



Kimberley Society

Book Note

'Every Mother's Son is Guilty': Policing the Kimberley Frontier of Western Australia 1882-1905 by Chris Owen. UWA Publishing, Crawley, 2016. Paperback, 640 pages, photographs and maps, ISBN 9781742586687. RRP \$50.

In August 2015, while this book was being prepared for publication, its author spoke to the Kimberley Society about his research. His five-page précis of that talk was published in the February 2016 *Boab Bulletin* and on our [website](#) so, rather than duplicate any of that material, this book note aims to add to it. Also relevant is that the book's 36-page introduction is accessible on the UWA Publishing [website](#).

While I consider this to be an impartial book note, I need to acknowledge that the author and I had numerous discussions about the interpretation of Kimberley history while he researched and wrote the PhD thesis that evolved into *'Every Mother's Son is Guilty'*. Twelve pieces of my work (writing, annotation or co-editing) are cited in the book, which also carries a copy of one of my maps. That contribution was small but it still needs to be mentioned here.

In his thesis, Chris Owen focused on the policing of Aboriginal people in the Kimberley in the years 1882 to 1901. The chapters in his book continue to 1905, the year that [Dr. Walter Roth](#) completed his report on the [Royal Commission on the condition of the Natives](#). A postscript then rounds it out by commenting on later events.

A key argument is that 'the period was far more complex than had been realized, with significant political and social forces shaping police actions'. Some of the previously published writing on Kimberley policing had identified those forces but, in the book, the complexity is spelt out in detail. Chapter 7 is particularly relevant with its discussion of drought, Depression, the introduction of Responsible Government, and the changes made to legislation that affected Aboriginal people. The role of John Forrest is examined and found wanting, with attention drawn to a hardening in his attitude to Aboriginal people and the Aborigines Protection Board. Underpinning that portrayal of Forrest is a quote from Forrest's biographer where Governor Robinson, writing to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, said that "personally we are excellent friends, but as Premier he is now a difficult, indeed unpleasant man to deal with".

When perusing the book, readers might find it helpful to keep a bookmark, or a finger, in the endnotes. A lot of text has been placed there, some as supporting evidence and some explanatory. The introduction's 113 endnotes have not been made available with the online copy. Most of those notes list single or multiple sources but some, mostly from note 51 onward, elaborate on points made in the text. I was puzzled by notes 73 and 74, which refer to five police files that were 'housed in the SROWA yet they had been omitted from the physical index, making discovery almost impossible'. But that's a story for another time. For now, it's worth remembering that the endnotes for the various chapters and the postscript contain plenty of interesting and informative material quoted verbatim or paraphrased from books, newspapers and archival files.

'Every Mother's Son is Guilty' is not a book for the faint-hearted. It reflects the reality that frontier life was harsh, poorly recorded, and the subject of much controversy. Yet, Chris Owen found the stamina to persevere for ten years with the extremely arduous process of documenting more than 23 years of interaction between police and Aboriginal people in the Kimberley. As a result, anyone interested in that part of our history can now access a book in which, unlike earlier works that focused on specific localities, the focus is on the entire region.

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