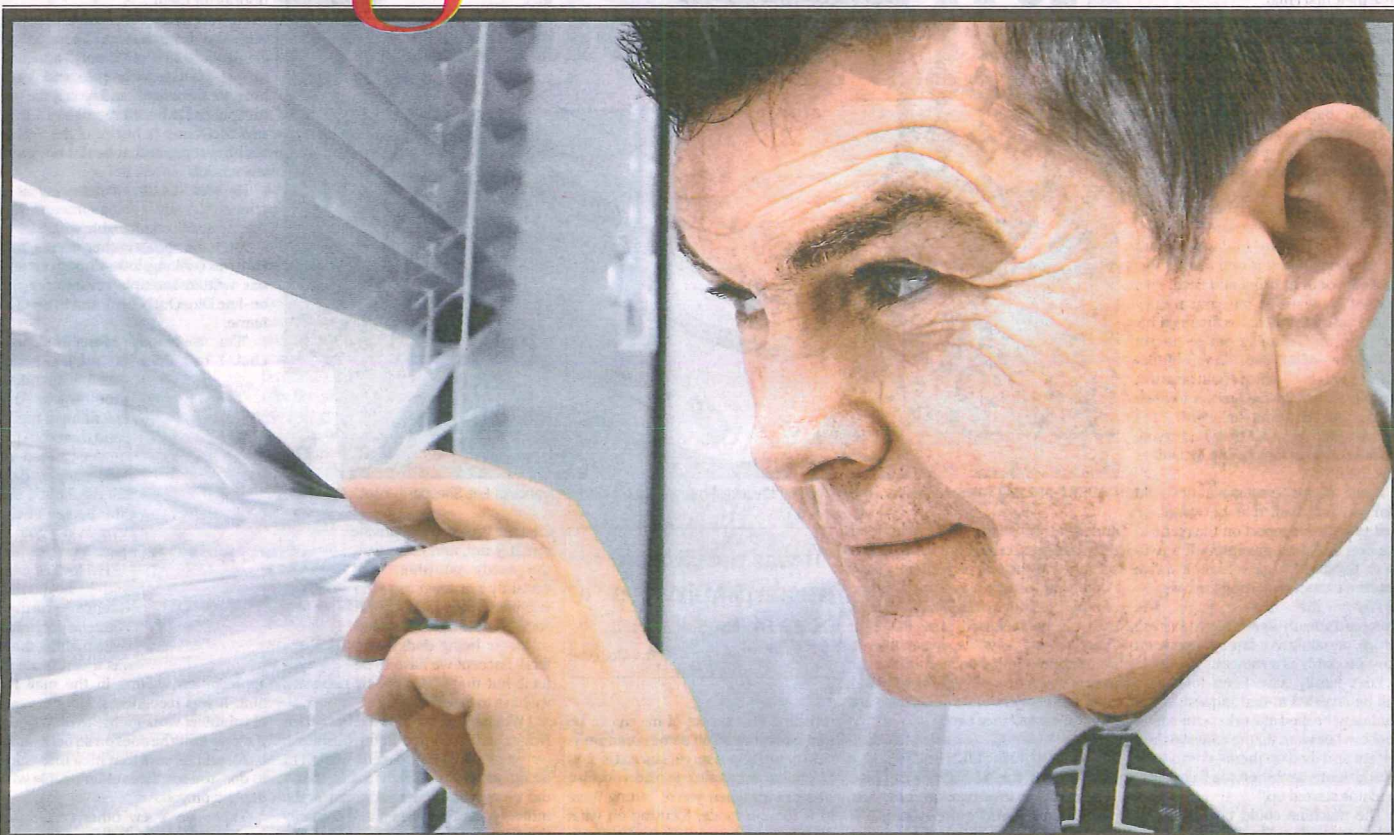


Sunday Insight

New Zealand's
Best Newspaper Section
— Qantas Media Awards 2009 —



DOUG SHERRING

I spy with my Private Eye

RONALD ALEXANDER McDonald McQuilter is looking for a woman. More than one, in fact.

It may well be to their personal advantage if they make their whereabouts known to him. And then again, it may not. The same can be said for the lengthy list of male names that further add to the orange pile of files in McQuilter's office.

Some may be reunited with loved ones; some will have the pleasure of learning they are in line for an inheritance they knew nothing about. Others can only expect a period of detention at Her Majesty's pleasure when they get a tap on the shoulder.

McQuilter is a private investigator. He finds missing people. He finds dead people. He is managing director of Paragon Risk Ltd, which is the

Ron McQuilter wears a suit and tie. He can phone up Cabinet ministers. Yet this detective, who reads the Bible on stake-outs, admits there is still a feral side to the life of a private eye.

He speaks to **Geraldine Johns**.

name of a company that looks into affairs of the murky kind: insurance claims, fraud and theft in particular.

Paragon has a client base that includes business, corporate, Government and local government sorts. It has a dedicated computer forensics department and a reach that sweeps the country and beyond. This is the private eye who has the private line to some of the most powerful people in the country. At any one time, McQuilter will have up to 50 investigators working on all manner of inquiries. You can run, but you can't hide.

MOST PEOPLE call him Ron. He, like all he seeks, has a past—but his is as open as the telephone book in which his name is still listed. This is his history.

Born and schooled in Scotland, he's one of seven children. He has an identical twin brother, Andrew—born on a different day from him (they arrived minutes either side of midnight). Andrew runs an icecream van in Glasgow; Ron grew up and joined the police force. And then he left to become a private investigator.

On the 12th day of April 1983 he arrived in New Zealand for a two-week holiday. He had his Scottish-born, but New Zealand-raised, girlfriend Gillian with him. He loved the place—as he did Gillian, whom he soon wed. Within a month, McQuilter had a job at Armourguard in Auckland as a private investigator. And 17 months later, he opened his own private investigation business. The two month holiday has now become a 26-year tenure.

The dates are important. McQuilter

has a computer-like recall of every fact and figure that he has ever had to grapple with. He will tell you the price he paid for his first house (\$96,500 for a home in the Auckland suburb of Blockhouse Bay). He rattles off the fact that they borrowed \$70,000 from the bank and another \$20,000 from their accountant. Interest rates were 23 per cent.

It's the same with names. He remembers them: Christian names and second names, too. He seems not to know the fear of forgetting, as far as nomenclature goes.

One name in particular has been very much to the fore of McQuilter's thoughts in recent years. He will never meet Lee Sheppard—but he certainly knows as much as there is

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to be learned about one young man from Whangarei whose disappearance on the other side of the world might never have been explained, were it not for McQuilter's efforts.

Sheppard was living in London with his pregnant wife, Juliet. The pair were planning to return to New Zealand and raise their first child.

Then, on the night of January 31, 2003, while working the overnight shift at a London industrial recycling plant, Lee simply vanished. Police and family failed to find him, or any evidence of what happened. The file stayed open but the case went cold - until 2006, when Lee's parents, Rose and Ken Sheppard, were put in touch with McQuilter.

"It was the ultimate whodunnit," he says, "a boy's own adventure."

McQuilter went to London to take up the investigation. It is one that he has backed - both in belief and cash. This is what it means to put your money where your mouth is. He financed his own trip and is today out of pocket to the tune of \$40,000. On top of that there are his fees, which could be put at around \$250,000 were he ever to draw up an invoice. (And he won't. Lee's parents had spent all they had trying to find their son long before McQuilter met them.)

Some of his contemporaries told him he was mad: that he would be best to write his report on the plane to London and then give himself a two-week holiday. He gave himself a five per cent chance of solving the case.

When the inquest into Lee Sheppard's death is held, McQuilter will return, certainly as a family supporter, most probably as a witness.

Lee's family have been told what will be revealed at that inquest. "I am confident he died at work on the night. I believe Lee went up the conveyor belt system and died up there - completely by accident - and then the [recycling] machine started up."

The machine could take up to 10 fridges at a time. On that night there were seven waiting to be crushed to dust. "Like putting ice cubes in a blender," says McQuilter.

Today he wears pinstriped pants and a black and white tie of strikingly geometric pattern. He has dark grey brows that were built to be quizzical



COVERT OPERATIONS: McQuilter, above, took on the investigation into the disappearance of Lee Sheppard, inset.

and hands most spick and span. It's a dirty business, crime, but his nails are scrubbed to surgical perfection.

Outside his office is a car the size of a bus: a shiny white Chrysler Hemi with the personalised plate RONYJR. "Very covert," says its owner, before pointing to another section of the car park where a fleet of vehicles so bland as to be barely noticed sits. These are the true surveillance cars.

MCQUILTER LIKES the big gigs now: the \$300,000 insurance claim investigation he's just completed ("it was quite technical"); the finding of the missing rushes for *Lord of the Rings* which were to be hawked about on the internet. ("We effectively saved the New Zealand film industry on that one.")

But he has not lost his love for the small stuff, either. He stills like doing surveillance; loves to get in the van. In

"It was the ultimate whodunnit," he says, "a boy's own adventure."

Ron McQuilter

revealing that aspect of his career, he also blows the lid off some commonly-held myths about surveillance. It is, says McQuilter, impossible to read a novel or make notes when you're "sitting there in a zombie mode, focusing on what you're focusing on". Still, you've got to do something to keep boredom at bay. McQuilter took to reading the Bible when out on the scout.

"I'm not really a Christian, but you can read a few lines at a time - and always pick it up later."

There are other misconceptions, too.

Like the image of the private eye. It is not, and never was, the seedy gumshoe sort; certainly not for those who survived in the industry, he says. "People have an image of PIs as being dodgy and feral. I accept we have to be feral, but that's because, by necessity, we have to be covert."

"When I look at jobs I did back then [when he first started in the business], we were still doing decent work; I'm doing work for clients today that I did then. What's changed today is the industry; it's a lot bigger, and arguably there's a perception difference. It's a step up from the police."

There is, he asserts, a whole group of older heads who have been good for the industry. "If you look at lawyers, or journalists, you'd have a heap more problems than you would have had with private investigators."

McQuilter was a constable when he left to become a private eye. The fact that he never made it to detective level is something that still niggles, and was one of the many stumbling blocks he encountered when first trying to make his name in New Zealand.

It wasn't just his lack of police experience that hindered, it was the way he spoke. (And, indeed, it is impossible to conduct a conversation with this Scotsman and not to note his accent. There is an avuncular tone to the permanent growl.)

He didn't give up. The small office where he started out at Number 430 Queen St in 1984 housed just himself and a secretary. He called it Ascot Investigations: partly to take first place ahead of Auckland Investigations when listed in the Yellow Pages - and because, he laughs, he was "A Scot".

IN ITS modern-day incarnation, McQuilter's business is regarded as the largest commercial private investigation firm in the country. Its premises command 10,200 square feet of office space in the purpose-built Paragon Building, on an Albany industrial site. Staff entry is via a fingerprint code. The building has a smoke machine: break in, and the whole place is covered in smoke in 30 seconds. It's a harmless substance, but it will totally obscure an intruder's vision.

Paragon's employees include Gillian, who works in administration, and son Andrew, who plans to become a police recruit.

That's the way to get into private

investigation, says McQuilter. Police first; then life as a private eye. It is his belief that people in his business do a lot of work that police, in New Zealand, at least, no longer do - fraud investigations for example.

"There are a lot of companies getting thieved. Police do a lot of criminal stuff, but when it comes to commercial business theft and fraud, that's not a priority for them."

He has two pieces of advice for wannabe investigators. There is an avuncular touch of "if only" attached to one. "Get a law degree and learn how to interview, and you'll be an exceptional private investigator." It is, says McQuilter (a Justice of the Peace) his biggest regret that he did not go to law school.

He sees the art of interview as a science. "It's about being someone who that person is comfortable with."

McQuilter boasts other talents, too. He loves cooking, loves dining out and has written multiple reviews for the on-line DineOut NZ column in his own name.

"I'm a bloody closet celebrity chef. I can think of nothing better than spending the whole day planning a menu and then cooking it. I've catered for 100 people; I do 30 regularly. I use the people at the gym as my guinea pigs."

His love of food and hospitality extends further. When he got home last night, there was a certificate of appreciation waiting in the mail for him. It was recognising his five years of volunteer work for Meals on Wheels.

It's something he does on an occasional basis, and he says that it's a nice thing to do. "You see these older people who depend on you."

There are a few other certificates in his office, including one from police commissioner Howard Broad, thanking him for his contribution to the Police Act review.

Clearly, whatever his passion, he likes to do things his way. And perhaps that explains the reasons that led to a recent event.

Earlier this year, McQuilter took up sky diving. After a couple of tandem jumps, he decided he wanted to go it alone, "instead of being strapped to someone". On his second solo, the parachute malfunctioned.

"You're trained to say 'malfunction', but what you say is 'oh shit!'"

He thanks his "exceptional" trainers for his safe landing. "You go through the emergency procedure. On the ground, it felt good. Then I went out drinking until midnight." As soon as was possible, he went back and jumped once more, and he has repeated a few times since.

Life after death: every written thing to do with Lee Sheppard since his disappearance now sits in a white cardboard box behind McQuilter's chair in his office. There are letters of condolence to parents who did not know if their son was dead or alive. Every newspaper clipping and report is there; cards and notes and McQuilter's London file, too.

Soon it will have another document attached: The report of the coroner into the death of Lee; the father-to-be from Pahi who one night never came home.

Truth will always out, says McQuilter. "I'm firmly of the view that if you do enough, you do get an answer ... but what you've got to do is start all over again."

He still has a few professional questions of his own; jobs he would like to see finished. These include unsolved cases in New Zealand and another from abroad. "I'd love to work on the Madeleine McCann file."



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Inquest will give family closure

4th August 2009

The wife of a Northland man who went missing in London six years ago says a decision by British authorities to hold an inquest into his death will give his family closure.

Lee Sheppard vanished on the night of January 31, 2003, after turning up for work at a refrigeration recycling plant. His absence remained a mystery until top Auckland private investigator Ron McQuilter took up the inquiry three years ago.

He flew to London and worked alongside north London police at Colindale Police Station, near Mr Sheppard's workplace.

Late last year, Mr McQuilter revealed he believed Mr Sheppard had died on-site in an industrial accident. He said it appeared Lee had been rendered unconscious and died before being caught up in large industrial recycling machinery when the plant started up the following morning.

The British Government has given permission for a formal inquest to be held into his death, but no date has been set.

Mr Sheppard's widow, Juliet, who now lives with the couple's son in Northland, said the inquest was "the beginning of the end - closure is in sight".

"The coroner obviously agrees there is evidence Lee died at his workplace and the inquest will confirm all details surrounding his death," she said yesterday.

The case would not have been resolved unless Mr McQuilter had gone to London, Mrs Sheppard said.

Advertisement "British police put off the investigation for a long time but Ron cracked the case. Now it will all be made official."

When Mr McQuilter took up the case, it was "basic policing work", she said.

"If the British police had done this, they would have worked it out too. They don't know what the past six years have been like for me."

The recycling company EMR and health and safety authorities would have a chance to speak at the inquest, Mrs Sheppard said.

"All details will be discussed. It will be interesting.

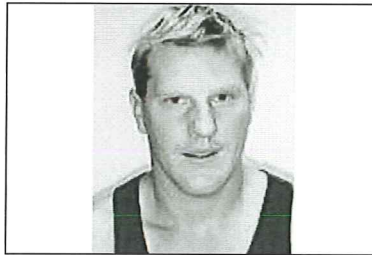
"I want to find out exactly what happened."

Mr McQuilter's explanation made sense, she said.

"We'll never really know unless someone was there. What we do know is he became unconscious or fell into machinery and it has something to do with nitrogen gas."

Mr Sheppard's grandmother, Elva Heath, said the family needed closure.

"It's so wonderful. We've finally got something to deal with. We'll all be very relieved when it's finished."



Lee Sheppard. Picture/supplied

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