

The Eton Boy and Such is Life

Julian Croft

University of New England

Damien Barlow in his wonderful article on Tom Collins' dog, has rightly pointed to the importance of Pup the kangaroo dog in Furphy's *Such is Life*. (Barlow 2013) Pup is the name the dog goes by, but his proper name (surely it can't be a pedigree name?) we are told is 'The Eton Boy.' (Furphy 126) I have often puzzled over this name despite the editors of *The Annotated Such is Life* glossing it with the following entry:

'The Eton Boy' The title of a one-act farce, usually attributed to Thomas Morton Jr (1842), though Samuel French's Acting Edition gives Edward Morton as the author. It was also a not uncommon pseudonym; cf. *A Day of My Life; Or Everyday Experiences at Eton*, by an Eton Boy, London, 18-?; and *The Adventures of Ariston*, by an Eton Boy, London, T. Cadell, 1830. (Furphy 383, Note 126: 19)

The puzzle was, why did Furphy choose this particular farce for the name of Collins' dog, and what significance could it have in the wider interpretation of the whole work?

I now think it most likely that the name is a reference to Edward Morton's play *The Eton Boy* (1843).¹ The play must have been current in Melbourne in the 1860s as Marcus Clarke refers to it in his journalism in his 1874 piece 'The Café Lutetia,' which celebrated the passing of the Melbourne Bohemia of the 1860s centred on the Theatre Royal and its attendant Café de Paris:

Which of our respectable married friends presumes to forget those days? The days when Ricardo was playing Verges, when Marwood was working hard as Don Antonio, when Flambert and Podgers held the stage, when Mrs. Woffington was our leading lady, when Hypatia did not disdain to play the Eton Boy. Alas, poor stage! Alas, happy memories! (Clarke 667)

In a recent note to the author, Mimi Colligan speculates that 'Hypatia' was 'probably Rosa Dunn (c.1840-1920), Marcus Clarke's sister-in-law and likely "Innamorata".' She goes on to add:

Rosa had left the stage in October 1863 to marry a wealthy wheat-broker. She played the part of Fanny in September 1863 at Barry Sullivan's Theatre Royal performance of ... *The Eton Boy*. (Colligan 2016)

It seems Rosa prospered as Clarke goes on to reference her present (1870s) respectability with her own carriage. As to the farce itself, some indication of its lack of respectability is apparent in an account from the *Advocate* (Melbourne), 3 May 1873:

The afterpiece was "*The Eton Boy*," which had been selected to afford Mr. Guyon an opportunity of appearing in female dress, and thus demonstrating that, owing to his height, 5 feet 10 inches, he could not have passed himself off as a woman ... Miss Louise Crawford, as the Eton Boy, made a favourable impression; but it

seemed to us that she was rather rude in using the boxing gloves upon Dabster (Mr. John Dunn) in a manner rather too practical to be quite a joke. Captain Popham, as played by Mr. Guyon, had no points of excellence. It was, in fact, a mediocre performance, without any very good or very weak points; but one fault was committed by Mr. Guyon, which people of any strict propriety condemn severely. In the scene in which he appeared as Fanny, he stooped to tie his boot-lace, and following literally the stage instructions, he showed rather too much of his leg. This was in bad taste; it was broad comedy of the lowest kind, and it was, therefore, unsuited to the piece and to the boards on which he was performing. But, nevertheless, Mr. Guyon has been condemned much too severely for his mistake. On the modern stage there are exhibitions which more strongly call for censure than his bad taste in this matter, and they altogether escape notice. At some of these displays modest women might be excused for blushing, but none but those who are in the habit of averting their eyes from an uncovered table leg could have been really offended by Mr. Guyon's display of a white stocking to his knee. Black silk ones on reverend gentlemen are seen quite as high in the street, and persons in livery, unconscious of offence, display more of their leg in Collins-street every day than Mr. Guyon did on Saturday evening. Nevertheless, the consequence is to him that he is not to appear again on the stage of the Royal.

Eight years earlier the reviewer in the Melbourne *Leader* had no such qualms about the play's acceptable humour:

... performances have concluded with that old stock favourite of Royal audiences, "The Eton Boy". In this, Mr Chas. Young finds ample scope for a humour which is always keenly relished by Melbourne playgoers. (*Leader* [Melbourne], 3 June 1865)

As the alert reader will now realize, *The Eton Boy* involves cross-dressing, in fact much cross-dressing, and some of the word-play is low enough to have suited the more robust audiences of the early nineteenth century, though obviously tastes had changed by the 1870s. Despite it being a one-acter, a plot summary is rather complicated. Fanny's father the Colonel wants her to marry Dabster, a London effete, but she has been carrying on an illicit correspondence with Popham, a soldier, through her maid Sally. Dabster comes to press his suit while the Colonel is absent, and Sally and Fanny conspire to dress Fanny as Tom, her cousin on holidays from Eton. I imagine that many in mid-century contemporary audiences would have been aware as Shakespeare's of the low connotations of characters' names, and with 'Fanny' and 'Tom' (see Eric Partridge²) they would have had a sly laugh at the double gendered nature of the heroine. Fanny as Tom plays the part of the sport-loving, huntin' and shootin' young country squire, even taking his/her boxing gloves to her intended. The teasing of Dabster is interrupted by news that Popham, the secret lover, is on his way. Dabster confesses that there is bad blood between them as Popham once played a hoax on him, by persuading a 'great hobble-de-hoy' of a boy to dress as a girl and flirt with him. To get his revenge, Dabster asks Tom to dress as Fanny, which, he argues, should be easy given his beardless youth and his family resemblance, and gull Popham. Of course Tom/Fanny agrees. Popham enters, Fanny appears as Fanny, and Dabster encourages Fanny to openly flirt with Popham, to kiss him, and even accept from him the gold ring which Dabster had brought with him and has given to his rival. Dabster is full of glee at the prospect of a reveal in which Popham realises that he has made 'violent love' to a man. The progress of Dabster's plot is interrupted by the arrival of the Colonel. Things become even more complicated. (Are you keeping up?) As the real Fanny is supposed to be arriving

with the Colonel, Sally, Fanny, and Popham arrange for Popham to dress as Fanny, while Fanny stays in drag as Tom. And thus the denouement of the farce as the Colonel enters and finds chaos rules. Finally Dabster is disabused of the plot he thought he was making, although he is mightily embarrassed at having carried out some heavy flirtation with Popham dressed as Fanny. Popham and Fanny unite, the Colonel is resigned to the alliance, Sally is glad that as a servant she has no taste for love, and Dabster is relieved to be out of it all.

Younger readers of *Such is Life* in 1903 when it was finally published might have been one generation removed from the popular culture tradition of *The Eton Boy*, but when the manuscript of the novel was written in the 1890s, most people of Furphy's vintage with access to popular theatre would have been alive to the resonances of references to it. The one overt reference occurs in Chapter Three of both the manuscript and the published versions. There, Tom has come to magistrate Quarterman's residence to retrieve Pup, lost the night before in Tom's naked mistaken excursus across the Murray into Victoria. Quarterman's daughter Jemima takes Tom to where Pup is being kept in a loose-box (a box for a horse which is kept loose), his collar missing and chained to the manger. She is embarrassed and blushes because it is obvious that her father is planning to keep the dog despite the collar which indicated that it was not a stray. Larceny, it seems, runs in the family, as Tom has already heard that her two brothers are at that moment illegally cutting down protected red gum on the nearby river bank. An embarrassed silence ensues as Tom unbuckles the dog, which is broken by Jemima in the following exchange:

“You call him ‘Pup’,” observed the girl girlishly. “He’s a big pup.”
 “His proper name is ‘The Eton Boy’,” replied the wretch wretchedly.
 And neither of us could see anything in the other’s remark. (Furphy 126)

Perhaps is it putting a textual butterfly to the rack, but these few words seem significant to me. My parsing of the exchange is thus. First: ‘Pup’ the name, presumably chosen by Tom when he bought the dog eight months ago³, must have nothing to do with size or age, but some other quality. Assuming that the dog when acquired was full-grown and already named, which seems likely, then what other quality could it be? The most obvious connotation of the name/word is in the phrase ‘to be sold a pup,’⁴ in other words, the true nature of the dog was not evident when bought, and like the ‘Eton Boy’ was the opposite of what it appeared. There seems to be little doubt as to the dog’s sex, it is always referred to as male, so the ambiguity must rest elsewhere. I suspect it might be to do with behaviour. Although Tom treats the animal selflessly with kindness and concern, its behavior is always one of self-interest,⁵ and is the opposite of the faithful hound celebrated in nineteenth-century sentimental art, for example Sir Walter Scott or Landseer,⁶ or even in *Such is Life* with Nosey Alf’s collie.⁷ We might note that Tom can’t resist making fun of Jemima’s literalness when she remarks on the contradiction in the dog’s name ‘Pup.’ The true nature of the world and its subtle ambiguities are only know to ‘men over forty—“old hands”,’⁸ not young rational women.

Another point to be made about Pup’s behavior is his ‘lack of sagacity,’ a trait he shares with his owner who we know is blind to the significance of many clues presented to him about those around him, the most telling of which is the true identity of ‘Nosey Alf,’ the cross-dressed boundary rider. We might note the exchange between Nosey Alf and Tom at the end of Chapter Six of *Such is Life* where Alf admires Pup and Tom responds:

“As you say, he’s a fine dog. I don’t know what I should do without him.”
 “I don’t know what I should do without my dog, either,” replied Alf. And he

related some marvellous stories of the animal's sagacity; to which, of course, I couldn't respond on Pup's behalf. (Furphy 261)

The editors of the Annotated *Such is Life* note 'A rapid survey of some thirty references to Pup ... reveals no details that Tom could have used' (Furphy 447, Note 261: 48) That is not surprising. Bush lore held that 'Bushmen frequently judge a man's character from the behavior of his dog towards him.'⁹ Second: "The Eton Boy" means nothing to Jemima, because, presumably, she is young woman of about 20 brought up in a country town by a strict patriarch, and has never been exposed to the licentiousness of the Melbourne stage of several decades ago.

Nevertheless, *The Eton Boy* is about gender confusion, and so is *Such is Life*, especially when it comes to Tom's ability to read behavior as well as he read Pup's when he bought him. So how well does Tom 'read' Jim/Jemima?

His first sight of her is when he sees her riding past the haystack in which he is hiding to cover his nakedness after losing his clothes in the Murray. In pursuit of a pair of trousers to cover his shame, he has come to the Quarterman's farm and overheard a conversation among the women that 'Jim' is about to arrive. Thinking that he might be able to stop a fellow male and beg a pair of trousers, he lies in wait for his arrival. Instead the rider turns out to be a young woman whose Amazonian presence he describes in great detail:

... "Jim" was a magnificent young woman, riding barebacked, *à la* clothes-peg; the fine contour of her figure displayed with an amazonian audacity which seemed to make her nearly as horrid as myself. (Furphy, 115)

There is in this passage a certain sexual *frisson*, as Tom describes Jemima's barely concealed breasts,¹⁰ and his use of the word 'horrid,' which F H Mares notes might carry overtones of its original meaning of 'stiff and erect.'¹¹ The erotic continues in the rest of the passage:

I noticed her pliant waist spring in easy undulation to the horse's flying leap. And so, with that thick cable of platted hair flapping and surging down her back, she vanished from the scene. She was a phantom of delight, when first she gleamed upon my sight; but the revulsion of feeling was one of the quickest and fullest I ever experienced. (Furphy 115)

It is hard to be sure what Tom means by 'revulsion.' Is it a revulsion against his erotic response to a young woman, or the sudden change in his feelings from realizing that the expected male 'Jim,' and his possible rescuer from nudity, is a woman? In the latter case, the 'revulsion' comes from the total inversion of expectation; in the former the word carries its negative connotations of 'revolting,' which makes one wonder about Tom's view of sexual feelings. Whatever the case, Tom's response is chaotic. He has similar problems when talking with Jemima (he now knows her correct name) when he returns to the Quarterman's to retrieve Pup. Which brings us back to the original passage under scrutiny.

Why is Tom a 'wretch' replying 'wretchedly' to Jemima? Prior to their conversation about Pup's name, Tom had analysed Jemima's blushing in Tom's presence as embarrassment at her father's obvious deviousness:

A terrible tie of sympathetic estrangement bound this sweet scapegoat and me

asunder, or divided us together; and each felt that salvation awaited the one who spoke first, and to the point—or rather, from the point. All honour to Jim; she paced¹²— (Furphy 126)

Jemima is the scapegoat for her father's crime, and both of them are aware of it, hence the difficulty in speaking first. That's Tom's interpretation, and it is quite reasonable. But there are other reasons for the blush which Tom is quite blind to, and which he misreads as mistakenly as he misread his own dog. The older Tom recounting this event (remember he is writing this at some point in the future) is quite aware of what might be going on in Jemima/Jim's mind. Three months after their meeting Tom receives a love letter (Furphy 226) which I have suggested (Croft 93) is from Jim Quarterman. I speculated then that Tom is too embarrassed to admit to the reader who it is from, and the same reticence is evident in his description of this little transaction. The wretch is indeed wretched in recognizing the real reason for the blush, but refusing to acknowledge it (now or then).

It is instructive to read closely the rest of the scene in which Jemima in demotic rural register and Tom in standard formal, educated English rehearse the morning's events, and note Jim's increasing reverence and her shy signs of infatuation with the scholarly and gentlemanly Tom. Their conversation ends with reluctance and embarrassment:

“Well, I won't keep you out in the sun,” said I reluctantly. “Goodbye, Miss Q——. And I'm very much obliged to you.”

“Oh, don't mention it! I'm sure we're very happy to”——she hesitated, blushing desperately.

“Well, good-bye, Miss Jemima.”

“Good-bye,” she murmured, half-extending her hand.

“I might see you again, some time,” I remarked, almost unconsciously, as our fingers met.

“I hope so,” she faltered.

“Good-bye, Jim,” said I, slowly releasing her hand.

“Good-bye.” The word sounded like a breath of evening air, kissing the she-oak foliage.

Then the maiden with the meek brown eyes, and the pathetic evidence of Australian nationality on her upper lip, returned to her simple duties. And the remembrance of Mrs. Beaudesart came down on me like a thousand of bricks. Such is life. (Furphy 127-8)

Tom's invitation for a hoped-for future meeting has been made; Tom's business address has been left at the house; and Tom has entered the realm of intimacy by using Jemima's nickname. All the elements of romance are at hand, but of course Tom has responsibilities in his unwilling relationship with Mrs Beaudesart (as did Furphy in his troubled relationship with his wife and his flirtatious relationships with Kate Baker and Miles Franklin), and nothing will come of thwarted flirtation. But such is life. Although, lurking in the future is the possibility of a love letter and a continuation of a romance.

It is ‘The Eton Boy’ which has brought them together, a spindly, slate grey, blue green kangaroo dog, a double-nature of singular self interest¹³ and ‘intra-specific mateship’¹⁴; and ‘The Eton Boy,’ the farce of gender confusion and romance, which has prefigured their relationship in a world where, as the final words of *Such is Life* remind us, we are all players bluffing and feinting on the stage. No wonder the wretch replies wretchedly.

¹ The text of the play can be found in the Hathi Trust Digital Library: catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/012434625. It is burlesque, and the play had been popular as a program filler from the 1840s through to the 1870s. There is also evidence in Trove of its performance on the goldfields. Furphy might have seen it during one of his trips to Melbourne, or in his youth on the diggings.

² Partridge. See Entry under ‘Fanny,’ ‘The female *pudenda*,’ 1860, though earlier; ‘Tom,’ sense 5, ‘a masculine woman,’ mid-C19; ‘Tommy,’ sense 6, ‘Penis,’ C19-C20; see also ‘John Thomas.’

³ Furphy, 122. Tom paid £3 for him. The original owner was a cockie—a farmer.

⁴ Damien Barlow has noted this. Barlow, 5.

⁵ My reading of Pup which Barlow persuasively argues against, but one I am happy to live with.

⁶ Furphy would have known many of the traditions of dog fidelity in the mid-nineteenth century. Walter Scott was renowned for his love of dogs, with his favourite ‘Maida’ featuring prominently in the huge statue of the author at the Sir Walter Scott Monument in Edinburgh. Edwin Landseer, famous for his ‘Monarch of the Glen’ had a breed of dog (the Newfoundland dog) named after him. His portrait of one of them ‘A Distinguished Member of the Humane Society’ was almost as widely reproduced as ‘The Monarch.’ The dog had saved many people from drowning. Equally well-known was the statue of ‘Greyfriars Bobby’ in Edinburgh, a terrier who refused to leave his master’s grave.

⁷ Again see Barlow for stories of other faithful dogs in Furphy’s fiction.

⁸ A phrase used by AG Stephens to describe the possible readership of *Such is Life*. Letter to Joseph Furphy, 25 May 1897, see Franklin, 52.

⁹ McIver, 39. McIver’s book is an account of his droving experiences as a young man in South Western Queensland and Western New South Wales in the 1880s.

¹⁰ Though if we were as pedantic as Tom the word should be singular.

¹¹ Furphy, 380, Note 115:14.

¹² *paced* Led the way, as in ‘set the pace.’ See OED. That is, Jemima initiated in this flirtatious exchange.

¹³ My reading, see Croft, 252.

¹⁴ Damien Barlow’s reading, Barlow *passim*.

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