

The Somerton Man

An Unsolved History

RUTH BALINT

UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

At dawn on a December morning in 1948, the corpse of a man was discovered lying propped up against the seawall of Somerton Beach in Adelaide, South Australia. He had apparently been there all night. Legs outstretched, feet crossed, his head bent slightly to one side, his pose in death appeared so casual that John Lyons and his wife, taking their regular evening walk along the seafront the day before, upon seeing him 'assumed he was drunk and was sleeping it off'.¹ The next morning, when John came down to the beach for his early morning swim, the man was still there. He took a closer look and called the police.

The body was stiff by the time the two policemen arrived. The pathologist who later examined him would put his death at about 2 am. There was no evidence of a fight, no visible sign of injury. A half-smoked cigarette lay on his open shirt collar, the sand around the body was undisturbed. Initially, the case sparked only passing interest in the local papers; however, as the mystery of both his identity and the manner of his death deepened over the next few months, public awareness of the case grew and speculation about the Somerton Man, as he came to be known,

mounted. Still, by the time of the inquest into the death, six months later, all that the city coroner, Professor Thomas Cleland, could state with certainty in his opening remarks was that 'the identity of the deceased was quite unknown; that his death was not natural' and 'that it almost certainly was not accidental'.²

For almost sixty years the Somerton Man's case has remained one of Australia's more baffling unsolved mysteries. At the centre of the mystery is a man who remains so elusive as to be invisible. A soldier, a displaced person, a spy; killed by his own hand or somebody else's—the evidence can be, and has been, read as pointing to any of these possibilities, yet in the sixty years since his death detectives have got no closer to discovering his identity. In recent years, the revival of the search by a senior detective, highly esteemed in Australian police circles for his capacity to crack difficult cases, has also led nowhere.

Historians who work to resurrect the world of individuals who lived in the past are always, ultimately, confronted by the 'unknowable-ness' of their subjects.³ The distance of time, the different mental and cultural worlds of the past, mean that we forever remain on the brink, only ever 'almost knowing' our subjects. This problem is exacerbated when the subject of historical analysis concerns the lives of those who lived, or died, in relative obscurity, and for whom a dearth of archival evidence exists. Natalie Zemon Davis's *The Return of Martin Guerre* is a seminal work exploring the possibilities that such a situation presents for the historian. Where there was a lacuna in the construction of the historical event she was describing, Davis was able to utilise other archival documentation to describe the wider world of her characters' contemporaries and thus also to conjecture about her characters' private lives. 'When I could not find any individual man or woman in Hendeyae, in Artigat, in Sajat, or in Burgos', she writes, 'then I did my best through other sources of the period and place to discover the world they would have seen and the reactions they might have had. What I offer you here is in part my invention, but held tightly in check by the voices of the past.'⁴

Yet as Carlo Ginzburg warns, 'invention' is not the right term for such an approach: 'Davis's research (and her narrative) does not hinge on the opposition of "true" and "invented" but upon integration ... of "realities" and "possibilities".'⁵ Thus the margin of uncertainty, expressed throughout the book by such terms as 'perhaps', 'maybe' and 'may-have-been', becomes a space of historical possibilities. It

is this recognition of the ways in which possibility and proof can work together, rather than against one another, in the construction or representation of the past, that is the touchstone of Ginzburg's advocacy of a new form of narrative history. Yet Ginzburg also acknowledged that Davis's approach is only one possible solution to the lacunae of the past, and wondered how far such solutions could be extended.⁶

This essay is a contribution to this discussion. In thinking through how best to approach the story of the Somerton Man, it became evident that there was no way to recreate the real life of the man himself. What does exist is simply the moment of his death, the few physical clues he left on his person, the public responses to his death and the insights of his contemporaries. The question is, then, of what benefit can there be for the historian in a case such as this, beyond trying to find out, like a detective, who the Somerton Man was? Clearly there is a thrill in the chase. But there is also, I believe, a thrill in pursuing a different kind of project, one that reveals, through and around the man, a chaotic universe of multiple possibilities, and the ambivalences, the conundrum, that he presented to the people around him. The body on the beach becomes the event around which conjecture and truth, proof and possibility are interwoven to give access to a different vision of history, one that openly acknowledges the randomness of the past.

In *The Life of an Unknown*, Alain Corbin makes the unknowableness, the invisibility, of his subject the very premise of his work. Picking a random name out of the archives, a woodsman who lived his entire life in the tiny commune of Origny-le-Butin, in the Orne region, Corbin sets out to write a history of the world as his subject might have seen it. Louis-Francois Pinagot, an illiterate who never recorded anything himself, 'would be the invisible centre', and Corbin 'like a filmmaker who shoots a scene through the eyes of a character who remains off screen'.⁷

Corbin sees himself as master of a salvage operation, rescuing one man from obscurity in order to open up a previously hidden avenue of access to the nineteenth century. In order to do this, Corbin will need to 'conjure up an image in the round from the shape of the mold, from what the very silence surrounding my quarry reveals'.⁸ Here, the individual is important not in terms of soul or psyche as he might be for the novelist or filmmaker, but rather for what the circumstances of his life reveal about the broader circumstances of his past, the wider world of culture and discourse in which he lived and participated. Like Corbin, I envisage the Somerton

Man as an invisible centre; however, in this case his invisibility is almost total—there remains no known name, no background, no birthplace: nothing to identify him at all. Unlike the examples of Corbin or Davis, there is no singular character or identity around which to construct, even partially, a life. His unknowableness in this case is absolute, and, it appears, deliberate on the part of the man himself.

In a sense this project represents something of a montage, created out of the discarded clues, the bits and pieces, ‘the rags and refuse’ to quote Walter Benjamin,⁹ that have become attached to the case, yet remain, until its resolution, disparate and irrational. Benjamin, avid reader of detective novels, decried the tendency of history writing to posthumously reconstruct ‘fragmented events according to a completely fabricated architecture’.¹⁰ Unlike the file stamped ‘case closed’ in the police drawer, the unsolved mystery defies the comfort of a well-ordered history with a neat resolution. There is a sort of Herodotean impulse at work in this kind of project, in that the event contains a profusion of stories about that event that are not necessarily coherent or ordered by it. Ann Curthoys and John Docker describe Herodotus's mode of storytelling by comparing it to the *Thousand and One Nights*, in which the frame story ‘is always in tension with the multiple stories that lead to more stories that have only an indirect or indeed no apparent relation to the frame story involving Shahriyar and Shahrazad: the stories exceed the frame story and the frame story can never rein them in’.¹¹

The Somerton Man thus becomes a kind of journey, through which each clue, each ‘dead-end’ lead, throws up a new discovery. The pursuit of those dead-ends, I argue, reveals something of the wider world in which he died. And because his death violated the natural order of things, and disobeyed the social conventions normally associated with the rituals of dying, the reactions of his contemporaries provide a different, and darker, kind of access to the society in which he lived.

The ‘unsolved mystery’, despite its capacity for exercising an enduring fascination in the popular psyche (witness, for example, the enormous ratings success of the documentary about Dr Bogle and Mrs Chandler on ABC television in 2006, or the spate of programs investigating unsolved crimes on commercial television), has not attracted much in the way of serious historical scholarship in Australia. As the popular revisitations in the media and in print reveal, however, unsolved crime stories are a source of fantasy and speculation, and a means by

which the past can be accessed and wondered at. Yet unsolved mysteries also cry out for resolution, which makes a project such as this one run the risk of leaving readers unsatisfied: a cliffhanger without a sequel. Hence the warning in the title: this history is unsolved.

—

The report of the inquest held in Adelaide in 1949 into the death of the Somerton Man seems to breathe a history not possible in our computer age. The typewriter font looks clunky, and in various sections of the report, mostly where the names of various chemicals appear in evidence, there have been crossings-out and careful revisions made in ink. These are frequent—poisons featured heavily in the report. To those who had autopsied and studied the man's body, it seemed that the ingestion of some sort of poison was the most likely cause of death.¹² His heart was sound, ruling out sudden heart attack, and the way the stomach was congested with congealed blood was consistent with poisoning. But there was no evidence of vomiting or convulsions, as one would expect. Even more baffling was the fact that no-one could find any traces of the sorts of poisons known to local experts. 'I found no common poison present, and I do not think any common poison caused death', stated Dr Robert Cowan, the chemist who tested the tissue and blood samples after the autopsy. 'If he did die from poison, I think it would be a very rare poison. I mean something rarely used for suicidal or homicidal purposes.'¹³ The inquest later heard that there were some poisons that excreted from the body very quickly, and poison remained the preferred diagnosis. Even less certain was whether it was suicide or murder. The coroner could speculate, but ultimately was forced to conclude: 'Because we do not know who he was, we are ignorant of the motives which may have actuated him or someone else.'¹⁴

We know little more about the man now than the police did on the day they found him. According to evidence presented at the coronial inquest, he was about forty-five years old; he had grey eyes, was clean-shaven, uncircumcised and physically fit. Detective Leane, the police officer assigned to the case in 1948, described him as 'square on the shoulders'.¹⁵ The inquest notes he carried 'an expression about his face as though he might have been an educated man'.¹⁶ His hair was greying on the sides, slightly receding, ginger but mousy coloured. The

taxidermist who embalmed the body made special mention of his highly developed calves, a peculiarity, in his mind, compared to other men's legs. He had his own teeth, sixteen of which were missing, and carried a few small scars on his left arm.

This was also clearly a man who liked to keep himself clean, a fact noted by both Leane and the pathologist, no doubt used to more dishevelled corpses. 'Many people who find their way to the morgue have toenails which are dirty and unattended to', stated the pathologist. 'His were clean.'¹⁷ Even his shoes deserved special mention: they looked as though 'they had been polished that morning or later'.¹⁸

His fingers, however, bore the yellow stains of a heavy smoker. Besides the half-smoked cigarette on his collar and another tucked behind his ear, he carried an opened packet of cigarettes and a box of Byrant and May matches in his pocket. Two combs, an unused railway ticket to Henley Beach, a bus ticket indicating that he had taken the bus from the city to Somerton Beach, a packet of Juicy Fruit chewing gum: these were the only other items found on his person. Nothing to indicate a name; even the label on the coat he was wearing had been torn out.

The death, like the man, had a certain neatness about it. There was no blood, no signs of a scuffle, no remaining traces of what had killed him. The only thing the forensic pathologist found in his stomach worth noting was a half-digested pasty. In the mind of the coroner in 1949 the mystery surrounding the manner of his death seemed deliberate, another reflection of the 'undue trouble' to which the man had gone to conceal his identity in life. 'It makes one rather think', he surmised, 'that he may have gone to equal trouble to use something which caused a quiet death, something unusual, which was unlikely to be found.'¹⁹

We have, then, the portrait of a man who carefully polishes his shoes and rids himself of his identity before embarking on a meticulously planned and executed suicide, if suicide is what it was. It seems a painfully paradoxical world exit: for a man who seemingly went to a lot of trouble to remain unknown, and thus to all intents and purposes unfound, he also chose one of the most public of places to die in. This puzzled Olive Neill, who was at Somerton Beach on the evening of 30 November with her boyfriend, and recalled seeing the man. 'Where he was lying was a fairly public place, not the sort of a place a man would be likely to choose if he wanted to go somewhere and die quietly', she remarked at the inquest.²⁰ 'The spot

was quite open, not secluded', concurred John Moss, the constable first called to the scene on that December morning. 'Anybody lying there might expect that they would be seen easily by anyone going up the steps to the esplanade to the beach. Those steps are used a lot, particularly on a summer evening.'²¹

These comments also hint at the alarm that such a public death would have elicited among the man's contemporaries. As Philippe Ariès has noted, by the twentieth century death, once so omnipresent and familiar, became 'shameful and forbidden', hushed-up and best avoided.²² People now died in hospitals instead of at home and suicide, one can speculate, was best practiced behind the closed doors of hotel rooms or the back shed. Murder was sometimes public, but it was violent, bloody and mostly spontaneous. In every way, the Somerton Man's death seemed to defy reason.

—

I fly to Adelaide one weekend to meet Gerry Feltus, the senior detective who inherited the case years ago when it was just a few dusty files at the bottom of a police drawer. Feltus is retired, although retired in his case turns out to be a rather loose concept. The second time we meet is in a hotel in another city where he has been installed for six months to assist with a highly sensitive case.

Our first meeting is on a busy street corner in Adelaide's city centre. Feltus is of that generation of Australians who give directions according to points of the compass, and for someone as magnetically challenged as myself his instructions on how to locate our meeting place are fairly incomprehensible. I have been anxiously standing on what I hope is the right street corner, when a tall man steps forward and introduces himself. Feltus grew up on a farm in the country and there is something about him that still resembles the boy from the bush, the carefully chosen words and measured way of speaking, the slight roughness around the edges. Perhaps it is just his faded jeans and sweater in Adelaide's CBD, and the fact that he spends a lot of our first meeting on the phone trying to sort out tickets to the weekend game of his beloved Adelaide Crows. But there is no denying the guarded exterior of someone who is renowned for having faced a number of tough cases in his time, in a state infamously associated with some of Australia's more bizarre and disturbing

homicides.²³ He doesn't tell me any of this of course or that he has received the National Police Medal. I learn of all this later.

Instead, we discuss the Somerton case. Feltus is in the process, when we meet, of transferring on to computer all the information he has gathered in his fifteen years of investigation. The detail of his research is astounding, from the origin of the cigarette packet found on the man's body, to the place of manufacture of his coat. He has tracked down old street directories to retrace the man's exact last movements, and attempted to visit almost every person once connected to the case still living, even down to the ticket collector at Adelaide's railway station. Later that day, Feltus and I visit the old sandstone building, Feltus pointing out where the lockers once were, the ticket office, the stop for the trams to Somerton. Designed and renovated in the 1930s, the building has retained some of the grandeur of its original neo-classical design; wandering through there that day, treading the old tiled floors under its great domed ceiling, it is possible to imagine the day in 1948 when the man, perhaps newly arrived in the city, tired and unsettled from his long journey, checked his suitcase into a locker and went next door to the public baths to wash.

—

At least this is how Feltus imagines it. And this is the thing about the Somerton Man: because so little is known about him, he has become a story in the making, a story that with each telling becomes embroidered with the prevailing fears, desires and ideas of its era. My own assumptions, I realise, are shaped by the prevalence of the refugee story in my own time, for I immediately imagine that he was someone from the displaced persons (DP) camps of Europe. The possibility that the Somerton Man was one of the thousands who, by December 1948, had left war-ravaged Europe to journey by boat to Australia, seemed to fit, in my mind, the description of a lonely death at the edge of the sea.

Sixteen ships departed Europe for Australia in 1948, and each of the thousands of displaced persons on board would have already passed through a number of bureaucratic hoops to get here. They would have had their photographs taken at least once, their personal and physical particulars recorded on various forms and documents, their names listed on the nominal rolls of the ships that

transported them. But names, the only avenue of investigation open to police with limited resources, were unreliable. Nineteen forty-eight was a year in which a lot of people arriving at Australian ports had either lost or discarded the names they were born with. Some were Anglicised. Others were transcribed incorrectly by the officers of the International Refugee Organisation or by the mobile Australian Migration Selection teams, whose interviews with candidates in the DP camps of Germany and Italy were often conducted by officers unfamiliar with East European etymology. Still others gave false names, shedding old identities to slip into the DP camps in the chaotic aftermath of war. By mistake or design, anonymity was a prevalent condition of this first wave of post-war immigration to Australia.

Nowadays this first wave of post-war immigration is remembered as a defining moment in the narrative of a multicultural Australia, but it is unlikely that the majority of Australians had as yet quite come to terms with it in the same way. They had been sold the resettlement scheme as an invitation to 'Bring out a Briton'. The displaced persons were a sideshow, an irritating but peripheral fixture of the Australian landscape. In some ways similar to today, the spaces occupied by refugees, the migrant hostels and work camps, were so far out on the margins they rarely figured in the popular worldview. There is nothing, in the initial responses by the public or in the reports in the media, to indicate the possibility that the man without a name could have come from somewhere else. Instead, in these early days of the investigation, the Somerton mystery quickly developed into an Australian story.

The detectives were faced with a deluge of correspondence following the request for information put out in the nation's major newspapers. Letters sent to police reveal a darker side to post-war suburbia, where families still reeled from the fallout of two wars and the Depression. The man without a name became the face of a hundred lost husbands and fathers, sons and brothers; of army mates; and of acquaintances made in the many boarding houses that littered the urban landscape, waystations of itinerant souls with no fixed address. One can read the desperation in some of these letters. A Victorian woman writes, convinced the man is her husband, a returned soldier of 'a very restless and moody disposition', whom she hasn't seen for eighteen months. Another, whose husband disappeared eighteen years ago—he had, she wrote, 'sleepy grey eyes'. There is the letter from a father, desperate for

news of his son who had last contacted him telling him he would be home from South Australia in November; and another from a man still looking for his brother, not heard from in twenty-five years since he left to marry a woman the family disapproved of.²⁴

Police time spent on these enquiries accumulated. Each letter had to be answered, each lead diligently chased up. 'I have made further inquiries at the Breweries, Military Records, Motor Drivers Licences, Electoral Offices, Trade Unions, Lodging Houses and Wireless Branch without trace of a man named A.', a frustrated officer wrote in his inspector's report, in response to one man who believed the dead man might be someone with whom he had shared lodgings in a Perth boarding house in the summer of 1941. The man's evidence for this was slight: 'He was a most peculiar type of man', he informed the officer. 'He was in the habit of wearing a dressing gown every morning. I would know the dressing gown if I saw it again.'²⁵

Apart from these letters, dozens of people came forward to view the embalmed body. Some of them gave positive identifications. A few thought, for example, that the man was Robert Walsh, a South Australian woodcutter who had disappeared. But he wasn't Walsh, nor any of the other identities volunteered by members of the public. Each lead ultimately proved fruitless.

Two weeks after the discovery of the body, Leane and his partner in the Adelaide CIB, Len Brown, were able to identify an unclaimed suitcase left in a locker at Adelaide Railway Station on 30 November as belonging to the dead man, by matching sewing thread found in the case with the thread used to patch up the trousers he was wearing when he died. The suitcase was practically new, and its identification tag had been removed. It contained a dressing gown, pyjamas, slippers, handkerchiefs, trousers still bearing the marks of a trip to the dry cleaners; everything 'kept well and tidy'.²⁶ Two items in the suitcase did have tags, a tie bearing the name 'Keane' and a singlet labelled 'Kean'. Yet police could identify no Keanes or Keans missing or unaccounted for in Australia. Detectives checked all the ports around the country for ships' deserters, but none matched the name or the dead man's description.

On 29 April 1949, in a letter to the Adelaide police superintendent, W.O. Sheridan, Leane wrote that he was pursuing the possibility that the name T. Keane may in fact be a corruption, or Anglicisation, of a European name. 'Mr Moss Keipitz,

an Egyptian, employed in Adelaide, has been interviewed and shown the neck tie', he wrote:

Mr Keipitz is of the opinion that the name on the neck tie is 'KEANIC' pronounced 'QUANIC' and that the name [is] of European origin, either a Chechslovakian [*sic*], Yugoslavian or from a Baltic country. He viewed the body, which helped him to form his opinion. He further [states] that the initial, which was thought to be a 'T' is a 'J' written in Arabic.²⁷

Leane requested that his letter be forwarded to Canberra police, 'for inquiries to be made at the Department of Immigration, Customs and Dead Letter Office at the General Post Office'. The response to Leane's letter from Constable Urquhart in Canberra came two weeks later. It was brief and disappointing. Despite a thorough search of records held at the Department of Immigration, Customs and the Canberra branch of the Commonwealth Employment Agency, Urquhart had to report that 'no trace can be found of the name 'Keanic' or a close variation'.²⁸

The discovery of these faint name tags would not have meant as much as might be expected. In 1948, returned soldiers, new migrants and many poorer members of Australian society were wearing second-hand clothes that carried the names of their original owners. Under a wartime policy of 'austerity', clothing had been rationed during World War II, and this system of rationing continued for a time after 1945. Charity services redistributed second-hand clothes, and if they didn't remove the old name tags (labelling clothes was common), the new owners would sometimes do it themselves or just leave them on.

The detectives were certainly thorough within the obvious constraints of their era, and this was not an easy time. The discovery of the dead man's body on Somerton Beach had caused only passing interest in the local Adelaide papers, sandwiched among other stories of deaths violent and otherwise. 'Found Dead With His Throat Cut' headlined the article that followed the short story of the 'Body Found on Beach'. 'Alleged Stabbing in City', began the next.²⁹ Crime, murder and suicide were a recognisable part of a society still reeling from decades of war and the deprivation of the Depression years. The rising rates of both crime and divorce after World War II, an increase of as much as 20 per cent, suggested that such social disruption was a direct consequence of the end of the war.³⁰ The re-entry of men

into Australian society after their long absence, many of them nursing 'war nerves', placed a heavy strain on police resources.

Investigation into the possibility that the dead man's origins were something other than Australian was also hampered by restrictions placed on police during the tense international climate of the Cold War. The man's fingerprints were sent to Commonwealth countries and the United States, but for reasons that remain mysterious, not to the Eastern bloc countries from which the bulk of Australia's first wave of 1948 refugees originated. Thus, the sphere of investigation remained firmly anchored in the English-speaking world.

A few months into the investigation, a chance discovery changed the entire course of the investigation. Trying on the dead man's trousers for size, the forensic pathologist discovered a carefully folded scrap of paper in the fob pocket, on which were printed the words 'Tamam shud'. Leane's offsider, detective Leonard Brown, was given the task of uncovering their meaning. As he was to discover, 'tamam shud' means 'the end' or 'the finish' in Persian. Further investigation revealed their origin as the final words of the famous poem, *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. As Brown explained to the coroner's court, he 'went to Beck's Bookshop in Pultenay where I looked through a number of copies of the poem, until I found one copy at the end of which appeared the words 'Tamam shud' in the same font of type as the words on the slip of paper I possessed'.³¹ It seems it didn't take Brown long to figure out the source of these two words, which points to another little known mystery of early twentieth-century Australia, our historic love affair with *The Rubaiyat*.

Written in the eleventh century by Persian astronomer, philosopher and mathematician Omar Khayyam, *The Rubaiyat* was introduced to the English-speaking world most famously by the Englishman Edward Fitzgerald in 1859. It is in fact hundreds of quatrains, the exact number widely open to debate: some have put them as high as one thousand although the real number is probably closer to one hundred and fifty. Fitzgerald, a minor poet in his own right, only translated about a hundred of them, arranging them in an order of his own creation, and often reworking or embellishing them according to his own dramatic interpretation.

'Rendered into English' is how the first editions of Fitzgerald's translation described his inventive approach; 'transmogrification' was his own word for it.

Since Fitzgerald, there have been dozens of other translations of Omar Khayyam's poem, some of them far more faithful to the original, and in Brown's time, as he searched through the different copies in Beck's bookshop, there were hundreds of different editions flooding the market. But it is Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat* that won the hearts of Western readers, inspiring a widespread admiration that persisted from the late decades of the nineteenth century through to the 1950s. Counted among its adherents were some of the most illustrious names in Western literature: Rossetti, Swinburne, Burton, Tennyson, Burne-Jones, and T.S. Eliot. Yet its audience spread across all classes—'the only good poem to have gone to the people', in the words of Ezra Pound.³² In America, the poem is said to have become a craze.³³ What then, was the attraction of the poem for those generations who lived through this span of fifty years?

The answer lies in both the overall message of the poem and its fashionably Oriental setting. The message, according to Fitzgerald, was simple: in the preface to his first edition, he wrote that the:

old Tentmaker, who, after vainly endeavouring to unshackle his steps from Destiny, and to catch, some authentic Glimpse of TO-MORROW, fell back upon TO-DAY (which had outlasted so many To-morrows!) as the only Ground he had got to stand upon, however momentarily slipping from under his Feet!³⁴

In other words, the poem appeared to urge its readers to forget about the past, abandon concerns for the future and to live for today. Many read its meaning as an implicit rejection of piety and the afterworld in favour of the earthly pleasures of the here and now. This was a very modern message, resonating in an age of stirring rebellion against the strict religious theologies of Victorian England. Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* was published the same year, a far more significant challenge to the teachings of the church, but it signalled that Fitzgerald's timing was right for the poem's success.

The poem was also, at its simplest level, a love poem, and the fact that the poem is set in an imaginary Persia cemented its romantic appeal. Orientalism, as Edward Said first explained, is the creation of an imaginary 'other', the Orient, by the

West to project its longings and its fears.³⁵ The *Rubaiyat* embodied the East of the West's imagination, a sensual, hedonistic place of exotic gardens, heady scents, overflowing cups of wine, nightingales, deserts and mystical philosophy.

The popularity of the poem in Britain and America quickly assured its ascendancy in British Australia. In 1895, Australian author Ethel Turner used two lines of the poem as an epigraph to her book *The Family at Misrule*.³⁶ Frank Wilmot, writing under his pseudonym Furnley Maurice, declared in *The Lone Hand* in 1909, 'No book during the last 25 years has had such a remarkable vogue as Fitzgerald's Omar Khayyam ... Edition after edition continues to appear, and just as rapidly to disappear.' He admitted his astonishment at the phenomenon: 'There is no accounting for the popularity of this book of verse, beyond the fact that it is very short and very cheap', but ultimately concluded: 'the fact is that Fitzgerald has written a great poem. That is the centre and end of all the fuss.'³⁷

An Australian poet in his own right, Wilmot also worked as a bookseller for thirty-five years with Cole's Book Arcade in Bourke Street, Melbourne, and was described by the Australian Bookseller's Association as 'being in charge of no. 4 desk', where he supervised the sales of poetry, among other things.³⁸ We have Wilmot to thank, then, for this description of the types of buyers for this very short, very cheap book from his vantage point of desk no. 4:

All sorts of conditions of folk buy it. 'Have you got that there book of poems by some funny old Persian cow?' says one. 'Have you got Omar Khayyam's poems?' asks another, and the next in the stream will inquire of the bookseller 'if he has the Rubber-yet?'³⁹

A lively Australian tradition of parodying or allegorising *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* also developed during the early years of the twentieth century. A competition that ran in *The Bulletin* in February 1907 to write the 'Rubaiyat of Australia', billed as the search for the Australian Omar, or the 'Omar of the Bush', received thirty-nine entries. Of these, reported *The Bulletin*:

One of the Omars was a Bush Deadbeat, another a Shearer, another a Swagman, another a Fruitgrower, and three of them were Omar Cowmen. There was an Old Man Khayyam, who did some cheerful 'ruminyatting'; an Omar Cassandra, and a Fitzgerald who produced a Rubaiyat of Jud.⁴⁰

It may seem ironic that the sort of White Australianness promoted by *The Bulletin* found identification with Fitzgerald's Khayyam. But on closer reading it is easy to see why: his 'manly spirit', the *laissez faire* attitude to living and dying, his love of wine (often revised to beer), the vagabond lifestyle of 'independent masculinity'. Ned Wethered's illustrations for a Gilmour's Bookshop edition titled *The Australian Omar Khayyam*, circa 1926, for example, reinforce the 'Australianness' of the poem in a much more direct way.⁴¹ Placed alongside the words of the Fitzgerald original, Wethered's images completely alter its reading. Cartoonish and larrikin, they evoke the dry humour of the *Bulletin* school of poetry, with the working class 'bush bloke' as its hero. The overall effect is of course comic, a send-up of the Australian bloke, but it also demonstrates the easy cultural domestication of the poem for a popular Australian audience.

Admirers were not restricted to men. Lyons and Taksa, in their oral history of early twentieth-century Australian readers, note that one of their interviewees, Dora S., was very fond of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. She told them that the poem 'seemed to be a part of our youth ... my mother loved it, my father loved it, they quoted it'.⁴² Her experience, as the Somerton Man case demonstrated, was not unusual. 'Between 4 p.m. and 11 p.m. yesterday police headquarters received 49 phone calls from people stating that they possessed copies of the "Rubaiyat"', an article on the front page of the Adelaide daily *The Advertiser* stated on 27 July 1949, the day after the story about the discovery of the scrap of paper on the dead man was printed.⁴³ One woman, trying to locate her missing husband, an electrician by trade, told police he had a copy of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* and could 'quote nearly all the poetry in this book and was very conversant with same'.⁴⁴

Calls to the public to locate the book from which the scrap had been torn at first yielded nothing. A breakthrough occurred when a 'local businessman' came forward with a copy he had found tossed through the open window of his car as it was parked in his Glenelg driveway, near Somerton Beach, on 30 November. 'Tamam shud' had been ripped out of the back. The detectives found four lines handwritten inside the back cover that read:

MRGOABABD

MTBIMPANETP

MLIABOAIQAC

ITTMTSAMSTGAB

Brown went back to the library, this time to try and connect the lines with the *Rubaiyat* or to other poems. By now the case had become something of a *cause celebre*. The Adelaide papers reprinted the four lines, and an entire subculture of amateur code crackers around Australia was galvanised into action. Interestingly, there were almost as many readings of the code as a personal code, invented for private use, as there were readings of it as evidence of foreign espionage, which, in the context of the Cold War, might have been more predictable. But codes were a familiar part of the lexicon of the era; people often created their own codes either to protect information or as a secret means of communication. Mr Rusten of Alberton Post Office 'drank ten pots of tea' to stay awake and came up with: 'Go B Wait By PO Box L1 1am T TG.'⁴⁵ Mr Reynolds was more poetic: 'Wm. Regrets. Going off alone. BAB deceived me too. But I've made peace now and expect to pay. My life is a bitter cross over nothing. Also I am quite confident that I have made the Tamam Shud a mystery. St GAB.' A number interpreted the lettering as concealing a message that the man was tired of life or that he had suicided for love, hence the love poetry in his pocket. All of which seems to indicate that for contemporaries of 1949, the problem of male isolation and depression was as much of a concern as communist spies in their midst.

For over two decades, armchair sleuths continued to post their theories in to the police. 'I did hear today by chance that the Police have offered a fair reward', wrote one. 'If that is so, I am claiming the reward right now. I am quite willing to come to the News office, or Detective office, and ... I will lay the code right open.'⁴⁶ It was not until the mid to late 1950s, as World War II receded in public consciousness via Cold War events such as the Korean War, the Petrov Affair and the ensuing Royal Commission into Espionage, that more sinister hypotheses appeared, usually in response to a newspaper article revisiting the case. This shifted the identity of the Somerton Man away from the familiar into the foreign, and there were those who resented his foreignisation. 'He has been wrongfully taken for a commo' wrote one woman from Manly, in a letter to *People* magazine, following a story about the case in 1953. 'Did he come to Australia for freedom? I bet he did.'⁴⁷ Another, in a lengthy letter to police, concluded that the Somerton Man was 'one of the most considerate men that ever lived'.⁴⁸

The original copy of *The Rubaiyat* tossed into the car at Glenelg that day in 1948 was destroyed along with the suitcase and all its contents in 1952, and the files of the case shelved. Feltus is still searching for a copy of the same edition, visiting hundreds of secondhand bookshops, antiquarian book dealers and book fairs around the country. He has about thirty-five different copies of the poem already, but none of them is the 'right' edition. On a weekend in Melbourne I accompany him as he makes his weekly trip to the local book fair on the off chance he might stumble upon it. He never does. I am initially puzzled by his determination. Finding Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat* is easy; the copies, give or take a few illustrations, are usually all the same poem. Even Feltus admits that he is unsure why he keeps looking. But Feltus has, in many ways, become the collector of the Somerton Man. A collector collects, as Walter Benjamin observed, 'to renew the old world'. The 'acquisition of an old book', he wrote, 'is its rebirth'.⁴⁹ Feltus collects now, I think, to restore something of a past to a man who left us only his death. Sixty years on, it has now become less about simply stamping the file 'case closed', and more about returning to this stranger, this man without a name, something of the unique poetry of his existence.

The link with the *Rubaiyat* allowed observers to imagine the dead man in new yet familiar ways, a poetic soul in the minds of some, a no-good husband in the minds of others. It also confirmed him as someone recognisable in the minds of Australians for whom the *Rubaiyat* was a common household item. If not an Australian, then almost certainly a Britisher or American, or one who sought an Australian 'way of life', as some of the letters from the public assert. This familiarisation softened the discomfiting, uneasy fact of his unknowableness, his invisibility. It domesticated his strangeness. The discovery of the code, as we have seen, did not necessarily alter this. Over the next few decades, the story resurfaced in the media with less and less frequency, surpassed in the public consciousness by other mysteries such as that of the Beaumont children, who disappeared along the very same stretch of beach almost two decades later.

Feltus admits that to find out the true identity of the man now, after so long, might be a little disappointing. A friend of his recently joked that he hopes Feltus

never does. I am reminded of those classic lines in *Casablanca*, spoken by Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman:

Ilsa: Can I tell you a story, Rick?

Rick: Has it got a wild finish?

Ilsa: I don't know the finish yet.

Rick: Go on, tell it. Maybe one'll come to you as you go along.

There are infinite wild endings to this story, none of which have been disproven. The Somerton Man has so far stumped some of the best minds in the investigation business. 'Here lies the unknown man' reads the epitaph on his tombstone. 'It would seem', remarked the coroner in 1949, 'that the deceased has not been missed by anyone who knew him.' Could he, I wonder, ever have imagined the amount of speculation and scrutiny his death would generate for the next sixty years? Or was that just the point?

—

Ruth Balint is a senior lecturer in the School of History and Philosophy, University of New South Wales, Australia. Her research is currently focused on postwar Australia, Displaced Persons and ideas of home and belonging in this period.

—ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Professor Stephen Muecke, Professor Richard Waterhouse and Professor Rae Frances for their helpful comments on the draft for this article.

—NOTES

¹ *Inquest Into the Death of a Body Located at Somerton Beach*, State Records South Australia (SRSA), GRG1/27/53/1958, (p. 2 of witness statements).

² SRSA GRG1/27/53/1958, p. 1.

³ Penny Russell, 'Almost Believing: The Ethics of Historical Imagination', in Stuart Macintyre (ed.), *The Historian's Conscience: Australian Historians on the Ethics of History*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2004, p. 111.

- ⁴ Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1983, p. 5.
- ⁵ Carlo Ginzburg, 'Proofs and Possibilities: In the Margins of Natalie Zemon Davis' *The Return of Martin Guerre*', *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature*, no. 37, 1988, p. 116.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 125.
- ⁷ Alain Corbin, *The Life of an Unknown: The Rediscovered World of a Clog Maker in Nineteenth Century France*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, Columbia University Press, New York, 2001 p. xii.
- ⁸ Corbin, p. xii.
- ⁹ Margaret Cohen, 'Benjamin's Phantasmagoria: The *Arcades Project*', in David S. Ferris (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, p. 199.
- ¹⁰ M. Christine-Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory: Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, 1996, p. 5.
- ¹¹ Ann Curthoys and John Docker, *Is History Fiction?*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2006, p. 30.
- ¹² Noel Sanders explores the spate of murders by poison in the post-war era, most notably with thallium, which superseded arsenic as the most popular homicidal poison in the 1940s and 1950s. Sanders notes that poison required a special kind of deliberation on the part of the murderer, unlike more 'spontaneous' murders. Noel Sanders, *The Thallium Enthusiasms and Other Australian Outrages*, Local Consumption Publications, Sydney, 1995, pp. 7–59.
- ¹³ SRSa GRG1/27/53/1958, p. 18.
- ¹⁴ SRSa GRG1/27/53/1958, p. 1.
- ¹⁵ SRSa GRG1/27/53/1958, p. 27.
- ¹⁶ SRSa GRG1/27/53/1958, p. 11.
- ¹⁷ SRSa GRG1/27/53/1958, p. 34.
- ¹⁸ SRSa GRG1/27/53/1958, p. 22.
- ¹⁹ SRSa GRG1/27/53/1958, p. 36.
- ²⁰ SRSa GRG1/27/53/1958, p. 19.
- ²¹ SRSa GRG1/27/53/1958, p. 3.
- ²² Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Towards Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Patricia M. Ranum, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1974, pp. 85–7.
- ²³ Possibly the four most famous Adelaide cases are that of the Beaumont children who went missing in 1966 on the same stretch of beach where the Somerton Man was discovered; the 'family murders' (1971); the 'Truro murders' (1976–77); and the 'Snowtown murders' (1999).
- ²⁴ Somerton Case file, possession of Mr Gerry Feltus: viewed 14/7/2007.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ SRSa GRG1/27/53/1958, p. 22.
- ²⁷ NAA: A1378, P17819, 'Unidentified Body Found on beach at Somerton, S.A.', 29/4/1949–26/5/1949.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*

- ²⁹ *Adelaide Advertiser*, 2 December 1948.
- ³⁰ Stephen Garton, *The Cost of War: Australians Return*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p. 197.
- ³¹ SRSA GRG1/27/53/1958, p. 29.
- ³² Ezra Pound, 'How to Read', in T. S. Eliot (ed.), *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, New York, 1968, pp. 33–4.
- ³³ Vinnie-Marie D'Ambrosio, *Eliot Possessed: T.S. Eliot and Fitzgerald's RUBAIYAT*, New York University Press, New York and London, 1989, p. 67.
- ³⁴ Quoted in William Cadbury, 'Fitzgerald's Rubaiyat as a Poem', *ELH*, vol. 34, no. 4, December 1967, p. 546.
- ³⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1980.
- ³⁶ The opening inscription reads: 'Ah that Spring should vanish with the Rose! / That youth's sweet scented manuscript should close!', 'The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam'. Ethel Turner, *The Family at Misrule*, Ward, Lock and Bowden Ltd., London, 1895.
- ³⁷ Furnley Maurice, 'Saint Omar Khayyam', *The Lone Hand*, 1 April 1909, pp. 692–3.
- ³⁸ John Arnold, 'Case Study: Frank Wilmot', in Martyn Lyons and John Arnold (eds), *A History of the Book in Australia 1891–1945: A National Culture in a Colonised Market*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 2001, p. 112.
- ³⁹ Furnley Maurice, 'Saint Omar Khayyam', *The Lone Hand*, April 1, 1909, p. 692.
- ⁴⁰ *The Bulletin*, 21 February 1907, 'The Red Page'.
- ⁴¹ *The Australian Omar Khayyam*, Gilmour's Bookshop, 141 Castlereagh Street, Sydney, no author, no date.
- ⁴² Martyn Lyons and Lucy Taksa, *Australian Readers Remember: An Oral History of Reading, 1890–1930*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1992, p. 63.
- ⁴³ *The Advertiser*, 27 July 1949, p. 1.
- ⁴⁴ Somerton Case file, possession of Mr Gerald Feltus: viewed 14/7/2007.
- ⁴⁵ *The Advertiser*, 1 September 1949.
- ⁴⁶ Letter, Somerton Man police file in possession of Detective Gerald Feltus, no date. Sighted 14 July 2007.
- ⁴⁷ Letter, Somerton Man police file in possession of Detective Gerald Feltus, no date. Sighted 14 July 2007.
- ⁴⁸ Letter from West Ryde, 5 June 1953, Somerton Man police file in possession of Detective Gerald Feltus, no date. Sighted 14 July 2007.
- ⁴⁹ Walter Benjamin, 'Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting', in *Illuminations*, Fontana Press, London, 1992, p. 63.