BOOKING THE MAFIA

Jim Dubro is a former professor turned mob chronicler.
He's brought a scholar's obsessiveness to his reporting on organized crime

BY JIM CORMIER

Late in the summer of 1983 journalist James Dubro was invited to dine with a Chinese gang leader, a professional thug who ran gambling houses in Toronto and occasionally completed extortion deals with his bare hands. The dinner was arranged by an officer in police intelligence, one of Dubro's regular sources. At about seven o'clock one evening Dubro and the cop arrived at a hotel bar in downtown Toronto. Their underwater date was seated and waiting.

"He was a heavy-set fellow," Dubro recalls, "intimidating-looking, big. He was dressed casually, but he exuded a feeling of power." The men took a short walk to a nearby Chinese restaurant, and settled in for the evening. For the first hour or so, Dubro made small talk with his quarry. The two men compared knowledge of Chinese crime figures and networks in Canada and Hong Kong. (Hong Kong had been the mobster's home base until he moved to Toronto in the early seventies to help found a chapter of the Kung Lok crime triad.) As drinks flowed, Dubro began to ask more pointed questions. Over the next three to four hours, he learned much about the Kung Lok's local operations and its internal power struggles. And he received first-hand accounts of an ominous trend: in recent months the Chinese mob in Toronto had been drawn into violent turf wars with a new influx of ruthless Vietnamese gangsters.

Several times during the evening, Dubro excused himself to go to the washroom, where he scribbled notes. It was the best way to record critical information without inhibiting his subject's free-flowing talk. At around midnight, the meeting ended. Dubro left hoping he might next persuade his source to talk on camera, in disguise, for a crime documentary. But before the month was out, Dubro picked up his paper one morning to read that the Kung Lok man had been severely wounded in a knife attack on the street. Other sources confirmed it was the work of a Vietnamese-gang hit man. The victim was now in no mood to appear on TV. Shortly after, he moved to a more hospitable, less influential, base in western Canada, away from the clutches of his criminal attackers — and the cagey manoeuvrings of Canada's top mob reporter.

Jim Dubro, a native Bostonian, has been working in Canada as an investigative journalist since 1973. While he's done distinguished work in several areas, he's best known for his unmatched reportage on organized crime. He's written three books and researched and helped produce several films that show off his unique mastery of underworld arcana — of topics ranging from world opium-trading routes to the sexual mores and habits of the notorious Papalia crime brothers of Hamilton. His encounter with the ill-fated Kung Lok man is one of hundreds of interviews he's done for his forthcoming book on Oriental crime.

Yet to be introduced to Dubro through this tale of dark intrigue is to be slightly misled. Like a prologue to a Spielberg