

Outback murder

A how-to guide

Kelly Handson

My grandmother is a crime-fiction fanatic. She loves anything sinister and can sniff out a crime scene while tending to her prize pumpkin-patch. She is that person who reduces traffic to a standstill as she stops her car to get a glimpse of a taped crime scene and possibly view a handcuffed perp. If I ever lost anything as a child, whether it was a button (not so important) or my favourite Strawberry Shortcake limited-edition holographic badge (critical), she was our resident detective. I would sit in her Sherlock Holmes-esque study, which was crowded with timber furniture and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. I would face her across the expanse of desktop and she would turn on the gold brass lamp, aiming it at my young and anxious face. The interrogation would begin, followed by an extensive investigation, after which only occasionally would the item actually be recovered.

Years later, when I asked Gran about the beginnings of her crime obsession, she revealed it was her love affair with all of the fantastic detectives she found among the pages of crime fiction. There were the greats, of course: Sherlock Holmes, Miss Marple, Hercule Poirot. But it was Detective Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte,

or Bony as he was more commonly known to readers, who was Gran's absolute favourite. The stories were staged against varied Australian outback settings. Detective Bony's father was a European settler and his mother was an Aboriginal woman. Gran's eyes sparkled as she explained that this was quite controversial at the time. But the most exciting story was when the author, Arthur Upfield himself, was involved in a real-life criminal investigation. This had been the *pièce de résistance* for Gran: the line between fiction and real life had been crossed.

Arthur Upfield (1890–1964), who led a fascinating life in the red dirt of Australia's outback, was Australia's premier crime-fiction writer in the early 1930s.¹ For this reason librarians at the University of Melbourne were excited in 2004–05 by the opportunity to buy from several dealers in Australia and overseas an extensive collection of manuscripts, typescripts, scrapbooks, correspondence, notes, ephemera and objects such as the very typewriter Upfield had used to write his ever-popular novels. Everyone was surprised when an elderly lady, after reading a local newspaper article reporting the recent acquisition, telephoned the university. She had an original manuscript written

by Arthur Upfield: a biography commissioned by her family. She generously donated this to the library in 2005, together with correspondence from Upfield about the project, and it is now a key item in the collection.²

I walk through the double doors of the Baillieu Library, keen to understand just what had captivated not only my Gran but thousands of readers around the world. If you look for Arthur Upfield's novels in the University of Melbourne Library online catalogue, your search will return dozens of items. When you check the details, you will notice the location code 'SpC'—Special Collections. Perhaps you have seen exhibitions drawn from Special Collections from time to time, such as rare books displayed in glass cases, or erotic novels from the 1980s that can still cause a stir in some quarters. But did you know that these books are only a tiny fraction of the 200,000 volumes of books, journals and other assorted literary material that make up the Special Collections? All have been deemed 'closed access' due to their age, value or uniqueness, as the website states this is intended to 'ensure the items' long-term care and preservation for future generations of scholars and researchers'.



So how does the public get to view the Arthur Upfield collection and its numerous manuscripts marked with notes scribbled in the hand of the writer himself?³ You must fill out an online request form so that your chosen gems may be retrieved from what I imagine to be never-ending, darkened aisles. From the large array available, I eagerly choose curiously titled novels such as *Bony buys a woman* and *Bony and the white savage*, then I select some more serious-sounding titles: *Breakaway House* and *The Murchison murders*. I approach the friendly face at the desk in the Cultural Collections Reading Room, with my pen and paper in hand. The man shakes his head at me: pens are forbidden—only lead pencils to take notes. Oh, I guess I can understand the reluctance to have ink anywhere near priceless and rare books, I'd just never considered it before today.

Immediately drawn into Upfield's books, I find it easy to see why so many of his 29 novels were translated into 11 languages and brought him great success both at home and abroad. His descriptive techniques are superb, not to mention the exoticism and uniqueness of a main character of Aboriginal heritage. This combination appealed to both a local and international readership.

It was around this time that the prominent historical figure, A.O. Neville, Western Australia's chief protector of Aborigines, was at his most influential.⁴ Neville's job title suggests the irony of his position in an overly paternalistic government. His policies, based upon a philosophy of assimilation and white-race dominance over other races, were a major factor leading to tragedies such as the Stolen Generations, which had devastating effects on Aboriginal people that are still felt strongly today. In the Eurocentric view prevalent in Australia at that time, Aboriginal people were the 'other'; their supposed difference added an extra dimension of interest to a fictional character. Terry Walker, in his comprehensive biography *The strange case of Arthur Upfield and Snowy Rowles*, claims that Upfield got along well with his Aboriginal co-workers and showed none of the racial prejudice common in Western Australia during the reign of A.O. Neville.

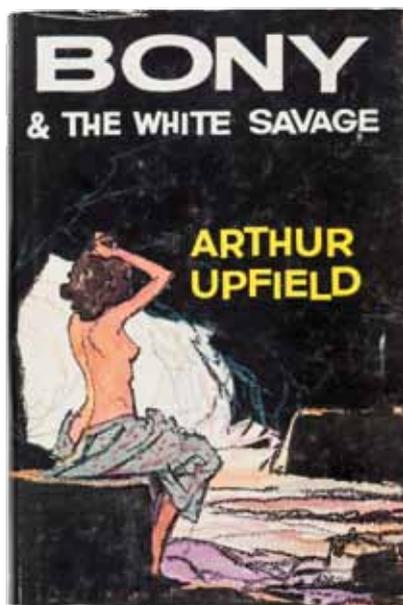
Although Upfield was born in England, he failed to do well in the various courses his father had enrolled him in, such as real estate and architecture, and was consequently sent to Australia in 1911 to become a 'man'. This turned out to be the best thing that happened to Upfield. He found work on outback stations

and travelled around with his swag, making mates along the way. After returning from service in the Australian Imperial Force, he took up writing. His surroundings and the people he met vividly influenced his work. Upon finishing his first crime novel but feeling far from happy with the final product, Upfield came across an old friend from the war, Leon Wood, now a tracker for the Queensland police. Wood was the son of a settler father and Aboriginal mother. But he did not know that he was soon to become the main inspiration for the much-loved detective, Bony. Upfield always insisted that Bony was at least 80 per cent real. The appeal of a unique fictional detective, whose skills in sleuthing and approaches to crime-solving differed markedly from those of his predecessors, proved to be a winning combination.

Writing novels suited Upfield's wandering bushman lifestyle perfectly: he simply wrote wherever his work took him. He was an enthusiastic and dedicated writer, but he wasn't choosy about the kind of jobs he picked up along the way. These included boundary rider, shearer's cook, fur trapper, bullock driver, opal gouger, fence runner and camel breaker. In 1928 his experience with camels

earned him a job with the Western Australian government at the camel station in the remote Dromedary Hills. His task: to patrol a section of the rabbit-proof fence, built to keep the European rabbit out of pastoral land in Western Australia. Upfield's two faithful camels, Milly and Curly, pulled his buggy up and down the familiar section of the Number One Rabbit-Proof Fence. Yes, there were actually three fences, aptly named Number One, Number Two and Number Three, each as inefficient as the other. In those days, when it was believed that the little devil rabbits would never set foot in Western Australia, it was a grave offence for the public to use the fence maintenance tracks as though they were roads. If you disobeyed this rule (which happened frequently) you would receive a fine equivalent to \$200, which was set in 1907 and is the same amount today. Although these days the lack of fence patrollers on camels makes the chances of a fine relatively slim.

At this stage, Upfield was in his physical prime and at the beginning of a literary career that was to bring him fame and a modest fortune. But he was also destined to become a household name in Western Australia for all the wrong reasons. When occasionally back at the camel station



base, Upfield would put his feet up on the veranda and share a beer with his boss, George Ritchie. One particular day, a blue-eyed, blonde-haired man named Snowy Rowles approached the two and asked for work. As the men were talking, another stockman was having a particularly hard time breaking in a horse. Rowles casually sauntered down, asked if he could have a go and was on the horse's back within a few minutes. Ritchie and Upfield, impressed, contacted the manager of Narndee Station down the road, who immediately

gave Rowles a job. In the months to follow, Rowles would often call in at the camel station to say hello, and he was popular with everyone. Upfield later wrote, 'Looking backward, I can find no excuse for anyone on the Murchison not liking Snowy Rowles. His appearance at bush camp at once vanquished depression'.⁵ Upfield and Rowles became close mates, often sharing a beer in a time when life in the outback could be lonely and desolate. Little did they know a storm was heading their way.

Meanwhile, Upfield continued his writing while patrolling the fence, and in early 1930 was trying to come up with a concept for a new Bony novel. In his 1934 pamphlet *The Murchison murders* Upfield likened writing to goldmining: where once there were lots of gold nuggets just waiting to be discovered, now it required more digging and hard work to come up with that unique story. So, naturally, he enlisted his companions to help with the digging. He went on to describe the very night when his good friend and boss, George Ritchie, came up with the perfect plan. Imagine Upfield and Ritchie playing cards in a small sitting room at the camel station, the smell of whisky and tobacco hanging in the air. One can imagine an exchange along the following lines:

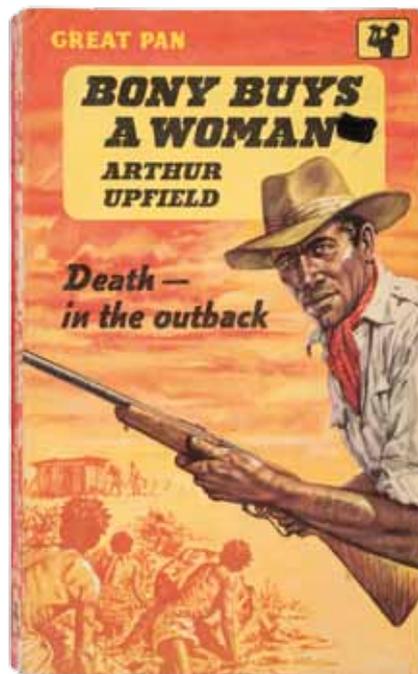
Upfield takes a sip of his whisky, and then casually asks his boss, 'Can you think of a good way of getting rid of a man? I need a method where the body will be completely destroyed using only materials you'd find on a station.'

'What? Are you writing another book?'

'Yes I am. I want to write another Bony yarn, in which he gets a job worthy of his brains, and his bushcraft. I want to give him the case of his life, if I can nut out a simple way of getting rid of the corpse.'

The card game progresses and numerous whiskies later, Ritchie jumps out of his seat. 'I've got it! If I wanted to do you in, I would lure you into the bush near a pile of timber and shoot you. Then burn the corpse along with the wood. The fire wouldn't burn everything? Yes I know. That's why I'd come back with a sieve or a dolly pot and go through the ashes for all the bits of bone, boot springs and whatnot. Then I'd kill a couple of roos and burn their carcasses on the spot. That would conceal the evidence.'

Upfield slowly puts his whisky onto the table and lowers his cards, face down. As he looks up, he wears a large smile from left to right.



Upfield was impressed by his friend's solution (although slightly unnerved at his boss's extensive knowledge on the subject) and loved the idea of incorporating a dolly pot (used to smash up pieces of gold-bearing quartz) as in those days it was a common prospector's tool, owned by many people working in the outback. There was no doubt that Ritchie's plan was a feasible one, and perfect for Upfield's next book, yet now there was another problem.

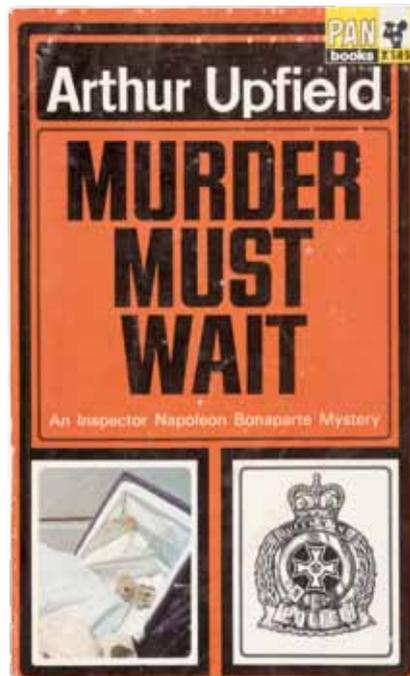
Ritchie's plan was *so* good, how could Bony possibly solve the case?

Upfield offered Ritchie one pound to come up with a solution to the problem at hand. Yet even with this cash incentive, Ritchie couldn't think of a believable way for Bony to solve the case. Ritchie went to their friend Snowy Rowles for help; he might have said something like this: 'Snowy, say I shot you right now, burnt your corpse under some of that dead timber there, then ran your bones through a dolly pot, how could anybody get me for murder?' Rowles quickly rode away without a word, later explaining to Upfield that he thought Ritchie was about to put a bullet in his back. Rowles laughed when he realised it was just a fictional plot, but couldn't think of a solution either. It was Upfield himself who finally thought of a solution for Bony. Unknown to the killer, the victim was a war veteran who had a small metal plate in his head. When the man was shot, this plate would be sent flying into a nearby bush for Bony to discover later. The plot was complete and Upfield eagerly began work on *The sands of Windee*.

More than a year later, in March 1931, Upfield received a visit from the local policeman. Three workers from nearby areas were missing,

presumed dead. The policeman told Upfield that Snowy Rowles had been arrested for three counts of murder and that the circumstances had been nearly identical to those of Upfield's latest novel. Suggesting that Upfield prepare a statement, the policeman rode off, leaving a shocked Upfield staring after him.

In September 1931 Upfield resigned from his job on the fence, as the successful release of *The sands of Windee* had allowed him to take a break from working. Still not having heard from the police, he watched the Rowles case slowly unfold in the papers. It seemed that Rowles had been desperate for work and had travelled for some time with the owner of a local station, James Ryan, and his friend George Lloyd, in hope of employment. When it became apparent that there was no work for him, Rowles had become angry and killed both his companions, disposing of their bodies in exactly the fashion of the murderer in Upfield's latest novel, except that it was a molar tooth and some still-intact portions of handmade artificial teeth that undid Rowles, when police sifted through an unusually large pile of ash found near the place of the last sighting of the group. The third count of murder was that of one Louis Carron, who had been seen



travelling north with Rowles and was eventually reported missing by a good friend who had not received a letter from his usually diligent mate in some time. The police once again found a fire, although this time a gold wedding band believed to be Carron's was left behind in the ominous pile of ashes.

In spite of Rowles' unwavering pleas of innocence, the evidence was stacking up against him. When police arrested him, they found all

of Carron's possessions wrapped in a piece of oilskin on the top shelf in his cabin. Rowles had also been seen driving Ryan's truck around town, telling people different stories as to why Ryan had 'lent' him the vehicle. He had also, rather carelessly, cashed a cheque made out to Ryan at the local general store. It seems Rowles did not pay as much attention to detail as Upfield's character had, and this negligence would be the cause of his downfall.

Just when Upfield thought he had been forgotten, he was summoned to speak with the crown prosecutor. They discussed the book's implications in the murder case against Rowles, and Upfield, along with Ritchie, was asked to testify against their friend in court. Upfield wrote in *The Murchison murders* that he remembered the police mentioning that, after reading *The sands of Windee*, they had followed Bony's steps in his investigation almost exactly. One can only imagine what a strange sensation it must have been for Upfield, as a murder-mystery writer, to see his fictional words become a reality, and to see police using his latest novel as a genuine how-to guide by carefully retracing Bony's investigation.

Upfield was the first to accept some responsibility:



'Model T' typewriter, owned by Arthur Upfield, made by Imperial Typewriter Company (Leicester, England), c. 1930, approx. 25.0 × 30.0 × 10.0 cm. Arthur Upfield Collection, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.

In a proper review of the Snowy Rowles case, it is impossible to disregard my work as a novelist; because, although I did not provide Rowles with a motive, and was in no way an accessory before or after the fact, the Crown alleged that I *did* provide him with a method of destroying the bodies of his victims.⁶

Upfield's method proved to be quite good, leaving absolutely no evidence for the murders of both Ryan and Lloyd. Yet despite consistently proclaiming his innocence until the end, Snowy Rowles was found guilty of the murder of Louis Carron and was hanged in the early hours of Monday 13 June 1932.⁷ In *The Murchison murders*, Upfield wrote eloquently of his friend:

Thus passed out a strangely stormy spirit. His life before him, favoured by the gods with a fine physique and good looks, he could have risen high in this country, impelled by the personality of his Doctor Jekyll; but the secret devil in all of us, the Mr. Hyde, was too powerful for 'Snowy' Rowles.⁸

I finally look up from my desk and wonder when it was that

everyone else left the reading room. Glancing again over some of Upfield's handwritten notes, I feel as though I am sitting with him in camp, the unforgiving Western Australian sun beating down on my neck. After taking a few sneaky photos to show Gran, I gently close the manuscripts and novels, carefully checking that no pages are folded in the process. I can't wait to tell her that I have just begun to understand where her passion came from. Heading over to her house, I think about borrowing a few of Gran's crime novels and I eagerly anticipate once again becoming immersed in the world of Upfield and his detective, Bony.⁹

Kelly Handson recently completed a Bachelor of Arts with a double major in creative writing and Australian Indigenous studies at the University of Melbourne. In her final creative writing subject, students were asked to draw upon one of the university's collections as inspiration for a creative non-fiction piece. Kelly has a special interest in Australian Indigenous literature and is currently working on her first novel.

Books and other items from the Special Collections of the Baillieu Library are available for use in the Cultural Collections Reading Room, third floor, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne. See www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/collections/special.

- 1 See Stephen Knight, 'Upfield, Arthur William (1890–1964)', *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 12, Melbourne University Press, 1990, revised 2012 and 2013 and published online at <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/upfield-arthur-william-8900>, accessed 23 March 2013.
- 2 Arthur Upfield, 'Francis Edward Cobbold: Sailor, Fijian trader and Australian pioneer pastoralist', unpublished manuscript, 1935; Various authors, Correspondence etc. relating to Arthur Upfield's biography of Francis Edward Cobbold, unpublished manuscripts, 1934–35. Presented to the University of Melbourne Library in 2005 by Catherine Dobson, in memory of Beatrice Rose Mary Howard (née Douglas), Robert Andrew Douglas and Thomas William Capell, medical student at Melbourne University, 1933–39, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.
- 3 A guide to the manuscripts of Arthur Upfield held in the Baillieu Library is available online at www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/collections/special/guides/upfieldms.pdf.
- 4 A. Haebich and R.H.W. Reece, 'Neville, Auber Octavius (1875–1954)', *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 11, Melbourne University Press, 1988.
- 5 Terry Walker, *Murder on the Rabbit Proof Fence: The strange case of Arthur Upfield and Snowy Rowles*, Carlisle, WA: Hesperian Press, 1993, p. 14.
- 6 Arthur Upfield, *The Murchison murders*, Sydney: Midget Masterpiece Publishing, 1934.
- 7 '“Snowy” Rowles committed to stand trial for wilful murder', *The Sunday Times* (Perth), 14 February 1932, p. 1; '“Snowy” Rowles hanged', *The Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton), 14 June 1932, p. 8.
- 8 Upfield, *The Murchison murders*, n.p.
- 9 This article draws generally upon Upfield, *The Murchison murders*, and Walker, *Murder on the Rabbit Proof Fence*.