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THE TAMÁM SHUD MYSTERY

AUSTRALIA 1948:
COLD WAR SPIES,
RARE BOOKS AND
A DEAD MAN WITH
NO NAME



TAMÁM SHUD

THE MYSTERY OF AUSTRALIA'S UNKNOWN MAN

On 1 December 1948, a man's body was found on the beach of an Adelaide suburb. Who he was and how he died have remained a mystery for nearly 70 years, despite a trail of bizarre and tantalising clues. **ROY BAINTON** re-opens Australia's weirdest cold case file. Illustration by **HAZEL LEE SANTINO**.

I remember walking through Somerton Park, a suburb of Adelaide in South Australia, back in the early 1960s. The mainly residential seaside suburb is home to Somerton Park Beach, and whilst enjoying a cold beer there that hot day, I had no idea that this was the location of what remains the most perplexing mystery in Australia's criminal cold case files: the enduring enigma of the 'Somerton Man', or as they refer to him down under, the 'Unknown Man'.

In an age of high-tech CSI, DNA and advanced forensic science, we like to think we're pretty clever when it comes to solving murder cases. There's usually a clear motive, and a list of potential suspects soon builds up. Was it the wife/husband? Was there a girlfriend/boyfriend? A mugger? A robber? The starting point is usually the identification of the victim. Yet what happens when absolutely no one knows whose body it is? The 'Somerton Man' case is a mystery laden with curious clues, hints and false leads, none of which provide an explanation or a conclusion, even after all this time.

THE BIG SLEEP

Perhaps no one noticed the smartly dressed middle-aged man who stepped from the Melbourne train at Adelaide station at 8.30am on the morning of 30 November 1948. It had been a long journey. He bought a one-way ticket for the 10.50am train to Henley Beach, but the ticket was never used. He was carrying a small brown suitcase, which he deposited in the station's left luggage room at around 11am. At 11.15am he bought

a 7d (seven pence) bus ticket outside the station for a bus going to Somerton, but he got off somewhere along the route. Some researchers suggest that he alighted at Glenelg, close to the St Leonard's Hotel. Between 7pm and 8pm that night several witnesses claimed to have seen the man. He stopped somewhere to buy a pasty. This much is known: now the mystery kicks in.

In southern Australia, 1 December is regarded as the first day of Summer. It was warm on the evening of Tuesday 30 November when a couple decided to take a stroll along Somerton Beach. John Bain Lyons was a local jeweller, and as he and his

wife ambled along the sands in the direction of Glenelg at 7pm, they spotted a smartly dressed man reclining on the sand, his head propped up against the sea wall. He was about 20 yards away when they first noticed him. He seemed quite relaxed, with his legs outstretched and crossed. Mr Lyons had the impression that the man might be drunk, as the reclining figure lifted up

his right arm, which then fell back down. It seemed as if he might have been attempting to light a cigarette but abandoned the idea. Half an hour later, a young couple were out for a walk along the Esplanade, and they had a view of the beach from above. The reclining figure was still there, with his left arm laid out across the sand. His shoes were clean and well polished, his suit looked immaculate – yet it seemed an odd sartorial choice for beachwear. He appeared to be sleeping, but with a swarm of mosquitos around his



ABOVE: The left luggage ticket for the Somerton Man's suitcase, dated 30 November 1948.



Tamám Shud



W R G O A B A B D
M I A O
W B I M P A N E T P
M L I A B O X A I R Q C
I T T M T S A M I S T G A B



face, inspiring the young man to comment: "He must be dead to the world not to notice them."

But the man on the beach was in the deepest sleep of all – he was dead.

The following morning, John Lyons emerged from the sea after a cooling swim and was joined by two men and a horse as they gathered around the dead man, still in the same position that Lyons had seen him the night before, legs crossed and outstretched. There was an unsmoked cigarette behind his ear, and a half smoked stub resting on his collar. There were no signs of violence.

Three hours later, the body was taken to the Royal Adelaide Hospital, where Dr John Barkley Bennett estimated the man had died, possibly from heart failure, at around 2am. There was a dramatic twist when the doctor announced that he suspected the man had been poisoned. The dead man's pockets were emptied but did not reveal much. For starters, he had no cash or wallet. What was found were two combs, a box of matches, a pack of chewing gum, a pack of Army Club cigarettes and seven Kensitas cigarettes. But there was another puzzle. Any maker's name labels or tags in his clothing had been carefully cut away, and one of his trouser pockets had been stitched with orange thread.

The police had no leads as to the corpse's identity. The local press reported that the man found on the beach was one 'EC Johnson', but Johnson turned up alive and well on 31 December.¹ A full autopsy and post mortem were carried out. John Dwyer, the pathologist, found a quantity of blood

mixed with the remains of a pasty in the man's stomach. Further examination revealed the dead man had unusually small pupils, his liver was distended with congested blood, and his spleen was three times normal size. With these results, suspicions of poisoning arose. Yet no cause of death was found, and expert chemical analysis on the man's organs revealed nothing.

So who was this dead man? At the subsequent Coroner's inquest, the evidence of one expert, who had inspected the man's legs and feet, suggested his well-developed calf muscles and oddly shaped, pointed feet



hinted that the mystery man might have been a ballet dancer. The cadaver was preserved with formalin and a cast was made of his bust for future examination. The corpse's fingerprints were taken and circulated around the world, but with no result.

Christmas 1948 came and went with the Unknown Man still resting in the morgue. Then, in January 1949, the suitcase he had left at the railway station was discovered. When police opened it, the mystery deepened. There was a reel of orange thread. There were a few items of clothing, from which the nametags had been removed, but on three the names 'Kean' and 'Keane' remained. There was a stencil kit, the kind of thing used to stencil names on packing crates, a coat, stitched with a peculiar feather stitching, a table knife with the shaft cut down, and six pence. Although the names 'Kean' and 'Keane' looked like good leads, the police could trace no one, and the local press suggested that the labels were left deliberately as red herrings. Once again the investigation was stalled.

But the strangest evidence – the evidence that would give this case its mysterious name – came when the Emeritus Professor of Pathology at the University of Adelaide, John Cleland, was brought in during April 1949 to examine the corpse. Sewn into the waistband of the trousers was what has been referred to as 'a secret pocket'. It contained a small, tightly rolled, piece of paper bearing the printed words 'Tamám Shud'. A reporter for the *Adelaide Advertiser*, Frank Kennedy, recognised the words as Persian. They were from a work of poetry written in the 12th



DEAD MAN FOUND LYING ON SOMERTON BEACH

The fully clothed body of a man was found on the beach at Somerton, opposite the Crippled Children's Home, at 6.30 a.m. today. Up to noon police had no clue to his identity. The body had not been in the water. The man was lying on his back against the sea wall. The legs were crossed, and death appeared to have occurred while the man was sleeping. A thorough search of his pockets revealed no papers or anything that would give a clue to his name.

The man is thought to have been about 40. He was 5 ft. 11 in. in height, and well built. He was clean-shaven, with fair hair slightly grey over the temples, hazel eyes, and was wearing a grey and brown double-breasted coat, brown trousers, socks, and shoes, and a brown knitted woollen pull-over, white shirt and collar, and red-white-and-blue tie. The discovery was made by Mr. John Lyons, Jeweller, of Whyte road, Somerton, who called Constable Moss, of Brighton, and Det. Sergeant

TOP: A close-up photograph of the unknown man. "He was clean-shaven, with fair hair slightly grey over the temples". **ABOVE:** A television documentary later mounted a reconstruction of the discovery of the mysterious body on Somerton Park Beach. **INSET:** A contemporary newspaper clipping describing the incident.



ABOVE LEFT: Detectives Dave Bartlett, Lionel Leane, and Len Brown search the suitcase found at Adelaide railway station. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Some of the contents of the suitcase, including a reel of Barbour orange sewing thread, a knife and a pair of scissors. **BELOW:** The plastercast of the dead man's head and shoulders.

century, *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, and come at the very end of the English translation by Edward Fitzgerald, after the final verse. They mean literally: 'It is ended'. The slip of paper appeared to have been torn from a book, and the seemingly hopeless hunt for the original copy began. The police began to suggest that this might point to a straightforward suicide. But there was much more yet to come.

CODES AND POISONS

In June 1949 the body was buried in a plot of dry ground and sealed under concrete, a precaution in case it needed future exhumation. On 23 July a man from the Glenelg area visited the Adelaide police station and presented a very rare first edition of Edward Fitzgerald's translation of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* published in 1859 by Whitcombe and Tombs in New Zealand. The odd story he told was that the book had been tossed into the back seat of his car by persons unknown. The torn extract matched the ripped space in the book. The identity of the man who found the book was kept secret, and has remained so. In the back of the book, police found five lines of letters written in pencil, and a telephone number. The number was that of a 27-year-old nurse who had trained in Sydney's North Shore Hospital and now lived not far from where the body had been discovered. Soon local media began to refer to the mysterious lines of letters as 'code'. Was the dead man a spy?

Attention now focused on the new lead, the nurse. She appears to be as mysterious as everything else in the case, as her real name was not revealed until 2013: Jessica Ellen "Jo" Thomson, née Harkness (see 'The Jestyn Mystery', p34). In 1949, when police

THE CORONER WAS TOLD THAT A VERY RARE POISON COULD HAVE BEEN USED



interviewed her she gave a false surname, and it turns out that she wasn't actually married at the time. The police agreed to protect her identity, and the media referred to her as 'Jestyn'. When shown the plaster cast of the deceased man's head, she thought that it might be someone she knew called Alf Boxall, but said she wasn't certain. She claimed she had given a copy of *The Rubáiyát* to Boxall at the Clifton Gardens Hotel in Sydney in 1945 when he was serving as a lieutenant in the Water Transport Section of the Australian Army. Apparently she behaved very oddly when questioned, and almost fainted.² She need not have worried, because Boxall turned up, very much alive, and he brought his copy of *The Rubáiyát*, a 1924 Sydney edition, with him. He knew nothing of the dead man and had no connection to him.

The extensive international publicity³ rolled on as detectives around the globe investigated; but the man remained unidentified. As the Cold War developed, attention focused on the possibility of poisoning, a favourite weapon in espionage circles, and the strange 'codes' written in the back of *The Rubáiyát*. The Adelaide Coroner, Thomas Cleland, was informed by the eminent Professor Sir Cedric Stanton Hicks⁴ that it was possible that a very rare poison had been used which would have decomposed "very early after death". When Hicks appeared at the court hearing, he stated that the poisons he had in mind were so deadly and secret that he would not speak their names out loud; so he jotted them down on a slip of paper and passed them to the Coroner. They were digitalis and strophanthin. Hicks suggested the latter as the culprit. It originates from ouabain, a poisonous cardiac glycoside also named g-strophanthin. Somali tribesmen



THE 'JESTYN' MYSTERY

The real identity of the woman known as 'Jestyn' – whose telephone number was found in the copy of the *Rubáiyát* from which the words 'Tamám Shud' had been torn – was only revealed in 2013. In November that year, the Australian current affairs programme *60 Minutes* added a new twist to the Somerton Man case, interviewing surviving relatives of 'Jestyn', who had died in 2007. Her daughter, Kate Thomson, claimed that her mother, Jessica Ellen "Jo" Thomson, née Harkness, was the woman interviewed by the police all those years ago. She went on to claim that Jessica had in fact known the identity of the Somerton Man, but had lied to detectives: "She did know and she told me that it is a mystery that was only known to a level higher than the police force." Kate also said that she strongly suspected her mother had been a Russian spy – she apparently spoke Russian and was interested in Communism – and that she had quite possibly murdered or at least been responsible for the death of the Somerton Man.

There was more. In 1947, while unmarried, Jessica Thomson had given birth to a son named Robin, Kate's older brother. Robin's widow and daughter, Roma and Rachel Egan, also appeared in the *60 Minutes* documentary, pointing out compelling anatomical similarities that suggested the Somerton Man had been Robin's father. They lodged an application with the Attorney General of South Australia to have the body exhumed for DNA testing, but this was turned down. Derek Abbot, Rachel's husband, continued to pursue his own investigation using DNA from the Somerton Man's hair samples and from presumed relative Rachel. In 2016, American forensic genealogist Colleen Fitzpatrick presented evidence to a conference in the US that this DNA virtually confirmed Somerton Man was from the east coast of the US. Her research revealed links to a large group of relatives in Virginia, indications of Native American ancestry and genes linked to the family of American Founding Father Thomas Jefferson. *Sunday Mail (SA)*, 23 Nov 2013; *Advertiser (Adelaide)*, 1 Oct 2016; phys.org/news/2015-06-years-forensic-somerton-identity-mystery_1.html.



have long used extracts containing ouabain to poison arrows used in both hunting and warfare.⁵

So, who was the Unknown Man – and was he a spy? At Woomera, they were testing missiles and gathering intelligence. Our man died in Adelaide, which is the closest Australian city to Woomera. Many have seen this as a feasible connection. It is also possible that he boarded his train at Port Augusta, which is much closer to Woomera. Then there is the bizarre pencilled 'code' in the back of *The Rubáiyát*. What does it mean?

WRGOABABD
MLIAOI
WTBIMPANETP
MLIABOAIAC
ITMTSAMSTGAB

Code specialists around the world, including some of the best intelligence experts, and even astrologers, have been wrestling with these random characters for decades – so far without success.

MORE MYSTERIES

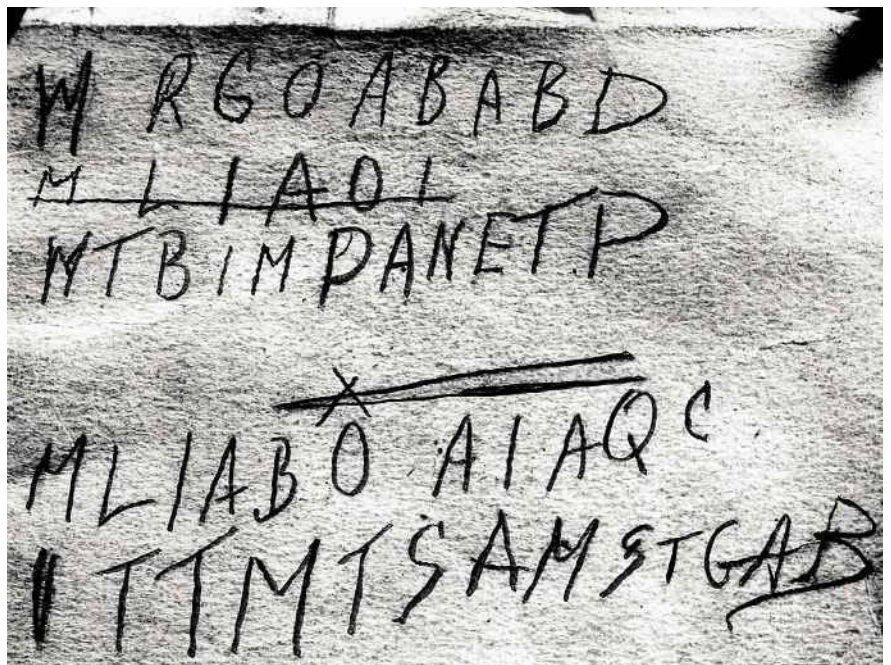
There is still an aura of mystery surrounding the nurse 'Jestyn' and her relationship with

Alf Boxall. It seems that Boxall's army career might also have involved military intelligence. 'Jestyn' died in 2007 and some believe that her real name was kept under wraps as it (or perhaps even her nickname) might have been a key to the decryption of the 'code'. Also, according to a 1978 TV documentary,⁶ when she gave Boxall her copy of *The Rubáiyát* she had written out verse 70:

*Indeed, indeed, Repentance oft before
I swore – but was I sober when I swore?
And then and then came Spring, and Rose-
in-hand
My thread-bare Penitence a-pieces tore.*

Was this just a romantic gesture – or something more cryptic?

In 1947, the year before the mystery man alighted in Adelaide, the United States Army's Signal Intelligence Service was carrying out Operation Venona, during which they discovered that the Soviet Embassy in Canberra had been in receipt of top-secret information leaked from Australia's Department of External Affairs. In 1948, the US banned the transfer of all classified information to Australia. Spies would have had to work much harder that year.

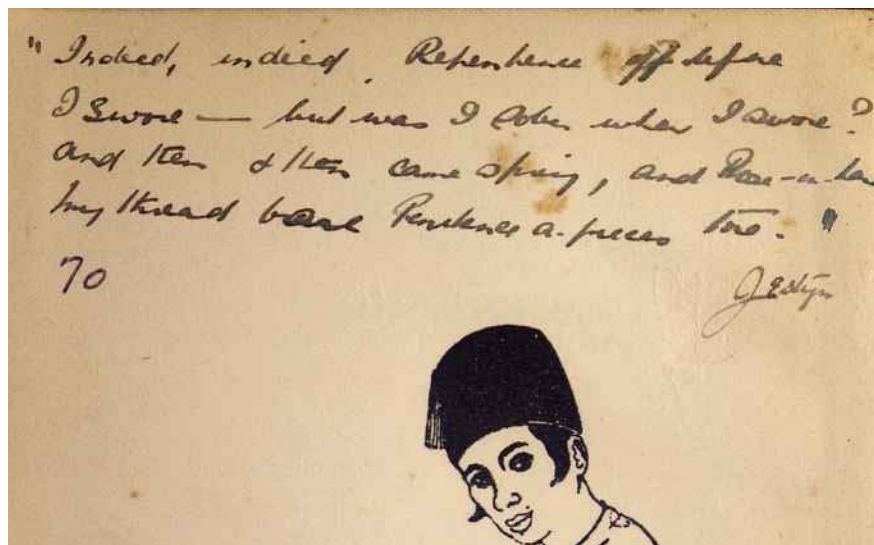


TOP: The scrap of paper torn from a rare edition of *The Rubáiyát* of Omar Khayyám and bearing the words "Tamám Shud". **ABOVE:** Writing found in the back of a copy of the *Rubáiyát* matching the torn fragment.

The more you dig into the murky undergrowth of the Tamám Shud case, the denser the tangled roots become. For example, in 1945, three years prior to the death of the 'Unknown Man', the body of Joseph (George) Saul Haim Marshall, a 34-year-old man from Singapore, was found in Ashton Park, Mosman, Sydney, with an open copy of the *The Rubáiyát* (reported as a seventh edition by publishers Methuen) laid on his chest. It was recorded that he'd committed suicide by poison. However, Methuen only issued five editions of *The Rubáiyát*, so either this was a reporting error or a copy of the New Zealand Whitcombe and Tombs edition. It might be just a coincidence, or some kind of synchronicity, but a quick look on Google Earth reveals that Sydney's Ashton Park is a short walk from Clifton Gardens. It was in Clifton Gardens, just two months after the dead Marshall was found with *The Rubáiyát* on his chest, that Jestyn gave Alfred Boxall a copy of the book. And who was Joseph (George) Saul Haim Marshall? It transpires that his brother was the famous barrister and Chief Minister of Singapore, David Saul Marshall. Joseph Marshall's inquest was held on 15 August 1945. A woman testified at the inquest. She was called Gwenneth Dorothy Graham. Within a fortnight of testifying, she was found naked and dead, face down in a bath with her wrists slit. Omar Khayyám seems to have had a lot to answer for.

In 1949, as the Adelaide police were still scratching their heads over the Unknown Man, at Largs North, just 12 miles (20km) along the beach from Somerton, another bizarre case unfolded. On 6 June, a two-year-old boy named Clive Mangnoson was found dead, his body in a sack. It was established that the child had been dead for 24 hours. Keith Waldemar Mangnoson, his unconscious father, was lying alongside him. The man was taken to hospital suffering from exposure and ended up in a mental institution. Father and son had been missing for four days. It gets weirder: the two were discovered by a man named Neil McRae, who said he had established their location in a dream the previous night. As with the Unknown Man, the coroner did not believe the boy had died from natural causes.

Then came the revelation by the boy's mother, Roma Mangnoson, that she'd been threatened by a masked man who almost ran her down outside her house in Largs North's Cheapside Street. The man was driving a battered, cream-coloured car. According to Mrs Mangnoson, "the car stopped and a man with a khaki handkerchief over his face told me to 'keep away from the police or else'." She believed this to be connected with the fact that her husband had previously been to identify the Unknown Man at Somerton, whom he believed to be someone he had worked with in 1939 named Carl Thompson. Local dignitaries, including the mayor of Port Adelaide, AH Curtis, and JM Gower, the Secretary of the Largs North Progress Association, received some strange, anonymous phone calls, threatening an "accident" should they "stick their nose into the Magnoson affair". The distraught Mrs Magnoson was so affected by her meetings with the police that she required subsequent



ABOVE: Verse 70 of the *Rubáiyát* inscribed by 'Jestyn' in the copy she gave to Alf Boxall at the Clifton Gardens Hotel, Sydney, in 1945. BELOW: The grave of the Unknown Man in Adelaide's West Terrace Cemetery.



medical attention.

South Australia's Major Crime Task Force still regard the Somerton Man as an open case. The South Australian Police Historical Society holds the Unknown Man's bust, which contains strands of his hair. Unfortunately, the chemicals used in embalming may have destroyed much of the DNA. In any case, a recent request to exhume the body was refused. Witness statements appear to have disappeared from police files, and the suitcase found at Adelaide Station and its contents were destroyed in 1986. There have been approaches from people in Eastern Europe who believe the Somerton Man might be one of many missing persons from the area during the Cold War. But it looks as if we may never know who he was and how he came to die on that stretch of Australian beach. So let's leave the last word to our 12th century Persian poet, Omar Khayyám:

'They change and perish all — but He remains...' Tamám Shud: 'It is ended'. **[1]**

FURTHER READING

Gerald Michael Feltus, *The Unknown Man*, Klemzig, South Australia, 2010.

Kerry Greenwood, *Tamam Shud: The Somerton Man Mystery*, University of New South Wales Publishing, 2013.

Stephen King frequently refers to this case in his novel *The Colorado Kid*, which in turn inspired the series *Haven*.

As this is an Internet *cause célèbre*, a simple Google of *Tamam Shud* will bring up dozens of links.

NOTES

1 By early February 1949, there had been eight different 'positive' identifications of the body. Some thought it was a missing stable-hand; two men from Darwin thought the corpse was that of a friend of theirs; and others suggested he was a sailor or a Swedish man. Police from Victoria suggested the man was from their state, as his the laundry marks were similar to those of dry-cleaning firms in Melbourne. Following publication of the man's photograph in Victoria, 28 people claimed they knew his identity.

2 Retired detective Gerald Feltus interviewed Jestyn in 2002 and found her to be either "evasive" or "just did not wish to talk about it". He agreed not to disclose her identity or anything that might reveal it. Feltus believed that Jestyn knew the Somerton man's identity.

3 <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/result?&publictag=Taman+Shud>. This site offers a selection of press coverage on the case.

4 Often mis-named as 'Stanford Hicks', Sir Cedric Stanton Hicks came to Adelaide in 1926 after an outstanding student career at the University of Otago in New Zealand, war service and a research studentship at Cambridge. He was appointed Professor of Human Physiology and Pharmacology in 1927, a position he retained until 1958 when he became Emeritus Professor. He was knighted in 1936 for his services to medical science.

5 A sufficiently concentrated ouabain dart can fell a Hippopotamus, causing respiratory and/or cardiac arrest. Only one creature is immune to its effects — the Galapagos Tortoise.

6 *Inside Story*, presented by Stuart Littlemore, ABC TV, 1978.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



ROY BAINTON spent seven years in the Merchant Navy and has worked in journalism, radio and TV. He is the author of numerous books, including *The Long Patrol: the British in Germany 1945-1989*

(Mainstream, 2004), *A Brief History of 1917: Russia's Year of Revolution* (Constable & Robinson, 2005), *The Mammoth Book of Strange Phenomena* (Constable & Robinson, 2013) and *The Mammoth Book of Superstition* (Constable & Robinson, 2016). He was born in Hull and now lives in Nottinghamshire.