Most non-Australians probably think of Australia in terms of beautiful beaches, coastal cities, especially those great rivals Sydney and Melbourne, the capital, Canberra – and Ayers Rock, somewhere in the middle. The rest is unknown: the ‘outback’, the ‘bush’, the ‘back of beyond’. Most criminologists probably believe crime is primarily an urban phenomenon, connected generally to the anomic conditions of city living and specifically to particular blighted areas: the Chicago School’s notorious ‘transitional’ zones. And most of us probably retain somewhere a bucolic image of the rural: innocent, wholesome, unspoiled, idyllic. What Russell Hogg and Kerry Carrington manage, in this painstakingly researched and well-documented study of crime in rural Australia, is to force us to revise all our inchoate images, stereotypes and understandings – of Australia, of crime and of the rural. The strength of their study is that they manage to do this by ‘showing, not telling’, an injunction drummed into all aspiring novelists. This ‘showing’, by an impressive combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses of statistical, ethnographic and secondary data, persuades us that their findings are robust and their critical theoretical starting point is necessary: crime is both a response to changing socio-political and economic realities (the ‘rural crisis’ of the book’s title) and a product of the ‘law and order’ reaction to crisis (the ‘policing’ of the title).

The picture that emerges – of a significantly higher level of all but property crime in rural areas – may come as a shock, but the findings do not surprise when situated in relation to (especially) changing race and gender relations in rural areas, and the role of law and order campaigns in attempting to manage these changes. We learn something we did not know, but it is as if we had always known. This is the skill of ‘showing not telling’. Let me try, briefly, to illustrate using the example of violent crime. Take the shockingly high rates among Aboriginal males. Properly situated, these become all too tragically explicable, a consequence of a triple whammy: a historical legacy of dispossession, segregation and aggressive assimilation that all but destroyed traditional family and community ties; an economic legacy that has destroyed rural jobs and transformed gender relations; and a legacy of exclusion that makes their crimes the particular target of law and order campaigns. Thus, aboriginal male violence is part symptom of family and community breakdown, part function of the greater visibility to public gaze of Aboriginal life, part result of the drink and drug-fuelled boredom and frustration of jobless young men experiencing a crisis of masculine identity, and part construction, as heavy-handed, insensitive policing helps translate minor, public order offences with their implicit threat of violence into the real thing – at least as far as the official records are concerned.

The story of female Aborigines and violence has points of similarity and of difference, which helps explain why their rates are (predictably) lower than those of Aboriginal men but higher than rates for non-Indigenous people. The story of non-indigenous violence is one of shockingly high but largely hidden rates of domestic and sexual violence, but a story, once again, that becomes readily explicable in the light of the settlement history, socio-cultural features of rural life, and the contemporary crisis of gender relations. But, just because the authors make their explanations seem obvious does not mean that we should not be shocked by what they found, nor that their findings will be readily accepted and acted upon. This is partly because historically and theoretically grounded accounts disrupt a politically expedient common sense in which moral panics about crime have proved far too useful; but it is also because accounts like this remind us that there are no quick fixes for the mistakes and wrongdoings of the past. Like it or lump it, we cannot undo the past but can only work through its painful, confusing and contradictory legacies. ‘Working through’ requires a reality-, not fantasy-based, starting point. On the long-overlooked issue of rural crime in Australia, criminologists and criminal justice practitioners now have such a starting point.