



BOOK REVIEW

Lies in a Mirror: An Essay on Evil and Deceit

Peter Charleton, Blackhall Publishing, 33 Carysfort Avenue, Blackrock, Co Dublin, (2006), ISBN 10:1 84218 101 7/ISBN 13: 978 1 844218 101 0 Paperback; ISBN 10:1 84218 102 5/ISBN 10: 978 1 84218 102 7 Hardback

Readers know the author is now a judge of the High Court, 'a high priest of the law'. The book was written before the author's appointment (or anointment) to the Bench and now takes on an extra dimension in that light. This book was published some little time ago and I commenced the drafting of this brief review shortly after the book was launched. I know the review has not seen the light of day until now; the fault is entirely mine.

The book considers, in part, the emotion of hatred. Where does hatred come from? The practising senior counsel (as he then was) came upon and confronted many patterns of evil (associated with hatred) during his practice as a prosecutor and defender at the bar.

In one sense, Peter Charleton, S.C., comes to the conclusion that the fundamental reason why people hate (a source of evil) which leads to violence and other deviant behaviour is because of 'a perversion of the truth'. Call this condition 'deceit' - a condition when taken to its ultimate results in the destruction of the 'victim'.

The author who prosecuted and defended many persons of notoriety argues that in the criminal courts it was lies (reflected in the title of the book) that prised open 'the worst aspects of human conduct'.

The author never writes about a legal confidence received either as a prosecutor or defender. He disguises the identity of the real persons, the subject of his research, even if the accused has been the subject of media attention. His reasoning on this aspect may be summarised: 'People are entitled to be let alone.' There is also the issue of professional ethics – of which the author is expressly conscious.

The central thesis of the book is that there is 'a lie' behind every crime. Of intriguing interest to many readers must be the author's belief that the most successful persons involved in 'evil' believe their own 'lies' and that is why they are so convincing. Every lawyer who reads this review will have come across the most convincing 'liars' in his or her professional practice. The evidence may be stacked against a defendant as to be almost irrefutable, yet the person charged claims he or she is innocent.

One case considered in the book refers to a male teacher who taught in a large secondary school in Dublin. He was charged in the criminal courts with abusing male adolescents. The teacher was a respected figure, 'a pillar of the community'. But he was also a paedophile. Let me state that this is only one case of many examples described by the author, most of which have nothing to do with sex. Your reviewer refers to this case because, sadly, this type of criminal activity is topical.

The accused teacher persuaded his male adolescent visitors to sleep with him in his bed. Senior Counsel met the 'proud' teacher in his solicitor's office. There was the excuse of 'accidental touching'. So it appeared there was a defence to the charges. At this stage, it was not known to counsel that a video had been used in the sexual sessions between the teacher and the young boys.

The accused teacher had organised a 'teach-in' weekend at a hotel. A chambermaid at the hotel became suspicious of the activities of the teacher and alerted the Gardaí. Defence counsel initially knew nothing about the video camera and was not informed about the video by the teacher. At the time of the trial before a judge, as distinct from a jury, no statements of witnesses were furnished in advance to the defence and no exhibits were listed.

The teacher denied any inappropriate behaviour over several hours of questioning by the Gardaí. He did admit that two of the boys had come to his room 'out of homesickness' and that he allowed them to stay in his bed 'under a separate cover'. This is what a normal parent would have done, he told the interrogating Gardaí. The teacher vigorously denied any sexual activity but might have 'brushed against' one of the boys 'accidentally'.

The incriminating video was subsequently produced in court. The teacher 'was confronted with himself'. Senior Counsel describes how the teacher 'shrank away and his colour faded'. The case was at an end. The teacher changed his plea from 'not guilty' to 'guilty'. Early in his fourteen year prison sentence, the teacher suffered from an apparent heart attack and died. The author concludes that what is certain is that the teacher's actions were 'evil'. 'His life was a lie.' The paedophile obsession dominated the teacher's thoughts but the teacher played the role of upholding the highest Christian norms. He believed the lie about himself.

The author in his book is endeavouring to make sense of what confronted him as a practising lawyer in the criminal courts. He concludes that deceit is the engine of evil; lying myths are the driving force behind many crimes.

The author argues that lying myths are also the driving force behind the most extreme forms of violence. This is not a modern phenomenon and has been with us from time immemorial.

For the record, the author graduated in law from Trinity College Dublin in 1980 where he later lectured in criminal law and was called to the Inner Bar in 1995.

He is the author of other works, *Controlled Drugs and the Criminal Law* (1986), *Irish Criminal Law: Cases and Materials* (1991), *Offences Against the Person*

(1991), and *Criminal Law* with P.A. McDermott and M.Bolger (1999). He was appointed a judge of the High Court on 11 December 2006.

Sadly, our history has not been one of memorable kindness. Yet kindness is all around us. But crime will be with us for as long as we are on this earth. This book, written by one of the Ireland's most respected jurists, now a judge of the High Court, a 'high priest of the law', is a thorough, magisterial, well-documented, passionately written account of explanations (not justifications, of course) of deviant behaviour. In that context, it is one of the best we are likely to get. The author has given us a penetrating, insightful, admirably focused and moving account of the human condition that manifests itself in criminal activity. We are offered new insights on an age-old condition. The author has provided us with a richly descriptive account of an important facet of human life.

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