

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE2873

Fortune, Mary Helena

(1833 - 1911)

Born 1 January, 1833, Belfast Antrim Ireland

Died 9 November, 1911, Windsor Melbourne Victoria Australia

Occupation Journalist, Print journalist, Writer

Summary

For over fifty years from the 1850s, Mary Fortune worked as a journalist and author of serialised fiction. The vast majority of her work was published in the popular magazine, the *Australian Journal*, under the pseudonym of 'W.W.' or 'Waif Wander'. Fortune's particular interest was in writing crime stories, and, over the course of her writing career, she produced no less than 500. According to New Zealand-born writer and academic Lucy Sussex, no other woman, with the exception of the American Anna Katharine Green, wrote so much crime fiction in the nineteenth century. What is more, Fortune was the first woman to write crime fiction centred on the detective as 'the narrator and hero of her stories': 'In this aspect, as in many others such as her realism, her reliance on police procedures and almost forensic depiction of violence, she anticipates much of the later crime fiction produced in the nineteenth century'.

Details

Mary Fortune was born Mary Helena Wilson in Belfast, Ireland, the daughter of Scots-Irish Protestant parents, civil engineer George Wilson and his wife Eleanor (nee Atkinson). Eleanor Wilson died in Mary's infancy, and father and daughter immigrated to Montreal, Canada. As a teenager, Mary married surveyor Joseph Fortune, and gave birth to a son – Joseph George, or 'Georgie' – in 1852. In 1855, Mary's father George Wilson left Canada for the goldfields of Australia. She followed him shortly afterward, arriving in Melbourne with her young son on the *Briseis* on 3 October 1855. Passenger lists show no record of her husband travelling with or after her, and Joseph Fortune died in Canada in 1861. Nonetheless, when Mary gave birth to a second son in Australia in November 1856, she registered his father's name as Joseph Fortune.

Mary joined her father – then working as a store-keeper – on the goldfields of Kangaroo Flat, and moved with the tide of hopeful diggers to Buninyong, Chinaman's Flat and Inkerman. On leaving Canada, she had been commissioned to write a series of articles on the goldfields for *The Ladies' Companion* magazine, but she soon abandoned the idea as economically unviable: 'Who would write pages at fifteen shillings', she asked, 'when one paid nine shillings per day for milk, and for a "woman's" magazine, too! Nay, there was nothing of the namby-pamby elegance of ladies' literature in our stirring, hardy, and eventful life on the early goldfields'. Instead, Fortune published sketches in the *Buninyong Advertiser* and poetry in the regional goldfields paper, *The Mount Alexander Mail*, under the acronym 'M.H.F.' Her work impressed the editor of the *Mail* sufficiently for him to offer Fortune a job as reporter and sub-editor, but he retracted the offer upon discovering her gender.

In January 1858, Fortune's son Georgie died, most probably from viral meningitis caused by poor living conditions on the goldfields. In October that same year, she married Percy Rollo Brett, a mounted police constable. The marriage was a failure and Brett moved to New South Wales, where in 1866 he married (apparently without obtaining a divorce) Mary Ann Leek, but his occupation triggered Fortune's switch to crime writing. Already she had been sending poetry and short romance fiction to the *Australian Journal* from her home in Jericho (later Wehla), a gold-crushing settlement in the Avoca district of Victoria. Now forced to provide for herself and her young son, she moved to the township of Oxley and began writing in earnest, producing a number of serialised novels for the *Australian Journal* in 1866: *Bertha's Legacy*, *Dora Carleton*, *The Secrets of Balbrooke* and *Clyzia the Dwarf*. This last can best be regarded, says Sussex, as 'a late and extreme flowering of the Gothic, with *Clyzia* a deformed witch-gypsy, possessed of a snake necklace which on command comes alive and bites her victims'. It was a departure from Fortune's usual style – the first novel centres on a defrauded heir; the second on a heroine whose raffish husband redeems himself by catching a bushranger – and by 1867 she had settled firmly into crime writing. Her detective stories were 'realistic, gritty, and considerably removed from the excesses of "*Clyzia*".' Increasingly they centred on the character of detective Mark Sinclair, who became the narrator of the longest-running series in early crime fiction. *The Detective's Album*, 'a collection of mug-shots' whose stories were compiled and recounted by Sinclair, ran for forty years. In 1871, seven of the stories were published as a book, also called *The Detective's Album*.

In 1868, Fortune moved to Melbourne and branched into journalism for the *Australian Journal*. Her trip from Oxley to Melbourne in a carrier's wagon (she paid £3 for the privilege) was the basis of her article, 'Fourteen Days on the Roads', published in November of that year. Fortune wrote with a light and humorous style. The trip, she confessed to her readers, had taken eleven days, but fourteen sounded better for the article. She described her conditions:

Take three coils of heavy rope, a broken box of Epps' cocoa, two brass-knobbed trunks of unequal height, one butter-keg and a patent churn. Having procured these articles, carry them one hundred and fifty miles in a carrier's wagon, at every township requiring something to deliver which happens to be directly at the bottom of the wagon. When all this has been accomplished, and you have delivered all the articles save those enumerated, take the remainder as a resting place for your mattress, and you will have some idea of the comfort I enjoyed on my first night on the roads.

A second article, published January 1869, was 'Down Bourke Street'. Here Fortune brought to life the sights and sounds and smells of Bourke Street, Melbourne, on a Saturday night. There were confectioners with their treats, fruiterers, jewellers' window displays, drapers, pie-sellers, and bonnet shops brimming with lace, ribbon, flowers and feathers. The street was a feast for the senses, and flooded with light: 'Stretching away down in brilliant star-like rows, and sweeping up the distant acclivity where Bourke Street West leaves the noble Post Office behind... those brilliant lamps stand like dusky soldiers with radiant helmets guarding the wide thoroughfare, and the wealth-full emporiums that line its sides'. Fortune had a talent for character description, and a keen eye for the peculiar modes of conversation and mannerisms of various social groups: 'I wish I could write down some resemblance to that so frequently heard sniff of disdain which *cannot* be written', she said, 'I should take out a patent for it'.

In the early 1880s, Fortune dug out the notes she had taken all those years ago on the goldfields for the *Ladies' Companion* articles that were never written. With these she produced a memoir, *Twenty-Six Years Ago; or, the Diggings from '55*, later reprinted by Sussex as *The Fortunes of Mary Fortune*. It was a detailed account of her first years in the colony: 'a blending of genres, part travelogue, part fictionalised... memoir, and part crime melodrama'. Fortune's foray into journalism was sporadic – she published approximately 17 articles over eight years – and in the last twenty years of her writing life she produced only short fiction. Her career was brought to an end by failing eyesight. Fortune suffered from alcoholism, her second son was a habitual criminal, and she never stopped struggling for financial survival. Despite her prolific output, she remained anonymous to her readers: not until the 1950s was the name behind the pseudonyms revealed by book collector J.K. Moir. The *Australian Journal* provided Fortune with an annuity in the last year of her life, and, upon her death, paid for her burial – but in another person's grave. Where and when she died remains unknown.

Events

1970 - 1900

Published resources

Resource Section

Fortune, Mary Helena (1833-1911), Sussex, L., 2006,
<http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/AS10167b.htm>

Edited Book

The Fortunes of Mary Fortune, Fortune, Mary, 1989

Booklet

Mary Helena Fortune ('Waif Wander'/'W.W.'), c.1833-1910: A Bibliography, Sussex, Lucy and Elizabeth Gibson, 1998

Book

Coe, and Other Poems, Fortune, Mary, 1995

The Detective's Album: Tales of the Australian Police, Fortune, Mary, 1871

Site Exhibition

The Women's Pages: Australian Women and Journalism since 1850, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2008,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/cal/cal-home.html>

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Author Details

Barbara Lemon and Nikki Henningham

Created 20 November 2007

Last modified 14 May 2019