

CHRIS MASTERS

Reporter Chris Masters has seen it all: bodies in Rwanda, rebels in Aceh and political and legal corruption at the highest levels. There have also been years of litigation and family tragedy. But, as he tells Claire Scobie, a belief in human decency keeps him going.

THE INVESTIGATOR

Chris Masters is consumed: at work, by the next story; at home, by Alan Jones. For more than two years, he has been working on the unauthorised biography of the outspoken talkback radio host. The book, expected out "sometime this year", has already been rewritten once, says Masters, "putting it through another legal process". With a weary nod, he picks up a thick manuscript. "Such a bloody hard book to do," he sighs. But little Masters does is trouble-free.

We are standing in a small study in his "bush block" home on the NSW Central Coast. The walls are covered with awards – Walkleys, a 1994 Logie for "Inside A Holocaust" on the Rwanda genocide, a 1999 Public Service Medal. The bookshelves are crammed with *Automobile Year* from 1958 to 2000 – he is an "unreconstructed revhead" with an interest in motor racing and his Subaru WRX. The view looks over gum trees and large mossy boulders; lorikeets screech above.

Masters waves a hand dismissively. "My wife put the awards up," he says. "I'm not really proud of them. Only the Gold Walkley [for a 1985 *Four Corners* report on the sinking of the Rainbow Warrior] has stood the test of time." Dressed in black jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt, without the hallmark square glasses, he looks younger than his 56 years and is smaller than he appears on television.

Interviewing Masters occasions a certain trepidation. As *Four Corners'* longest-serving investigative reporter, with more than 100 documentaries to his name, he is described by *Sunday* executive producer John Lyons, his friend and a former editor of *The Sydney Morning Herald*, as "one of the finest journalists of his generation". Broadcaster Mike Carlton, who has known Masters for 25 years, agrees. "If I was a crook, I would be pretty scared if Chris Masters was on the case."

Masters's landmark "Big League" report on corruption in rugby league in 1983 precipitated the Street Royal Commission and the resignation of Australian Rugby League head Kevin Humphreys. Two years later, the French Defence Minister resigned after *l'affaire* Greenpeace uncovered that his government was responsible for the sinking of the Rainbow Warrior in Auckland Harbour. In Rwanda, Masters has seen "dead bodies piled to the roof"; covering the Aceh civil war, he met with rebels in

a Malaysian jungle camp. He's risked his life in war zones and has been tailed by Brisbane cops.

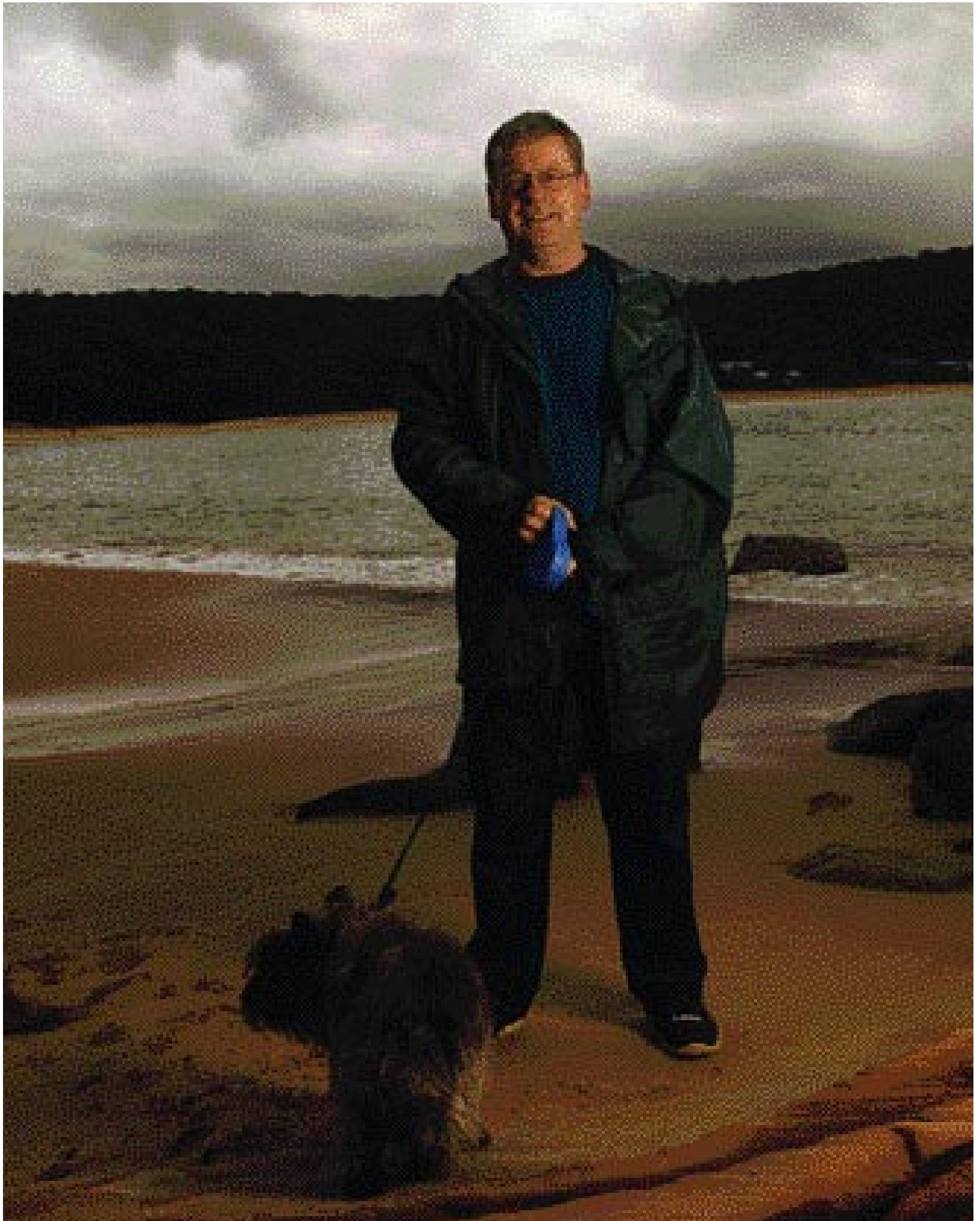
Masters repeatedly exposed corruption but it was his 1987 "The Moonlight State" report that was "the epic", triggering Queensland's Fitzgerald Inquiry. During a period in the '80s, gravel was dumped in his driveway, mischievous notes were sent and Masters received threatening phone calls – along the lines of "We know where your kids go to school" – implying his family could be harmed. Nonetheless, "most of the time investigative journalism is quite friendly," he insists. "I've got a sort of moral toughness and a stubbornness but I'm not physically brave."

Buttering a bun, Masters concedes he's nervous about being interviewed. This is unexpected. His steely blue eyes are intense but he rarely meets my gaze. His brow is frequently furrowed. Behind the familiar weighty voice, one senses the guard is up.

The fourth of seven children, he thinks he takes after his mother, Olga, who "had the ability to get people to talk". He adds with a laugh, "Genuine curiosity is a dangerous thing." His father, Charles, was a headmaster at Urbenville Public School, a timber town in northern NSW. Olga, a part-time provincial newspaper journalist and novelist, instilled in him "a strong sense of social justice", says his younger sister, Sue. "An antennae for fairness."

Talking about his bush childhood, Masters relaxes, recalling how as a boy around Lismore, he would "find owls' nests and catch yabbies". He grew up in "a house full of words" and the "long apprenticeship in storytelling" that the Masters kids served, thanks to their parents, has paid dividends. Sue Masters is now head of drama at Network Ten, Roy is a columnist and sports writer for *The Sydney Morning Herald* and Deb is a producer at the ABC's *The 7.30 Report*. Ian has a radio show in Los Angeles and Quentin runs a film company in London.

For Masters, the idyllic childhood came to an end at age 15. The family moved to the northern beaches in Sydney when his father was offered a promotion to Manly West Primary School. For his brother Mikey, 12 years younger, the move would expose him to a world his siblings had never known. "He was introduced to the drugs scene and got a heroin habit just out of school," says Masters. "It came as a hell of a shock. We didn't know how to deal with it; most families don't." After kicking the habit and working →



Photography: Sahlan Hayes



Masters mind (from top): Chris Masters at home with daughter Laura in 1984; reporting for *Four Corners* in Italy in 1986, Cambodia in 1983 and Vietnam in 1984; with the *Four Corners* team (bottom right) in 1991.

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in London, 28-year-old Mikey returned to Australia in 1989. “He hadn’t been long back and got among the same company and...” Masters scrunches up his eyes. “He overdosed.”

When Masters joined the ABC in 1966 as a mailroom boy, he had no burning ambition to be a journalist. He followed a “shambolic” career path as a radio talks officer and manager in various country towns – Albury on the NSW/Victoria border, Tamworth in NSW, Rockhampton in Queensland. Working in “an environment where not a lot happens” taught him “to get below the surface”, a skill he has honed. “Chris is meticulous almost to the point of being obsessive,” says *Media Watch*’s Liz Jackson, who worked at *Four Corners* for 11 years. “He is fascinated by what lies behind the story.”

Aged 18, Masters met Tanya, “a local schoolgirl”, and after dating for two years, they were married in 1969. Tanya, 55, a primary schoolteacher who is now a psychologist, had a country upbringing in NSW’s north-west and as they both had “a rural mind-set”, they were happy to move out of Sydney. The couple were living in Rockhampton in 1979 when life suddenly took a tragic turn. Their second daughter, 18-month-old Alice, was diagnosed with cancer.

“She kept saying, ‘Mine eye,’” recalls Masters. When a visiting English eye specialist came through Rockhampton, he diagnosed retinoblastoma, a rare cancer of the eye. “That afternoon Alice was on a plane to Sydney; the next day the eye was removed.”

The family moved to Sydney so Alice could receive regular treatment. (Masters is now a trustee of the Malcolm Sargent Cancer Fund For Children that helps rural families in similar predicaments.) “She was in terrible pain and needed our help. When we couldn’t give it to her, that was pretty hard.”

On New Year’s Eve 1980, Alice died at three and a half. “It ripped us all apart, not just me,” says Masters. “My first daughter, Clare [then five], would climb trees and leave little notes [to Alice]. Coming out into the backyard, I would find them tear-stained by the dew.” Covering his face with his hands, he continues. “Like a lot of men, I internalised it... My wife was much more sensible in coping with the grief.” Ultimately, the tragedy brought Tanya and Chris closer, although he admits, “We had a lot of trouble after that.”

By now working at the ABC’s *A Big Country*, Masters, “mad from the grief”, recalls “once sitting at my desk and I was so unhappy I had my head between my legs more or less. I could see another woman across the office crying – on my behalf.” He shifts in his seat. “I can remember thinking that

I could never be happy again. But, look, you can be happy again.”

Another daughter and a son were born – Laura, now 22, and Tim, 20. “Life went on richly, differently, after Alice’s death,” says Sue Masters. “But there’s not a birthday or anniversary that goes by without a wistfulness that she is not around.”

After relations soured at *A Big Country* following a dispute with his boss – “I felt like I was a plague in my workplace and [he] didn’t want me around” – Masters was shunted to *Countrywide*. Months later, in 1982, a video of Masters ended up in the hands of Jonathan Holmes, then executive producer at *Four Corners*. Holmes hired him immediately. “He had this indignant sincerity,” remembers Holmes, now a reporter. “But we had no idea that he was going to turn into a great investigative journalist.” *Four Corners* had a reputation as one of the toughest places to work in television, with a high burnout rate. Most reporters only lasted two years. The older ones, says Masters, who was then 33, were “sick of the world. I thought, ‘I can’t let that happen to me.’”

“His first story, ‘Big League’, was absolutely trailblazing,” says Mike Carlton. In it, Masters raised questions about whether or not the then NSW premier Neville Wran had influenced a fraud case brought against Kevin Humphreys. “On the night it aired, I said to Chris, ‘You’ll never do a story like this again.’ He said, ‘I will.’ He went on to do three or four,” says Holmes. The Street Royal Commission later cleared Wran but chief stipendiary magistrate Murray Farquhar was jailed.

“We had lots of fun but Chris can be a cranky old bastard, so bloody finicky about getting the right shot, telling the story the way he wants to tell it,” says Peter Manning, who was his producer on “Big League”. “Sometimes producers have come to grief.”

Four years later came “The Moonlight State”, which changed Queensland’s political history. It also changed Masters. For 13 years, he was hounded through the courts. “I definitely fear the cold-blooded QC more than I do the gangster.”

He becomes agitated as the grim memories flood back – of interviewing bent cops, drug traffickers and sleazy politicians and uncovering a corrupt chain of command that spiralled to the top. Scores were prosecuted under the Fitzgerald Inquiry, among them police commissioner Sir Terence Lewis. The Queensland premier, Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, was ousted in the fallout.

Masters was also in the dock, defending “as history has showed, a profoundly correct” program and his profession. The case that would cost the

ABC more than \$750,000 to successfully defend left Masters “a bit crazy”. He gives a brittle laugh. “I became awful to be with. It became awful to be with me. Then I got that epiphany when I realised that I wouldn’t want to be with me either so I started to treat my litigation load as if it was a disability and that I had to get on with it... That restored some sanity.”

“Chris is not defined by work but by his family,” says Sue. “They’ve watched him suffer. He couldn’t have the professional life without Tanya... For many years, she kept the family vertical. When he is really relaxed, he has a cheeky sense of humour. When he’s tortured by a book or program, he’s intense.”

Throughout the ’90s, Masters paid litigiously for stories he had covered in the previous decade, including “The Moonlight State” and “Branded”, about the disgraced medical entrepreneur Geoffrey Edelsten who was later jailed. One case from his time at *Page One*, a current affairs program on Network Ten, resulted in defamation proceedings that attacked Masters’s private assets. “I thought at the time journalism is hard enough, and myself and my family have had to pay a big price for this, but to think that we are going to end up with nothing...” He trails off. “Things really came apart,” he recalls. “The truth is, it was extremely hard and if I have a serious regret, it is that I obviously didn’t spend as much time being a father and husband as I did being a journalist.” He falls silent.

During those years, he was demanding and critical of his colleagues, says Holmes. “He was not an intriguer, more a grumpy old man ... and not hugely approachable for a period. Now he’s mellowed.”

In 1987, Masters joined *Page One*, a bruising experience. He was “hopeless”, he says, in the celebrity reporter role. He lasted 18 months, took a \$200,000 cut in salary and returned to *Four Corners* where he works long hours on programs that take six weeks to three months of relentless “digging” to make. “Chris has a real sympathy for the underdog; it’s a very Australian thing,” says Manning.

And is there life after *Four Corners*? A moment of lightness sweeps over Masters when he imagines “doing not very much at all, travelling, reading books, fishing, boating”. He says he relaxes more than he used to – in a six-metre motorboat on the Hawkesbury River, bushwalking and mountain biking because he’s “old and fat”. He admits to being “a wine bore” and is a keen cook, like his mother, clearly a defining influence on him.

“I think I have got something of my mother’s notion that people are decent. I am still a bit naive, genuinely surprised when I experience mean-spiritedness.” Even after everything he’s seen? He looks at me squarely. The sound of a whipbird ricochets through the gum trees. “If a journalist comes to a view that people aren’t basically decent, there isn’t much point in doing the job.” ●

What other people say about Chris Masters

Sue Masters, sister: “Chris was more sensitive and sweet to his two sisters [than his older brothers were]. He was very popular with my friends. I started to wise up – the girls would come to the house to see him, not me.”

Mike Carlton, 2UE broadcaster and columnist with *The Sydney Morning Herald*: “He is a shy man ... not a high-flying journalist, not a TV star. He looks a bit like an accountant who has lost his way in the corridors.”

Liz Jackson, *Media Watch* presenter and former colleague: “He is a moralist with his ideas of what is right or wrong... For those stories that he thinks are important, he will devote months, years, and produce excellent work.”

Jonathan Holmes, *Four Corners* reporter: “Chris is more jokey than you think. His sense of humour is silly. He likes poo jokes.”

Peter Manning, former head of news and current affairs at ABC and now adjunct professor of journalism at the University of Technology, Sydney: “Chris probably knows more about how crime works in Australia than most of the judiciary and senior levels of police and criminals.”