

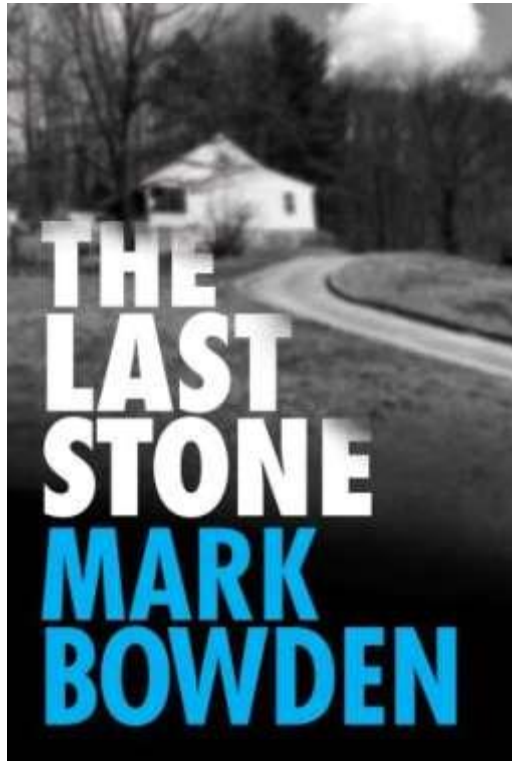
In *The Last Stone*, Mark Bowden reconstructs a crime and proves that interrogation is sometimes the best way to explore the mind

David Hayes: Should rules — of fairness, respect, truth — apply or not when trying to convince an unwilling person to tell the truth?



By David Hayes, The National Post, June 25, 2019

Most Canadians will remember the case of Colonel Russell Williams, the decorated military pilot and respected commander of CFB Trenton, Canada's largest and most important military airbase. In February 2010, he was charged with the murder of two women and the forcible confinement and sexual assault of two others during separate home invasions. Another 82 charges were later added. And, in an extraordinary development, the public was given the opportunity to watch something unfold that most of us have only seen in crime movies and TV series.



On Sunday, February 7, Williams was interrogated by Ontario Provincial Police Det. Sgt Jim Smyth, who first established a friendly rapport, then gradually began revealing the mounting evidence against him, from tire imprints and boot tracks to DNA at the crime scenes. At first, Williams, wearing a blue-and-white striped shirt and chewing gum, looked confident that he could talk his way out of things, but as the questioning continued for more than ten hours, his body language became increasingly defensive and, eventually, he was a broken man, confessing everything. At no time was Williams aware that the affable, soft-spoken fellow interviewing him was an OPP behavioral specialist and one of the top interrogators in Canada. As one police official said of the encounter, "it's a smart man, outsmarted by a smarter man."

An abridged version of the interrogation ran on TV news programs and later a documentary on CBC's *The Fifth Estate*. It's still available on YouTube. I remember discussing with friends the remarkable experience of seeing the real thing unfold in real time.

I had a similar experience reading Mark Bowden's latest book, *The Last Stone*. In March of 1975, Bowden was a young reporter launching his career on the police beat for *The Baltimore News-American*. One day, two angelic, blonde-haired, young girls — 12-year-old Sheila Lyon and her 10-year-old sister Katherine — went missing from a shopping mall in Wheaton, MD., a suburb north of Washington, D.C.. Bowden covered the story for weeks, but the case was never solved. For decades to come, though, the Lyon case haunted everyone involved, from the children's tormented family members to the investigating officers to Bowden.

The author of bestseller *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War* and a dozen other books along with countless essays and magazine articles, Bowden writes in *The Last Stone*: "To me, the story was sad and beyond understanding... As the decades passed I wrote thousands more stories, big ones and small ones. I experienced tragedy and loss in my own life. I became a grandfather — of two little blonde-haired girls, as a matter of fact. Few stories haunted me as this one did."

To his surprise, he would return to that story when, in 2015, he learned that Lloyd Welch, then serving time for molesting a minor, had been charged in connection with the Lyon case. Bowden talked to the principal investigators and discovered that over two years they had interrogated Welch for more than 70 hours, and it was all on videotape. The question on Bowden's mind: "How do you get a compulsive liar, one with every reason to lie, to tell the truth?"

One of Bowden's specialties is reconstructions. (*Black Hawk Down* was a 320-page reconstruction of a disastrous 1993 firefight in Mogadishu, Somalia in which 500 Somalis and 18 Americans died.) They're a specialty of mine, as well, and I know what's involved. (Along with a dozen or more long-form features that were reconstructions, my first book, *No Easy Answers: The Trial and Conviction of Bruce Curtis*, and third book, *The Lost Squadron*, were 90,000-word reconstructions.) So, when starting work on a project like this, you ask, what kind of materials exist? (Hoping that there is audio tape, videotape, photographs, journals, letters.) And you conduct long interviews with the major characters, asking them to help you see what they saw. To bring alive an event from the past, you need far more detail than run-of-the-mill reporting can produce.

As Bowden explained in a recent interview on the website, Crime Reads, "You don't just ask, 'What did you do?' Or, 'What did you say?' You ask, 'What exactly did you do? What exactly did you say? What were you wearing? Was it cold or warm? Night or day? Rainy or sunny? Where were you standing? What did the place where you were smell like? Sound like? Which hand did you use?' People look at you funny when you start down this path, but drafting a compelling scene on the page depends on such minute, seemingly irrelevant, detail."

So, it was the 70-plus hours of videotaped interviews with Welch (along with wiretaps of his family members and grand jury proceedings), and the cooperation of the police, that convinced Bowden he had the potential for a book. He wouldn't have to rely on memories; he could reconstruct what happened by observing the interrogation sessions himself.

He had once written a controversial article for *The Atlantic* called "The Dark Art of Interrogation," which explored the moral quandary at the heart of any interrogation: Should rules — of fairness, respect, truth — apply or not when trying to convince an unwilling person to tell the truth? That would play a role in the case of Lloyd Welch and the extraordinarily dogged team of principal investigators: Dave Davis, Chris Homrock, Mark Janney and Katie Leggett.

During the original 1975 investigation, Welch had given police a statement, but he seemed, to officers at the time, like a drugged-out teenager who was lying. It was only four decades later that one detail in his story — having seen a man with a limp accompanying two young girls out of the mall — struck a cold-case detective as possibly referring to one of the prime suspects, a man with a limp who had since died. But interviewing Welch produced so many confusing details that he became a prime suspect himself. Soon, investigators suspected he knew what had happened to Sheila and Katherine Lyon, if he hadn't killed them himself.

Welch, it turned out, was a far more difficult subject than Russell Williams. A seventh-grade dropout, he came from a massively dysfunctional family — abuse of all kinds — and he had grown up to be an amoral narcissist, ignorant but wily, almost entirely lacking in conscience or moral insight. Every time one of the investigators would contradict him, Welch would hit reset, compulsively inventing

new twists and turns to his story, never taking advantage of the investigator's offer that he could get a lawyer. (His misplaced cockiness suggests he thought he could outwit the investigators.) Bowden writes that he was "like a fairy-tale goblin guarding a treasure, speaking in riddles."

Page after page, *The Last Stone* takes readers through hours of testimony, which Bowden has edited and crafted to give it the momentum of a thriller. Through interviews with the investigators, he presents their reasoning as they struggle to lead Welch toward a confession, every interview an exercise in improvisation since Welch's testimony was serpentine and contradictory:

"Your problem is that I didn't do nothing to those girls."

"Lloyd, you can explain away each little piece, but when you have to explain away everything, what's the reasonable person (going to) think?"

"Well, you all think I did it. I mean, let's be for real."

Mark said he knew that Lloyd left the mall with the girls, and also that he had been on the mountain at the same time they had been tossed into the fire.

"Now, what happened in between is what I'm hoping you can help us figure out, because those two things are fact."

Lloyd now offered, at last, something new. He said his trip to Bedford with Helen was prompted by his fear of his Uncle Dick.

"He knew that I knew that he had them," said Lloyd.

"If you are so scared and so upset, why did you go back to the mall and risk being put right in the middle of it?" asked Katie.

"I had a little bit of conscience, a little concern."

"But then you misled them."

Lloyd nodded. She was right; this made no sense. If he were concerned about the girls, why lie to the police?

"Every time we jump a little hurdle with you, your face slams in the mud," she said.

The investigators are sometimes sympathetic toward Welch, sometimes challenging. (The classic "good cop-bad cop" technique.) They flatter him and sometimes lie to him. After interviewing most of his extended family, they tell him his relatives are against him and blaming him for the murders when that wasn't the case, not that the family didn't seem to step out of a Stephen King novel. Bowden describes Edna, Welch's obese stepmother, as "a deceptively simple, mean country woman in her eighties, sharp as the cut rim of a tin can and prone to didactic and random biblical quotation." He also writes that the investigators "imagined the Lyon sisters as the guarded clan's most deeply buried secret, running through its shared memory like a subterranean third rail, known to all but too hot to touch."

But for all its novelistic flow, *The Last Stone* is non-fiction and, as Bowden writes, "anyone who investigates crimes, or who writes true stories, knows how untidy the process is and how readily such stories can break down. Often there are too many causes and too many effects to completely sort out."

Welch was the last stone left unturned, the last hope of solving the Lyon case. In the end, he pleaded guilty to two counts of felony murder, admitting that 40 years earlier he had participated in the kidnapping of Sheila and Kate Lyon. Although he still denied he had raped or killed them, what he had told the investigators "fell within the confines of a Virginia legal doctrine defining as murder a killing 'in the commission of abduction with intent to defile.'"

Still that left things unresolved. Who had murdered the girls if Welch hadn't? (Among others, Welch had blamed his father, who is dead, and his uncle, who has repeatedly denied it; additional family members may have been directly involved or co-conspirators.) The bodies have never been found. Bowden asks each of the four principal investigators to give their theories on what happened, and each provides a different answer. "This is what you get with a 'true story,'" writes Bowden. "Artful, informed, honest speculation. At bottom, this is what we call history."

Like Jim Smyth in the Russell Williams interrogation, the investigators in the Lyon case were trying to reconstruct a crime to charge a guilty man. For Bowden or any journalist, reconstructing a crime is a way to make sense of a senseless act and probe the darkest corners of human behaviour.