

By Estelle Blackburn, who, in research for her book, *Broken Lives*, had access to a serial killer's medical, legal, police and prison files and interviewed two psychiatrists and a psychologist who had dealt with him. Ms Blackburn is a member of CLA. This article appeared first in The West Australian – [Go to article](#)



Eric Edgar Cooke: What makes a serial killer?

Eric Edgar Cooke was a perfect fit for the serial killer type identified by criminal profilers.

He was physically and emotionally abused as a child in a dysfunctional family, he escaped through disassociation and fantasy, sought to boost his low esteem through self-aggrandisement, raged against the society that ostracised him and he sought revenge, power and control through violent acts starting with arson and escalating to power over life and death.

Cooke was born in February 1931 to a violent, alcoholic teenage father who loathed at first sight the son born with the facial deformity of a cleft palate and cleft lip.

Eric had a misshapen mouth and bad mumble, surgery and speech therapy not in those days able to remedy what was called a hare lip, as it can today.

He was subjected to daily beatings from his father using his fists, belts and sticks, as well as such general neglect and emotional cruelty as to leave him in no doubt that his father didn't want him.

His mother also suffered at her husband's brutality, living in fear and poverty, working to raise him and two younger daughters on her meagre kitchenhand and cleaning wages, her husband drinking all he earned as a motor spare parts salesman.

The hungry young Eric who grew up describing himself as the freak of the family took to wandering the streets to escape his father's cruelty and to steal food. School was more of the same – the children taunted him, mimicking his speech. He was expelled from Subiaco

Primary School in his first year for stealing, and his behaviour brought canings at subsequent schools.

He joined the Scarborough Junior Surf Lifesaving Club at 14, and his desperation for inclusion and admiration led him to steal a watch and have it engraved to look like an award: To Cookie from the boys of the SJSLC. On discovery of this theft, and suspicion on other thefts from lockers, Cooke was rejected by the club on the excuse of him having had several blackouts.

He suffered blackouts regularly and spent a lot of time in hospital due to them, as well as because of headaches, sinus trouble and many illnesses and injuries from being accident prone — some accidents caused by daredevil acts for notoriety.

Though accident prone while attention seeking, he grew into a cunning and adroit criminal, becoming a particularly deft cat-burglar who could get through the narrowest or highest windows, break one piece of stained glass door or remove one louvre to reach the key inside, and, after propping open a back door for quick getaway, stealthily steal in the presence of the owners.

Leaving school at 14, he learnt his way around the streets through his first job as a delivery boy for Central Provision Stores in North Perth. He stole to supplement the few shillings pocket money left after he gave his wages to his struggling mother.

As he grew up, stealing funded his efforts to make friends and to impress women.

Arson can be an accurate indicator

An indicator on his road to serious crime was the common precursor of arson, seen by profilers as an attempt to gain power and a feeling of success.

At aged 17, Cooke started setting fire to the houses and flats he broke into, after stealing food and money and slashing clothing and bedding. Always cunning, he smashed a window in a house to make it look like a break-in when the friendly owner had given him a key to look after it while on holiday.

When caught for the break-ins and arson, police examining his background were sympathetic, describing him as 'one of life's unfortunates'.

So at age 18, too late, he finally received the intervention he had needed years earlier. In an attempt to 'rescue him from a life of crime and early symptoms of schizophrenia', he was paroled after three months of his three year jail sentence: some time in prison so he wouldn't think he'd got away with it, but not so long as to be contaminated by hardened criminals.

He was watched closely during parole, and received an excellent report — even though the psychiatrist he was ordered to see at a mental hospital merely labelled him a liar beyond help.

A Methodist Minister he met there, the Rev George Jenkins, offered to rehabilitate him, taking him into the fold of his South Perth Methodist Church. Cooke gained an active social life, particularly hockey, through acceptance by the Young Methodists, and he enthusiastically embraced Bible classes.

But he was indeed beyond help. He later stole from his Methodist friends – and the Rev Jenkins finally accompanied him to his execution for the worst crime of murder.

The Methodist Church inadvertently introduced him to the wealth of the western suburbs when he started attending the Nedlands Methodist Church and was welcomed into the homes of parishioners.

The Methodists' care and effort at rehabilitation could not counter the rejection of his dismissal from the CMF (now the Reserve Army). Exclusion from an organisation or activity where they shine is a pointer to serial killers' future violent behaviour.

Fast, accurate shooter...but dismissed from the army

Lance Corporal Cooke's flair for fast and accurate shooting trained him in weaponry and helped satisfy his need to dominate. His dismissal from the army, which excludes anyone with a criminal conviction, was dire punishment for the break-ins and arsons.

He had really enjoyed the army's fellowship and the regimentation. Ironically it could have been that enjoyment, and the sense of rejection when told that his speech impediment would prevent him rising in rank, that was the trauma trigger which led to him starting the arsons soon after.

He desperately tried to get back into the CMF, going to Melbourne at the age of 21 and joining there. In the three and a half months before his WA conviction was discovered, he excelled further at weapons training, being able to shoot a native grass spear from the hip at up to 13 metres, and to spend a magazine of 10 bullets in 8 seconds without losing accuracy.

He returned to Perth and in a further attempt to gain admiration, he lied about having been in the Korean War and having a metal plate in his head from his injuries.

Cooke met Sally at work at the metropolitan markets, married her in 1953 and had a son six months later and another son, Tony, a year after that.

But the love and happy home was also too late to overcome his early damage. The charming man who Sally's mother thought was a good catch turned violent after the first child and Sally was trapped by a cruel, violent, womanising husband.

Dressing well, in keeping with the criminal's pattern of concern for appearance to counter low self-esteem, he played bowls in the city, finding girlfriends there and amongst usherettes at the city cinemas he also frequented.

Sally was too loyal to leave him, even when advised to do so after he was jailed for two years for crashing a stolen car when following a girlfriend to Bunbury just two months after Tony's birth.



The birth of twins followed his return from jail, but they couldn't stop his cravings for attention, friends, peeping Tom thrills and for winning the game against society by so audaciously invading people's homes and stealing from under their noses.

His takings supplemented his wages gained from various labouring and truck driving jobs.

He prowled most weekends, cunningly reading The West Australian's wedding notices and breaking into the brides' homes in the knowledge no-one would be there, and he studied the floorplans of big houses from the West's weekly home architecture features to know his way around them.

He always wore a hat, pulled low over his face to disguise his disfigurement, and wore women's leather gloves he kept hidden above the toilet at home to ensure he was never caught out again by fingerprints as he had been over the arsons. He often left some coins in purses so thefts might not be noticed.

Another trait seen as indicating future violence is sexual perversion, including the voyeurism that had Cooke regularly watching lovers through house and car windows and stealing panties from clotheslines.

Despite having work and family, the pain of rejection rankled. His first violence in September 1958 may have been sparked by failing to win a young woman he once followed home from a bus stop and used to watch in her bedroom from behind a street tree.

He stole her father's car and ran down a mother cycling nearby, saying, in his confession: 'I just wanted to hurt someone, and she was it for the night.'

He continued wanting to hurt people, explaining it with a story that his first son had run across the road and been hit by a taxi. He soon fractured the skull of a teenager asleep in her bed in Applecross, then deliberately ran down another woman in a stolen car in Belmont.

He claimed that his first murder in January 1959 was from panic, stabbing Pnina Berkman in South Perth after she awoke and fought back. At the end of the same year, he was ferocious in his hatchet and scissor attack on a sleeping Jillian Brewer whose sexual activity with several men he had watched during the previous months.

Rejection was most likely the motive for his Australia Day rampage, having been told to 'piss off' by the man he was watching parked in a car with a woman late at night. This time he had a rifle. This night he had total power over everyone.

The power of god that he claimed overtook him during his murders let him disassociate himself from the revenge he had wanted all his life.

His rage escalated when he strangled his next sleeping victim, dominating her further through necrophilia and abuse with a bottle.

When he was caught after his shooting murder in August 1963, he gave up and told all – no doubt wanting Perth people to know how he had won over them, and remembering the benefits of confession from his childhood Catholicism.

He admitted to eight murders – including two that other youths had been convicted of and jailed for, wanting them freed before he hanged – and to 14 attacks on people who survived – five of them deliberate hit-runs and five of them attacks on sleeping women.

He had an extraordinary memory, detailing features of homes and exact denominations of coins he stole. His break-ins and thefts, car thefts and the reports by frightened women of a man who dazzled them with a torch when they awoke to find him in their bedrooms were too numerous for the police to record.

Deemed sane by the Director of Mental Health Services and the defence being refused its request for a second opinion, his fate was inevitable in Perth's hanging days.

It was almost as inevitable given his formative experience and development fitting so well the pattern of serial killers.

On death row, he read his Bible a lot, spoke often about his wife and children, expressed much concern about John Button and Darryl Beamish who were in jail for his murders and went on a hunger strike over not being believed about them, and banged his head against the wall for a long time after his father visited.

He joked when being weighed and measured for the executioner, and walked to the gallows calmly, saying he would pay his debt to society.

There are many in Perth still deeply affected by Cooke's activities — including those he condemned to the heartache of having loved ones so cruelly stolen from them, and others so traumatised that they still can't sleep without the light on.

For them and most of Perth, he was indeed the Nedlands Monster, as he was dubbed. It would be understandably too difficult for them to accept the view of South African profiler Micki Pistorius, who stated in 2000: "Serial killers are not monsters. They are human beings with tortured souls."

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