

The background of the cover is a complex, abstract composition. A central, dark silhouette of a human figure is the focal point, overlaid with a vibrant, glowing cyan and yellow energy or light pattern that resembles a network or a map. This central figure is set against a dark, almost black background, which is punctuated by large, irregular splatters of bright red and cyan. The overall effect is one of intense, chaotic energy and digital or scientific imagery.

THE PETRIFIED WOMAN

PETER BUTT

**THE
PETRIFIED
WOMAN**

**by
PETER BUTT**

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Butt is an Australian investigative filmmaker specialising in true crime and espionage. He has produced and directed major history series and dozens of documentary specials for local and international broadcasters. His multi-award-winning film, *Who Killed Dr Bogle & Mrs Chandler?*, remains the highest-rating commissioned documentary in ABC TV history.

His book on the Bogle Chandler case was shortlisted for the 2014 NSW Premier's Literary Awards - Douglas Stewart Prize for Non-Fiction. In 2022, he produced a five-part podcast series on the case.

Peter's book *Merchants of Menace* reinvestigates the notorious Nugan Hand bank, which was involved in gunrunning and money laundering for drug traffickers and the CIA. The book reveals new evidence about the mysterious death of the bank's CEO Frank Nugan and uncovers the new identity and whereabouts of its co-founder Michael Hand, one of the world's most elusive corporate fugitives.

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**For
Unknown-Unknown**

CHARACTERS

Andy Peterson - Labourer, Renmark
Charles Bath - Brother of Russell Bath
Charlie Wilson - Irrigation Worker, Renmark
Constable Weston - Victoria Police
Dan O'Connell - Fisherman
Detective David Flint - South Australia Police, Renmark
Detective Inspector G. L. Gully - CIB, Adelaide
Detective John Killeen - Victoria Police
Detective L. Harper - CIB, Adelaide
Don Bruce - Witness
Dr. J. M. Dwyer - Pathologist
Eva Edge - Adelaide Resident
Harry Salter - Tramway Worker
H. H. Hobcroft - Coroner, Renmark
Humphrey Kempe - Owner Lindsay Point Station
John Breen - Lindsay Point Station Resident
Lucy Snook - Witness
Margaret Ellis (nee Salter) - Harry Salter's Daughter
Margaret Salter - De facto wife of Russell Bath
Mr Favolora - Lawyer
Mrs Alice Price - Witness
Ron Trigg - Undertaker
Russell Bath - Farm Worker Lindsay Point Station
Valda Jones - Witness
William 'Bill' Phillips - Witness
William Sleeman - Doctor, Renmark

FLOOD

It was September 1951. A month of rain across eastern Australia had swelled the country's longest waterway, the River Murray – a 2500-kilometre-long winding behemoth. In the northwest Victorian town of Mildura, floodwaters had washed away levee banks, destroying orchards and vegetable gardens, threatening glass houses, and turning grazing pastures into stinking, mosquito-infested swamps. Scientists feared another outbreak of encephalitis, which only the previous summer had blighted the river town for the first time in recorded history.

Fifty miles downstream in South Australia, the townspeople of Renmark were also on edge. The first wave of high water struck just after midnight on Monday, September 17. With the river rising an inch a day, all eyes were on the levee. Floodwaters had already broken through irrigation gates and submerged 21st Street. Locals reported a prevalence of snakes driven from the river flats by the

rising water. One desperate snake had crawled into the cabin of a school bus that had stopped on its regular route.

The River Murray was already five feet higher than what the Engineering and Water Supply Department considered 'full'. Another five feet and the record books would be broken. Following a decade of drought, the once wilting gum trees that lined its banks were now knee-deep in whirling water. Here and there, eddies, like liquified whirlwinds, swept up logs, under-growth and soil like a voracious monster. Debris was causing havoc for professional fishermen and the paddle steamers operating between Renmark and Mildura. On Monday evening, September 24, sleeping passengers on the paddle steamer Marlon were awakened by a tremendous thud. They ran on deck in their pyjamas to discover that the unpredictable current had forced the vessel off course. She had struck a tree, and the damage took her out of service.

Early on Wednesday, September 26, 1951, thirty-nine-year-old irrigation worker Charlie Wilson set off on his boat upstream from Renmark to enjoy a day off work. That morning, the river was flowing at least five miles an hour and carrying a fair amount of debris, forcing Wilson to keep a vigilant eye out for logs.

At around eight o'clock, Wilson arrived at his favourite spot north of Woolenook Bend. He dropped anchor below the high cliffs close to the southern shore and settled in for a morning's fishing.



Professional fishermen, who held leases along this section of the river, jealously guarded their territory against greedy amateurs by spreading spurious claims that the fish had gotten wise and moved away from their patch. But Charlie Wilson knew better. Woolenook was an angler's paradise. During the last War, the army had set up a Japanese internment camp on the northern shore. After a long day of cutting timber, the internees were allowed to fish for dinner, and their efforts were rewarded with rich pickings of redfin, cod, callop and bream.

At 11.20 am, with a bucket full of cod and bream, Wilson weighed anchor and set off back to Renmark, unaware that his biggest catch was yet to come. Ten minutes downstream, a glint from the corner of his eye drew his attention. For all the world, it looked like a mannequin – the type he'd seen in department store windows in Adelaide – floating face down. With his curiosity piqued, he motored on a few hundred

yards, turned back and drew close enough to prod it with his oar, causing it to bob a little out of the water. This was no mannequin but a naked human body.

‘Now that’s something you don’t see every day,’ he thought.

Wilson carefully manoeuvred the body beside his boat, tied a rope to it, and then towed it close to the riverbank, where he secured it to a tree that edged the mudflats. Fortunately, the floodwaters were opaque with red earth and hid the worst of the grisly find. He daren’t touch the body, let alone turn it on its back. But as he carefully adjusted the rope, he brushed the back of his hand against the thigh, and his blood turned cold. The flesh was hard as stone.

On his way back to Renmark, Charlie Wilson rehearsed what he would say to the police.

“I went fishing and hooked a corpse!”

As flippant as it sounded, the statement was the simple truth. But shock soon set in, and Charlie was consumed by thoughts about how the poor victim might have met his or her fate.

One thing was sure - the great flood of September 1951 was not going to be forgotten around these parts for a while.

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UNDERTAKEN

At around 3.30 pm, Detective David Flint overheard an excited male voice stumbling over his words, telling the weighty desk sergeant about finding a body in the river. Flint turned and nodded to his colleague to send the fellow over to his desk.

Wilson explained to Flint that he initially thought the body was a shop dummy.

“It was face down and had no hair, and I couldn’t tell if it was a man or a woman. I secured it to a tree at the south end of the Heading property, near Woolenook Bend.”

Flint looked at his watch, picked up the phone and asked the desk sergeant to put him through to Ron Trigg.



Detective David Flint

Charlie Wilson accompanied Detective Flint in a police car north along Murtho Road. Undertaker Trigg followed in his mortuary van. The bullock wagon had long since given way to the motor car. Nevertheless, travellers rarely soliloquised about the speed or comfort of driving on South Australia's outback roads, especially along this rutted track.

"This better not be a waste of time," warned Flint. "You sure you can find it from land?"

Hanging on for dear life, Wilson told Flint that he worked for the Renmark Irrigation Trust and knew the river like the back of his hand. In his years as an apprentice, the old timers had shown him where they'd moored a floating pumping plant, the Argo, at Woolenook Bend.

Charlie Wilson wondered aloud why other fishermen or the officers aboard the paddle steamers hadn't noticed the body - unless, of course, it hadn't travelled very far.

Thirty minutes out from Renmark, Wilson directed Flint onto the Heading property and down a boggy track, at the end of which lay the swollen river. Flint and Trigg donned rubber boots and gloves and followed swampy ground to the semi-submerged tree where Wilson had secured the body.

The three men stood scrutinising the corpse. The most unusual aspect was the pale, waxy nature of the skin. Flint lifted the shoulder a little. The skin was taut as if it had undergone some form of petrification. He and Trigg carefully turned the body face up, revealing, to their shock, an absence of soft tissue above the nose and no eyes. Both

arms were laid across the chest, but there were no hands, and both feet were devoid of toes.

‘It looks to be female,’ Flint suggested, though without any certainty.



Trigg returned to his vehicle and retrieved a mortuary stretcher. The three men stood silently for a moment, taking in the sad and confronting sight, before carefully manipulating the gurney under the floating body. They carried it to the mortuary van. Trigg covered the corpse with a sheet and secured it with leather straps. Flint and the undertaker then slid it into the vehicle.

At the Renmark Police Morgue the following morning, Flint watched as local practitioner William Sleeman conducted a partial post-mortem examination. Only four years out of medical school, the boyish-looking doctor had mainly carried out perfunctory autopsies: heart attack and stroke victims and the occasional farm or car accident. His most distressing case to date had been a five-month-old boy who accidentally suffocated in his pram.

Mopping perspiration from his forehead, Sleeman said that he'd never seen a corpse in this abnormal, petrified condition. With bits of anatomy missing, the body resembled one of those Greek or Roman statues pictured in *Readers Digest* that had lain at the bottom of the ocean for thousands of years. But there were only minor indications of marine life activity upon the body, leaving Sleeman to estimate that the corpse had been immersed in water for no more than a month.

He determined that the body was that of a white female, five feet two inches high and between forty and forty-five years of age at the time of death. She had no teeth, and the

gums were smooth, which suggested that she had worn dentures for at least twelve months.

Flint pointed out a fracture on the left side of the skull. Dr Sleeman stated that it had possibly contributed to the woman's death but that he would be unwilling to swear to it conclusively at an Inquest.

The South Australia Police protocol called for homicide cases to be overseen by the Criminal Investigation Branch in Adelaide. Flint called his city colleagues on the station's newly installed radio-phone. He briefed them on the discovery of the body and the findings of the post-mortem, which he said posed more questions than provided answers. His hunch was that the victim had been murdered, but identification of the body - the obvious priority - was going to be difficult.

The following day, Adelaide detective Len Harper drove to Renmark in a police van. After a briefing with Flint, he collected the body and transported it to the Police Morgue in Adelaide.

The same afternoon, David Flint and a constable set off upriver by boat to talk with landholders, farmhands and woodcutters, asking if anyone knew of a woman who'd gone missing. Flint had prepared rations and first aid kits, as they would also be heading onshore to search for a possible burial site, even though such a site likely remained submerged under floodwater. Flint knew the coroner would expect him to follow up on every possible line of enquiry.

In Adelaide, the following morning, police pathologist Dr J. M. Dwyer, who had performed 1,800 autopsies since the War, carried out a second and far more detailed post-mortem examination. Like his Renmark counterpart, Dwyer determined that the body was that of a woman, of approximately five feet two inches in height, of heavy build, weighing around eleven and a half stone, and big busted. Diamond-shaped markings on her upper right thigh suggested that she had been resting against cyclone wire or a wire mattress. He recorded that the woman had suffered a four-inch by two-inch skull fracture. There was no doubt in Dwyer's mind that she had been alive when she suffered extreme trauma to the head, perhaps caused by a fist or an instrument of some kind. He was also convinced that the woman lying on the slab had been murdered. But the next question that needed answering was her identity. With the entire tissue of her face missing, as well as her hair, hands, toes and teeth, Dwyer acknowledged that identification may prove elusive.

The most striking feature of the body was the state of the flesh, a condition Dwyer described as calcification and fatty mummification. The calcification of human bodies was rarely reported in Australia. Dwyer assumed it came about as a result of specific circumstances: she'd been buried in limestone-rich soil not exceeding 50 degrees Fahrenheit¹ for at least four months.

¹ 10 degrees Celsius



In the past, numerous killers had attempted to cover up their crimes by burying their victims in quicklime, believing that lime would completely destroy a body. But the opposite is true. While lime will cause a small amount of superficial burning, it essentially preserves bodies.

Dwyer suggested that the woman's body may not have been buried in South Australia. More likely, it was interred in a location experiencing colder temperatures, either in New South Wales or Victoria, and perhaps in alpine country. He also suspected that the burial site was likely on the bank of a river in an area with sparse vegetation, which allowed floodwaters to swirl open the grave and release the body.

In his report, he deduced that her death had occurred at least twelve months earlier, and at the latter end of summer. Therefore, she was killed between March and September 1950, twelve to eighteen months before her discovery.

Subsequent events would prove Dwyer right.

WOMAN'S BODY IN RIVER MYSTERY

MILDURA, Sun.—Police believe a woman whose body was found in the Murray River near Renmark last week died about six months ago and may have been murdered.

Despite extensive investigations in three States, her identity is not yet known, and may never be known.

Police believe she may have been murdered, because the skull and body were severely fractured.

Renmark fisherman, Charles Wilson, found the body floating in the river about 12 miles upstream from Renmark on Wednesday.

Police say that the body apparently floated down the flooded river and could have come from as far away upstream as Albury.

Adelaide pathologist, Dr. J. M. Dwyer, who conducted a second postmortem examination on the body on Saturday, said the woman had been dead six months or more.

He described her as about 5ft. 2in., of heavy build weigh-

ing between 11 and 12 st., and aged between 40 and 50 years.

Police believe the condition of the body indicates that the woman had not been in the water for the full period since she died.

They say it is likely that the body was exposed by floodwaters and washed into the river's midstream by a strong current.

None of the descriptions of women reported missing along the river more than six months ago fits that of the dead woman.

Renmark police believe the woman could have been one of the many itinerants who frequent places all along the river.

Inquiries at Renmark are being handled by Det. D. O. Flint. He is preparing a report for the Coroner (Mr. H. H. Hobcroft).