

# Why the POST helps with Button's pursuit of justice

Some people might wonder why Bret Christian, the editor and owner of the POST, has spent so much energy, time, space and money on John Button and Darryl Beamish.

Why would he spend a couple of years helping to write and publish a book, collect evidence, find 40-year-old cars, and fly in an American crash expert at his own expense?

A rough estimate would put the cost in time and money at

By **GEORGE WILLIAMS**

around \$60,000.

He has also paid a high cost in leisure time, energy, and his family.

The answer to all the questions is simple: it became glaringly obvious to him that Mr Button and Mr Beamish

had both been locked up unfairly.

And they were men in very weak positions who had little chance to fight for themselves.

The pain of the two men gripped Bret when he first read the details of their story, which would later be told in Estelle Blackburn's book, *Broken Lives*.

"I sat at the kitchen table to read a draft of the early chapters at 9 o'clock one night and I got up at 3am to check around the verandah because it had spooked me so much," Bret said.

"Now, not a day goes by when I don't think about John Button and Darryl Beamish.

## Suspicious

"John was a shy, skinny teenager who stuttered, and he didn't look people in the eye. He must have looked suspicious.

"His girlfriend had been killed. He was on the scene, he didn't know what the hell had happened, but suddenly he was in jail with a pretty strong chance that he would be hanged.

"There but for the grace of God goes any one of us." Bret said it had jumped out at him that John Button was a terrible victim of circumstances - he was in the wrong place at the wrong time, caught in a set of horrible coincidences.

## Run down

On a hot February night in 1963, Mr Button had argued with his girlfriend, Rosemary Anderson, who walked off along Stubbs Terrace, Shenton Park.

Mr Button said he had smoked a cigarette and then followed her.

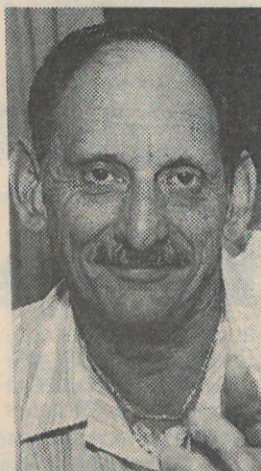
Eric Edgar Cooke, who was hanged for other murders, said that in those few minutes he happened along the road in a stolen car and had deliberately run down a girl he'd seen on the roadside, exactly as he had done five times before.

Mr Button said that when he had arrived, he found Rosemary

unconscious on the ground.

He'd picked her up in his arms and drove her to a nearby doctor.

His Simca sedan had small dents in the guard and grill from a previous accident with a car - and he eventually signed a confession that he had driven into Rosemary.



Darryl Beamish

Darryl Beamish, a profoundly deaf man, was jailed for the murder of Jillian Brewer at Cottesloe.

Cooke also claimed to have viciously killed her.

But both of Cooke's confessions to these killings were dismissed by the courts.

Until a couple of years ago, as far as Bret was concerned Button and Beamish were simply names from his teenage years, two men who had been jailed for murder in the 1960s.

He was a schoolboy when they were in the headlines.



John Button

As a young reporter on the Daily News, the Perth afternoon paper, he'd heard the mutterings, the doubt, but never got involved, either professionally or personally.

But then, about four years ago, an old reporter acquaintance, Estelle Blackburn, had called and asked if the POST would be interested in a book she was preparing that would show both men had been wrongly jailed.

She said there was strong evidence Cooke had been the real killer in both cases.

Bret said he was very interested; they were local issues that affected the whole of Perth and particularly the western suburbs, where the POST is delivered and read.

In 1996, the POST reported finding a vital new witness, and the book began to take shape.



US crash expert Rusty Haight (left) with POST editor Bret Christian at the test crash site in Claremont.

"I've done OK out of the paper and like a lot of people want to put something back into the community," Bret said.

"I'm not a joiner - I hate joining anything - so I guess this is my way of putting something back."

This leads to the question of why he has become so involved when, like every newspaper editor, a steady stream of worthy causes crosses his desk almost daily ... people with medical problems, charities, social issues, and so on.

The POST has never taken such a strong stand on any issue, so why such an effort on this?

## Unexpected

Bret said: "It was obvious to me there was only one bit of hard physical evidence left: the police photos of John Button's car.

"Today's mass of research into pedestrian crashes simply did not exist at the time of John's trial.

"If it could be shown how John's car would look if it really had hit a pedestrian, and what would happen to the body, the case would be solved.

"I realised John could never organise something like a crash test of the cars that were said to be involved.

"There has been an unexpected extra result. Rusty's analysis has solved another mystery about police mistakes and the way the courts interpreted Cooke's admissions.

"To my mind, this is the final nail in the coffin of the Appeal Court judges' refusal to believe Cooke's confessions.

"John has suffered hugely.

"He is a very quiet man who works as a bricklayer and is very religious.

"He has written to each new state premier

asking for help, that is about the limit.

Bret, who has been interested in cars since he was a kid, found he bought a Simca like Button had at

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A glass-proof crash mask protects Rusty Haight as he prepares to crash a car into a pedestrian dummy.

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