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Fergus Hume's <u>The Mystery of a Hansom Cab</u>

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I

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in

such works as Robert Southey's <u>Botany Bay Eclogues</u>, the young

Australian colonies were imagined simultaneously as barren

wastelands, utopias of social renewal, and exotic byways of

sinister criminality. Throughout most of the nineteenth

century, the imagery of a frontier wilderness populated by

adventurers and transported convicts persisted even as the

colonies developed into a multi-ethnic urban society rapidly

progressing to a democratic Federation with a high degree of

political autonomy. In the last decade of the century the most

popular image of Australia in England came not as literature

students might expect from Micawber or Magwitch, but in fact

from the bestseller of the day, a remarkable mystery set in

Melbourne, <u>The Mystery of a Hansom Cab</u> by Fergus Hume. This New

Zealand-raised lawyer's success in the rather new genre of urban

detective fiction allowed him to immigrate to London,

anticipating a career as a popular fiction writer. He would soon

be eclipsed by Conan Doyle in this genre. But his signature

novel remains interesting not only as detective fiction. A

novel that begins as a rather pedestrian murder mystery deepens to reflect the peculiar ways the search in the colonies for self-renewal and the utterly fresh start ramifies into a weird quest dogged by shifting identities, obstinate and revenant criminality, and a sense of the futility of colonial escapism.

But this is consistent with the broad ambiguity of South Seas colonialism. Australian colonies were seen as essentially white, and as bringing European civilization to an untamed waste. But at the same time, the founding colonists had been, after all, an unsavory lot, exiled criminals or those who had failed somehow in the colonial homeland. The promise of the colonial city, the Melbourne of Hume's fiction, is of starting over, making oneself new; more, it is the promise of corrupt Europe itself made new. In Hume's immensely popular novel, the colonial city hides the same paradoxes as London itself: modernity and respectability sustained by teeming masses and filthy slum life. Beneath the newness and promise of a blank slate world was a repressed legacy of scandal and shame, of dirt and crime. Hume's novel ends, remarkably, with its young lovers fleeing the corrupt world of Melbourne to start life over in Britain.

Leaving was exactly Fergus Hume's own strategy for making it in Australia. He left for London just two years after the success of his mystery novel. It had sold 400,000 copies in

England, 750,000 abroad, making it, according to Australian critics Michael Pollak and Margaret McNabb, "for many years. . . about the best known Australian book in Europe and America."[i] But Hume was more a deracinated colonial than an Australian: born in England in 1859 and raised in New Zealand, he became a lawyer and lived only about three years in Melbourne before emigrating in 1888 to pursue his career as a novelist. His second Melbourne novel, Madame Midas, was said to have been written on shipboard (Pollak and MacNabb 15-16). Midas was only a modest success; and though he ground out some 130 novels (he died in 1932), he sank into obscurity, rapidly eclipsed by Haggard, Kipling, and Conan Doyle—whose 1887 A Study in Scarlet may well have been a response to Hume's popular urban detective fiction.

Some critics will find this descent into obscurity not undeserved. His next novel, Madame Midas, suffers from thick melodrama, clumsy dialogue, and characters whose eccentricities reflect mere caricature. But its portrait of corruption in the gold fields and suburbs of mid-century Melbourne is vivid and compelling. My claim, though, is not that Hume is an undiscovered major novelist. Yet Hume's one great popular and artistic success, The Mystery of a Hansom Cab, does deserve to be better known and studied. Hume's novel is noteworthy for its shrewd exploration of those counterpoints of civilization and

savagery, of social climbing and hypocrisy, that characterize the greater novels of imperial adventure by Conrad and Kipling.

At one level, the novel's mass popularity—Hume assisted in a stage adaptation (Pollak and MacNabb 16)—reflects the development of the detective genre beyond Dickens's sentimentalized vision of slum life to explore a more harrowing and squalid sense of urban society from the lowest classes to the effete and corrupt rich. This development itself owes something to the professionalization of police work and to newspaper crime reporting. Although Hume's contribution to detective fiction is of some interest, this is not my topic. Beyond this generic interest, Hume's novel changes the way the white colony of Australia could be imagined, or romanced, at the imperial center.

It was, of course, not a South Seas city but a paradisiacal nature that, for much of the nineteenth century, had served as the locus for the fable of the renewal of the sinner and the society that rejects him. As one Australian historian put it, "The South Pacific is the region of the earthly paradise, where Natural Man in his primitive vigour and virtue shows his superiority over old world effeteness and corruption; it is the Antipodean realm, where everything is the reverse of the European order of things" (McCauley 123). One of the best known Australian novels of the 1870s and 1880s had been Marcus

Clarke's His Natural Life (1870; rev. 1874), celebrating the adventures of convict settlers whose sufferings evoke compassion and awe at their heroic project of taming the distant waste. Despite the implicit criticism of the cruelties of the transportation system, such fiction could also enable a British reader to imagine the frontier as the enforcer of the discipline needed for self-re-fashioning—perhaps even for the masculine renewal of a white European race grown shallow and effeminate.

Such was the romance. So British readers of Hume's mystery might be surprised to find themselves in a modern city, and despite talk of "ranches" and "stations" in Hume's fiction, colorful shearers, diggers, squatters, farmers, and freed convicts are notably absent. Of course, in Hume's day transportation was a generation gone (Kingston 158-62); the new challenge for voluntary immigrants was the forging of European cities from the scruffy port and mining towns on hostile and impossibly remote shores. Indeed, Hume's readers would be surprised also at the fact that by 1880 Australia was one of the world's most urban nations, with half its population living in towns and cities—and today that figure is over ninety percent. And by 1890 the native-born population outnumbered immigrants (Taft 196, 200; "Australia"). The romance of Hume's 1886 fiction is in how the order and excitement of a bustling city

and its suburbs reproduces a modern metropolitan center, albeit on the periphery of empire.

We do not feel, though, as <u>The Mystery of a Hansom Cab</u> opens, that we are on any periphery. At once we are plunged into the neatly ordered velocities of a very modern Victorian city. Cabs clatter through gaslit streets at the wee hours, carrying gentlemen in evening dress from their clubs to boarding houses in the suburbs. The sense of motion, of rootlessness and class mobility, mark Melbourne as modern in the sense of a metropolitan center. As we shall see, this blurring of periphery and center reflects a crisis of colonial identity, particularly for white settler colonists far from the "homeland." The urge to establish the national and local as discrete, set against both a wild Asian otherness and a faraway British home, is assaulted by a modern reality of broken boundaries and globalization that requires mobility, fluid identity, and the demands of capital.

The urge to locate a national culture is natural for a colonial writer, and Hume's sense of crisis, or of dual national / imperial identity within a modernizing world is typical of many popular colonial authors.[ii] Andrew McCann, writing about one of Melbourne's most famous authors, Marcus Clarke, remarks on the writer's "wish for the nation as an entity that always eludes [his] grasp." What was possible for colonials to intuit,

though, was "the abstracting forces of captialism without the redeeming effects of national belonging. Settler-colonies, looked at this way, distil the essence of modernity. They are cosmopolitan by definition and, at least initially, they struggle to reproduce the sense of belonging that lingers in the nation-states of a modernising Europe. As a result, they are also disenchanted. It is for this reason that Romanticism can be said to have failed in Australia" (McCann 5). Hume's novel, I will argue, evokes not only ambivalence about the romance of Australian national identity, but more a fear of the essentially disenchanting and deracinating nature of modernity even in the aspiring cities of far-flung outposts of European civilization. Because the novel is unfamiliar, some discussion of its plot would be helpful here.

II

The Mystery of a Hansom Cab evokes both a vertiginous blur of dislocation and speed and also the careful reticulations of neat colonial order. The crime is set out, in the city newspaper, The Argus, in the measured prose of a police report: "A crime has been committed. . . within a short distance of the principal streets of the great city, and is surrounded by an impenetrable mystery" (Hume 7). A cab has pulled up to an urban police station, its passenger found dead, chloroformed inside,

the driver reporting that the drunken victim was helped inside
by a shadowy companion, who rode a distance but disembarked
before the cab reached the suburb of St. Kilda. We are oriented
in time by church and post office clocks and in space by
meticulous attention to travel times and street intersections.
The victim is helped into the cab at Collins and Russell
Streets; the murderer turns away at first, walking back to
Bourke Street; but he soon returns, and by the lamplight he
helps the driver bundle the drunken man into the cab, directing
the cabman down the broad north-south thoroughfare, the St.
Kilda Road. Everywhere in this novel there is travel across
city and suburb, by train, cab, or foot, and everywhere we are
kept mindful of street names and street crossings, the
demarcations of the colonial city grid.

Melbourne was, in fact, known for its urban plan, a
rectilinear grid designed by Royal Surveyor Robert Hoddle in the
40s, with no central square, to facilitate the sale of equal plots
in his Enlightenment vision of a classless space. In his study of
the colonization of the Australian landscape, Paul Carter argues
that this grid represented new beginnings and the launch of a
progressive trajectory: "it belongs to the progress of the West as
quintessentially as the discourse of history
itself. . . Melbourne's urban plan symbolized
advancement. . . . Melbourne was the very embodiment of

'Progress'" (210-11; 215). It was a word often linked to this booming colonial city on the far shores of empire. "Contemporaries marvelled," says one historian, "at the evidence of progress and civilization that had appeared in such a short time in Melbourne" (Kingston 29). Carter sees that "If we want to understand the historical success of Hoddle's Melbourne, there is no doubt that we need to seek it in the city's extraordinary economic growth" (212). But Carter's semiologic analysis of the geometric conditions for that growth gives too little credit to the overwhelming material fact of Melbourne's early history: it was a gold rush boom town.

In the generation before Hume's carefully ordered Victorian metropolis, Melbourne grew from a sleepy frontier town in the 1850s to a city of 125,000 just a decade later; in Hume's day it was Australia's largest city at half a million.[iii] As Fergus Hume was landing in London, Melbourne was celebrating the Australian Centennial, a festival of imperial pride organized around the ideology of progress. The Centenary, says Robert Hughes, in his great history of the Australian convict system, was both "a lavish feast of jingoism" and also an occasion for incipient nationalism and anti-imperialism (598). For a great colonial settler city like Melbourne progressed by becoming both like and not like London. Hume's portrait of Melbourne reflects this contradiction. His city is Anglophilic, looking "home" to the great cultural and

imperial center. But its white settlers are themselves proud

founders of their own civilized order, have reproduced the

civilizing mission on a new continent, have become themselves a

new center. The process though, of developing an ideology of

progressive autonomy entails erasing the very imperial history

that makes a London the center of a modern empire: the

displacement, exploitation, or violent suppression of (in

Australia's case) both Aboriginals and a class of convict and

outcast labor. As Hughes summarizes this late-century erasure:

> A favorite trope of journalism and verse at the time
> of the Australian Centennial, in 1888, was that of the
> nation as a young vigorous person gazing into the
> rising sun, turning his or her back on the dark
> crouching shadows of the past. . . . At the heart of
> each proclamation of renewal was a longing for
> amnesia. . . . "The convict stage is now forgotten as
> a dream," wrote one of these Centennial Boosters.
> (597)

Hume's novel is replete with those crouching shadows of the

past. Their revelation is, of course, part of the novel's

melodramatic fun, its cheap romance. More interestingly, the

discovery of this paradox that modern Melbourne is becoming both

like and unlike London is the colonial dilemma that underlies the

plot's unfolding vision of urban criminality. Always in Hume's

novel lurks the unstated fact of the city's raucous history. As

the booming gateway to Australia's goldfields, it had been home to

transients and fortune hunters, to grifters, gamblers, and

thieves, to immigrants from all over Europe, America, and Asia.

These adventurers, mostly young men but women too, disembarked at Queen's Wharf to face a rowdy town struggling to house, employ, and control this onslaught. The streets were a colorful tumult of "cheap restaurants, hotels, taverns, sixpenny cafés, chophouses, oyster bars," as well as theatres, billiard parlors, bathhouses, and brothels (Davison 57-8). Its back alleys and many lodging houses, said The Argus in 1854, were "overcrowded and filthy. . . scenes of extortion, drunkenness, riot and robbery, if not of murder" (qtd. in Davison 57).

The smartly dressed young Oliver Whyte's death by chloroform seems comparatively genteel. His is a world of well-heeled swells drinking in fashionable clubs by night, living in suburban rooms by day, with no visible means of support. From a secret pocket inside the gentleman's waistcoat, some kind of paper has evidently been torn. The accused murderer, Brian Fitzgerald, is identified, too, by his evening dress: a light overcoat, a soft light-colored hat. Fitzgerald is engaged to Madge Frettlby, daughter of Mark Frettlby, one of the richest men in Victoria colony. He admits to quarreling with Whyte over Madge and leaving the drunk Whyte in the Collins Street gutter, down the block from the Melbourne Club, where Fitzgerald had been drinking late. He proclaims his innocence of the murder, admits he was at the time visiting an unsavory woman in a

wretched slum, but declares that he cannot advance the alibi, since the secret of the slum would destroy his beloved Madge.

Avid readers of detective fiction, even those of 1886, will of course suspect blackmail and infer that Whyte was murdered for the papers he carried. And as is common in such melodramas, blackmail exposes the fissures in the social order, often surrounding paternity, threatening a wealthy bourgeois with the sins of a lurid past. As one critic of Hume's novel, Robert Dixon, puts it, Whyte's attempt to blackmail Mark Frettlby—demanding marriage to the unwilling Madge in exchange for silence—"brings the bourgeois subject into contact with the low other he excludes as part of his constitution, causing a moral panic" ("Closing the Can of Worms" 39). But I would argue that the panic is not only psychological. It becomes emblematic of a deep rot, not merely of the colonial enterprise, but of modernity itself.

In his discussion of crime fiction in the imperial city, Dixon himself suggests but does not pursue such a larger view. He sees the colonial crime novel as a narrative of fear and corruption in which urban slum life operates symbolically to control and define bourgeois anxiety in an era of rapid capital expansion and shifting boundaries between self / other, or nation / empire. In this model, crime constitutes an "irruption of the other" into the ideologically controlled space of the

bourgeois city dweller. The slum "threatens the disintegration of the self by the deregulation of discursive space in the form of crime or disease. In the slums or the native quarter, the self comes face to face with the impurity of its own identity." At the same time, the detective attempts to reinscribe stable boundaries, often through a thrilling underworld descent, "a deliberate penetration of, or penetration into, the space of the other."[iv]

And so it is that Fitzgerald's lawyer, Calton, and a canny urban detective, Kilsip, discover, through a Dantesque descent into the filthy slums, that Frettlby had long ago been married to the infamous showgirl Rosanna Moore—a character who suggests the notorious Lola Montez, whose dancing scandalized European capitals and then Melbourne in 1855 (Anderson 235-37). Moore was thought to be dead, but she has returned with Whyte to squeeze the wealthy Frettlby, who now knows Madge (his daughter by his second wife) is illegitimate. And Fitzgerald knows too, as Moore, dying of drink in the squalid slum, has confessed to him.

This slum inverts, but as a mirror, the streets around it. From the elegant promenade of Collins Street to the theatres of Bourke Street to the steaming squalor behind Little Bourke Street, one needs only to walk a few city blocks. Hume is particularly deft at evoking the multiple layers of class life

in the city. We hear the dialects of rich swells, landed

gentry, caricatured middle-class landladies, tough cops, and

cabbies. Kilsip and his rival detective Gorby are themselves

new urban types (descended from Dickens's Inspector Bucket),

gruff, scruffy metro civil servants on the trail of effete

upper-class swindlers—more like Peter Falk's Columbo than Holmes

or Poirot. Most vividly, we hear the snarling, cursing voice of

the hideous Mother Guttersnipe, who presides over a fetid den,

where she drinks cheap Schnapps from a broken cup.

Just off Little Bourke Street, the world of the Oriental

and the exotic, Mother Guttersnipe presides over a world of

drunken violence, crime, and bitter rage. Guttersnipe is indeed

a remarkable character, brazen, vulgar, and (it develops) the

mother of Moore, whose child by Frettlby, Sal Rawlins, has been

brought up in Guttersnipe's dens. Frettlby has been kept

ignorant of Sal's existence—until, Guttersnipe had hoped, he

could be tormented by her corruption. Here the cruel violence

of her world reveals itself, not as generalized cynicism but as

class resentment:

> "'E, a-comin' round with di'monds and gold, and a-
> ruinin' my poor girl; an' how 'e's 'eld 'is
> bloomin' 'ead up all these years as if he were a
> saint, cuss 'im—cuss 'im!. . . Aye, 'e were a swell in
> them days. . . and 'e comes a-philanderin' round my
> gal, blarst 'im, an' seduces 'er, and leaves 'er an'
> the child to starve, like a black-'earted villain
> as 'e were." (176)

Guttersnipe is the center of Frettlby's shadow family, and though Hume attempts to fold Sal the reformed prostitute into a respectable role as Madge's sister-like maid, this bit of sentiment is less convincing than the powerful imagery of a hellish slum interimplicated with that glitter of new wealth. In turning upside-down the rich man's sense of familial order and reformation in a modern Anglicized city, Guttersnipe is less a realistic character than an emblem of horrific origins and inescapable filth.[v] As such, she repeats that nightmare character of family origins so common in both nineteenth-century melodrama and satire, from Dickens's Magwitch in Great Expectations to the charming scoundrels in Shaw's Plays Unpleasant. Yet she is saved from mere caricature by the genuine power of Hume's portrait of her casbah, horrifying but also fascinating in its exotic contrast with the city just round the block. And of course that portrait undercuts the central myth of colonial reinvention.[vi]

This hurly-burly of local color extends out even to the prim suburbs, where single gentlemen lodge in neat rooming houses run by garrulous landladies who eke out some cash and respectability by cooking and caring for their wealthy swells. They are keenly aware that this respectability is snatched from a cruel colonial world that constantly disappoints and threatens them with abandonment by husbands who succumb to drink or the

diseases of a strange climate. Whyte's landlady holds a

particular grudge against men in general, deprived as she was of

a life of ease by a husband who was "such a brute. But ye can't

make a man out of a beast, whatever them Darwin folk say." The

"hardworking and thrifty" widow blames her failure on that

drunken brute, her late husband, no worse of course than all

men: "They is brutes. . . they marries a woman, and makes her a

beast of burden while they sits at 'ome swillin' beer and

calling themselves lords of creation" (21). She repeats here in

a broad comic register the drunken brutality that seems to be

hiding behind every facade of fashionable modern Melbourne.

In Collins Street, Hume's Melbourne has produced a great

mirror of the European city: "all fashionable Melbourne was

doing the Block," he writes, "Collins Street corresponds to New

York's Broadway, London's Regent Street and Rotten Row, and to

the Boulevards of Paris"(59). This promenade, writes one

Melbourne historian, "was once part of the daily ritual of

Melbourne society. . . . fashionably dressed young men and

women, politicians, businessmen and bankers passed the time of

day with. . . actors, artists, and musicians" (Newnham 43). In

1870, Anthony Trollope could say the same of Collins Street: it

is "the High Street of the city, and its Regent Street and Bond

Street." Trollope would cheerfully conclude that "one cannot

walk about Melbourne without being struck by all that has been

done for the welfare of the people generally. There is no squalor to be seen," though he admits he has not looked very hard. Trollope had been told "there is an Irish quarter and a Chinese quarter" where a visitor "might see much of the worse side of life" (1:385). Trollope's novelist's instincts fail him here, and if we are more curious about that "worse side" we must follow Fergus Hume.

North of Collins two blocks is Bourke Street, "always," says Hume, "more crowded than Collins Street," with theatre crowds, hawkers, and a "demi-monde" of "gay-plumaged" ladies, crowds of sports fans reviewing racing sheets, newspaper boys (98). From this gaslit hubbub we descend to Little Bourke Street, Melbourne's original and current Chinatown (Newnam 49). The Chinamen "stole along" in dank, muddy lanes, and odd sounds of Asian gambling dens and the scent of "cook-shops" assail the detective and the lawyer Calton. They descend through narrow lanes into "darkness and gloom" (100).

Hume's Dantesque portrait of the Little Bourke slum owes something to the similar scene in Bleak House where the detective Bucket guides Snagsby into the tenements and brothels of Tom-all-Alone's "as if he were going, every moment deeper down, into the eternal gulf." This London slum assaults and astonishes the bourgeois Londoner, just as Hume's Calton is shocked by a neighborhood he has apparently never seen: "Mr. Snagsby passes along

the middle of a villainous street, undrained, unventilated, deep in
black mud and corrupt water—though the roads are dry elsewhere—and
reeking with such smells and sights that he, who has lived in London
all his life, can scarce believe his senses" (310).

But Hume's more immediate source for his portrait of low
Melbourne life is a series of vivid essays on streetlife
published between 1868 and 1869 in the Melbourne Argus and The
Australasian by the novelist Marcus Clarke. Clarke—who himself
had emigrated from London in his teens—treats his subject with
an anthropologist's detachment, but he also means to demonstrate
that Melbourne's "Bohemian" quarters are an inevitable product
of a great modern city's development. His Bohemia is, however,
benign compared to the untidy violence of London and Paris:
"There is little open violence, and the criminal class prefer to
keep to themselves. . . . The smallness of the city forbidding
the existence of a race of social Arabs, like the floating
street population of Paris or London, those who habitually
frequent the large streets after dark are all of a better class"
(Clarke 100-101). The imagery of descent into a sub-human
cesspool is familiar:

> I will take you, Dante-like, an excursion through a
> real Inferno, where rags, and poverty, and
> drunkenness, and crime, and misery, all huddle
> together. . . . The gutters were choked with filth,
> the walls blackened with slime. Drains asserted their
> presence by almost palpable stenches. . . . The hair

> of [a child's] mother was dragging in the mud, and
> some person had apparently flung a basinful of dirty
> water over her body. . . . As we passed the open
> windows, we were cursed and blasphemed at in terms
> which were absolutely terrible to listen to. (132;
> 126-27)

For Clarke, this nether world is like an urban wildlife reserve, dangerous if one ventures too far but not impinging on the respectable life without.

> The dainty daughter of some sleek suburban citizen
> passing quickly from her carriage to the theatre; the
> comfortably-dined merchant or Government official
> strolling down to look in at the play. . . know little
> of the strange undergrowth of humanity that flourishes
> in the streets through which they pass. (148)

Indeed, the proximity of the neighborhood in space to the broad shopping streets is for Clarke ironic only in that the bourgeoisie are so unaware of a realm populated not by another class exactly, but by another species, "ragged, shambling creature[s], blinking uneasily at the approach of daylight" (148).

Marcus Clarke's urban phantasmagoria was an imaginary connection to modern metropolitan Europe, a romance of internationalism in which dislocation and exile are not peculiar to the colonies but signs of the modern itself. The immigrant Clarke was active in promoting the literary arts of modern Melbourne, acquiring magazines and working for its libraries. As Andrew McCann concludes of Clarke, the more that his Melbourne is imaged as a London or a Paris, the more that

identification implies not progress but a common rootlessness, a vulnerability to the movements of capital and the ruthlessness of exploitation. The colonial city is London stripped of its history or the security of established national identity: "Far from overcoming the dislocation of colonial experience, the obsessiveness of Clarke's metropolitan identifications, animated by his constant desire for the cultural capital of the European city, highlights dislocation. . . . the colony reproduces the metropolis, but in the urgency of its desire to do so, it also reveals its own distance from it" (8).

Hume works this dilemma through a series of mirrorings in which the modernity of the colonial city reflects a surface of hope and romance, indeed of personal and social remaking. Hume is more bitter than Clarke, however; his slums become reflections in quite another sense, threatening to reveal the deep identification of colonizing bourgeois, criminal exploiter, and economic victim. I suggest that Hume's obsessive use of doubles and reflections implies that the colonial city repeats the modern world of the metropolitan center, and that modernity is characterized by a nauseating fear of dislocation, hypocrisy, and a corruption that crosses oceans in space, generations in time, and the borders of classes and nations. Mirrorings reflect one class in another, or reflect the English in the Australian. Through this stylistic pattern, internal

exploitation is interimplicated with colonial adventure, and
vice versa.

III

Hume's gentlemen are more implicated than they know in the
nether world, which images both the class to which they may
through bad luck descend; and also the class whose children they
may exploit (as Frettlby did). The distance between Hume's
Melbourne streets is not very great, and not just in space.
Bourke Street, just a generation before, had been "Melbourne's
amusement parlour," where Montez had danced in the Theatre
Royal, and brothels lined the back alleys (Davison 58). And even
in glittering Collins Street, by night, wandering swells drink
themselves to incoherence in their own dens—"clubs," but
collections of drinkers often no less idle or parasitic than
Mother Guttersnipe's.

Hume suppresses, but only barely, a history of colonial
development and capitalist transformation of a gold rush
frontier town. As I have said, this incomplete amnesia in Hume
allows us to see a contradiction central to the idea of the city
he depicts, that Australia is both becoming and not becoming
England. This paradox allows us to explore what Said would call
the "contrapuntal" currents of colonial ideology in the novel.[vii]
The mirrorings in Hume's novel reproduce but also invert: "a hot

December day. . . must sound strange to English ears," he writes. "But here in Australia is the realm of topsy-turveydom, and many things, like dreams, go by contraries. Here black swans are an established fact" (137). In one place Hume asserts, "on a hot Christmas day, with the sun one hundred-odd in the shade, Australian revellers sit down to the roast beef and plum pudding of old England. . . and John Bull abroad loses none of his insular obstinacy" (138). Yet elsewhere he writes, "the beautiful climate of Australia, so Italian in its brightness, must have a great effect on the nature of such an adaptable race as the Anglo-Saxon. . . . and our posterity will be no more like us than the luxurious Venetians resembled their hardy forefathers" (99).

We might wonder just how many Australian colonists were John Bulls at their plum puddings, and for how long those in the colonizing center had thought of them so. "'White' colonies like Ireland and Australia," writes Said, "were considered made up of inferior humans" (134). By 1880, one quarter of immigrants were in fact Irish, and suspect Brian Fitzgerald was one of them (Taft 200). The romance of Australia, at least for the laboring Irish who came, was that it called upon similar rural virtues, and one critic points out two cultures with the parallel heroism "of those struggling to make a bare living from small holdings in a hostile and often barren land."[viii] But here

was a settler colony whose indigenous peoples were already

conquered, and a poor Irishman might be free of his subaltern

past and become a nation builder or even a leader. Everyone in

Melbourne would know the story of Ned Kelly, the son of Irish

immigrants who became the colony's most infamous and much-

romanticized bushranger outlaw. But they would also know—and in

the 1880s even more admire—Charles Gavin Duffy, Ulster leader of

the anti-Union Young Irelanders and founder of the radical Irish

Tenants league, twice tried for sedition, who freely emigrated

and rose to become Prime Minister of Victoria Colony in 1871.[ix]

But it is significant that Brian Fitzgerald is not poor or

a tenant farmer, and appears to be a Protestant landowner. "He

had left behind him in the old country a ruined castle and a few

acres of barren land, inhabited by discontented tenants who

refused to pay the rent." And so, "with no rent coming in, and

no prospect of doing anything in the future, Brian had left the

castle of his forefathers to the rats and the family Banshee,

and came out to Australia to make his fortune." Indeed, under

Mark Frettlby's tutelage, he becomes a wealthy rancher (though

we never see him work at it) and woos his patron's daughter.

Having now earned gentleman status, he dreams of returning

successfully but kindly to recolonize his serfs: "He began to

indulge in castles in the air concerning that other castle in

Ireland. . . . In his mind's eye he saw the old place rise up in

pristine splendour out of its ruins; he saw the barren acres well cultivated, and its tenants happy and content" (35). Australia mirrors Ireland here but inverts it, becomes a training ground for a new colonization, a place where unhappy history is wiped clean by new men who will revitalize the civilizing mission of Anglo-Saxon empire.

Here we have a ground, perhaps, of that dreary tone that makes mirrors seem like traps in this gloomy fiction. Fitzgerald's is the dilemma of the white settler Briton in a white colony of the outcast or the dispossessed. Neither exactly British nor exactly racial inferiors to be subjugated to a radically different "Englishness," the new men on a modernizing mission are also victims of a kind of displacement of their European identity, seeking to become some new thing. Such ambiguous colonists were "hybrids" in Homi Bhabha's term. Bhabha remarks that the exercise of colonialist authority "requires the production of differentiations, individuations, identity effects thorugh which discriminatory practices can map out subject populations. . . . the reference of discrimination is always to a process of splitting as the condition of subjection: a discrimination between the mother culture and its bastards, the self and its doubles, where the trace of what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as something different—a mutation, a hybrid" ("Signs" 153).

Applying this term to Australian popular fiction, Dixon concludes that "The proliferation of hybrid identities in ripping yarns suggests that the Australian identity is trapped between a nostalgia for the purity of Englishness and the vortex of otherness that defines its opposition to Britain, yet which must be kept safely outside the boundaries of Australian civility" (<u>Writing the Colonial Adventure</u> 11). To some degree, this explains Hume's ambivalence about what exactly is being reflected in his mirrors, a new "Australianness" or an old British national identity that includes class priviledge and the insular life of the country gentry.

One practice that enacts the dilemma of hybridity is mimicry, "at once a mode of appropriation and of resistance," says Bhabha, a "colonial doubling" ("Signs" 162). The mimic reproduces the signs and practices of the colonial power, displays the colonized as having appropriated the dominating culture—"<u>but not quite</u>." The mimic also confronts the colonizer with its difference, its refusal: "the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an <u>ambivalence</u>; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" ("Mimicry" 126). Hume's novel itself means to <u>mimic</u> the urban British detective tale, to succeed in the <u>British</u> marketplace alongside a Dickens or Wilkie Collins. Yet

simultaneously his novel must market itself as a curiosity, a peek into a world recognizably British yet also exotic.

One must be careful, however, in applying this notion of mimicry to a white settler colonial. Australia is not India, and its ambivalence toward "Englishness" will take a different turn. I would suggest that for a writer like Hume, the urban crime novel—he wrote dozens of them when his success allowed him to write them in London—was a mode that transcended the ambivalence of colonial identity and situated itself in a larger field of power and corruption. This was the sense that colonialism was only one appearance of an inevitable historical development, that center and periphery are merging into the modern. Nations, peoples, signposts of identity, become, like John Bull's roast beef, emptied symbols; and colonization only enlarges the global reach of greed, corruption, and disillusionment. This is especially the case for Hume's Brian Fitzgerald. In Australia, with its promise of democracy, second chances, remaking, "Englishness" itself (unlike in an India or a Hong Kong), in being mimicked, is always reborn. As Irish gentry, Fitzgerald is rather born to mimic English gentility. But as a failed Protestant overlord, he might be "reborn" as a new British colonizer, in a colony where his self-making might legitimate his rule—which in the old country had degenerated into "barren lands" and "discontented tenants" (35). In the

colonial city, that rebirth is a product of rapid urbanization

and the rapid enrichment possible in the modern marketplace.

The anxiety, even bitterness, of Hume's fiction emerges from the

ideal of Europeans remaking themselves yet constantly betrayed

by the very precondition of that renewal, this open marketplace

of the modern metropolis.

    For Brian Fizgerald, his fantasy of renewal would lead him,

really, away from the city, back to his Irish castle, to become

at home a benevolent gentry landlord, like his mentor Mark

Frettleby. But Fitzgerald had been summoned by a low woman who

appears at his club to guide him, that night of the murder, to

the hovel where with horror he hears Frettlby's dark secret.

Fitzgerald had dreamt of becoming not just a new kind of man but

a new kind of aristocrat. But Hume's Melbourne with its layers

of conflictual and interdependent classes is no more likely to

produce a purified wealthy class than Shaw's London. In a way,

this nausea of broken dreams is a not-untypical nineteenth-

century byproduct of Melbourne's evolving, leveling modernity,

its newspapers, street life, and civil-servant detectives.

Indeed, for some writers of the period, democratic debunking

could provoke its own Australian romance, as one critic

comparing Irish and Australian culture put it: an ethos of

"mateship" and equality "replaces the hierarchical communities

of aristocrats, saints, and peasants, of romantic heroes and

beautiful women, which are invoked in Irish nationalist literature" (Innes 130). And there is certainly a gesture at exuberance in Hume's embrace of the modern new-world metropolis, its suburbs, even its native decadence. But Hume leaves us in that "topsy-turveydom" where a Melbourne more London-modern becomes a Melbourne more London-corrupt.

These reflections we have been surveying are also crucial to the murder plot itself, as all the wealthy suspects seem to dress alike. Fitzgerald is ultimately cleared when it is established that after he left the victim in the gutter an identically dressed but still mysterious man bundled him into the cab. Now the most obvious thief of the incriminating papers is Mark Frettlby himself, and at one point Madge mistakes her father for Brian Fitzgerald: "in that hat and coat I couldn't tell the difference in the moonlight" (183). At this moment, Brian is convinced his future father-in-law is Whyte's killer. In the end, both the real killer and Frettlby conveniently die, and the secret of an infamous past is repressed, Madge remaining innocent. But both lovers are by now broken by cynicism and despair at the cracks that have opened across Melbourne's progressive bourgeois landscape. For if the city is becoming more like London, it has now revealed its founding by outcasts and so weirdly mirrors the exploitations and corruptions of the imperial center itself.

In a moment of supreme irony, the lovers leave Melbourne for England, glancing from their steamer as they depart the Yarra's outlet at "masses of black clouds. . . smoke like a pall. . . a sea of blood." They are borne away "towards the old world and the new life" (224). And in just two years, their creator, Fergus Hume, would embark from that same river port, never to return. The Yarra river in the 1840s was notorious for its wild, destructive floods, until it was subdued by a series of bridges, dredgings, and canals (Graham 282-84, 284n). If it becomes, then, an Australian Thames, Hume sees too what Conrad's Marlowe would, gesturing towards a Thames that mirrors his Congo: "And this also. . . has been one of the dark places of the earth" (Conrad 29).

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[i]Pollak and MacNabb 15. They point out that these fabulous
publication figures "can in no way be verified. It was the
practice of the time to inflate sales figures." But the general
magnitude of his publishing phenomenon is not in doubt. See
also Knight v-vi.

[ii]This struggle with definitions and borders, of national
and imperial spheres set against a modernizing trend of liberal
economic development, is perhaps typical, in fact, of colonial
fiction from such Walter Scott novels as Waverley and Rob Roy to
the Irish novels of Maria Edgeworth at the turn of the
nineteenth century.

[iii]Davison 53. The population in 1901 was 501,580: "1901: A Socio-Economic Profile of Australia at Federation."

[iv]Writing the Colonial Adventure 156. Dixon here is developing the crime novel theory of James Donald, in "How English is it? Popular Literature and National Culture," New Formations 6 (Winter 1988): 31-47.

[v]Dixon ("Closing the Can of Worms") treats Frettlby's shadow family as emblematic of "a civilized repression of the forbidden connection between the bourgeois psyche and its low other" (41). Dixon sees a "symbolic relationship between the body and the city," but his psychoanalytic reading tends to see class relations in the novel as more ideal and symbolic of bourgeois neurosis than real and reflective of the deep contradictions of colonization and urbanization.

[vi]As Said notes, the figure of Magwitch also denies real redemption to the transported Australian, who "cannot be allowed a 'return' to metropolitan space" or any real recreation into a respectability only permitted to Pip, the "hardworking trader in the East" (xvi).

[vii]"We may thus consider imperialism as a process occurring as part of the metropolitan culture, which at times

acknowledges, at other times obscures the sustained business of empire itself. . . . [colonial cultural identities are] contrapuntal ensembles, for it is the case that no identity can ever exist by itself and without an array of opposites, negatives, oppositions" (Said 52). Of course, in the case of white settler colonies like Australia, the counterpoint is made more complex by the settlers' sense of themselves as both the (imperially dominant) colonizers and the (outcast) colonized.

[viii]Innes 129. Innes compares the Irish and Australian cultural and literary experience in the nineteenth century.

[ix]Innes 128. For more on Duffy see also "Searc's Web Guide to Nineteenth-Century Ireland."