A Woman of Mystery: Mary Fortune

by Lucy Sussex

Between the years 1865–1908 a woman of mystery, in art as well as life, published over 500 detective stories in the popular Australian Journal (AJ). Her ‘The Detective’s Album’, a series of self-contained crime tales—the form later used by Conan Doyle with Sherlock Holmes—was published for over forty years, making it the longest running series in the early history of crime fiction. She also wrote poetry, serialized novels, lively journalism and an (unreliable) memoir. Seven of her stories were reprinted in book form, as The Detective’s Album: Tales of the Australian Police (1871), the first book of detective fiction published in Australia. Yet nobody knew who she was…

During her lifetime and afterwards, this woman was, said the writer Henry W. Mitchell, ‘shrouded in mystery […] no one knows who she is or where she lives’. She wrote under the ambiguous pseudonyms ‘Waif Wander’ and ‘W. W.’, with her real name, identity, even (with the latter pseudonym) her gender concealed. Occasionally in her autobiographical writing clues emerge, such as that her initials were ‘M. H. F’. The AJ guarded her privacy, which was so total that her death passed without public notice, the exact date remaining even now unknown. But for the lucky chance of a book collector, J. K. Moir, who embarked on a detective search for ‘Waif Wander’ in the 1950s, at a time when people who had known her were still living, her real name might never have been revealed. He found some manuscript poems by his quarry, and also a letter, c. 1909, signed M. H. Fortune.

In 1987 Stephen Knight assigned me ‘Waif Wander’ as a research puzzle, at a time when the boom in family history had meant that newspapers and other documents from colonial Australia had been microfilmed and indexed. Therefore, when reading her memoirs and journalism, if something checkable was mentioned, it was possible to follow a hunch through a maze of microfilm. Fragmentary as the autobiographical writing was, it could be read as a detective story, the object being to ‘chercher la femme’, the unknown woman writer.
In her memoir, Fortune revealed that she and her little son George arrived in Australia from Canada in 1855. She gave no indication of her marital status, something odd given the Victorian obsession with feminine virtue, and the likelihood was that she had been widowed young. Had she remarried, then? An archival search revealed record of a goldfields marriage in 1858 between Percy Rollo Brett and Mary Helena Fortune, nee Wilson. For the first time Waif Wander’s full name was revealed. She had showed in her writing knowledge of police procedures, something explained by Brett’s occupation of mounted policemen.

However this marriage soon broke up, and in 1866 Brett made a second marriage without benefit of divorce, then costly and difficult. Bigamy was not uncommon in such situations, but in fact Mary, not Percy, was at fault. Recent research has shown that Mary Fortune’s first husband Joseph died in Canada in 1861. There is no evidence that he came to Australia, despite Mary giving birth, in 1856, to a second son (Eastbourne Vawdrey Fortune), and naming Joseph Fortune as the father. Most likely E. V. Fortune was illegitimate—and he grew up to be a notorious jailbird. Such potentially scandalous (in Victorian terms) material provides an explanation as to why Waif Wander was so determinedly anonymous: she had secrets that could threaten her reputation and her livelihood as a female author.

By 1865 she was living on the remote goldfield of Jericho (now Wehla), when the Australian Journal came her way. This magazine had a strong interest in crime fiction from its first issue, which featured ‘The Shepherd’s Hut’, described as the memoirs of an ‘Australian Police Officer’, although its author was a former lawyer, James Skipp Borlase. Within a month Fortune had sent the AJ a fictional response. Her ‘The Stolen Specimens’ was published as the work of ‘An Australian Mounted Trooper’, which is what Brett had been.

The AJ made use of Fortune and their staff writer Borlase to inaugurate the first detective series in Australia. It ran to nine stories before Borlase left the AJ, sacked for plagiarism. Subsequently Fortune wrote mostly non-crime novel serials, including an exquisitely excessive Gothic melodrama, ‘Clyzia the Dwarf’. It was not until 1867 that the AJ announced that ‘The Police stories’ which at one time formed so attractive a feature, will be resumed [...] as the leisure of the writer permits’. The stories, appearing under the heading ‘The Detective’s Album’, were ascribed to W. W., apparently an editorial decision to distinguish them from the established Waif Wander (and feminine) pseudonym.

The notion behind the ‘Detective’s Album’ is a collection of mug-shots, which prompts recollections from their compiler, detective Mark Sinclair. They follow the format she used with Borlase, a short (although often extending to novelette-length) story, narrated by the viewpoint sleuth, in each monthly issue of the magazine. She was to continue in this vein, twelve stories...
a year, for the next forty years. The format was varied in 1871–2 by a serial novel ‘edited’ by Sinclair, ‘The Bushranger’s Autobiography’; and The Detective’s Album collection was printed by the AJ in 1871. It is now one of the rarest and most valuable items in Australian crime collecting.

Her major achievement in detective writing was as a pioneer of the ‘police procedural’, with Sinclair developing into a likable character, not over-scrupulous in his pursuit of criminals. Mitchell noted that W. W.: ‘exposes all the nefarious arts, tricks and dodges’ of detectives, ‘undoubtedly the authors of more crime than they prevent’. Sinclair’s voice, though, is remarkably similar to that of Fortune in her journalism, being lively and colloquial, addressing the reader directly. Their personal histories also intersect to some degree. He might be regarded as Fortune in drag, a game of performative gender for her.

Very little is known of Fortune’s later life, although it would seem that the treadmill of production took its toll. In the last of her journalism, the 1876 ‘My Friends and Aquaintances’, an article about dogs, she wrote that: ‘I am what my friends—ahem!—two-legged acquaintances call a ‘very eccentric person’, and a ‘rather peculiar creature’. In her writing she is scathing about women drunkards—yet that is what she became. Ron Campbell, editor of the AJ, wrote to Moir in 1952 of Fortune’s ‘bibulous habits, for which, God knows, she probably had every reason, as she wrote more, and doubtless got less for it, than any other Australian writer of the time.’ The Police Gazette of Victoria noted in 1874:

Information is required by the Russell-street police respecting Mary Fortune, who is a reluctant witness in a case of rape. Description:—40 years of age, tall, pale complexion, thin build; wore dark jacket and skirt, black hat, and old elastic-side boots. Is much given to drink and has been locked up several times for drunkenness. Is a literary subscriber to several of the Melbourne newspapers. Stated she resided with a man named Rutherford, in Easy [Easey] Street, Collingwood. (10 Feb. 1874 10)

The above is the only surviving visual description of Fortune known.

By 1909, as a surviving letter attests, she was impoverished and nearly blind. Failing eyesight would appear to have stilled her busy pen. Her original magazine contributions ceased in 1913, although her earlier stories in the ‘Detective’s Album’ series continued to be reprinted in the AJ until 1919. After this date the series was continued until 1933 by other writers. The AJ granted her an annuity, as she was unable to work any more, even paying ‘for her burial in another
person’s grave’—a chilling detail recorded by Moir that, like so much in her life, evades explanation. Yet when she died and where this grave is remain unknown despite concerted search—in death as in life ‘W. W.’ remaining a mystery.

When Fortune began writing her detectives, Arthur Conan Doyle was still in short petticoats and Wilkie Collins was three years from penning The Moonstone. Detective fiction was so young a literary genre that it lacked a name. She was therefore a significant trailblazer. We can regard her as the first woman in Australia to write detective fiction, precursive of Marele Day, Kerry Greenwood and so many others. However, she was probably the first woman worldwide to specialize in the genre. In England and the US she had been preceded by Mary Braddon, Ellen (Mrs Henry) Wood, Louisa May Alcott and Harriet Prescott Spofford—yet none of these authors wrote from the viewpoint of the police detective, nor with her authenticity. Moreover, no other woman, Anna Katharine Green apart, who began her career in 1878, wrote so much crime fiction in the nineteenth century. For all these reasons we should celebrate Fortune as a significant mother of the detective writing genre.

In 1989 I edited Fortune’s autobiographical writing as The Fortunes of Mary Fortune (Penguin; still available from Spinifex Press, www.spinifexpress.com.au). Her memoir of goldfields life was termed by modern reviewers the most ‘vital account of those exciting days’, and deserving ‘to be regarded as the first instance of Australian, as opposed to colonial, prose’. It took longer to collect her detective fiction, given that I had over five hundred examples to read and choose from. The Detectives’ Album was published in 2003, by Broken Silicon Dispatch Box (only available in the US and Canada, PO Box 204, Shelburne Ontario Canada LON 1SO; PO Box 122 Sauk City, Wisconsin, USA 53583-0122). Samples of her crime, journalism, and an exquisitely over-the-top vampire story ‘The White Maniac’ (eerily precursive of Angela Carter), can be found on the Gaslight website, http://gaslight.mtroyal.ca/)

As she herself said of her writing:

I have been told by some that I tell horrible stories, and by others that I am not sensational enough; and I have personally come to the conclusion that I shall tell just such stories as I please…

(from ‘A Woman’s Revenge; Or, Almost Lost’)
