



Blockbuster! Fergus Hume & The Mystery of a Hansom Cab. The Story of the Crime Novel that Became a Global Publishing Phenomenon,

by Lucy Sussex.

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Blockbuster! is a fascinating and engaging read from start to finish. The exhaustive research which informs the book never overwhelms the flow of the narrative, which is expressed in clear, precise prose.

The reader is offered here two intriguing subjects. While this is the publishing story of Fergus Hume's famous detective book, *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*, and an early example of the detective genre, it is also, side-by-side as it were, the story of Melbourne in the final two decades of the nineteenth century. Indeed Lucy Sussex labels three novels by Hume his "Melbourne Trilogy": *Hansom Cab* (1886), *Madame Midas* (1888) and *Miss Mephistopheles* (1890), all three novels offering vibrant local colour: "a prospectus, in fiction" (200) as Sussex later puts it. The "trilogy" designation moreover lends a specific gravitas to Hume whose standing in literary terms has never had the prestige it should within the annals of Australian literature. *Blockbuster!* will considerably amend this situation. That Hume had published seventeen books by the end of 1892 will doubtless come as a surprise to most readers.

Unlike many nineteenth-century authors who left behind vast collections of letters, diaries and journals, there is little extant archival material for the Hume biographer to consult. Hume's early life is revealed through his father's occupation as an asylum attendant, and later supervisor, in England and in Dunedin, New Zealand where he had some social standing. The family's life comes to light through newspaper articles and other ephemeral fragments. Very early on Sussex refuses what she terms the "temptation" of the biographical fallacy (6). For this reason, great care has been taken not to read Hume's life through his fictions and only rarely are any ideas or beliefs attributed to Hume without sound evidence. Where suppositions are offered Sussex is careful to point out that there is no specific evidence to support them, only a range of facts from which irresistible inferences can be drawn, the question of Hume's sexuality for instance.¹ Thus as a pathway to the author, the reader is offered instead the story of the book itself, its rocky road to publication, to local success within Australia, and subsequently its astonishing international success. The insights delivered along the way to the publishing trade at the time, both colonial and at "Home," the "colonial cringe," the dubious business practices that led to the financial crash of 1890s Melbourne, the opportunism and frauds that took place all swirling around this one book and its author, make intriguing reading.

Blockbuster! offers one other key subject that warrants discussion: the detective genre itself. The early covers for *Hansom Cab* label the book "sensational" and of course the title itself

¹ Editorial note: After *Blockbuster!* had been published Lucy Sussex discovered definitive evidence that Fergus Hume was the subject of homosexual blackmail before he left Australia. Her essay "The Queer Story of Fergus Hume" is published in *Murder in the Closet*, ed. Curtis Evans (McFarland: South Carolina, 2017) a collection of essays shortlisted for the 2018 Edgar Award.

offers the word “mystery.” The detective genre certainly emerged from the earlier gothic and sensation novels, the term “detective fiction” first appearing in the press around 1881, as Sussex points out (78). Conan Doyle was yet to make a success of Sherlock Holmes, in the series of short stories published in the *Strand* magazine in 1891. Doyle dismissed *Hansom Cab* as a “swindle” and a weak tale (161). Sussex makes a considerable claim for Hume’s book, that it “consolidated detective fiction as a publishing genre” (245). Moreover, she suggests that Hume’s novel “played a major role in creating [Doyle’s] market” (247). She also writes that the later golden age detective authors, namely Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, Dashiell Hammett, Margery Allingham, Ellery Queen and Arthur Upfield, “had read or owed something of their success to *Hansom Cab*” (253). While these claims are tempting, they may also be over-reaching in estimating the extent of *Hansom Cab*’s influence.

In formulating the novel that may or may not have made a major contribution to the detective genre we are told that Hume made “one crucial mistake” (246) in not making the detective the central character of his work. After all, he had, among others, the model of Emile Gaboriau who had published from 1865 the popular police procedural novels with M. Lecoq as the key detective figure. Hume, however, was ambitious. Sussex believes that the novel was designed to provide him with a reputation chiefly as a means to obtaining theatre work, his first love. But possibly he was also ambitious for any work he produced to be regarded as literature, while in fact he seems to have been consistently labeled as a writer of “shilling shockers.” In not making the detective the central character, he may well have been using as his models authors of some literary repute: Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins. *Bleak House* by the former and *The Moonstone* and *The Woman in White* by the latter could well have been in his mind as he constructed his story. As with most discussions of Hume’s writing life, this too can only be surmise.

Ultimately these objections are merely quibbles in what is overall an outstanding example of authorial detection in itself. Lucy Sussex has produced a book that is a gold-mine for any Victorianist or for those fascinated by nineteenth-century Australian literature. Colonial Melbourne springs to life as we are taken down its streets and lanes, as do the characters who cross its stage: Fergus Hume himself, Frederick Trischler the entrepreneurial salesman who turned *Hansom Cab* into a blockbuster, Alice Cornwell the mining speculator and model for *Madame Midas*, and George and Jessie Taylor, whose financial machinations could be the basis for yet another novel. Carefully annotated and indexed, this is a scholarly book well worth a place in any collection.

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