

The Trials of Justice Murphy
Stephen Walmsley
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486 pp
Reviewed by Tim Tierney

In Greek mythology, Actaeon was a hunter punished by becoming the hunted. Transformed into a stag, Actaeon was torn apart by his own pack of hounds.

The tragic story of Lionel Murphy is the tale of a hunter in law and politics, ending his days hounded by packs of lawyers, journalists, judges and politicians.

A Labour hero who reached the heights of the legal profession as Attorney General and High Court Judge, only to spend his last years clouded in controversy.

The hounds of Judge Murphy began with illegal police activity to create tape recordings of telephone conversations. Despite the destruction of those tapes edited transcripts were released to the media. The edited transcripts “recorded” Judge Murphy’s pre-trial intercession to magistrates on charges against another lawyer, “*my little mate*”.

Multiple enquiries supported no action against Judge Murphy but he continued to be pursued.

In the end lawyers and politician, friends and foes, chased him to the precipice.

“Murphy was not present on the day his (last) judgements were given. Only two judges were present on that day, Sir Harry Gibbs and Sir Gerard Brennan. At 3:30pm they delivered their own judgements and those of their colleagues while Murphy remained at his forest home. A little over an hour after the judgements were delivered, Murphy died.”

The tale would make a great Grisham novel.

Although no Grisham thriller, this substantial book of 486 pages makes steady considered progress through the trials and enquiries as an engaging read. The book sets the scene but essentially follows the progress of the trials and judicial enquiries.

It is a lawyer’s tale told with a lawyer’s careful and deliberate style of writing, by a lawyer, and retired judge who like Judge Murphy practised in New South Wales. There are entertaining asides and explanations to explain the legal process to the lay person.

This book is well written. It is clear and comprehensive.