

Pioneer refused to take crooked path

By Stephen Fitzpatrick

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Code of Silence: How One Honest Police Officer Took on Australia's Most Corrupt Police Force By Colin Dillon Allen & Unwin, 304pp, \$29.99

Col Dillon never planned on becoming one of the country's best-known whistleblowers. Nor, to be fair, did he set out to become Australia's first indigenous copper.

But one thing he was certain of, from the age of four: that he wanted to join the force, which he did in 1965, two years before the referendum that led to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders being counted in the census.

And so, really, it was little more than happenstance that saw him become the first of his people to pull on a police uniform. At heart, he just wanted to be a cop.

There was nothing coincidental, however, about the fact Dillon's scrupulous honesty and integrity led to him being the first in the Queensland force to answer Tony Fitzgerald's August 1987 call for its "honest policemen" to give evidence at his commission of inquiry into corruption in the service.

Dillon's father had always impressed on him, he writes in his engaging and moving memoir *Code of Silence*, "to act honestly and to have the courage of my convictions. It was the values I had absorbed from him that gave me the strength to give my evidence at the commission." A descendant on both his parents' sides of the Kombumerri people of the Yugambah nation - the original occupants of what would become the Gold Coast - Dillon experienced racism throughout his career, which ended in his 2000 retirement with the rank of inspector, and included three years as a commissioner with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission.

This account goes to that, of course: at his very first posting, in Ipswich, Dillon was told by a well-meaning workmate that a certain sergeant had said "if you were posted to the same station, he would refuse to walk down the same side of the street as you".

But it is Dillon's ramrod refusal to be swayed by corrupt cops around him, particularly once he joined, in 1982, the quaintly named Licensing Branch - which is to say, the vice squad with a feelgood shingle hung over its door - that forms the initial narrative.

A couple of years in, when he was fully across the fact that brothel owners, nightclub tsars and SP bookies were being tipped off in advance of police raids, Dillon was offered \$400 a month by bent detective senior sergeant Harry Burgess (aka "Dirty Harry").

"Four hundred dollars a month and you don't have to do anything about it," Burgess told him. "All you have to do is not be in certain places at certain times. It can be

done real easy". There's no need for you to know who's paying or where it's coming from. No one but you and I will know about it. How does that sound?" Needless to say, Dillon declined, and it was Burgess's later admission of being crooked that would lead to Fitzgerald's 1987 call for honest coppers to take the stand, and his remark that "the issue is no more whether there was any corruption as how much and by whom".

The narrative begins, grippingly, with a brief description of that fateful day before the commission, barely weeks after Fitzgerald's call and mere days after being released from hospital after undergoing heart surgery. It turned out he'd been the only one to put up his hand, and the commission was concerned that without his evidence, its days were numbered.

Taking the stand, he writes, "I took a deep breath. Once I started telling the inquiry about what I knew, there would be no going back. How would I get through it? Would it be the end of my policing career? What would be the effect on my family? I was about to find out." Not only was Dillon prepared to blow the whistle on his colleagues as a point of principle; a cousin, the only family member to have followed him into the police force and someone Dillon had babysat, became embroiled a car rebirthing racket featuring a Gold Coast officer given, because of his impressive physique, the nickname "Arnold Schwarzenegger".

When the officer in question appeared, on a covertly installed camera in a panel beating shop, Dillon felt "sick in my guts; it was my cousin Ivan". Not only did the older man then recuse himself from further involvement in the case so a prosecution could proceed, he insisted that Ivan's father also be charged.

"It didn't matter that Ivan and his father were members of my own family: if they had committed an offence I was going to make sure they were charged," he recalls. "In my book you can't be half honest: bending the rules is halfway towards making them up yourself." The reform of the Queensland police force following the Fitzgerald inquiry is a matter of record, but Dillon's role went far beyond that. His final job in uniform began at the end of 1993, as head of the cultural advisory unit: an appointment that, as he puts it, "wasn't at all favourably received by the indigenous community, many of whom accused me of being a traitor and of selling out my own race ". I was as hated as much for my efforts to improve relations between indigenous people and the police as I had been for taking a stand against corruption in the Licensing Branch."

Extraordinary as it should seem now, he recalls one of his greatest battles was to have the Aboriginal flag flown over police headquarters during NAIDOC Week - extraordinary, except that the same struggle continues, manifested as recently as this month in Carnarvon, Western Australia. Still, it was momentous when finally it was won: "Seeing that flag rippling in the breeze was one of the proudest moments of my career." The Dillon story continued with his ATSIC appointment, and then after his official retirement from the force as an adviser to the Queensland government on alcohol management plans, including on troubled Mornington Island where, he recalls, "the only thing I could compare with what I saw â€¦ was television pictures of African famines and war zones".

Worryingly, he writes, shortly before sending this manuscript off to the printers, there was little evidence that had improved.

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