

# Mary Helena Fortune: Waif Wanderer or a cross-dresser with a mission?

---

**Klepač, Tihana**

*Source / Izvornik:* **Studia Romanica et Anglica Zagrabienisia, 2017, 62, 39 - 54**

**Journal article, Published version**

**Rad u časopisu, Objavljena verzija rada (izdavačev PDF)**

*Permanent link / Trajna poveznica:* <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:131:476346>

*Rights / Prava:* [In copyright](#)

*Download date / Datum preuzimanja:* **2021-01-27**



*Repository / Repozitorij:*

[ODRAZ - open repository of the University of Zagreb](#)  
[Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences](#)



UDC 821.111(94).09 Fortune, M.

Original scientific paper

Received on 24 September 2017

Accepted for publication on 17 April 2018

## Mary Helena Fortune: Waif Wanderer or a cross-dresser with a mission?

Tihana Klepač

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

University of Zagreb

tklepac@ffzg.hr

At a time when marriage and domesticity still largely defined women's lives, women often found increased freedom in the colonial environment where social expectations of them were more relaxed than in Europe. The first Australian crime fiction writer, Victorian Mary Helena Fortune in both, her life and in her writing, took advantage of this opportunity. Shrouding her private life in mystery, and writing under a pseudonym Waif Wander shielded her, and protected her income from the audiences whose Victorian values she did not share. Professionally, writing under a pseudonym, and within then but emerging literary genre, she had the liberty to speak freely: she discussed the issues of gender and identity in the hybrid and fluid colonial society which was being constructed as a place where identities could be forged, and redemption was possible, as is evident from the only printed (and reprinted) volume of her crime stories *The Detective's Album*.

*Key words:* Australia, Mary Fortune, crime fiction, New Woman

There is a New Woman, and what do you think?  
She lives upon nothing but Foolscrap and Ink!  
But, though Foolscrap and Ink form the whole of her diet,  
This nagging New Woman can never be quiet!  
*Punch*, 26 May 1894

Mary Helena Fortune was the first woman in Britain, America and Australia to write detective fiction specifically (Watson 2012: 172). She mainly wrote her stories for the *Australian Journal*, which was a trailblazer for the production of colonial literature at the time. In 1868 she inaugurated *The Detective's Album* casebook series within which she published over 500 detective stories, until its termination in 1908. The longevity of this series exceeds that of any of the women writers elsewhere (Watson 2012: 72). When selected stories were printed in book form in 1871, it became the first detective fiction book in Australia. And yet, for almost a century after her death Fortune went undetected by history and the reading public. However, painstaking archival research conducted by Lucy

Sussex<sup>1</sup> in the past few decades, and, as Sussex readily admits, a few strokes of luck (xxx), unearthed a life so extraordinary, that it sometimes, unjustly, overshadows her work.

Mary Fortune to date remains the only Australian writer who earned her income by her pen exclusively. Moreover, as Sussex writes, her “professionalism is even more significant considering her gender. At a time when women were expected to be domestic helpmeets, angels in the hose, Fortune freely admitted to being self-supporting, without the benefit of spouse, almost unheard of for a women writing in the colonies” (Overland 2006: 54). In her journalist piece titled “How I Spent Christmas” Fortune boasted that her tea tastes better when she remembers that she has “earned every penny of the money that bought it.” She continues by saying that she does not “owe a single ‘thank you’ to one of [her] kind friends” ending this expose with an unconventional wish for a woman living in the Victorian age: “God bless ye all, my dear friends, and grant me continued independence!” (Sussex 1989: 187). In her journalism she refers to herself as a Waif (“How I Spent Christmas” 168) and a rolling stone (“Our Colonial Christmases” Sussex 2006:57), thus having chosen the pseudonym of Waif Wander for herself. Also, “Waif is a legal term, signifying among other things lack of ownership – and a woman without legal owner in the Victorian era was single, beyond control of husband or father. ... waif also has the meaning of outcast, which for a woman in Victorian society usually meant loss of virtue” (Sussex 2006: 57). Fortune thus represented the New Woman who “rejected the traditional role for women and demanded emancipation” (Nelson 2001: ix). Namely, the New Woman argued that the ideology of separate spheres for men and women, where a woman’s sphere was the home, and man’s everything else, “was a construct of society and culture rather than a biological mandate” and “demanded that women be given the same opportunities and choices as men” (Nelson 2001: ix). The New Woman was educated, ventured outdoors, insisted on sensible dress, and engaged in professions previously reserved for men exclusively. She had opinions on political and social issues where the marriage issue was central. In their writing New Women ventured to demonstrate “how social and legal forces subordinate women in marriage” (Nelson 2001: x), they dealt with issues of sexual purity, they questioned marriage as being the best profession for women. Mary Fortune not only described the life of women from the standpoint of a New Woman, but she also lived it.

Such an extraordinary person is hard to pin down for the purposes of systematic research, but Sussex comes closest to it by formulating Fortune’s central characteristic: such an opinionated writer speaking directly to her readers about her life and opinions was also intensely private, shrouding her life in anonymity (Sussex 1989: xiv)<sup>2</sup> and hiding under a pseudonym. Sussex accurately detects that her “pseudonym shielded her – and protected her income – from her reading

---

<sup>1</sup> It was a book collector, J.K. Moir, who embarked on a search for a Waif Wander in 1950s, at the time when people who knew her were still alive. He located a few manuscript poems, and a letter dated in 1909 signed by M.H. Fortune. If it had not been for him Fortune’s name might never have been revealed. Sussex picked up on Moir’s research.

<sup>2</sup> Sussex makes a memorable comparison by stating that the “image that comes to mind is of a woman in purdah, shouting her speech from behind a brick wall” (1989: xiv)

public, whose Victorian values she did not share" (Overland 2006: 54).<sup>3</sup> A few facts from her personal life will reveal why anonymity was imperative if Fortune was to pursue a career of a self-supporting writer in the nineteenth century Australia.

Mary Fortune was born in Ireland as Mary Wilson, and as a child emigrated with her parents to Canada which she will continue to call her home for years. There she married Joseph Fortune in 1851, and the couple had a son Joseph George. In 1855, at the age of 22, she emigrated to Australia with her son to join her father, George Wilson who was then on the Victorian goldfields. As there is no evidence of divorce, and records reveal that Joseph Fortune died in Quebec in 1861 (Sussex 2006: 55), and having in mind that divorce laws were strict in predominantly Catholic Quebec, Sussex concluded (2006: 60) that "Mary did a runner with the child" (55). Indicatively, she adds a comment by Sue Martin "But how brave for the period!" (55). Indeed, it was. Ironically, the boy died "of convulsions" (meningitis) three years later, aged five. In 1865 she had another child who died. Shortly after, she married a police officer stationed on the goldfields, Percy Brett, but the couple split up soon, and again, there is no evidence of divorce, as it was a costly affair, and bigamy was common. The two had a son who also went by the name of George. Mary continued to raise her child and live in and around Melbourne for the rest of her life supporting herself by writing.

It is easy to see why in the era when "marriage and domesticity still largely defined women's lives, and they were 'expected to give birth, raise families and provide a moral, civilising influence'" (Bird qtd. in Brown 2007: 76), Fortune would hide her true identity. Namely, her personal life, as well as the transgressive nature of her work did not fulfil those ideals.

And yet, she bravely interweaves abundant personal information in her texts. She shares her life and opinions with her readers. She blurs the "boundaries between author and fictional character in her game of performative gender," (Sussex 2010: 135) so that some assumed that Sinclair really existed, and that Fortune was his widow: "It was claimed 'W.W.' was: 'the widow of a well-known detective, who got the details from her husband's journals and dressed them up for publication. I fancy the detective's name was Sinclair'" (Sussex 2010: 135).<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> "In 1880 the writer and journalist Henry W. Mitchell wrote an appreciation of an Australian woman writer both popular and enigmatic:

The gifted lady who for so many years has contributed to the AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL under the mon de plume of 'Waif Wander', or more recently simply 'W.W', is beyond all doubt one of the most talented, versatile and interesting writers of fiction that we have, or ever had, in the Australian colonies...

I am sorry that I am not in a position to place before my readers full details of the life and work of this popular author, but as her very name is shrouded in mystery, and as no one knows who she is or where she lives, I do not think that I ought to bring her forth from her obscurity, but simply content myself by criticising her writings, and congratulate the proprietors of the AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL on their good fortune in having so gifted a writer on their staff" ("A Well Known Contributor" p. 487; Sussex in Adelaide (ed.): *A Bright and Fiery Troop*, 1988: 117).

<sup>4</sup> The source was allegedly the *AJ*'s founding publisher, Alfred Massina, although it could also be a misremembrance of Fortune's 1898 story 'The Diamond Cross'. Here Sinclair

Fortune's knowledge of the police largely derived from her marriage to Percy Rollo Brett who emigrated to Australia from Ireland in late 1856 where he joined the police force as a mounted trooper. He was soon sent upcountry, to the goldfields. "A year later he was in charge of the two-man station in Kingower, a responsible position, as the goldfield had a population of 800 and a reputation of being 'a nugget or nothing.'" (Sussex 2010: 135). Thus Sinclair is in "The Stolen Specimens" "stationed within two miles of the diggings, where many large nuggets had been turned up, but where the fine gold was so scarce that a poor man had no chance." (Fortune 2003: 21).

Gold-digging is in Fortune's writing, as was in her life, connected with a lot of hard-drinking – she writes about the old cooking stove which was "afterwards put to illegal use"<sup>5</sup> (Sussex 2010: 136), and describes "thousands of new and scarcely discoloured corks ... swept into an embayed bend of the creek" after a diggers' spree. "The Stolen Specimens" describes Ellen, a wife of a grog shanty keeper, who begins as "a young and good looking woman, the mother of a baby that she carried almost constantly in her arms" (Fortune 2003: 23), but soon becomes "reduced more and more to the level of those around her" whom Fortune describes as "rascals." She becomes an alcoholic and, "at length it became no uncommon thing to see her staggering up the street still carrying the unfortunate child, with its clothes, as well as her own, the picture of neglect and untidiness" (23-24). Ellen's end paints a picture of horror: detective Sinclair found her "dancing idiotically before her child, which she had hung up to the tie-beam of the tent, and whose black and distorted features seemed to afford her the most satisfactory amusement. The child was quite dead, and some months after Ellen died herself, the inmate of the hospital of an asylum, another victim to the curse of intemperance so prevalent in our colony" (28).

Finally, there are numerous references to Percy Brett. Lucy Sussex claims that he reappears in his wife's fiction as Constable Brett, young Brett, Inspector Brett, Percy Rae, Percy Brereton, Percy Butt, Pyne Rollington, Eber Pierce and Rollo Bourke and that all but one of these characters are policemen. Apparently, in one 'Detective's Album' novel, 'The Bushranger's Autobiography', his physical appearance is appropriated, as well (Sussex 2010: 136).

In 'The Star-Spangled Banner', Percy Butt is a mounted policeman at the Ti-Tree diggings. He becomes intrigued by a woman shantykeeper, Kate Juniper

---

enlists his wife as crime helpmeet, and she partly narrates the tale under the heading 'Detective Nellie's Notes', with the self-referential comment: "Not a bad heading is it, Mark? Wouldn't it do for a book, and couldn't I write it?" (Sussex 2010: 135)

<sup>5</sup> "The illegal uses of a stove are limited; it most likely became part of a still. Whether Fortune and her father actually made moonshine is unknown, but she describes such activity in her fiction with her usual unwomanly authority: 'The still, although of rough formation, was in complete working order. The boiler stood over the hot ashes, among which still remained red embers, and the head and worm were attached; and the worm carried its convolutions down through a large hogshead of cold water, discharging the "mountain dew" by a pipe near the bottom into a vessel for the purpose' ('Jim Dickson's Fit of the Horrors' 333)." (Sussex 2010: 136)

who "has a weakness for handsome, young faces with down on 'em instead of hair" (Fortune 2003: 41). Percy is attracted to her, but the romance ends with Kate being murdered by her jealous husband. A footnote to the story declares that "Kate Juniper is no creation of the imagination. There are many diggers yet living who will recognise the favourite of more than one 'rush' in the early days" (Fortune 2003: 39). "Yet why does she link this character with a young man based on her husband? Percy Brett's son Henry spoke in his dotage of a woman who 'would not let his father alone', which if referring to Fortune, was certainly, in fictional terms, true" (Sussex 2010: 137).

In addition to her fiction, she shared personal material in her journalism, as well. Thus, for example, we learn that conventional Christmas was not for her as she writes of hurrying out for a walk "before I should hear the arrival of the son from up-country, or the married daughter from Tasmania, or the merry-voiced lads from the distant schools." She did not "want to see even the big goose stuffed, or another stick placed under the pot which held that great plum pudding." (Sussex 171-172) She fled "as one who flies from a crime" (172).

As she meets a specimen of "Young Australia"<sup>6</sup> she shares her thoughts of this emerging caste of young native-born city youth as she wonders "what

---

<sup>6</sup> "Young Australia" was the subject of heated debate in Melbourne in the 1870s and 1880s. "In fact, Melbourne generated the most serious engagements in this debate, with journals including the Melbourne Review and Victorian Review hosting ongoing considerations of such topics as 'the Coming Australian' and the especially contentious question of how Australian climatic factors might effect local physique. 'The Coming Man' in Melbourne will be a sorry affair if he is a pure development of what the boy is now', worried the evangelical John Cromack in 1874; a year later Judge Redmond Barry launched an inquiry to determine whether "the race in its transplantation to Australian soil retains undiminished the vigour and fire and stamina of the strong old fire of which it is an off-shoot" (Sleight XXX: 32). In his essay "The Future Australasian Race: Our Children" published in 1877, Marcus Clarke prophesised that the race will flourish in the Australian climate: "The conclusion of all this is, therefore, that in another hundred years the average Australasian will be a tall, coarse, strong-jawed, greedy, pushing, talented man, excelling in swimming and horsemanship. His religion will be a form of Presbyterianism; his national policy a democracy tempered by the rate of exchange. His wife will be a thin, narrow woman, very fond of dress and idleness, caring little for her children, but without sufficient brain-power to sin with zest. In five hundred years, unless recruited from foreign nations, the breed will be wholly extinct; but in that five hundred years it will have changed the face of Nature, and swallowed up all our contemporary civilisation" (Clarke, [teletlib.com](http://teletlib.com)). However, in her journalistic piece "Fourteen days on the road" Fortune paints a far less favourable picture of the colonial youth: "Tall as a reed, and flat as a lath, Ben was nevertheless strong and active beyond his seeming. His hair one could scarcely judge the colour of, so tangled was it and matted with dust. His eyes were light blue, and *nothingy*, his nose nowhere, and his mouth large and unshapely. But there was a pleasant smile always ready to impart beauty to Ben's face, that made you forget its want of regularity and form. ... The simplicity of a youth who was a proficient in all the slang and oaths of a colonial 'road'! ... Ben's wickedness, I do firmly believe, was gathered through the ear as a magpie learns his words, while his heart was susceptible of far better influences. But, alas, for poor Ben! where is he to meet with those influences? Who will undertake to provide that instruction for the lad that might enable him to judge between the evil and the good, and to eventually prefer the latter? 'Echo answers, where?'" (Fortune 1989: 131-132).



combination of circumstances had 'raised' such an ineffable self-conceit, so perfect a specimen of self-assertive youth. Surely such young gents are not the work of unassisted nature, not have they emanated from any ordinary arrangement of matter or mind" (178), hoping never to come in contact with the specimen again, "unless it should be that empty monkey's cage in the Botanical Gardens" (177).

In "The Spider and the Fly" as she observes a job interview for a hotel housekeeper, where the post is awarded to a pretty, yet ignorant girl, Fortune reveals that she is fully "aware of the webs the Victorian society set for independent flies:" "Retired we all discomfited. Retired the poor widow and her pale-faced child. What impudence she had to suppose that one without youth, and with sense, would be eligible for a position of trust under a bloated old Spider!" (Sussex 1989: 229).

While the above reveals Fortune as a transgressive Victorian woman and writer, Stephen Knight in his book *Continent of Mystery: A Thematic History of Australian Crime Fiction*, published in 1997 appropriates her in support of the Australian nationalist bush ideology. He does make a coherent argument; however, while thematically Fortune's oeuvre may fit Knight's classification, ideologically it actually subverts it. Namely, in the brief period between the development of the popular colonial press in the 1860s until the rise of nationalism in the 1880s whose "masculine resurgence" pitted women writers (Watson 2012: 184), Fortune took advantage of the opportunities of a hybrid colonial society to stretch the genre of crime fiction to the extent that she was able to voice her colonial and feminist opinions in it.

Knight builds his argument by describing how Fortune contributed to two of the four elements of crime fiction which he detected "derived and developed in this county with specific local meaning" (Knight 1997: 174): zero policing and the goldfields tradition.<sup>7</sup> Fortune combined "the structure of the convict stories with patterns from the goldfields novel" (150) realising "the voice of those who are not owners of the new lands, but workers within the colonising process," as she wrote about the "threat and resolution in the undergrowth of colonisation" (144). "Fortune weaves a close web of anxious social tension, where all people own is some clothes, a few sticks of furniture, a little coin, and their own respectability" (184). "The gold diggers and their wives as well as the shopkeepers and other workers who service their world are in most cases too young to be convicts. They have often come as free immigrants... which offers a full account of this newly formed social world" (185). By doing so, she not only formulates Australia-specific element of the crime fiction genre, but also contributes to the formulation of location, "one of the major dynamics in crime fiction" (143) as distinctively Australian, through her documentary mode. Thus "The Dead Witness" has "a distinct, positive, Australian setting," and although the "murder intrudes into idyllic setting, this sympathetic representation of Australia differs from the harshness depicted by European writers" (Watson

---

<sup>7</sup> The other two being zero location and criminal sagas.

2012: 178). By describing detective Sinclair's spring ride through the Australian bush, she introduced new and positive interpretations of Australian topography<sup>8</sup>:

...to a man accustomed to the sights and sounds of nature around him there is nothing distracting in the warble of the magpie or tinkle of the 'bell bird.' The little lizards that sit here and there upon logs and stumps, and look at the passer-by with their head on one side, and such a funny air of knowing stupidity in their small eyes, are such everyday affairs to an old colonist that they scarcely attract any notice from him. A good horseman, with an easy going nag under him and plenty of time to journey at leisure through the park-like bush of Australia, has, to my notion, as good an opportunity of enjoying the Italians' *dolce far niente* as any fellow can have who does not regularly lie down to it (Sussex 2010: 135).

Her descriptions of mining camps do not serve the mere purpose of delineating a setting in her crime stories, nor do they have solely documentary value – her artistry in the presentation of sights and sounds finds her contributing to, what T. Inglis Moore will a century later detect and name as social patterns in Australian literature: the spell of the bush. Thus in "The Star-Spangled Banner" she describes the "tent-lined road, behind which, on either side, were up-piled the heaps of yellowish soil that marked the digger's labours" with "flags of every hue and shape and size, mounted on rough, bush-trimmed saplings, dotted the tent-covered low hills, and there was a little sound, save what was, to me, the strange swash-swash, swash-swash of the rocking cradles down by the hidden

---

<sup>8</sup> What should be mentioned here is that while Fortune's oeuvre is first and foremost one that contributes to the formulation of new social patterns in Australian literature which were to be formally articulated in the nationalist 1890s, there are still instances of early colonialist tropes, the most common one being that of Australian landscape is described as treacherous, a remnant from the early days of exploration. Australian spatial historian Paul Carter writes: "Space itself was a text that had to be written before it could be interpreted. This was the significance of Cook – that he provided such a text, something that could be interpreted, something with which a dialogue could be carried on, something against which places could come into being." 1988: 41). However, as European nature was the "'emblem' of human life" (44) Australian landscape was in reality undecipherable, as the explorers soon found that it violates the logic of association. Explorer Edward Eyre reports of the shores of Lake Torrens whose basin consists, "as far as I could penetrate, of a mass of mud and sand, coated on the surface with a crust of salt, but having water mixed with it beneath," thus calling the lake "false waters" situated at the foot of Deception Mount. Charles Sturt will even "wish not to hide from my readers the disappointment, if such a word can express the feeling, with which I turned my back upon the centre of Australia, after having so nearly gained it; but that was an achievement I was not permitted to accomplish" (Sturt 1849: 35). This is what Fortune wrote: "I paused opposite the swamp in which I was so very much interested. I had ridden down close to the creek, and with the rippling of the gleaming water in my ears, looked across it to the level flat beyond. Green as emerald it was, but treacherous as an enemy's smile, and I felt that it would be a folly in me to attempt exploring it. Pools of glittering water lay numerous over it, and the tall box forest that encircled it threw a deep shadow around its borders" ("Circumstantial Evidence", 88)



creek" ... (Fortune 2003: 38). From a vantage point on the Castlemaine road the narrator could see the entire valley of Ti-tree. "It was beautiful, sunny day, with a fresh, cool breeze playing, that caught the many-coloured tent flags, and set them fluttering fitfully, now and then spreading some bit of bunting broad and wide, and anon letting it drop again limply" (57).

In "Circumstantial Evidence" detective Sinclair is riding his horse along the Yathong Creek in Kurriwroo district in New South Wales:

A lovelier day never broke over Australian ground than that on which I took my way in the direction of Yathong. ... the joyful sun glanced warmly upon the still flooded but clear bosom of Yathong.

Every green bough of the scattered gum trees was gilded with warm sunlight. Softly and verdant swept the untrodden grass into the flowing creek. Gracefully bet the feathery wattle foliage down into the glassy water; and gladly sang many a bush bird to the sound of the stream as it reached Yathong. ... not a fleck upon a sunny sky, and the music of forest nature around me (88).

In "The Geneva Watch" he is riding through the Australian forest alone proclaiming that "it is next to the pleasantest thing in the world" (96), until he decides to dismount and take a rest in the scrub:

Did you ever lie under a tree in the forest, and think dreamily until the dreams came in reality, and sleep had overtaken you amid the rustling leaves and grass? Did you ever rest on grass in the shade, where you could see the white fleecy clouds moveless in the blue sky, and the blue mountain and king parrots flitting through the boughs, and the Australian water-rat, rising and diving, with his porpoise-like roll, in the still waters of a near creek? It is a pleasant rest ... (97)

Decades before Lawson, Patterson and the fellows of the Dawn and Dusk Club<sup>9</sup> of the revivalist 1890s Fortune described bush a "no place for a woman" as is evident from her description of Miss Carr in "Circumstantial Evidence":

I looked keenly at the speaker; not, of course, that I hesitated for a moment to see her into some place of shelter; but I could not get it out of my head that

---

<sup>9</sup> Dawn and Dusk Club was the exclusive club of single young men, professional writers and artists in Sydney in the 1890s. The Club was formed at the home of Fred Broomfield in Darlinghurst. The founding members were Broomfield, Daley, Philp, journalist Herbert Low, William Bede Melville, Bertram Stevens and Randolph Bedford. Soon they were joined by John Le Gay Brereton, Henry Lawson, Nelson Illingworth, George Taylor, and Frank Mahoney. The Club took the name from the recently published book of poetry by Victor Daley – *At Dawn and Dusk*. Henry Lawson came up with the motto "Roost high and crow low" (Roderick 1991: 197). Mocking the traditional criticism of culture in the colonies they proclaimed that their objectives were, among other things, "to establish a society for the erection of ancient ruins in Australia; another to form a fund for the establishment of Old Australian Masters" (White 1981: 96). While they were also famous for drinks and camaraderie they are also credited with establishing the Australian literary canon.

there was something very singular indeed in a woman, frail and delicate, standing there in the wet bush in a late evening of winter.

"You must have walked a very long way for a young person like you," I said. (84).

Fortune also detected and was one of the first to describe the salvaging of a miner from the sinking hole, the event which looms large in the Australian psyche and is a common *topos* of the nationally formative, revivalist 1890s. One of the most memorable scenes is salvation of Kate Juniper (after she went in to save young Charlie Gold):

"Mate," whispered Dunn to me, as he dropped the relieved rope into the shaft again, and hurriedly lowered it, "the poor girl is lost! Look back at the ground! Kate! For the love of God don't wait to hook on the bucket – the claim is sinking fast!"

Ay, it was surely sinking fast – I felt it shuddering under my feet, and there was a widening crack within half a dozen feet of the shaft. A minute of agony, and then, with a weight on the rope, we wound at the windlass – with dropping sweat that was not the effects of our work, but of our fear – and then Kate's white face was visible, was level with the windlass, was above me, and the bucket visible – nay, Kate's foot was on the ground when the windlass sank into yawning space, and someone literally dashed me back to safer ground. I fell, and when I rose again I saw Kate being dragged from the debris, among which some of her garment had caught, and there was a ringing cheer that echoes for miles along the rough sides of old Ti-Tree, and is to this day remembered by those who heard it and live to recall it (48-49).

Another archetypal Australian fear, that of the dead man in the bush, Fortune dealt with in the "Dead Man in the Scrub": "It was a lonely and out of the way place ... Two or three shallow holes had been sunk, and at a small waterhole, not far off, the stuff had been evidently cradled..." (73) And when the diggers got closer an awful scene awaited them: "I need not attempt to give you any idea of the sound made by millions of those horrible flies that collect around and revel in the decomposition of any ... life in Australia" (73).

An element of bush life fully articulated in the 1890s, primarily by the great Henry Lawson, is that of hatters in the bush. Kay Schaffer describes hatter as "a bush eccentric, a man who lives and works alone, gradually becoming so shy of human company that he avoids it—isolated in his madness from the social order. Hatters, by definition, never marry. This, in turn, helps to explain their condition of eccentricity" (Schaffer 1988: 121). In Fortune's writing hatters are mentioned only in passing and are not dwelled on as one does on a significant characterising element, but the very fact that she singled them out shows how perceptive she was: "...single-handed diggers – that is to say, "hatters", seldom camped far from store or shanty is they could help it. (51)"

If this were her sole contribution to Australian mid-nineteenth century colonial context, it would have been priceless, and Knight thus deservedly suggests that "her work appears to be the main source through which this new

world of the Victorian settlements was interpreted, in terms of place, people and the disruptions they faced and feared" (33).

Fortune contributed to yet another Australia-specific element of crime fiction – that of the vanishing policeman. Knight aptly observed that Fortune was sensitive in detecting the changing attitude to police in the second half of the nineteenth century. Specifically, Knight claims that following the Eureka Rebellion and the Kelly capture, after the *Bulletin* becoming "a positive sanctuary for low-cost demotic fiction," (119) and demanding a sketch form which did not support a crime story, and ultimately, with the invention of the ideal of the noble and enduring bushman, the heroic policeman vanishes, and the police became merely "supporters in detection, only there to arrest the villains so brilliantly identified by truly independent heroes" (118) the (amateur) detective. Therefore, while Fortune's stories in *The Detective's Album* all feature a detective, in several of them Sinclair is hardly involved in revealing the real nature of events.

With her goldfields mysteries, her celebration of the Australian landscape, and her currency attitude of dissent and disregard for authorities, Fortune detected and seized social characteristics which will be at the core of Australian bush ideology two decades later, and Knight could appropriate her fiction for his theory of Australian crime fiction.

However, as bush ideology is but an Australia-specific version of Victorian bourgeois ideology<sup>10</sup>, Fortune, with both, her life and her writing, could not possibly fit the bill. The transgressive nature of her writing in terms of both, the crime fiction genre and Fortune's worldview transpiring through it, is evident already in the instance of the narrator. As Megan Brown has cleverly noticed, "Fortune performs discursive cross-dressing to write the voice of the male detective Mark Sinclair" (Brown 2007: 82). And the guise is perfect, as the fact that Sinclair's masculine first person narration was written by a woman, never transpires through the stories. What does, however, is the female impetus of a number of stories, such as the murder of a woman on Chinaman's Flat in "Traces of Crime," which sets the action going, or Kate Juniper's past which catches up with her in "The Star-Spangled Banner." It is this female impetus that is crucial for the interpretation of Fortune's texts, and it the main factor which prevents Fortune's crime stories from comfortably sitting in the position Knight awarded them.

In addition to the above, the introduction of an amateur female detective who solves the case for the detective is as much an example of zero policing, as it is of the inversion of gender roles. Therein Mary Crawford possesses more knowledge than Mark Sinclair – she sees that Mrs. Bell the housekeeper and a murderer of Mrs. Hart, is Emma Fairweather in disguise. She writes a note

---

<sup>10</sup> "Sex' in texts of this period, principally signifies the (patriarchal) ordering of relations between men and women which is believed to ensure the continuing superiority of the '(white) race'; and this race, in turn, is construed as having a mandate to develop 'Australia' as a new political and spiritual entity. ... women are designated specific positions in nationalist discourse." They are "the mothers of the race" (Sheridan 1995: ix-x).

to Sinclair saying: "You a detective! Bah! That woman is young, and she wears a wig!" (Fortune 2003: 133). Still, although she solved the case, and Sinclair received a financial reward for it, "the only part of it [he] could prevail upon Miss Mary to accept was a handsome pair of gold bracelets, prettily formed in imitation of a pair of handcuffs, and bearing the motto, in fine diamonds, 'To the fair detective, in memory of August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1860'" (134). Watson sees this as "gendered recuperation: they symbolically lock her wrists into place, arresting her into proper feminine passivity and reasserting masculine (detecting) power" (Watson 2012: 180). However, in spite of being put in her "proper sphere," Mary still comes out as superior to Sinclair. While the story may be seen as supporting the stupid policeman stereotype, Watson correctly noticed that "in Fortune's tale Sinclair is not so much stupid as Mary is more intelligent and acute" (180).

Female impetus is visible in a number of other stories wherein Detective Sinclair is fooled by a whole series of women: in "The Camperton Necklace" he had to be told by the young villain Coglan who was plotting to rob Mr. Camperton himself, that he was overtaken by Mrs. Camperton who stole the titular necklace from her dead husband, while in "A Matrimonial Advertisement" it was the respectable and hard-working, but middle-aged and not-so-pretty, Sarah Starch who had to reveal to him the plot concocted by Miss Marcia Taylor to marry and then kill rich Mr. Ruston by whom Sinclair was engaged precisely for the purpose of being protected from such women having thus terribly failed as a detective. Even his colleague on the case, Detective Bannon, ejaculated in desperation when he heard Sinclair saying that there was "something convincing" (196) in the actress's manner: "Her manner! And she a stage woman! Lord! how green you are, Ned!" (196). In "Circumstantial Evidence" he falsely accused a young woman of having murdered a child, when the child was safe throughout and young Miss Carr was actually trying to protect him from the abusive stepmother: "'Sold again,' was my muttered exclamation as I 'made tracks', and flung 'Miss Carr's' boot out of my inside pocket on the dungheap. And I hope you are better pleased at the termination of my clear case of "Circumstantial Evidence" than I was myself. That's all!" (94)

Fortune's narrative cross-dressing is so perfect that the female voice, indeed, remains hidden in the discursive shadows, however, what does transpire through the narrative occasionally is a female point of view. It might not have been evident to the then reading public which would not have been terribly versed in detecting levels of focalisation and focalisers, but the present day reader is, reading Fortune's detective stories, reminded of Henry Lawson's immediate initial response to Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career*.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Franklin wanted to conceal her female identity and rather wanted to pose a "bald-headed seer of the privileged sex", thus sending the novel to Henry Lawson to read it under a male pseudonym. Having begun reading the novel, Lawson immediately realized that it was written by a young girl. Henry Lawson subsequently abused Franklin's wish and wrote a preface in which he praised the book for its reality of the bush thus inclining readers to approach it as they would his own work and not attend

Thus in "Traces of Crime" our attention is drawn to the fate of numerous females on the diggings – that of being attacked when without male company:

One dark night, in a tent in the very centre of a crowded thoroughfare, a female had been preparing to retire to rest, her husband being in the habit of remaining at the public-house until a late hour, when a man with a crape mask – who must have gained an earlier entrance – seized her, and in the prosecution of a criminal offence, had injured and abused the unfortunate woman so much that her life was despaired of (29).

The perils of protruded loneliness endured by women on the goldfields is discussed "In the Cellar" as well:

The tent was inhabited by a digger and his wife. They appeared to be childless, and the woman was the most wretched and miserable being I had ever beheld. She seemed quite young, but ill and broken-hearted, and had a despairing look in her eyes, that used to haunt me for days after I had last seen it. At last I saw it no more for months, and gossip assured me that the poor creature was confined to her bed, ill and helpless.

The husband used to work in the Deep Lead, I believe, and I had no reason to doubt that the woman had every necessary comfort, save that of attendance; but *that* she certainly had not, for no doctor was summoned, and no one ever went or came about her, as far as I could see, although I often noticed the man spending his money at the counter of the store where drink was sold, or carrying home parcels for household use (61).

Additionally, specific attention to the details of female attire in numerous instances breaks the conventions of the genre by revealing a female point of view. Here is an example from "The Star-spangled Banner": "She had a black print on, with a bit of lace collar and a little bunch of grass flowers pinned to it. Poor Kate! she never cared for brooches, though she might have worn dozens of them if she wished; but she was fond of bits of "shivery grass" and the like as a child" (54).

"The female voice at the centre of the narrative also disputes the conventions of the genre" (Watson 2012:180); Emma Fairweather kills Mrs. Hart by savagely beating her about the head with an iron bar. Emma is an independent woman who, rather than being controlled by men, controls them, bribing Edward, a man employed by Mrs. Hart, in order to incriminate him. She is "motivated purely by financial gain and the reader is given no details of her past life that might mitigate her acts" (Watson 2012: 180). As Watson points out, Emma "defeated [Sinclair] literally and figuratively" (Watson 2012: 180). Namely, Emma drugs him to snoop around his room and read his Police Gazette and he needs Mary to tell him what happened.

Fortune created a similar evil female figure in some other stories as well, for example in "The Geneva Watch" Mrs. Murdoch kills her stroke stricken

---

to its feminist dimensions. He furthermore wrote that "the story had been written by a girl!" breaching Franklin's express desire that her gender remains secret. (Lawson's Preface in Franklin 2007: 1).

and disabled husband's first wife by strangling her in the night so that she need not share his wealth following his death. Mrs. Camperton of "The Camperton Necklace" is another example of a long line of women motivated by financial gain when she steals an eight-hundred pounds worth necklace with gemstones, and then pulls it to bits for the purpose of selling them to get the money for her future life of a single woman.

Miss Marcia Taylor of "A Matrimonial Advertisement" equals Emma Fairweather in independence and agency, as well as a complete lack of moral compass. When asked by Detective Sinclair if she, perhaps, made a mistake by applying for a matrimonial advertisement by an old gentleman, Marcia Taylor responds: "Not a bit of it; only satisfy me that the old chap is rich, and I'll marry him if he hadn't a tooth in his head." (186). When informed of having competition, as there is another lady who responded to the advertisement, she confidently retorts: "I am not afraid of any woman ousting me when I once set myself to conquer. And you may be sure I shall use all my arts to entangle your wealthy miser" (182). She does succeed to marry the gentleman, and soon ends up shooting him in the middle of the night with the assistance of her former lover, and then flees both with the money.<sup>12</sup>

"A Matrimonial Advertisement" is, additionally, Fortune's comment on the fate of elderly, and not-so-pretty professional women in Victorian society, one that elaborates what she had to say in her journalistic piece "The Spider and the Fly" mentioned above.

Female impetus is thus visible in a number of her stories where female characters are "uncontrollable, wilful females, brazen bedizened girls and in particular women drunkards" all of which were "common figures of Victorian scorn" (Sussex 2010: 134). There is, however, Kate Juniper who stands apart from all of them.

Kate Juniper is the most complex of Fortune's characters. Kate is a woman shantykeeper, self-possessed and independent, handy with a revolver: "And when you come to know a little of her, Percy, you will wonder how such a woman ever came to marry, for she's as masterful and independent – ay, and powerful – as any ordinary man, though she has a heart soft as honey for sickness and trouble, for all that." (Fortune 2003: 40). Trooper Percy Butt describes Kate as "a woman of twenty-six, perhaps more, ... in every movement that was a natural grace and suppleness, and a dark, handsome face was crowned by a mass of the most splendid black hair I ever sat eyes upon" (40). As far as her attire is concerned, it was a simple dress, "thin black material, but it was draped upon her according to some classical secret of her own, for I never saw another woman's figure outlines so perfectly and gracefully" (40).

The diggers at the Ti-Tree "take time from Kate's shooting-iron" (40). Namely, every day at sunset she fires six shots marking the end of the work day. Once she puts the revolver away, she pulls "up and out, broad and resplendent" the "star-spangled banner on the breeze" (41). This is the time she begins serving drink

---

<sup>12</sup> She is, eventually, caught and hanged, however.



at her hut. Serving drinks "She was certainly far superior to her surroundings," and had refined taste which "her plainness of dress evinced." (43). At the time when lucky diggers lavished their gifts on their girlfriends, "Kate Juniper had not a single ring on her hand, or even a brooch at her throat" (43).

New chap Flynn brought the information that Kate was on Eaglehawk diggings at the very beginnings of the rush, and was married there with a child. However, her husband deserted her, while the child died and "was buried in the bottom of Mr Stanton's run" (45). Kate was "nearly broken-hearted; that was how she took up the grog-selling business" (46).

Kate is fonder of dogs than she is of people. When Dark Deccatur came in with his dog she "coaxed the dog to the counter for half a dozen lumps of sugar" whispering "I love that dog ... How faithful he is!" (44). However, when young Charlie Gould got trapped in the sinking hole she wasted no time, "she deftly folded her skirts round her and stepped into the bucket. ... In one hand the girl carried a coil of light rope; with the other she gripped the rope to which the big bucket was attached" (48). In a matter of minutes she sent Charlie up hanging by his armpits.

With her aptitude and bush intelligence she resembles Baynton's Squeaker's mate (or rather vice versa, as Fortune's text preceded Baynton's by a decade). "Squeaker's Mate" is Baynton's short story from her collection *Bush Studies* (1902) wherein she describes a man, Squeaker, and a woman, his 'Mate', walking a bush track for their business of wood and honey. Squeaker's Mate carries all tools and does all the work. Squeaker carries very little, and is incompetent in bushwork. At an instance Squeaker's Mate attempts to retrieve her axe caught in a trunk of a tree, but is caught under a branch which breaks her back. He never helps, instead tells the invalid woman to "Go and bite yerself like a snake!" She is left with the loyalty of her dog. It is Baynton's criticism of highly masculinised bush mateship of Australian mythology. Much like the Squeaker's mate, Kate, too, learns that biology is destiny. Kate ends up being murdered by her jealous husband, a bushranger living incognito on the goldfields.

Not only is Kate akin to Baynton's Squeaker's Mate, but Mary Fortune herself, as well. Kate's dislike of people and her fondness of dogs, her life skills, strength and independence, her fondness of Percy Brett, and finally, her loss of a child, uncannily resemble the author.

If Fortune revealed episodes from her life and her opinions in her writing, her son's actions revealed even more. Namely, her only surviving child, Eastbourne Vaudrey Fortune, who went by different aliases, George being the most common, figures in the records of juvenile crime in Melbourne. Thus a boy whose mother in her 1865 publication in the *Australian Journal* in a poem titled "To My Little Son on His Birthday" writes "a strong and bold/ and rude and wayward son; but not without germ of good,/My Kindly little one!" (Sussex speech) was soon picked up by the police and committed to the Industrial School (Reform School) for two years, as a "neglected child," "which meant that he was in the street unsupervised" (Sussex speech). "There is evidence that she tried to get him out, his discharge was approved, but something happened, and he remained there." His first entry

in the *Children's Registers* stated that his mother was "at present an inmate of the Melbourne Home" (Sussex 2006: 56). That would have been the Melbourne's Immigrants Home two years previously described by Marcus Clarke as a "terrible Golgotha of ruined lives" (Sussex 2010: 139), which effectively meant that she was homeless, and yet she was still publishing steadily for the *Australian Journal*. When he was convicted for the second time, as James Davidson, the *Children's Registers* show that Fortune was in a *de facto* relationship: "Father James Davidson, Mother Mrs. Mary Davidson [...] is stated to be a writer for the *Australian Journal*" (Sussex 2006: 57). His third conviction noted "Father Joseph Fortune dead. Mother Mary Fortune, a governess [...] East Melbourne, is in poor circumstances. Mother is drunk." And indeed, former editor of the *Journal* told Moir that Fortune was "of 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" (Sussex 2006: 58). In 1874 the *Police Gazette* of Victoria noted:

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 February 1874: 10)" (Sussex 2006: 59).

This is the only known portrait of Mary Fortune.

She maintained her literary output and lived into old age. Thus over a decade later a letter to her friend Minaille Furlong reveals that she was impoverished and blind, and suffering from senile dementia: "there is a want in that brain somewhere nothing else can possibly account for the muddle" (Sussex 2010: 140). The *Australian Journal* granted her annuity, thus ending her independence, but she was unable to work anymore. The *Journal* even paid "'for her burial in another person's grave' – a chilling detail that, like much in her life, evades explanation" (Sussex 2006: 60).

Thus while Fortune may have been all that Lucy Sussex attributes to her: "Angel? Devil? Sinister or Shady Lady? Scarlet Rider? Scarlet Woman? Drunk? Mother of a jailbird? Mother of Australian detective fiction?" or as she concludes "All of these perhaps, or simply human... and a singularly unfortunate one" (Sussex 2006: 60), she will be remembered in Australian literary history as an innovative writer who bent the conventions of the genre to introduce a female voice and a female point of view.

## References:

- Fortune, Mary (2003). *The Detectives' Album*, The Battered Silicon Dispatch Book  
Brown, Megan (2007). "'I Shall Tell Just Such Stories as I Please': Mary Fortune and the *Australian Journal*" in: *Australian Literary Studies* 23. 2, pp. 74 – 88  
Franklin, Miles (2007). *My Brilliant Career*, London: Penguin

- Knight, Stephen (1997). *Continent of Mystery: A Thematic History of Australian Crime Fiction*, Melbourne UP
- Carter Paul (1988): *The Road to Botany Bay*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf
- Christensen Nelson, Carolyn (ed.) (2001): *A New Woman Reader*, Peterborough Ontario: Broadview Press
- Clarke, Marcus: "The Future Australasian Race: Our Children", <http://www.telelib.com/authors/C/ClarkeMarcus/prose/AustalianTales/futureaustralian.html>, retrieved 22/09/2017
- Roderick, Colin (1991). *Henry Lawson A Life*, North Ride NSW: Angus & Robertson
- Schaffer, Kay (1988). *Women and the Bush*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Sheridan, Susan (ed.) (1995): *Along the Faultlines*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin
- Sleight, Simon (2013): *Young People and the Shaping of Public Space in Melbourne 1870-1914*, London and New York: Routledge
- Sturt, Charles (1849). *Narrative of an Expedition into Central Australia*, Vol. I, London: T. and W. Boone
- Sussex, Lucy (ed.) (1989). *The Fortunes of Mary Fortune*. Ringwood: Penguin
- Sussex, Lucy (2006). "Mary Fortune The Only Truly Bohemian Lady Writer Who Has Ever Earned a Living by Her Pen in Australia", *Overland*, 183, pp.
- Sussex, Lucy (2009). "Mary Fortune's Three Murder Mysteries", *MARGIN: Life and Letters in Early Australia* no 78, pp. 33-38
- Sussex, Lucy (1988). 'Shrouded in Mystery': Waif Wander (Mary Fortune), in: *A Bright and Fiery Troop Australian Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century* [Debra Adelaide], Sydney: Penguin, pp. 117-132
- Sussex, Lucy (2010). *Women Writers and Detectives in Nineteenth Century Crime Fiction*, Palgrave Macmillan
- Sussex, Lucy. "'The Devil in the Galle(r)y' Truth and Notoriety in the Literary Life", unpublished speech
- Watson, Kate (2012). *Women Writing Crime Fiction, 1860-1880*, McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers
- White, Richard (1984). *Inventing Australia*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin

### **Mary Helena Fortune: Skitnica Lutalica ili transvestit s misijom?**

U doba kada je brak i obiteljski život još uvijek uvelike definirao živote žena, žene su u kolonijalnom okružju često nalazile veću slobodu jer su društvena očekivanja od njih bila manja nego u Europi. Prva autorica kriminalističke literature u Australiji, Mary Helena Fortune je i u svom spisateljskom radu i u životu iskoristila navedenu priliku. Čuvajući svoj privatni život tajnim, te pišući pod pseudonimom Waif Wander (Skitnica Lutalica) čuvala je i svoj prihod od čitateljske publike čija viktorijanska uvjerenja nije dijelila. Pišući pod pseudonimom i u okviru žanra koji je tada bio tek u nastajanju, Fortune je imala slobodu slobodnog govora: raspravljala je o pitanjima roda i identiteta u hibridnom i fluidnom kolonijalnom društvu koje se upravo tada formiralo u mjesto u kojem se mogu izgraditi novi identitet i u kojem je otkupljenje moguće, kao što je vidljivo iz njezine jedine objavljene zbirke pripovjedaka *The Detective's Album*.

*Ključne riječi:* Australija, Mary Fortune, kriminalistička fikcija, „nova žena“