BOOK REVIEWS

Crime scene to court. The essentials of forensic science, Third edition, edited by Peter White, Cambridge, UK, Royal Society of Chemistry, 2010, 567 pp., ~AUS$45.00, ISBN 978-1-84755-882-4

This well-known book, which first appeared in 1998, now reaches its third edition and with significant new chapters on forensic ecology, forensic entomology and forensic archaeology and anthropology. With 17 chapters and running to close to 600 pages, the word ‘comprehensive’ comes to mind and, of its genre, this is the most wide ranging text available. The original philosophy was to produce a relatively non-technical book but this does not mean that the content is in any way superficial. Indeed, some chapters are well beyond being a mere introduction. They are certainly an excellent starting point for undergraduate and postgraduate students and for lawyers facing new areas of forensic evidence.

Whilst content is squarely aimed at a UK audience, it will be generally useful to an international readership, with the possible exception of some elements of the chapters on forensic practice and presentation of expert evidence, which are set in a clear UK context; however, that is not say the content of these two chapters will not be of interest to the Australian reader.

In addition to the chapters already mentioned, other chapters cover the crime scene, trace and contact evidence, marks and impressions, bloodstain pattern analysis, forensic examination of documents, computer-based media, fire investigation, explosions, firearms, drugs of abuse, forensic toxicology and analysis of body fluids. As previously stated, it is comprehensive indeed.

Unlike another review I recently completed in the UK Forensic Science Society series ‘Essentials in Forensic Science’, this book delivers and should be an essential on the bookshelves of lawyers and forensic scientists.

James Robertson
NCFS, University of Canberra
Australia
Email: james.robertson@canberra.edu.au

Forensic botany. A practical guide, edited by David W. Hall and Jason H. Byrd, Chichester, UK, Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, 195 pp., AUS$85.00, ISBN 978-0-470-66409-4

In his prologue to this book, the senior author, David Hall, comments on the fact that most botanists who have worked on forensic cases have not been interested in joining the Academy of Forensic Science (the US Academy!) or any other forensic organisation.
and adds that no standards exist for the training or expertise to establish professional certifications. Hence, I journeyed into this book hoping that the content would help address at least the issue of what might constitute professional practice in forensic botany. Sadly, having identified some of the problems with the use, or lack of use, of forensic botany, this book is overall a lost opportunity. The senior author comes from a background of plant identification and was the Director of a centre for plant identification and information services. This background is obvious from the content, which has an emphasis on plant identification but little emphasis on the criminalistics aspect, and potential, of forensic botany. I found most of the chapters quite superficial and struggled to determine exactly the audience to whom the book was aimed. If this audience was meant to be the non-forensic botanist, they would find little to encourage their involvement. If the intended audience was law enforcement officers, they may find material of some general interest.

In a sense the title of Chapter 6 says it all, ‘A primer...’. Overall the book is at best a primer for a broad readership but ,with the exception of Chapter 8 (palynology) and Chapter 9 (algae), it is not in any sense a detailed consideration of forensic botany.

The senior author states that law enforcement in the 1960s and early 1970s had very few cases involving plants as evidence. I am constantly astonished by the view that forensic botany is a new invention! The facts are that the 1960s and early 1970s were arguably the high point of forensic botany, certainly in the United Kingdom. At the very start of my journey into forensic science in 1975 I visited the then forensic laboratory of the Metropolitan Police in the UK and was shown many examples of forensic botany. This laboratory had an early example of properly documented methods and, in those pre-DNA days, a significant portion of this manual was devoted to forensic botany methods. It is perhaps a sad reflection that this book, which is part of the ‘Essentials of Forensic Science’ series involving the UK Forensic Science Society, has no authors from the UK. There is little historical trace left in the UK of that past world!

With the obvious exceptions of the Victorian Police Laboratory botany section and cannabis identification (and even with the latter, skill levels are generally minimal), Australia fares no better.

As an ‘old’ botanist, I would have liked to be more positive about this book, and certainly there are parts of the book that are useful, but an essential book for your bookshelf? I think not.

James Robertson
NCFS, University of Canberra
Australia
© 2013, James Robertson
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00450618.2012.756066