2

‘The Most Popular Book of Modern Times’: Fergus Hume’s *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* (1886)

This chapter focuses on the book that has been called ‘the bestselling detective novel of the nineteenth century’ – a novel, like the others in this study, which also illustrates the often overlooked formal and ideological complexity of the nascent Victorian detective genre (Davies, *Shadows* 16).\(^1\) Perhaps surprisingly, the bestselling detective novel of the nineteenth century is not by Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins or Arthur Conan Doyle. Rather, the first crime novel to sell over half a million copies was New Zealand lawyer Fergus (Ferguson Wright) Hume’s literary debut – *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* (1886), a murder mystery set in Melbourne, that’s now all but dropped out of the crime fiction canon. In the year before the publication of the novel often taken to be the first significant work of late Victorian detective fiction – Arthur Conan Doyle’s *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) – Hume’s novel was published in Australia and sold more than 25,000 copies in just three months. Before the turn of the century, *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* had become a global hit: it had been republished in the UK, France and America; it had been turned into a successful stage play in London, Melbourne and New York (running for over 500 performances in London). Bizarrely, it had even inspired a copycat murder in Manchester in 1889.\(^2\)

In this chapter, I examine the reasons why it has been overlooked, in spite of its huge commercial success. I suggest that the novel has been elided from the canon of Victorian fiction (in spite of its phenomenal contemporary success) precisely for the reason that should make it fascinating to any contemporary devotee of the crime genre. Specifically, with its compromised investigators and crimes featuring the middle classes, it once again showcases the formal diversity and moral ambiguity present in late nineteenth-century detective fiction, a period that is

C. Clarke, *Late Victorian Crime Fiction in the Shadows of Sherlock*  
© Clare Clarke 2014
often erroneously read as producing only a particularly reassuring and conservative incarnation of the genre.

Bored with the law and determined to make a name for himself as a playwright, the young barrister Hume set out to write a novel simply ‘to attract local attention’ (Hume ‘Preface’). As the author later put it, ‘I was bent on becoming a dramatist, but, being quite unknown, I found it impossible to induce the managers of the Melbourne Theatres to accept, or even to read a play. At length it occurred to me I might further my purpose by writing a novel. I should at all events secure a certain amount of local attention’ (Hume ‘Preface’). Thus inspired, Hume astutely decided to write a novel specifically designed to appeal to the appetites of local readers. As he explained it,

I enquired of a leading Melbourne bookseller what style of book he sold most of. He replied that the detective stories of Gaboriau had a large sale ... I bought all his works – eleven or thereabouts – and read them carefully. The style of 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. (Hume ‘Preface’)

The bookseller had advised Hume well; Emile Gaboriau's 1866 crime novel, *L'Affaire Lerouge*, featuring amateur detective Tabaret and methodical police detective Monsieur Lecoq, had established the Frenchman as one of the most widely read authors of the nineteenth century. Over the next few months, Hume constructed a story very much in the Gaboriau mould – like *L'Affaire Lerouge*, *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* features amateur and professional detectives, family scandal, scenes of low life, mystery and murder.

In spite of Hume’s hopes, the novel had a rather inauspicious start – in the summer of 1886 it was rejected by George Robertson, the leading Melbourne publisher at the time, on the grounds that ‘no colonial could write anything worth reading’ (Hume ‘Preface’). Therefore, in October 1886, Hume had 5000 copies of the novel printed and published at his own expense. According to the *Illustrated London News*, this edition of the novel sold out in spectacularly quick time: ‘in seven days after its publication not only 500 but 5000 copies were sold in Melbourne’ (‘The Author of Madame Midas’ 410). A second and third printing followed ‘until in three months 25,000 copies were disposed of, a circulation unexampled in the history of the colony’ (410). A few months after its Australian debut, Hume sold the rights to the novel for 50 pounds to a group of London-based speculators who promptly rebranded