

Foreword

The *Mystery of a Hansom Cab* was, in the words of John Sutherland, the nineteenth century's 'most sensationally popular crime and detective novel'. When first published – in Australia in 1886 – this tale of a Melbourne murder sold out in three weeks; translated into a dozen languages, it went on to sell more than half a million copies around the world. Yet its author Fergus Hume was an accidental novelist, and his work so poorly received by publishers that he was forced to pay for the first edition himself.

As so often with classic whodunits, the scenario is deceptively simple. A man is helped into a hansom cab, journeys to his destination, and on arrival is found to have been murdered. The police do not know who he is, why he has been killed, or who might be responsible.

The first two questions are answered with surprising swiftness. The victim is a recent arrival from England, and he has been robbed of a piece of paper. But what the document contains and who was so determined to get it is not revealed until the end, with more twists and turns than a python swallowing a corkscrew.

Born in England and brought up in New Zealand, Hume moved to Melbourne in 1885 after qualifying as a lawyer. His real interest was in writing plays, but as an unknown young dramatist he could find no producer willing to look at his work. Reasoning that he would be better received with a novel to his name, he asked a leading bookshop what sold best. The answer, as he recounted in a later preface to *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*,

was the detective stories of the French author Emile Gaboriau: 'as, at this time, I had never even heard of this author, I bought all his works – eleven or thereabouts – and read them carefully. The style of these stories attracted me, and I determined to write a book of the same class; containing a mystery, a murder, and a description of low life in Melbourne. This was the origin of the *Cab*. The central idea – i.e. the murder in a cab – came to me while driving at a late hour to St Kilda, a suburb of Melbourne; but it took some time and much thought to work it out to a logical conclusion.'

Hume – then in his mid-twenties – was clearly a man in a hurry, for he had sketched out the skeleton of his book within eight weeks and cannot have taken more than a few months to write the first draft. But publishers proved to be as unaccommodating as theatre managers: 'every one to whom I offered it refused even to look at the manuscript on the ground that no Colonial could write anything worth reading.' In desperation, he arranged for 5,000 copies to be printed at his own expense. Over the next decade British readers alone bought 375,000.

Were he writing today, Hume would be praised for his skill in subverting the conventions of the mystery story. The detective apparently introduced to solve the crime proves incompetent; the courtroom scene which traditionally provides a climactic finale takes place only halfway through. But though almost 50 years had passed since Edgar Allan Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* – now widely accepted to be the first detective novel – this was not yet a genre with established characteristics. Hume was in fact opening the door to a defining age; the following year Arthur Conan Doyle (born, like Hume, in 1859) would introduce Sherlock Holmes to the world.

Hume's delight in different narrative formats – here a newspaper report, there a handbill or facsimile letter – is another aspect of the novel which seems well ahead of its time.

His love of the theatre is also evident: the scene in which Brian Fitzgerald is arrested in front of his prospective wife and father-in-law is one of several which could have been written for the stage.

Above all, Hume is a master of the red herring. His favourite ruse is to present us with what appears to be conclusive evidence, only to reveal that we have misread it. It is typical of his trickery that the near-perfect murder turns out to be one that was completely unplanned.

The Mystery of a Hansom Cab has obvious echoes of Dickens, both in its narrative tone – sometimes facetious, sometimes melodramatic – and in its descriptions of poverty. Mother Guttersnipe, the drunken crone who holds the key to the mystery, is as repellent a creation as Fagin, and the two landladies – Mrs Sampson with her fund of stories about her relatives, and Mrs Hebleton with her bitter complaints against men – would sit easily among Dickens's comic characters. Hume, however, swore to their authenticity:

‘Mother Guttersnipe I unearthed in the slums off Little Bourke Street; and I gave what I am afraid was perhaps too vivid a picture of her language and personality...the two lodging-house keepers were actual personages whom I knew very well, and I do not think I have exaggerated their idiosyncrasies...’

Dickens is one of many literary reference points. There are constant allusions to famous writers, from Seneca and Shakespeare to de Quincey and Disraeli – perhaps as a riposte to critics who thought the Colonies lacking in culture. G.K. Chesterton was typical in declaring that ‘The first-rate writers of the new countries are really almost exactly like the second-rate writers of the old countries’ – though he conceded that ‘when they write most sincerely and most successfully, it is not with a background of the mystery of the bush, but with a background, expressed or assumed, of our own romantic

cockney civilization. What really moves their souls with a kindly terror is not the mystery of the wilderness, but *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*.'

Sadly, Hume received only a fraction of the money that his novel earned, for he sold the English and American rights for £50. Settling in Essex in 1888, he went on to write more than 130 books (sometimes managing five a year), none of which proved nearly so successful. Conan Doyle, probably in a fit of jealousy, declared that '*Hansom Cab* was a slight tale, mostly sold by "puffing" ' – but 125 years on Hume's story remains as enthralling as the best of Sherlock Holmes.

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