

'WHODUNIT?': A POSTSCRIPT

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Following the recent publication in the *BSANZ Bulletin* of 'Whodunit?: Literary Forensics and the Crime Writing of James Skipp Borlase and Mary Fortune', by myself and John Burrows, several interesting pieces of information have come to light. In one case these supported our conclusions, but in the other contradicted them.

The first instance concerned Borlase. We had, in 'Whodunit?', surmised that Borlase had acted as editor of the *Australian Journal*, though not being able to say for certain, given the lack of surviving archives for the magazine. Even Ronald Campbell was unable to say who edited the magazine between the acknowledged first editor, George Walstab (1865-?), and Marcus Clarke, who took over in 1870.¹ John Burrows' computer analysis showed signs of Borlase editing Fortune's stories; and his salary was very high, suggesting he was more than just a staff writer. Recently, an article entitled 'Melbourne in 1869', from the *Temple Bar* magazine (30 November 1870, 225-235), came to my attention. Although published anonymously, the *Wellesley Index* identifies the author of the piece as Borlase. In it he claimed to be 'for a long period editor' of the *Australian Journal*. He added that it paid its writers shabbily - less than a quarter of the rate of the similar English periodical, the *Family Herald*.

To Toni Johnson-Woods at the University of Queensland I am indebted for the *Australian Journal's* response. In the column 'Our Whatnot' (December 1870, 219) Borlase was castigated. It is worthwhile, perhaps, quoting the item in full:

A writer in the last number of "Temple Bar" has been telling the good folks at home some strange things about Australia - so strange; that his comparisons between Melbourne and London would indeed be "odious", were they not supremely ridiculous. In regard, however, to one item, it may be as well that Temple Bar - an appropriate place whereon to pillory literary impostors - should know the sort of *lusus natura* by which it has been befooled. For a short time after the commencement of this journal, an individual who, by custom, is entitled to be called a "gent, one etcetera," was engaged to furnish certain literary contributions; but, as it was soon found these bore more than a mere "family likeness" to "Ivanhoe", and other obscure productions of an *unknown* Scottish baronet, the straightforward commercial men who

1 Ronald G. Campbell, *The First Ninety Years: the Printing House of Massina, Melbourne, 1859 to 1949* (Melbourne: A.H. Massina, 1949).

had embarked in the worthy enterprise, gave *Mr. Skiplace* his congè. Thereupon he ran the circuit of the southern colonies, vainly endeavouring to establish himself as an Austral Anacharsis Cloots – the simple colonists failing to appreciate the valuable services of the would-be “Attorney-General of the human race” – so that, it seems, he has had to share the fate of a bad penny, and return, to furnish “Temple Bar” with its *striking* picture of Australia. When such a person complains that his remuneration was inadequate, it must be remembered that there are some things which are dear at any price, and still others which are dear at a gift. But it is really too bad, on the part of the “gent, one etcetera,” after lactating freely at Sir Walter’s dairy, to grumble that he was insufficiently rewarded for the crude caseine which the Austral bantling rejected. One thing we feel bound to state, as well in justice to the proprietors of the Australian Journal, as for the information of the honourable gentleman who so ably presides over “Temple Bar.” The present conductor of the Journal has been so engaged for considerably more than four years out of the five and a half years of its existence – with what success, let the criticisms of the whole colonial press attest – and in regard to the charge of illiberality, he considers it will be sufficient to state the simple fact, that, on three several occasions during that period, the proprietors spontaneously made substantial additions to his remuneration, wholly unasked and unsolicited in any way whatever. This fact would teach even so obtuse a “gent” as a writer in “Temple Bar,” that, had he been worth salt, he perhaps might not have been compelled to retrace the sixteen thousand miles of briny, and there behave like an ill conditioned bird.

Borlase was a member of an old-established county family in Cornwall, and added the suffix of ‘Esq.’ when signing his contributions, which would indicate that he took his status as a gentleman seriously. ‘Attorney-General of the human race’ refers to his previous profession as a lawyer, which, in Melbourne at least, was severely compromised when he deserted his wife and levanted to Tasmania. An allusion to this event is possibly present in the appellation ‘Mr. Skiplace’ – no doubt used for fear of a libel suit, for accusing a writer of plagiarism, particularly one with a legal degree, is a fighting matter. Unfortunately, as Burrows and I have proved, it is all too true. Borlase’s short story collection, *The Night Fossickers*, contains at least four unacknowledged borrowings from other writers.

The reference to Scott’s *Ivanhoe* may be explained by the fact that Borlase’s first signed contribution to the *AJ*, in its maiden issue, was ‘Galfried of Arlington’. This serial, about the Normans versus Saxons in early medieval England, bears obvious resemblances to *Ivanhoe*, to the extent of the heroine being called Rovenia. Yet, while ‘Galfried’ was certainly derivative (falling into

the grey area between rip-off and pastiche), it does not appear to borrow actual wordings. Such is not the case with some of his other efforts. Certainly 'Galfried' was followed by a number of other Borlase contributions to the magazine, signed and unsigned. Possibly, Borlase, having got away with one (at the very least) plagiarism, pushed his luck with another instance, very obviously from Scott, and thus got the sack.

That he should claim to be editor, something which the *AJ* so vigorously denied, is probably explained by his working at the editorial level – as is shown by his proven influence on Fortune's texts – without the actual title as such. What is unknown at this point of research is who was the author of the 'Our Whatnot' piece, the 'conductor of the Journal' for 'four years out of the five and a half of its existence'. It, like so much else about the *Australian Journal*, remains obscure.

The other piece of new information relates to Mary Fortune. The whole purpose of the computer-based textual comparison was to establish that several anonymous texts in the *Australian Journal* were her work, thus giving her the precedence over the American writer Seeley Regester 'Metta Victor'. Thus Fortune would have been the first known woman to write detective fiction, as had been surmised by J.K. Moir in the 1950s. However, no sooner did the research get into print than several other claimants emerged. One was the English writer Mary Braddon, who in the 1861 novel *Three Times Dead* (also published as *The Trail of the Serpent*) had a police detective as a major character. The other was the American writer Harriett Prescott Spofford, who had a detective in her 'Mr Fairbrush', a short story published in *Harper's Monthly Magazine* in 1865. Spofford also had an earlier detective story (though with an amateur detective along the lines of Poe's Chevalier Dupin), 'In a Cellar', published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1859.

Claiming precedence for a writer, particularly in genre fiction, can be a matter of splitting hairs. Braddon and Spofford were certainly writing detective stories before Mary Fortune, but Fortune remains the first Australian woman known to write in the genre. Furthermore, unlike Braddon and Spofford, Fortune wrote stories from the viewpoint of the police detective, thus privileging him – hardly surprising given her brief marriage to Percy Brett, mounted constable.

Melbourne