

Philip Butterss, *An Unsentimental Bloke: The Life and Work of C.J. Dennis*.

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C.J. Dennis, author of *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* (1915), was once considered the unofficial poet laureate of Australia. Throughout his career he was erroneously conflated with his famous character ‘the Bloke’ in the public imagination. ‘Many have imagined him as a sentimental bloke’, argues Philip Butterss, ‘an easygoing fellow with a naïve and slightly romantic view of the world’ (1). Since three previous biographical works have the word ‘sentimental’ in the title, Butterss’s decision to add the ‘un’ to ‘sentimental’ immediately signals his intention to examine the darker side of Dennis.

Butterss acknowledges the work done by collectors and scholars of Denniseana including J.G. Roberts, J.G. Moir, Harry Chaplin and Perry Middlemiss. Each of the previous biographies have shortcomings which Butterss seeks to redress. Alec Chisholm’s *The Making of a Sentimental Bloke* (1946) was a generous account by an admiring friend which left Dennis’s wife Olive Herron (Bidly) almost completely out of the narrative due to Chisholm and his circle’s animosity towards her (204). Ian McLaren’s *C.J. Dennis: His Life and Work* (1961) focused on the ‘sentimental’ aspects of Dennis’s nature, overlooking important elements of Dennis’s early work such as the decade of political journalism.

Of course Butterss is not the first person to write about the more disturbing aspects of Dennis’s often tumultuous life. Humphrey McQueen’s sharp article ‘Sentimental thoughts of “A Moody Bloke”: C.J. Dennis’ (1977) questions Dennis’s sexuality and his honesty, arguing that his public persona was an elaborate fabrication. What sets Butterss’s work apart from previous book length biographies is the extent to which he has mined archival material including correspondence, unpublished manuscripts and the memoir *Down the Years* (1953) written by Dennis’s wife, in order to offer a fuller portrait of a writer who has been largely neglected since the 1970s.

Dennis’s story begins in a pub in Auburn, South Australia. By the time he turned three, Dennis was living in his third pub. Butterss tactfully observes that the pub is an institution with which Dennis would have a long association. Dennis had bouts of intemperance—or ‘gettin’ on the schick’ as the Bloke would say—which recurred throughout his life, especially in his later years. His wife recalled that she would often have to put his head under a tap to sober him up enough to meet deadlines for the *Herald*. One of Butterss’s discoveries was a despairing letter from Bidly to publisher George Robertson dated March 1924: ‘I am in despair. Den is in hospital again, he has been drinking very badly, this last two years. I seem to have lost all grip on him (170).’ Bidly begs Robertson to suggest that Dennis ‘get busy on a book’ to keep him away from alcohol (170–71).

The loss of his mother when he was thirteen and his upbringing by three ‘prim, upright’ maiden aunts seems crucial to the conflicted adult he became (3). The young Dennis was described by a former classmate as ‘inclined to be effeminate’ and frequently teased for playing mainly with the girls (5). As he grew older he found the rarified sensibility of his home to be at odds with the masculinist culture at large. Butterss argues that ‘the question of what was appropriate behaviour for a man was to concern him for many years’ (5). Beginning with his rejection of his first name Clarence—which he saw as pretentious and effeminate—

Dennis used a series of nicknames, pseudonyms and abbreviations throughout his career (6). Chisholm has argued that Dennis's attraction to 'tough guys' was a form of revulsion from his own prim upbringing and an expression of the desire to escape from his increasingly asthmatic body (Chisholm, cited by McQueen 28).

Butterss demonstrates that Dennis's writing often features tension between a man's domestic duty to provide for his family and the delights of a wilder masculine world (14). One of the central concerns of *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* is present in the first poem Dennis published, 'Comin' 'Ome from Shearin'.' This poem shows experiments with language related to that used by 'larrikins' in his later work. Like the 'Bloke', the speaker regrets his gambling and drinking when returning home to his wife (13). *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* suggests the possibility for the 'softening' of a rough character who renounces physical violence, transforming into a loving husband and father. The book grew in popularity when WWI began as it was 'just what a wartime audience needed'; a reassuring story about the essential goodness of human nature (81). Butterss argues that the *Bloke* straddles the popular/high culture divide; it contains references to pastoral poetry and Shakespeare alongside Australian dialect and street slang. Critics have been alienated by its immense popularity—or the 'wrong kind of success' as David Carter puts it—resulting in minimal scholarly attention until this biography (Carter 30). For many highbrow and middlebrow readers, Dennis's popularity and accessibility have been read negatively.

H.M. Green, who dedicated an unprecedented seven pages to the *Bloke* in *A History of Australian Literature* (1961) argued that 'the Bloke is a fake, because he is compounded of incompatibles' (83). Green found it 'absurd' that a larrikin could be capable of such refinements and romantic yearnings: 'one might as well expect him to be a connoisseur in fine porcelain' (83). Butterss argues that these incongruities in part account for the *Bloke's* popularity, as it promoted hilarity while encouraging a sense of community (83).

By 1917, due to the success of the *Bloke*, Dennis was the most prosperous poet in Australian history. Dennis's newfound financial security enabled him to propose to Olive Herron. This decision evinced surprise from many of his friends who did not see Dennis as the marrying kind. Will Dyson said to Bidy: 'Clarrie was the last man I ever thought would get married. How did you get him to propose to you?' She replied: 'Because . . . I fed him' (Herron 64). Humphrey McQueen has raised questions about Dennis's sexuality (343–53). As Butterss has observed elsewhere, Dennis's closest associates from *The Critic* and *The Gadfly* did not expect him to settle into a traditional nuclear family (Butterss *Adelaide* 89).

After their marriage 'Den' and Bidy took a lease on a property in Toolangi (near Kinglake in Victoria) which they originally dubbed 'Seaview' even though the sea is nowhere in sight. Over a period of 10 years, with the help of a local handyman, they converted the mill house to a two-storey house named 'Arden.'

The *Bloke's* narrative charts a movement from an urban slum to a pastoral idyll, reflecting the author's own shift from the city to a remote bush location. As Les Murray has argued, the farm is 'away from the restraints of the city and, by implication, of class itself' (88). Class pressures may have been less pronounced in Toolangi. Dennis was, nonetheless, driven to show off his wealth by endless renovations and extensions to Arden paid for by his royalty cheques.

Dennis is an intriguing subject for a biographer given that his character seems riven by contradictions. An obituary in the *Herald* mentioned the 'combination of antithetical

characteristics' he exhibited (221). His friend Grace Croll described him as a 'queer queer mixture' (221). Collaborator Hal Gye thought he was a 'Strange fellah!' due to the juxtaposition of practicality and dandyism in his personality (221). He could be a hard-nosed manipulator in some situations and yet his energetic enthusiasms were endearing to many. He admitted himself that he had never really grown up. Through his verse, Dennis conveyed his own childlike view of the world but at times he cynically produced emotional effects in the reader.

He fancied himself as canny operator who drove a hard bargain yet he would throw away money on extravagances without a second thought. Hal Gye recounts the visit of 'a commercial man' to Toolangi to discuss the film rights to the *Bloke*:

Den was washing his dog Mick on the front verandah when the caller arrived and began to get down to business. Then the battle began: Den calm, cool indifferent, his eyes piercing and cold, the man important, and Den still scrubbing Mick. (138)

The dog's bath goes on interminably, demonstrating Dennis's seeming indifference to the caller. When Gye asks about the outcome Den observes: 'That special marathon bath put just one thousand pounds in my pocket' (138). Dennis was quick to spend this extra cash on various pleasures—as Bidy claimed: 'Den was as fond of the Flesh-Pots as any Roman Centurion of by-gone times' (136). His extravagance with money—or 'open handedness'—had unfortunate consequences for his widow who was left 'as poor as when she met him' after Dennis squandered his once substantial earnings (203).

The relationship between Dennis's life and his work was pivotal to the way his writing was read when it was first published. Dennis noted that the last of the *Bloke*'s songs 'The Mooch o' Life' was accepted as the author's own experience; he was pictured as a 'reformed character' who had attained 'complete felicity' in a married partnership. Dennis's public persona would have been less captivating had he been known as a lonely bachelor prone to depression and alcoholism (Chisholm 61–62). McQueen argues that Dennis's public posturing as 'sentimental' was a deliberate attempt to trap the bourgeoisie financially through book sales and aesthetically through having them 'praise his contrived emotional falsehoods as profoundly decent human feelings' (McQueen 27).

Whatever the motivations for the creation of Dennis's iconic characters, they were taken up enthusiastically by the general public. After his death at age 61, J.A. Lyons, Prime Minister of Australia at the time, said: 'I am sure that I speak for all Australians in expressing deep regret at the death of C.J. Dennis. He was the Robert Burns of Australia. He created characters which have become immortal and he captured the true Australian spirit. Already his work is world-famous, and future generations will treasure it' (202).

Butterss helps the reader to make sense of Dennis's varied publishing record, taking pains to examine the unpublished work as well as the well-known, showing that he had a number of 'failed' projects such as *Limp Ben*, a book about a maimed returned soldier and his fixation on a female neighbour. Other works had less longevity due to their publication in serial form, such as the 'Ben Bowyang' letters, from a semi-literate country bumpkin to the *Herald*. Although the quality of Dennis's work over his lifetime was uneven, he was one of Australia's most prolific authors. Perry Middlemiss estimates that 'Dennis appears to have produced somewhere in the vicinity of 4,000 pieces of prose and poetry during his 40 or so years as a writer. It would be hard to find another Australian writer who comes close to the

sheer volume of material he produced' (Middlemiss). According to Ian McLaren's calculations, more than 900,000 copies of Dennis's books had been sold by 1980, making Dennis the most popular of all Australian poets (216). In the preface to the first edition of *Bloke*, Henry Lawson pays homage in Dennisean 'slanguage': 'I dips me lid' (69). Butterss reveals that Dennis deliberately dropped any allusion to their shared political sympathies from Lawson's original preface to prevent readers from being alienated by the book's radical intentions (69–70). Ironically, Lawson's preface had a much greater circulation than any of his own books (70). Dennis went on to eclipse both Lawson and Banjo Paterson but has since fallen behind them, in terms of literary reputation (Middlemiss).

In Chapter 14, Butterss meticulously details Dennis's 'afterlife' decade by decade. As with other notable literary figures, there was a hiatus between Dennis's death in 1938 and a resurgence of interest in the 1950s. Just as official forms of remembrance were considered and executed—the most ironic being the C.J. Dennis memorial drinking fountain near the District Hotel in Auburn—other material memories began to diminish. In the early 1960s Dennis's Toolangi house Arden was receiving an estimated 6000 visitors per year. Arden was burnt to the ground later in the 1960s when a kerosene refrigerator caught alight. In 1965 two of Dennis's childhood homes—the Beetaloo and the District Hotels—were demolished. Hal Gye and Bidy both died in late 1960s and the cohort of readers who enjoyed the *Bloke* books during the First World War was steadily diminishing.

The C.J. Dennis Society now assumes responsibility for keeping interest in his writing alive. Every September Dennis's birthplace—the town of Auburn—runs a C.J. Dennis festival in his honour. The town of Laura has significant Dennisean relics on display, including a pub window he scratched his name into as a youth. In Toolangi, Jan and Vic Williams operate a tearooms in the restored Singing Garden, the site of the annual C.J. Dennis Poetry festival. The inspiration for Dennis's final work, *The Singing Garden* (1935)—a celebration of the sounds, sights and emotions that the author had experienced there—the Toolangi garden remains Dennis's most popular living memorial.

Inevitably perhaps, true believers are becoming fewer and older. The chances of younger readers encountering the *Bloke* directly are slim, according to Butterss, given that it is probably 'unteachable' due to offensive terms such as 'nigger' which appears in 'The Stoush o' Day' (218). Nevertheless, Dennis is a distinctive presence throughout Australian popular culture, as in Chopper Read's homage 'The Semi-Mental Bloke' in *For the Term of His Unnatural Life: Chopper 4* (2012) which does not get a mention in the biography.

At such a temporal distance from its original publication, Butterss observes, Dennis's work is 'no longer judged on its own terms' (222). It is virtually impossible for modern readers to interpret the text in its contemporaneous context. Dennis makes explicit connections between Dennis's character and the merits of his verse, arguing that it was precisely the competing aspects of Dennis's nature that enabled him to 'put on paper the contradictory feelings of his compatriots towards his country' (222). Compared to the overly positive biographical works on one side and McQueen's harsh account of Dennis on the other, *An Unsentimental Bloke* is fair-minded and balanced. Butterss endeavours to communicate the man's appealing qualities as well as his deficiencies, bringing a wealth of photographic and textual resources together to produce a nuanced, bittersweet portrait.

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