

books



...by Paul Donnelley

In recent years a new phenomenon has hit the book trade. Where once we would have read the fictional exploits of criminals, we are now flooded with the real-life reminiscences of ex-cons – big-time and small fry.

Joe Cannon, Tony Lambrianou, Freddie Foreman, Roy Shaw, the Krays (all three of them), Geoff Thompson, Lenny Mclean, Cas Pennant and Bruce Reynolds have all in one way or another written their life stories.

It is illegal for criminals to benefit from their nefarious activities but that surely, indirectly, what all of the aforementioned villains have done. And there's the rub. Which is better for society? For these men to retire and earn an honest living from writing and appearing on television and radio talking about their former ways and paying their taxes and national insurance contributions or to continue their illegal activities until the law or old age catches up with them? Some might argue that TV producers should not book them as guests and thus cut off the lifeblood of publicity and also deter glibble wannabes from attempting to follow in their footsteps but this again does not address the problem of what they can do to earn a living. As for the wannabes, I would have thought that being stuck in a cell with a criminal and having to slop out would be more than enough to make most level-headed people think twice. But then again... I remember a pair of young brothers a few years ago who apparently wanted to emulate the Kray twins. The boys may not be so keen to be associated with the twins if they read John Pearson's searing indictment of two of Bethnal Green's "finest" *The Cult of Violence* (Orion, £16.99). In 1967 Mr Pearson was approached

JOHN PEARSON THE CULT OF VIOLENCE THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE KRAYS



by a bisexual publisher and some time film producer who was in the thrall of the twins and persuaded to write their "authorised" biography. *The Profession of Violence* became the standard work on the twins and an international best-seller. It was also apparently the most popular book in prisons after the Bible. Much of what Mr Pearson learned about Violet Kray's boys could not be published in their lifetimes. If anything, his first book helped to turn them into the myth they became. The popular cry and accepted falsehood was that they were Robin Hood figures who never harmed the ordinary

people of east London and only hurt their own. Hopefully, Mr Pearson's book will, for once and all, lay this myth to rest. The Krays were a pair of mentally unbalanced, vicious thugs who hurt anyone who got in their way. When Ronnie died in Broadmoor, an estimated 30,000 people turned out for his funeral in the East End. Reggie's death on 1 October 2000, a few months after that of older brother Charlie, resulted in a much more sombre funeral. Few genuinely mourned his passing. Unlike much of the press *The Times* didn't publish an obituary. By way of explanation, the editor explained, "The only gangsters to whom we give obituaries are those who become heads of state." However, the *New York Times* did carry a half-page death notice in its pages.

Mr Pearson first met the twins eight days after the murder of Jack "The Hat" McVitie by Reggie who hurt his thumb in the bloody assault. When Mr Pearson asks Reggie how he came to injure his bandaged hand, he receives the one word reply, "Gardenin".

To help him gather materials for the book the twins put Mr Pearson up in a seedy flat in Blackwall Buildings and promptly send round two ladies of easy virtue to ease his "loneliness". The two were, in the author's words "two of the weirdest women I have ever seen" Tall Tess who spoke with a lisp and small Trixie. When he declined their generous offer Mr Pearson "was faintly put out to see that both of them were obviously relieved".

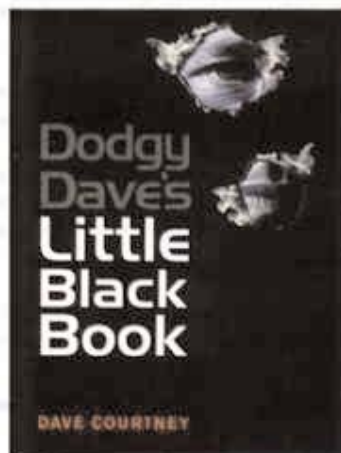
What is known or as with much Kray mythology is that Ronnie was the gay one and Reggie the straight one. However, in jail Reggie, too, had gay affairs and even before his time inside he was an active homosexual. In fact, Mr Pearson reports that at one stage the twins were gay lovers. were Reggie married on the outside to Frances Shea but it was his intolerable behaviour that caused Frances to commit suicide.

The book also deals with Ronnie's affair with bisexual politician Lord Boothby which resulted in a libel action against the *Sunday Mirror* even though the newspaper didn't actually mention either of the lovers. It cost the redtop an apology and £40,000 damages. It also cost Mr Pearson his first publishers and a newspaper serialisation. His new publishers only went ahead on condition that the references to Boothby were toned down.

The Cult of Violence is fascinating reading for its story of 1960s London, the East End and two criminals who somehow managed to captivate Britain.

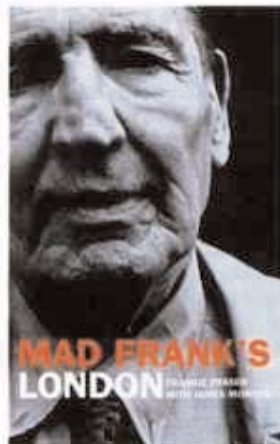
Dave Courtney came to the attention of the public when he arranged the security for Ronnie Kray's funeral. Numerous smartly dressed men with shaven heads and often cauliflower ears and badges bearing the legend "RKF" lined the route of the cortège. Courtney later wrote his autobiography *Stop the Ride I Want to Get Off* which sold over 100,000 copies. Now he has written his third book, *Dodgy Dave's Little Black Book* (Virgin, £4.99). Written may be too strong a word since it doesn't seem to have been edited. It reads probably as Courtney speaks (I've never

actually heard him speak except on a TV documentary when he and some thugs were evicting some students from a house) and so it is full of four-letter words. Nothing wrong with



that, though don't show it to aged female relatives. Courtney has a section of the book in which he gives his opinion of other villains. Perhaps surprisingly, he is critical of the Krays. "To be honest the closer I got and the more I got to know about the Krays the less impressed I was... They were not the actual gov'nors of that era: that was the Richardsons. The twins were the ones that clambered more for the press and fame thing... I could not say with my hand on my heart that they were the most intelligent human beings in the world... I wasn't by the end of their time a Kray fan." Courtney is also not a "fan" of Mad Frankie Fraser over allegedly racist comments made about Mrs Courtney.

Which brings us to *Mad Frank's London* by Frankie Fraser and James Morton (Virgin, £16.99). This is Fraser's fourth book and is based on his tours of London's ganglands. Divided into eight chapters and illustrated with fifteen pictures and maps, Fraser uses his local knowledge to guide us around some of London's most infamous crime spots the Magdala Tavern where part-time prostitute Ruth Ellis shot dead her wimpy boyfriend David



Blakely; Cecil Court where a shop assistant was murdered and identikit pictures were used for the first time and, of course, the Blind Beggar where Ronnie Kray shot George Cornell. Interesting reading... if you like that type of thing.