

# **Centaurs, Bushmen and Fictitious Regnal Years: Serendipity in Annotating Furphy**

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Joseph Furphy's source for the Curr quotation in Chapter VII of *Such is Life, Pure Saddle Horses and How to Breed Them in Australia*, was useful to him for more than the local purpose of scoring a cheap shot at the expense of the squattocratic class. Furphy, in a rare act of generosity, pointed the editors to his source:

Edward M. Curr knew as much of the Australian horse and his rider as any writer ever did; and this is what he says of the back-country natives:—

'They are taciturn, shy, ignorant, and incurious; undemonstrative, but orderly; hospitable, courageous, cool, and sensible. These men ride like centaurs,' etc., etc.

Yes, yes—but why? Looking back along that string of well-selected adjectives, does n't your own inductive faculty at once place its finger on Ignorance as the key to the enigma? Notice, too, how Curr, being a bit of a sticker himself, is thereby disqualified from knowing that the centaurs were better constructed for firing other people over their heads than for straddling their own backs. (*SL* 279)

What Samuel Furphy's recent biography of Curr (2013) makes clear (that was not so clear when the 1991 annotated text was being prepared) was how mean a jibe Furphy's anti-squattocratic remark was: not only was Curr an experienced horseman, but he was also the kind of squatter who had done the Grand European literary tour in a manner that would do an old-world aristocrat proud, and who, like Joseph Furphy himself, read widely and littered his practical handbooks and treatises, like the one on Saddle horses with classical quotations. Curr perhaps aspired to become the kind of novelist Furphy himself eventually became: the former was a creative writer manqué who satisfied his

creative urges by parading his learning in unlikely (but useful) documentary non-fiction. One of the challenging (and endearing) practices of Furphy as a fiction writer, which one in time comes to expect as an annotator, is that the context for any particular allusion may be important, especially if it is erased. For example, in Chapter VII, Furphy has Tom take possession of that ‘nonpareil’ (SL 269) of pipes, the magnificent meerschaum (which smokes him (SL 272) and habitually discourses on the Larger Morality, SL 85), under the Act relating to treasure-trove, 6 Henry III c17, sec. 34 (SL 272). A reader used to Tom’s self-serving wiliness, would expect the statute to be fictitious, and it is, but the joke is better when one knows that Furphy chose a year when Henry III (reigned 1216-1272) could not enact any legislation, much less legislation relating to treasure trove (Milsom 319). Henry III was a child-king and in the sixth year of his reign, the kingdom was ruled by a regent: he did not rule in his own right until the eleventh year of his kingship. Indeed, statutes were promulgated during the period of the regencies, but not during the sixth year of his reign, and all were revoked by him when he ascended the throne: ‘he caused the charters he had formerly granted, to be cancelled, by reason of his infancy, and being in ward at the time of granting them’ (Pickering iii). Furphy, however, was careful to emulate the ways in which statutes are recorded. If Furphy’s source was Travers Twiss’s translation (1878) of the work attributed to the writer contemporary with Henry III, Henry De Bracton, *de Legibus et Consuetudinibus Angliae*, which does raise the matter of ‘*inventus thesaurus*’ (treasure trove), then it did not furnish him with the statute number or regnal year, but may have furnished the idea of a statute relating to treasure trove, and the crown prerogative claimed over such finds. Closer to hand might have been F. W. Maitland’s edition of *de Bracton’s Note Book* (1878). This arcane text exists, and possibly did in Furphy’s lifetime, in the State Library of Victoria, which Furphy is known to have used both directly and indirectly through the good offices of William Cathels, but it did not give him the leads he needed to enact the elaborate feint. Some of the intricacies of Furphy’s writing may never yield their secrets.

To return to the Curr allusion/quotation in Chapter VII: as the notes to both the first and second edition make clear, the quotation is more or less as Curr wrote it. It is what follows in Curr (and is not directly reproduced in Furphy) that is of more interest:

Ask one of them to ride the horse that has just thrown you: he examines the girth, crupper, and bridle. His face shows no emotion of any sort. If the tackle is right, he lifts his hat, lets the string fall under his chin as he replaces it, carelessly gathers up the reins, and mounts. When once in the saddle he sticks there, and enjoys the row in his own quiet way, and dismounts as unmoved as he got on, perhaps with some quiet remarks upon saddles and horses. (Curr 177)

This passage may well have supplied to Furphy ideas for the laconic, seemingly disengaged demeanour of the experienced bushmen in Chapter I. When the English remittance-man Willoughby (formerly a rider to hounds), in his innocence, offers to ride Cleopatra, a horse which bucks spectacularly on first being mounted, and is trapped under the saddle while the horse springs ‘about five feet high’, pinioning the rider’s privates in undignified, ‘ticklish’ ways under the (stolen but high quality) saddle, the native-born react, as bush protocol dictates, without ‘a trace of new chum interest’ (*SL* 234):

Price, Mosey, Thompson, and Cooper forgot the dangers of the time and discontinued their work, drawing near the spot with a carefully preserved air of indifference and pre-occupation. Even Dixon [who had been himself spectacularly bucked off the horse during the night] ignored his screwmatics, and composed his demeanour to something like apathy. (*SL* 43)

If the four bullockies display less than the required nonchalance in their running commentary and in their aspersions on the horse and Tom for buying it, Tom acts exactly like Curr’s stereotypic bushman ‘with ostentatious offhandedness, though in a prayerful frame of mind’, anticipating ‘Westminster Abbey rather than a peerage’. His eye for a spirited horse is vindicated when the creature ‘sail[s] away across the plain at his own inimitable canter’ (*SL* 44). As Curr notes, in a passage just following the one cited by Joseph Furphy in Chapter VII, but not of course adverted to in Chapter I:

Every species of vice, except buck-jumping, is quite disregarded in the bush, and a horse that does not buck is consequently considered to be quiet; kicking, plunging, rearing, bolting, &c, clearly showing that the horse,

though excited, is only playful, or he would at once had had recourse to bucking—as the only way any sensible nag could expect to eject his rider.

(Curr 179)

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