
Security Investigations: A Professional's Guide

by Larry G. Nicholson

Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann (1999) ISBN 0 7506 7147 5
(235 pages, £25.00)

Reviewed by Martin Hemming

Largely because of the detective genre on screen and in literature the view persists in some quarters that investigation is exciting, glamorous, stimulating work. As a result, some are no doubt attracted to the profession for the wrong reasons. Dr Nicholson's book puts the record straight. By concentrating on the day-to-day reality of what investigators do, the author emphasizes routine, humdrum tasks such as record-keeping, report-writing, file management and evidence-cataloguing. He also rightly points out that surveillance can be intensely boring, that investigation requires meticulous attention to detail and limitless patience, and that results are hard-won. In all this, Dr Nicholson's book serves a useful purpose in the sense that it might deter some who are unsuited to the work. For those who are not discouraged, *Security Investigations* offers some general common-sense advice, but the way it is written makes it very hard going indeed.

The book contains a large number of lists. For example there are six steps in an interview, five 'Cs' for report writing, four elements of sexual harassment, three types of report and two types of surveillance. When the book goes on to describe the individual elements of its lists, this reader was underwhelmed by the content. For example, two of the Cs for report writing are the need to be 'concise' and 'complete'. All very well, but little help to anyone agonizing about whether to include or omit a particular piece of information. Dr Nicholson also advises that reports be 'correct', which is hardly ground-breaking counsel. The skill of writing is to satisfy the reader, and different readers have different needs. It is usually better to find out what they are and ensure they are met than rely on generalized lists of requirements.

Another of Dr Nicholson's lists comprises the five senses to be used while on surveillance (which, for those who can't guess, are sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell). Examples abound of advice that could be summarized by a general exhortation to use common sense. When it tries to give more concrete instruction, the book almost becomes self-parody. The 23-word sentence in which Dr Nicholson tells his readers to limit sentences in reports to 20 words might have been ironic, but one can't be sure. Frequent reference is made in the book to the need for clear, grammatical writing. The advice is undermined, however, by the author's own confusion between words such as 'affect' and 'effect'.

For the experienced investigator there is little in this book, and for the aspiring detective there is no more than very general advice; where it does get specific (such as in listing sources of information) the book is useful only for readers in the USA. Anyone picking it up for general interest will very soon put it down again. The book's main usefulness is likely to be in putting off those who are attracted to investigation as a career purely by what they have seen on TV.

Martin Hemming
Formerly Investigation Officer
Post Office Investigation Department