

“Your Vote Is Wanted”: C. J. Dennis at the *Call*

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C. J. Dennis made his name with *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* (1915) and *The Moods of Ginger Mick* (1916), vernacular verse narratives that were huge hits with the Australian public during the First World War. In these books, he produced humorous, nationalist and comforting portraits of the larrikin and the ANZAC. During the time when they were published, Dennis was working as a clerk with the Department of the Navy, and then as private secretary to Senator E. J. Russell, both jobs having come through his strong Labor Party connections. Dennis’s radical leanings had been evident since he became founding editor of the *Gadfly*, a satirical weekly published in Adelaide, in February 1906.

In 1976, however, Geoffrey Hutton’s *C. J. Dennis, The Sentimental Bloke: an Appraisal 100 Years After His Birth* is almost entirely silent about Dennis’s political views and political verse. In spite of hundreds of leftist contributions by Dennis over many years, particularly to the *Gadfly* and the *Bulletin*, Hutton’s book has only a vague allusion to those ideas and their expression in the first half of a single sentence, before they are dismissed in the second half. He writes: “Dennis held strong opinions on many well-aired public topics but he was at his best when he was being funny, deftly and brilliantly funny” (10).

Given that its publication was funded by the Victorian State Government as part of the 1976 celebrations of the centenary of Dennis’s birth, the book’s reticence is, perhaps, not surprising. The C. J. Dennis Centenary Committee was chaired by Sir George Reid, Liberal Member of the Victorian Legislative Assembly and namesake of Dennis’s long-time political enemy and trenchant free-trade advocate from the early years of the twentieth century. Prominent in many of the commemorative events was Ian McLaren, another Liberal MLA and Dennis’s bibliographer. Reid commissioned Hutton to produce a biography commemorating the writer who had “contributed so much to the literary development” of Victoria (Hutton 2). The Foreword was by the Premier, Dick Hamer, whose face greeted the reader opposite the title page.

C. J. Dennis, *The Sentimental Bloke* was launched at Government House by the Governor, Sir Henry Winneke, who had attended Scotch College with the author many years earlier.

Hutton makes no mention of Dennis's distinctly *unsentimental* attacks on the Liberal Party—a distant precursor to the current Liberal Party—in the 1914 election. For the duration of the campaign, he was employed by the chief publicity vehicle for the Labor Party, the *Call*, a ha'penny daily published by the Australian Workers Union from the *Australian Worker* office at 129 Bathurst Street, Sydney, and distributed nationally. During his brief stay in Sydney, he contributed about fifty poems and over twenty prose pieces in a frenetic seven-week period, at first often under pseudonyms, including "The Glug", "Doreen", "T. O'Langi", and "Ned", before reverting to his more usual "Den", and then simply "C. J. Dennis".

Certainly, Dennis's political views became more conservative as he got older, and the world-view of his most famous books, *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* and *The Moods of Ginger Mick*, is much more benign than his partisan contributions to the *Call*. But that is no justification for ignoring Dennis's time in Sydney—as Hutton does—or downplaying it and the kind of verse he was producing—as his biographer, A. H. Chisholm, does. His brief period at the *Call* illustrates an important phase of his writing life as well as a low-point of his personal life.

Backblock Ballads and Other Verses, Dennis's first collection, had appeared in the middle of 1913, to good reviews if mediocre sales. He was delighted with the critical reception and was inspired to develop the four Sentimental Bloke pieces from the volume into a book in their own right. But by 29 November of that year, he was feeling very lonely in his Toolangi shack, in the bush near Healesville, and was having "to work like blazes to fend off the blues" (Dennis to Croll, Croll papers). On 10 February 1914, he wrote to Bob Croll: "It's the dull, drab, dreary damnable *flatness* of things that's getting to me. I feel just like flat soda-water" (Croll papers). Dennis was off the drink, but struggling with his cravings, as he confided to his friend:

I think, possibly, that it is my poor old abused system fretting for a little drug-produced excitement—for the whiskey that biteth with its tail and the beer that giveth the nasty suck. I've not the slightest "craving" for the brimming bowl (possibly because I recognise inwardly that tho' a couple of whiskeys would make me glad for a time they would also make me doubly sad afterwards)—but possibly my nerves have been suddenly reminded of the buck-up they used to get in bygone days. I used to get these attacks pretty frequently and severely when I first boarded the water waggon, but they grew weaker and rarer. I'm

thinking that possibly this is the last dying duet of the whiskey wasp and the beer-bug. It's rather an interesting psychological study, but I'd rather someone else were the subject.

Dennis wasn't sure what he wanted, but he was restless and felt he should get out of Toolangi. Early in the new year he wrote to James Davidson, editor of the Melbourne *Herald*, about a job but was glad when a permanent position was not available. In March and April his mood had swung and he was in a phase of almost manic activity, as he put it, “waxing enthusiastic”, “see[ing] great possibilities” and “firing topical stuff at the ‘Bulletin’ by almost every mail” (to Croll, 27 March, 3 April, Croll papers). At the same time he submitted political poems to the *Worker*, wrote a story for the *Lone Hand* and a play for the *Bulletin*, which was not published, and he was mapping out a novel, also never published (Dennis to Croll, 26 February, 16 April, Croll papers).

When the Liberal Prime Minister, Joseph Cook, sought and obtained the first double dissolution of Federal Parliament on 8 June 1914, Dennis had been living in the isolation of Toolangi for more than six years. Labor's defeat in the 1913 federal election had been unexpected and narrow—the result left the Party with just a one-seat deficit in the House of Representatives and a substantial majority in the Senate (McMullin 40). Cook hoped to improve the Liberal results for both Houses. For Dennis, the offer of a position in Sydney on the *Call* provided a solution to his restlessness, the chance to continue the political writing he had been publishing in the *Bulletin*, and the prospect of a community of bohemian writers like the one he had enjoyed while editing the *Gadfly* in Adelaide in 1906-7.

He moved to “Lammermuir”, 96 Glenmore Road, Paddington, in time for the first issue of the *Call* on 20 July. It contained Dennis's “Do You Remember, Joe?” a poem devoted to the Prime Minister. Cook had been a radical coal-miner in Lithgow, then MLA and leader of the New South Wales Labor Party in 1893, but had gradually drifted to conservatism. One of the chief focuses of the Labor campaign was his betrayal, devastatingly scorned by Dennis. “Do You Remember, Joe?” is prefaced by five excerpts from Hansard, quoting Cook's radical views from the early 1890s; it repeatedly addresses him:

Do you remember how you bade us stand
Shoulder to shoulder in the Labor cause;
And how you scorned rich grabbers of the land;
And cheered aloud for socialistic laws?
You were a revolutionary then—
The plutocrat you made your deadly foe.
Ah me! 'Twas then you had respect of men
Do you remember, Joe?

And it stresses his unreliability:

What were you yesterday, or Tuesday week?
 What flowers of speech next Friday will you pluck?
 Are you quite certain when you rise to speak
 Just where you are—or do you trust to luck?

Henry Lawson was deeply moved by the poem and left a clipping in the Angus & Robertson offices, with a note for George Robertson saying that it was, in his words, “hitting me hard”, and asking what the publisher thought of it (n.d. [July 1914] Mitchell MSS A1920). Never one to under-exploit a good idea, Dennis produced another “Do You Remember, Joe?”, as well as “Do You Remember, Joe? Part 1”, “Do You Remember, Joe? Part 2”, “Do You Remember, Joe? Part 3”, and various other poems on the now-Liberal leader’s inconsistency.

Cook was not the only Labor rat to contest the 1914 election. William Johnson, the Liberal candidate for Lang, NSW, had once been active in the Labor movement and, perhaps predictably, Dennis wrote “Do You Remember, Bill?” about his desertion. The poem sees an echo of his about-face in an incident in the wilds of the Northern Territory, for which Johnson was famous:

And was it not—(forgive the smile)—
 A man who bore your name
 Who sat down on a crocodile,
 And earned undying fame?
 And, when he found he was at fault
 He rose with clamor shrill,
 And—’twas his second somersault.
 Do you remember, Bill? (31 July 1914)

As well as attacking the Liberal leadership and candidates in these and many other contributions, Dennis lavished praise on his own side of politics. Andrew Fisher, the Labor leader, was described as a mate of all working men in “Andy”, a poem asserting the support for Fisher in all sectors of the economy, beginning with the founding radicals of the Labor movement:

In the mines beyond Coolgardie, in the sheds way back o’ Bourke,
 They are talking now of Andy as they go about their work.
 On the wharves of Sydney Harbor, in the northern sugar mills,
 ’Mid the bullock teams and palings on Toolangi’s timbered hills,
 They are battling for their champion who has seen them safely thro’
 Since the days when hope was distant and the Cause was young and new.
 Mate to mate good cheer is calling; mate with mate is clasping hands,
 As they pledge the trusted leader of Australia’s toiling bands. (25 July 1914)

A brief and hyperbolic article, "The Flesh and the Spirit", made much of the bravery of Billy Hughes, the deputy leader, who continued to campaign after an accident that had broken two of his ribs. This bravery put him in great company, wrote Dennis: "Men like the Julius Caesars, the Nelsons, the Napoleons of the world seem to regard broken bones as mere trivial circumstances" (11 August 1914).

While in Sydney, Dennis probably made contact with his old friends from the *Gadfly*, Archie Martin and Beau Smith. He met Lawson, who was "very complimentary" (Dennis to Lawson), though the latter's partial knowledge of him was evident when Lawson later described Dennis to George Robertson as [quote] "practically tetotaler [sic] and a bit on the gentleman side" (n.d. [1915] Mitchell MSS A1920). Lawson was correct in noticing something of a patrician aspect to Dennis, but in Sydney it became clear that "the whiskey wasp and the beer-bug" had by no means sung their "last duet". Perhaps their voices were warmed by his association with Rod Quinn and Randolph Bedford, later "reputed to be able to out-drink any man in Queensland" (Boland 242). Bedford was a colleague at the *Call*; so was Claude Marquet, the cartoonist, for whom Dennis wrote a tribute in the *Worker* after his death in 1920, and Cecil Hartt, later the first artist to work on *Smith's Weekly*. Other writers who contributed included Frank Cotton and Mary Gilmore, both from the *Worker*.

On 4 August 1914, Britain declared war on Germany, automatically bringing the dominions into the conflict. Bedford had "a wild scheme" that he and Dennis should embark on the battle cruiser, *HMAS Australia*, the pride of the Australian navy, as war correspondents, but nothing came of it (Dennis to Croll, 4 August 1914, Croll papers).

The election campaign had begun in the knowledge that war was imminent, and Fisher's statement of unqualified support for the Empire on the same day as a similar declaration by Cook ensured that war would not be a divisive election issue. A number of Dennis's contributions, however, were directed at scoring political points on the topic. A brief article, "Hitting the 'Joss'", attacks the Prime Minister and the Governor General, Sir William Irvine, because they decided a meal was more important than informing the Australian public that the nation was at war, deferring the announcement, on Wednesday 5 August, until after they had eaten their lunch. In the same issue he chastises these leaders for their lack of statesmanship in refusing Fisher and Hughes's offer to postpone the election (10 August 1914).

The day before the news broke in Australia, Dennis wrote from the *Worker* office to Bob Croll about the rumour and excitement that was sweeping

Sydney. He claims to have tried to do his bit to settle things down by visiting a milliner known to Croll, “to assure the girls that most of the yarns that were going about the town were merely piffle. A number of the women—and some of the men here—are getting very excited” (4 August, Croll papers). The women in the millinery shop, however, had different ideas about who was overexcited, and the account one of them gave A. H. Chisholm provides a glimpse of Dennis’s appearance, and more than a hint of the effect of overwork and overindulgence:

we had a visit from Den—a very seedy, unkempt, and generally forlorn little figure. “It’s all right,” he said grandly, “I’m here to protect you!” [. . .] I’ve no doubt [. . .] that Den’s intentions were sound, but—well, you can’t do business to the best advantage in a fashionable millinery shop while a man in grubby attire is marching around among the exhibits and making speeches. We girls, in fact, were much more troubled by the presence of our ‘protector’ than we were by the Declaration of War. (Chisholm 37)

A sharp awareness of class divisions can be seen in many of Dennis’s pieces concerning the war, such as “The Man Who Makes the Gun” (8 August 1914), which sets the huge profits for armament manufacturers against the martyrdom of the soldiers at the front. “The Patriotic Plutocrat” (24 August 1914) points out that Australian businessmen were making large donations to patriotic funds at the same time as they were laying off workers. And a brief prose piece, “Is North Sydney Exempt?”, criticises the bias in the Cook Government’s mobilisation orders, claiming that working-class areas were being “exhausted” of young men, while “Liberal” electorates were “conspicuously absent from the mobilisation orders” (6 August 1914).

Dennis had set aside his work on the *Sentimental Bloke* book, but the *Bulletin* released “The Play” four days before the first issue of the *Call* and “Mar” on 6 August, amidst news of the outbreak of war. In the *Call*, his only experiment with working-class language was “A Political Hypochondriac”, where he returns to Cook’s past, noting that “E used to eat a Labor dite/ In days that’s past an’ gone” (27 July 1914). The deeply divided society depicted in Dennis’s contributions to the *Call* could not be further from the harmonious consensus he was so keen to present in *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke*, released just over a year later. Dennis’s vision of Liberals on election day pulls no punches:

In their motors fat voters will bowl to the booth,
Exploiters whose living is easy and smooth,
State Righters and blighters, who don’t care a jot
For the—haw—common people, will throw in their lot

With Magnates and Middlemen, owning fat wads
 Whose yearning to diddle men passeth the odds
 And the bookies, the boodlers, the Stock Exchange crew
 Whose desire is to plunder the Public—(that’s you). (18 August 1914)

The Moods of Ginger Mick (1916) went even further than *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* with its assertions of mateship between all classes at the front, extending its celebration of unity and harmony to the Empire, with Mick accepted as “a gallant gentleman” by Trent, “an English toff wiv swanky friends” (119). At the outbreak of hostilities, however, Dennis and some of the leftist press were more equivocal (Walker 250-51): a week after war had been declared, he could mercilessly lampoon the Australian and British powerbrokers, feasting in London at the “Trocadero”, while “’Tis the man who humps the burden who must sacrifice to war” (12 August 1914).

The Labor Party felt that the Liberals were vulnerable on their inaction over the American owned “Beef Trust”, an organisation accused of driving down prices for farmers and driving up prices for consumers, and Dennis had almost a dozen prose and verse offerings on this topic. As “Doreen”, he wrote of rising prices for families in “The Soaring Chop”. “Fattening on Britain’s Need”, suggested that the Trust was intending to profiteer from the disruption to Britain’s food supply (22 July 1914). Many of his contributions lampooned the Government’s decision to set up an enquiry into the operations of the Trust rather than acting more decisively (6 August 1914). In “Will You Wait Till You’re Hurt? A Little Dissertation on the Wisdom or Otherwise of Killing a Tiger Before He Bites”, he compared the Labor and Liberal positions:

If you wish to be quite sure
 That the Trust will be outed,
 Biffed, banged, smashed, confounded, kicked out and utterly routed
 Before it has time to do harm to yourself, or your wife, or your wife’s
 cousin, or the cousin of the wife of your friend and neighbour,
 Then vote Labor.

If, on the other hand, before the Trust is burst,
 You prefer to be hurt a little first—
 Not seriously killed, you know, but just banged about a bit, and sand-
 bagged, and garrotted, and hit with a bottle and partially paralysed
 below the waist—
 You can take it from Mr. Cook that your case will be considered—
 without undue haste.
 Then, if you would like a Board to gravely consider your abrasions
 and sprains;
 And a Select Committee to leisurely examine your aches and pains;

And a Royal Commission to enquire into each particular cut and
 contusion,
 Then, by all means, my dear friends, vote for the Fusion. (1 August 1914)

On 14 August Dennis wrote to Grace Croll, saying, perhaps euphemistically, that he had been “rather ill and very, very busy” (Croll papers). His Melbourne friends urged him to come home, but Dennis felt he had made a commitment to the *Call* and wanted to see it through (McLaren 27). The heavy workload and heavy drinking took its effect, and his output from the last couple of weeks of the campaign was half that of the first couple. In the final edition on 4 September, the day before the election, his rather lame offering, “Your Vote Is Wanted”, indicates that he was almost spent. It begins:

Your vote is wanted, that is plain,
 For you have everything to gain.
 And you must vote for men who'll give
 Sufficient for the poor to live.

One of the most delightful episodes in *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* is an account of Bill forgetting his promise to his new wife and staying out all night, blowing his wages on drink and gambling. The next morning he is moved to tears of remorse when, instead of scolding him, Doreen brings a cup of beef tea, an act evidently to be interpreted as generous. There are very few direct parallels between the author and his fictional characters, but this may be one. As voters were going to the booths, Dennis caught the train back to Melbourne with Randolph Bedford and Jimmy Mackay (McLaren 27), and went to stay with “Garry” and Berta Roberts, by now surrogate parents whom he regularly addressed as “Dad” and “Mother”. Grace Croll wrote of his return:

He was in an awful state after his drinking in Sydney. No one showed him any resentment of his lapse—and that dear woman Mrs Roberts had a hard time getting him back to normal—“Beef Tea” was the outcome of his reception. (29 May [1950] Dennis and Gye papers, Item 80)

The Labor Party won the election convincingly, gaining majorities in both houses. Bob Birrell has argued that, in the period after federation, the ALP’s “embrace of nation-building goals and accompanying citizenship ideals had helped build its electoral base” (276). And, there is no doubt that its strong credentials in the area of defence were very significant in a wartime context; the Labor government of 1910 had given defence a high priority (McMullin 39, 42).

Dennis’s contributions to the *Call* had sometimes been stirring, occasionally humorous, and often merely churned out. The radical views he expressed

were consistent with a significant portion of his output for the best part of a decade. But he was deliberately to show a very different face to his readership with *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* and *The Moods of Ginger Mick*, whose success rested on their encouragement of an inclusive idea of what it meant to be Australian.

The public's response to *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* inevitably meant extraordinary changes to the life of its author, and his political views were to move markedly to the right. As the royalties rolled in, Dennis struggled to adjust to the sudden wealth and celebrity status. Against the advice of George Robertson, he retired from the civil service and returned to Toolangi to devote himself to writing. When he was in Melbourne, Dennis stayed at the Menzies Hotel, where, according to Gye, he “distributed 2-bob-pieces [to waiters and attendants] as falls the gentle rain from heaven”. With wealth, his vanity came to the fore, and he “liked to mix with the Haves more than the Havenots” (Dennis and Gye papers, Item 81). Humphrey McQueen suggests that Dennis “was torn between his long-standing radicalism and an ineradicable fear of proletarian power” (352). Perhaps, though, Lawson's observation that he was “a bit on the gentleman side” was closer to the mark; his mother's family, who had a large involvement in his upbringing, had worked hard to instil old rich values in the young Dennis.

By the time he published *Jim of the Hills* (1919), his political views had altered as much as his economic and social standing. In this book, the owner of a timber mill is “stintin' himself” so he can pay his workers, while the villain is a man who wants to start a strike at the mill (51). Colleagues from the *Call* could easily have written a scathing, “Do You Remember, Den?”

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