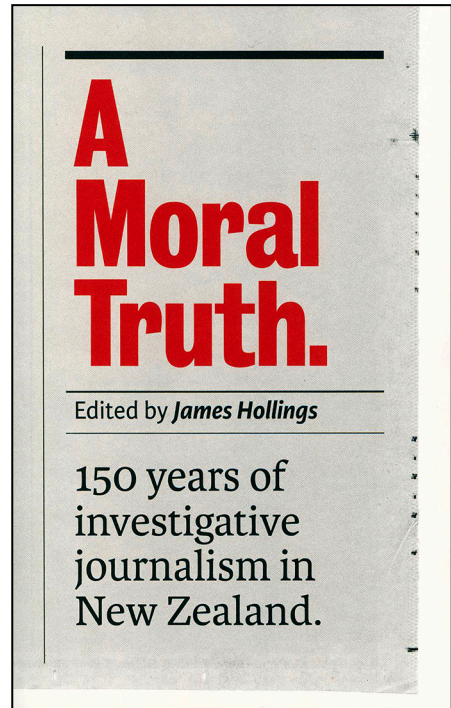
A real inspiration for the next generation of NZ journalists

A Moral Truth: 150 years of Investigative Journalism in New Zealand, edited by James Hollings. Auckland: Massey University Press. 2017. 448 pages. ISBN: 978-0-9941-4158-3

TWO executions 40 years apart; New Zealand's worst aviation disaster; people wrongly imprisoned; the plight of tenants in slum housing; the pollution of our waterways; health scandals resulting in deaths; corporate scandals, sometimes likewise; and so much more.

They are all examples of the investigative journalism to be found in this book, in fact 33 fascinating examples. They start in 1863 with the independent Māori newspaper *Te Hokioi* uncovering government preparations for the invasion of the Waikato, but modern day case studies proliferate too, ending in two widely differing 2016 investigations: one into the tiny New Zealand tax paid by global companies, and the other into revisiting victims of child killers.

Despite initial comments received by editor James Hollings that a com-



pilation of New Zealand investigative journalism would make a 'short book' (p. 9), he has indeed shown there really is no shortage of choice, exemplified by the sheer variety here which also trigger collective memories of many others (which, if room allowed, could have also joined the throng).

And these are textual examples, nearly all from print/online newspapers and magazines or news sites. It does not include the large body of broadcast work through New Zealand's radio and television journalists. (Although this is briefly referred to at the end of the introduction (p. 16), it would have been useful, and fairly simple, to clarify in the subtitle.

After all, it would be possible to include these in the same reflective

exegesis/interview way as had to be done with some of the larger bodies of work in this edition. Perhaps an idea for the next collection.

This is a precious book in many ways, in the purest sense. It captures works a society can be proud of (never mind the journalists, editors and publishers who made them happen), while perhaps feeling the shame of what inspired them, especially when similar stories still appear down the years.

So it was that ‘muckraking’ *NZ Truth* newspaper campaigned, unsuccessfully, against the hanging of Māori teenager Tahi Kaka in 1911, and then pursued the business of state execution. Summing it up as such though doesn’t do justice to the journalist’s original copy conveying the sadness and horror involved.

Later in 1945, the same newspaper again attends and covers the hanging of a young man, this time Irishman Albert Black, also at Mt Eden, in its campaign for the abolition of the death penalty. Here the writing is damning through its powerfully sparse style, which also reflects the restrictions by then placed on how hangings could be covered by the press.

As reporter Jack Young wrote in the story at the time:

Press reporters who have to attend as representatives of the public have been warned that they are expected to be ‘restrained’ in what they write, and that if they ‘sensationalise’ reports of executions they may lose the ‘privilege’ of attending ... The government it is understood knew very little about the

mechanics of capital punishment when it introduced it. It is doubtful whether its members have much more first hand knowledge now. (p. 97)

The investigation into the plight of rental housing tenants wasn’t recent but written in 1903 by *New Zealand Herald* freelance journalist Hilda Rollett who went undercover into the Auckland slums, sometimes finding landlords living alongside in similar penury, and holding the council to account. In 1904, she went undercover as a maid to investigate ‘the Domestic Service Problem’ (p. 45) with writing as engaging now for readers as it must have been then, even if the subject matter and general views have dated, with a tacit acceptance of the status quo.

Also not recent but as relevant is the investigation into ‘dirty dairying’ and polluted rivers by Jim Tucker in 1972 for the *Taranaki Herald*, a lyrically and powerfully written piece which pioneered environmental journalism in New Zealand.

But there is no shortage of modern day examples whose subjects are hopefully still well known in the collective psyche, whether the wrongful conviction campaigns, such as those of Arthur Allan Thomas and David Dougherty, to certain events surrounding major disasters, such as the Christchurch Earthquake and the Pike River Mine explosion.

Elsewhere, how long it took for things to be put even partially right—where possible—by authorities in a number of cases suggest some of

the more recent investigations, such as that of Nicky Hager, may also be waiting a while for an outcome. Bruce Ansley's piece on the selling of New Zealand land to foreigners, focusing on the iconic High Country, was in 2002.

Defining 'investigative journalism' has long exercised many, moving past the 'all journalism is investigative' line. An example of a persuasive and useful argument is that of Starkman (2014) whose *The Watchdog That Didn't Bite: The financial crisis and the disappearance of investigative journalism* exposed the failings of the press, particularly financial and business, who missed especially the subprime mortgage scandal.

He theorises dividing journalism into two types: 'accountability' or 'watchdog' journalism which takes no prisoners to produce the 'Great Story' to effect change; and 'access' journalism which relies on relationships journalists have with their regular sources, providing the interviews and material but with the risk that those relationships prevent the necessary revelations (Usher, 2016).

However, here, the title *A Moral Truth* reflects Hollings' decision, with reference to various scholars, to define it more broadly, around uncovering secrets which transgress a central moral value(s) which thus matter to the general public (pp. 12-13). Quite rightly this means that important works can be included, even if they did not manage to effect change at the time.

These stories offer real inspiration and aspiration to the next generations

of journalists, students or trainees, and encouragement to any journalists feeling more world weary and battered than usual, at a time when the profession sometimes seems under attack and unsupported.

By their being brought together in this modern collection, they collectively reinforce the impressiveness of such New Zealand journalism. It brings new audiences to older work and who knows what that might trigger? In the case of the oldest pieces, this book perhaps rescues, preserves and breathes new life into that work.

Reference

- Starkman, D. (2014). *The watchdog that didn't bark: The financial crisis and the disappearance of investigative journalism*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Usher, N. (2014). Dean Starkman: The watchdog that didn't bark [Review]. *International Journal of Communication*, 8(5).