

dOSSIEr COREA: A portfolio on crime by Firoze Sameer

Review by AC Alles

former acting chief justice and author of the *Famous Criminal Cases of Sri Lanka* series

The author of non-fiction crime adopts a set pattern in the narrative of a sensational criminal case. In the case of premeditated crime such as highway robbery, the accused would concentrate on their detailed preparations, the appropriate location for the crime and the subsequent conduct of the perpetrators to get away successfully with the loot. In the case of individual crime, which requires careful preparation, the suitable opportunity to commit the crime and the subsequent cover up to avoid suspicion, motive would predominate. But in both classes of crime, the author would provide the reader with an intimate knowledge of the actors in the scenario, the background of the accused and his criminal propensities to provide the reader with a visual picture of the architect of the crime.

The background of the accused is always an important factor in the ultimate verdict. An acquittal in a sensational case may sometimes reveal the inadequacy of the evidence to bring home the charge to the accused. This happened in the English case of Wallace, and although in the local case of Pauline de Croos the defence was unable to establish her innocence of the capital offence before the Court of Criminal Appeal, her conviction was gravely in doubt and her case would fall into that category of cases which have been admirably classified by Edgar Lustgarten as a verdict in dispute. On the other hand there are criminal cases where the circumstantial evidence of motive, preparation, opportunity and subsequent conduct may reveal that the accused was properly convicted of a diabolical and premeditated crime. The conviction of Jayalal Anandagoda in the Wilpattu Murder case is a classic case of this type.

The present publication of author Sameer titled *dOSSIEr COREA* is the account of the criminal career of an individual who was not found guilty of any serious crime, but who has had many a close brush with the law, was able successfully to establish an alibi, which would keep him clear from the scene of the crime, and avoid being enmeshed in the long arm of the law. This book is therefore an unusual publication in the field of non-fiction crime and primarily deals with the criminal activities of an individual who was not directly involved in the crime but was always present in the background in those cases in which he was interested.

The author, with remarkable zeal, had made a close study of the criminal activities of Ossie Corea in his book *dOSSIEr COREA* punning on the name of his subject in the title. Interviews with knowledgeable persons, accounts of Corea's activities published in the media, reinforced with photographs, research at the Lake House Library and the Government Archives and the accounts of published sensational cases of Sri Lanka have provided him with a wealth of material from which he has been able to provide the reader with the criminal activities of a remarkable individual who has triumphed over the long arm of the law without any direct involvement. In the author's research he has provided the reader with several appendices which supplement the value of his research.

Although in the last chapter of his book the author has recounted various acts of 'dare devilry' of Ossie Corea and his crimes of a violent nature on a lower key, he has never been found guilty, and, in the few minor cases in which he has figured in the Magistrate's Courts, has been discharged by the Magistrate. Nor does his incarceration during the Coup trial of 1962 indicate his involvement in the conspiracy to overthrow the Government, which was a criminal undertaking in which a top administrative official and high-ranking members of the Police and Army were the chief culprits. But the fact that the Government of the day considered it necessary to put Ossie Corea behind bars for a period of six-and-a-half months indicates that the authorities considered Ossie Corea to be a dangerous man.

The author has dealt extensively with Ossie Corea's involvement in the assassination case in which Prime Minister SWRD Bandaranaike was destroyed. Three of the chapters in the book deal with this subject. There can be no doubt that Ossie Corea's involvement in the case was of a very serious nature and there are many who, in spite of direct evidence to the contrary, believe that Ossie Corea was the assassin. The important fact that it was his revolver which was the lethal weapon that killed the Prime Minister is in itself sufficient proof of his close association with the crime, but although the ramifications of the revolver have been extensively referred to in the author's account of the case there was no evidence to establish that Ossie Corea was a member of the conspiracy who participated with the other conspirators to kill the Prime Minister. Ossie Corea gave evidence at the assassination trial and was noticed to appear before the Bandaranaike Assassination Commission but neither tribunal found him guilty of being privy to the killing of the Prime Minister.

Though not a lawyer, Sameer has displayed not only a deep interest in matters affecting crime and the administration of justice, but has also published in the media articles on various other topics in the public interest. He is the co-author of a publication on the genealogical table of the Sri Lankan Muslims, which is a source of information not only to the local Muslim community, but also to the general public to indicate the prominent part played by his community in the development of the social and cultural values of Sri Lanka.

I have pleasure in commending this unusual publication on non-fiction crime to the public by an author who has portrayed the criminal activities of a local Godfather and provided the reader with a narrative of absorbing interest.

**Colombo.
December 1, 1998**

Report of the 1998 Gratiaen Prize Committee for Creative Writing (Panel of Judges: Prof. Thiru Kandiah (Chairman); Dept of English, Univ. of Colombo); Dr (Ms) Manique Gunsekera (Dept of English, Univ. of Kelaniya); Philip Coorey (Chief Editor, *The Weekend Express*). (Full report in *Weekend Express* of Sat-03 Apr/Sun-04 Apr, 1999 p23).

"...A lot of presumably ordinary writing which might have ordinarily been denied the status of literature showed the kind of skilled use of language, and the kind of persuasive power and compelling human significance and conviction that people were accustomed to seeking out in literature. For instance, through its unpretentiously factual style of the interpretative news report, Firoze Sameer's careful documentation of the facts of the notorious Ossie Corea case in his *DOSSIER COREA* kept us involved in what was going on and keenly interested in what was going to happen next and in trying to discover the larger significance of the whole episode..."