

# Joseph Furphy: The Philosopher at the Foundry

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It is exactly one hundred years today since Joseph Furphy, the author of *Such is Life*, died. He was barely a fortnight short of his sixty-ninth birthday. His death early on the morning of Friday, 13 September 1912, was sudden and unexpected. He had been preparing for yet another day of work—but not literary work. He collapsed as he was preparing to deliver a cart load of cast-iron railings from his sons' foundry in Fremantle. That was the sort of job that he was doing in what we would think of as years of retirement. His whole life had been spent in manual labour. As he once told A. G. Stephens of the *Bulletin*, he had had 'experience of many occupations—chiefly of an arduous and thankless character'. In his youth he had done farm work and had learnt, in his own words, 'to mismanage various kinds of portable engine plant—threshing, sawing, pumping, chaff-cutting'; he had tried his hand at prospecting on 'worn out goldfields'; he had failed as a selector; and having lost his land he had worked as a bullock driver, including three years in the Riverina; and finally, both his bullock teams having died in the drought of 1883, he was destitute and turned to his elder brother for help. John gave Joe a job—I shall call him 'Joe' because that is what his family and friends called him, and he himself thought that his full name was 'sickeningly reminiscent of lilies, haloes, and women scorned' (To Stephens, 23 February 1902). (Stephens, to whom he made this remark, would have recognized the allusions to St. Joseph, the father of Jesus, who had been named patron of the Catholic Church in 1870, and to Joseph, whom Potiphar's wife attempted to seduce, in the *Book of Genesis*). As everyone here knows, during the twenty years that he worked full-time in his brother's foundry in Shepparton he wrote the novel for which he is remembered. Probably most of us when reading *Such is Life* form an image of the author as a bullock driver with his team on the seemingly endless plains of the Riverina, and forget that when he wrote the book he was earning his living as a foundry worker in a country town.

It is appropriate to mark the centenary of his death by devoting this year's John Furphy Memorial Lecture to Joe, because had John not come to his rescue and given him a secure job *Such is Life* would probably never have been written. Of the good deeds that John Furphy did

in his life, the help that he gave his brother may well have had the greatest consequence. As a farmer or a bullock driver Joe would not have had the leisure to complete a substantial book. Working for his brother, he had '16 hours "off" out of the 24' (as he told Cecil Winter, 23 September 1903). Unlike his sons, who began as apprentices in John's business and later set up on their own account, Joe showed no ambition to 'get ahead' after settling in Shepparton. To be the Poor Relation, dependent upon his brother, involved some humiliation, perhaps, but he stoically accepted his position. Not that he lacked ambition. In 1903, when *Such is Life* was published by the *Bulletin*, he had the satisfaction of having achieved the sort of success that meant more to him than material gain.

'My normal condition is stony broke', Joe had told A. G. Stephens, by way of explaining that he could not subsidise the publication of *Such is Life* (30 May 1897). (His family and friends knew that whenever he had any spare money he gave it away. He himself once said: 'If I die worth a tenner outside my typewriter and a few books, I must regard myself as an imposter' [To Cecil Winter, 15 November 1903]). In contrast with him, John was wealthy. And that was not the only difference between them, Joe told Stephens: 'without a word of a joke, he is an intolerant Conservative, an enthusiastic loyalist, a valued contributor to the War Cry, and is a local preacher of eminence'. Said Joe, with heavy irony: 'I think I see him helping to launch "Such is Life"'. It would be interesting to know what John thought of Joe's Socialism, his 'offensively Australian', anti-imperialist attitude, and his rejection of the conventional Christianity that they had known from childhood.

John's life, unlike Joe's, had been one of steady achievement. The only member of the Furphy family not to settle on the land, he had completed his apprenticeship as a blacksmith in Kyneton, and then established his own business there. In 1873 he had recognised the potential of the Goulburn Valley and moved north, starting again, this time in Shepparton. Fundamental to his success was his skill in adapting farm implements to the particular needs of the district. In November 1883, just after Joe came to work for him, The *Shepparton News* hailed John for 'having contributed to the perfecting of that essentially Australian invention—the most economical harvester in the world—THE STRIPPER' (1 November 1883). Eventually, the mass-produced harvester of H. V. McKay was to dominate the market and the manufacture of the Furphy stripper was to cease. A second invention was to become the staple of the business for many years. As every schoolboy knows—or should know—at his foundry John Furphy designed and manufactured the water-cart which not only made the family name known

throughout the country but led to a new word being added to English vocabulary. Twenty years after arriving in Shepparton, John took his sons, William and George, into partnership and J. Furphy & Sons came into being. When *Such is Life* was published in 1903, most people in Shepparton, if they knew of Joe, would have identified him merely as the unsuccessful and unassuming brother of the senior partner of the firm.

John was admired in Shepparton for both his enterprise and his moral attitudes. In 1889 the *Shepparton News*, in a series on ‘Our Industries’, identified him as one of the ‘earnest, industrious, steady-living men’, an example of the ‘man who succeeds in business because from his honesty, attention, and natural aptitude he has inspired his fellow men with confidence in his integrity’ (3 September 1889). The famous exhortation, ‘Good Better Best’, which he inscribed on the tank ends, was very expressive of his attitude to business and to life in general. He was a public figure, a man of standing in the local community: member of the Urban Waterworks Trust, leader of the temperance movement, and prominent member of the Methodist congregation. It was even rumoured once that he would stand for the Shepparton Council, but he did not enjoy controversy and declined to seek that ‘Municipal dignity’ which Tom Collins in *Such is Life* calls one of the ‘prizes of civilisation’. In the museum at Furphy’s Foundry you can now see a cast-iron wall plaque he made that reads: ‘Call on a man of business only on business. Transact your business and go about your business in order to leave him time for his business’. That combination of shrewd practicality and homely humour went along with a firmly moral stance in all aspects of his life, including his business dealings. In *Such is Life* the squatter named Stewart is described as ‘a (adj.) Christian’. For both John and Joe Furphy that was the highest praise that anyone could receive—though John would probably have preferred that the adjective were dropped.

On arriving in Shepparton John had joined the congregation of the United Free Methodists, and donated land behind his blacksmith’s shop in Wyndham Street for a church. He was a popular lay preacher, cheerfully driving out in his buggy, come wind, come weather, to take services outside Shepparton—Tallygaroopna, Toolamba, Kialla, Tank Corner, Rushworth, Mooroopna, are some of the places mentioned in his preaching diary. He drove on country tracks that were not always easy to follow, even in moonlight. On at least one dark evening he lost his way returning from Mooroopna, and a search party found him in the early hours of the morning marooned in a lagoon. Harry Furphy, John’s nephew, remembered that John came to the family home at Sandhills, near Corop, to preach sermons to his mother Judith in her old

age. He had a vivid childhood recollection of John's sermon on the Book of Habakkuk. (When telling me about this Harry, who had what I think of as a characteristically Furphian sense of humour, asked me with a straight face for my opinion of the prophet Habakkuk. I am afraid that my opinion was not worth much).

As he grew older John left the day-to-day management of the business in the hands of his sons, and devoted more of his intellectual and creative energies to writing sermons for Methodist congregations and articles for the Salvation Army newspaper, the *War Cry*. In 1897, when Joe decided to type out the manuscript of *Such is Life*, there were only two typewriters in Shepparton, one in a lawyer's office and the other which, as Joe told Stephens, 'my Right Rev. elder brother keeps for writing out his exhortations' (28 July 1897). In the year that *Such is Life* was published, John was keeping a diary of his preaching, from which it appears that he had a stockpile of over 70 sermons, which he was continually reworking and editing. For years the two brothers were both spare-time writers, and in the foundry their thoughts may not always have been on the work in hand. An employee of J. Furphy & Sons remembered that, like John, 'Joe was always thinking' (Claude Gent to J. K. Ewers, 29 July 1958). Reviewing *Such is Life*, the *Shepparton News* remarked: 'we have in our midst a distinctly Australian philosopher, who, while he has been fashioning the implements for our fields has also been carefully moulding in his own brain gems of thought'. Joe's thinking took him in a different direction from the man whom he once described as my 'well-to-do and correspondingly right-thinking brother' (*Bulletin*, 22 September 1904), and Joe's writing was of a different order of creativity from his brother's.

John and Joe were alike, though, in their commitment to Christian principles—and reading *Such is Life* you may think that there was more than one preacher in the family. For both of them the essence of Christianity was to be found in the Sermon on the Mount, which is described in *Such is Life* as 'no fanciful conception of an intangible order of things, but a practical, workable code of daily life, adapted to any stage of civilisation'. John would have had no difficulty with that formulation, but his interpretation of what that meant would have been different from Joe's. He argued against individualism (which he defined as 'selfishness') and praised altruism (which he described as self-denial), saying that altruism was 'as old as the Sermon on the Mount and is the foundation of the Kingdom of God' (*War Cry*, 9 October 1897). The whole thrust of John's preaching was to encourage people to live better, less

selfish lives as individuals. John's Christianity did not lead him to see a need to re-make the social order: Joe's Christianity led him directly to Socialism.

On first settling in Shepparton Joe may have talked over with John some of the radical ideas that he had started to develop in the Riverina, but he would have discovered quite quickly how far he had moved from the attitudes of John and his parents. According to Joe's own account, he had undergone a sort of conversion during the years in the Riverina. He told A. G. Stephens:

[...] I was widely known as a crawling Conservative, till I met the Lord in the way to Damascus, and the usages of Riverina rasped the scales from my eyes. Even now I can never live down the fact that I have been a Vic. Squatter's land-dummy. My old Dad—whom heaven assoilzie!—used to boast that no Liberal vote had ever been recorded by a son of his. In fact, politically and sociologically—'O Lord! Thou knowst what a blanker I've been'. (14 January 1902)

Out in Riverina, alone with his team of bullocks during the day and often alone at night by a campfire, he had pondered the pattern of his own life and had begun to question the ideas of Providence that he had been taught in childhood. Joe's idealism led him to be critical of organised religion—'too much Churchianity and too little Christianity', in the words of one of his Shepparton friends (A. Lee Archer). He explained to Miles Franklin how he had ended up in a church with a congregation of one. He had tried the Church of Christ, but he thought that church was not exacting enough: what he wanted, but did not find, was a church that would expel him 'for having two coats while another had none' (20 August 1904). 'The justice of heaven must be the justice of earth', he wrote in an early draft of *Such is Life*. His belief in Christian Socialism was expounded at length through his character, Jefferson Rigby, in the first version of the book: 'Socialism', says Rigby, 'represents the secular side of Christianity'. The explicitly political element in the novel was considerably reduced when the relevant chapter was removed during revision in 1901. Joe reworked it as a separate novel, *Rigby's Romance*, and was frustrated that he could not get the second novel published, telling his friend Cathels that 'every day's delay is a public misfortune, for I flatter me that Rigby says the last word on the Ethics of State Socialism' (September 1904).

A. Lee Archer, who in his youth had known Joe in Shepparton, described him as 'very pronounced in his opinions, firm in his convictions'; but however pronounced his religious

and political opinions and however firm his convictions, he was not an activist. He was not the sort of man who writes letters to the editor or speaks at public meetings or tries to get on committees. Nor was he the sort of man who gets into arguments with people who think differently from him. In its review of *Such is Life* the *Shepparton News* described the author as a ‘quiet, self-effacing, short-spoken man’ who was ‘very little known in his own town, beyond his own immediate circle’ (21 August 1903). His life revolved around the foundry where he worked, the library at the Mechanics’ Institute where he did much of his reading, and his ‘sanctum’, as he called the unlined lean-to behind his house. He spent most of his free time in the sanctum, and it was there that, night after night, he sat alone, reading and writing by the light of a kerosene lamp shaded by an old felt hat.

Claude Gent as a young man worked with Joe in the foundry when the book was being written, but knew nothing of his literary work. Long afterwards he remembered him ‘as a very quiet old chap, just done his work & never interfered with any one, & when it was over I can see him now going to his home over the road to have his glass of claret wine, the best drink of the lot he would tell me after a big cast’ (Claude Gent to J. K. Ewers, 29 July 1958). Joe may have ended the working day with a glass of claret, but he had no liking for the Lower Bohemianism (his phrase) and was dismayed by Lawson’s alcoholism. For him the end of the working day in the foundry meant, above all, an opportunity to continue his self-education. As he told a fellow-autodidact, a Melbourne blacksmith called William Cathels, when he had paid ‘the Adamic penalty’ of daily work, then his ‘labour of love—ignorance-shifting’, began (To Cathels, 9 September 1895). To his fellow-bushman Cecil Winter he explained what he did with his leisure: ‘my idea of dissipation is to revel in some new volume of one of my favourite sciences—Ethnology or Astronomy’. And he went on: ‘Also I have a weakness for History, ancient or modern; and in my untruthful moments I claim to know off by heart all the Poetry in the English language’ (12 October 1903).

‘Education, of any kind, never was, and never can be, a curse to its possessor’, says Tom Collins in Chapter I of *Such is Life*. Joe was puzzled that so few of his fellow-workers in the foundry were members in the Mechanics’ Institute. But much as he envied the sort of knowledge—I’d be inclined to say pedantry—displayed by his friend Cathels, he was not satisfied with simply trying to reduce his ‘vast and voracious’ ignorance. Like other members of his family he had early acquired a taste for writing. Because there was no school nearby, both John and Joe had initially been taught by their mother, who had been a teacher in Ireland.

For texts she had used the Bible and the plays of Shakespeare, the effect of which is obvious in the prose of *Such is Life*. It's no surprise that Joe carried pocket editions of Shakespeare for reading by firelight in the Riverina. As young men he and John had read their own poems when courting farmers' daughters in the Kyneton district. In 1867 shortly after his marriage Joe had had a local success, winning a poetry competition run by the Kyneton Literary Society, but in the years between then and his coming to Shepparton in 1883 circumstances were against his attempting to write. According to his son Sam, he had begun to write in Shepparton as soon as his eyes had recovered from the ophthalmia that he had contracted in the Riverina. When the *Bulletin* published a short article of his in 1889 his career as a writer could be said to have begun.

We who live in an age of instant communication can hardly appreciate the significance that a paper like the *Bulletin* had for someone as isolated as Furphy. Published weekly in Sydney, it identified itself as 'The Australian National Newspaper' and carried the slogan 'Australia for the Australians'. With its team of talented journalists and black-and-white illustrators, it was lively and entertaining, and had a wide circulation throughout Australia. As its red cover indicated, it made no pretence of being neutral on political and social issues. Its radical politics and its irreverent anti-establishment attitude meant that it was not welcome everywhere. The committee of the Tatura Mechanics' Institute, for example, apparently less liberal than that at Shepparton, voted against having it in the reading room. The *Bulletin*, which Joe read every week, was a sort of lifeline for him, keeping him in touch with the world beyond the foundry. It was important in shaping his thinking on the issues of the day; and even more importantly, it offered him the possibility of publication.

The gifted editor of the *Bulletin*, J. F. Archibald, used to encourage contributions from his readers with the declaration: "Every man can write at least one book", therefore every man with brains can write at least one good story in prose or verse'. As well as articles, stories and verse, the paper printed paragraphs on diverse subjects sent by readers. Often the paragraph was a response to something another contributor or the *Bulletin* itself had said, and a controversy would be sustained for weeks. More than half a century later, Furphy's son Sam remembered such an exchange about the attempt led by the union leader William Lane to found 'New Australia' in Paraguay. In 1951 he wrote to me about his father:

I know he thought a lot of Lane, but he was entirely opposed to Lane's leaving Australia, he considered or perhaps I should say favored the idea, of staying here

to “Preach the Gospel”, if he had any message for the people, Incidentally Dads had quite a long controversy in the *Bulletin*, when the split occurred in the Lane experiment, in a rather sarcastic article they remarked “The *Bulletin* backs the party without any moral tone”. Dads tackled them on it, claiming the only one with any chance of success was the one with the moral tone. “Titus Salt” (James Edmonds) took the other side. They both dug up some ancient history, to prove their case, and kept it going for several issues. I remember Archibald wrote Dads a letter saying how he enjoyed the discussion. Though he thought “S is L” long and slow he liked Dads in an argument. ([sic]To John Barnes, 20 August 1951)

The quiet foundry worker, who had no liking for argument in person, relished the confrontation on paper with James Edmond, who was a skilled polemicist and had the same enthusiasm for displaying his erudition. (Edmond would later become editor of the *Bulletin* and change its slogan to ‘Australia for the White Man’). In 1890 both he and Furphy submitted essays on the subject of World Federation in a competition run by the famous Melbourne bookseller and publisher, E. W. Cole. As is often the case, the judges did not know the names of the authors: there were prizes for the best essays for and against, and when the names were revealed it was discovered that Edmond had won both categories. For some reason Furphy had marked his essay in favour of World Federation as ‘non-competitive’. However, when Cole decided to publish a selection of the best essays, Furphy’s was among the 53 essays (out of 660 submitted) chosen for inclusion by the judges. That sign of approval could only have added to the self-confidence of the aspiring author.

Furphy’s first *Bulletin* publication had been the article, ‘The Mythical Sundowner’, in which he refuted the argument of an earlier and unsigned article that the ‘sundowner’ (the swagman who deliberately turned up too late to do any work on a station in return for food and shelter) was a myth. Furphy wrote with the authority of a man who has been there and knows what he is talking about. That insistence on reality as opposed to fiction or invention runs through all that Furphy wrote; and is clearly fundamental to the purpose of his novel, as the title, *Such is Life*, indicates. ‘I write only of what I know’, he told Cecil Winter, ‘You wouldn’t catch me laying a scene in Russia or Brazil, nor undertaking a Society story’ (23 September 1903). In *Such is Life* there are mocking references to the ‘sort of thing a novelist would write’: such was not life.



From the Riverina Furphy's son Felix once wrote to his grandfather that 'father reads nothing but shakspere everybody carries books but they are yallow [*sic*] novels'. The 'yellow novels' (so-called because of their bright covers designed for railway bookstalls) were light entertainment, to be read once and then put aside—or, if you were working in the bush, to be swapped. (Readers of *Rigby's Romance* will remember that the bullocky Dixon, who read yellow novels, unexpectedly got the Bible in a swap for one of the popular romances of Ouida). Such popular novels might pass the time and even entertain momentarily, but they offered no intellectual stimulation, nothing worthwhile for reflection. Furphy's aim was to write fiction that dealt with the reality of life as he had known it.

One might hazard a guess that had Joe Furphy spent all his life working at the same job his impulse to write about what he had experienced would not have been so great. As it was, he'd had an unsettled and varied life, had encountered all sorts of people, and he drew upon the memories of that life which had ended when he left the Riverina. He knew what it was like to work in a foundry, but he never wrote about that, and none of the locals could identify themselves in what he wrote. He didn't have the problem that the young Miles Franklin had with her first book when the originals of many of her characters in *My Brilliant Career* recognised themselves—and were not pleased. There is only one clear instance of Furphy taking a character from life, and that is, surprisingly enough, the one that you might have thought completely fictional: the disfigured woman whom Tom Collins and everyone else takes to be a man. Nosey Alf, the boundary rider on Runnymede station in the Riverina, is based on the real life farm labourer Johanna Jorgensen (known as 'Jack'), who died in 1893 at Runnymede East, about nine miles from Elmore, which is not far from here [Shepparton] and not far from where Furphy had a selection. Calling the station Runnymede was probably Furphy's private joke. He said that he had been 'intimate with poor Johanna' (don't misinterpret that phrase) but like the others who worked with her he did not know her true sexual identity at the time. Furphy transposed settings as well as people, and I'm sure that he did not intend the stations in the Riverina to be identified. Of course, there may be incidental details in the text that could indicate the exact locality. I had a small example of this in 1983, after Andrew Furphy flew a party of us up to Coan Downs station, where Furphy is known to have been: the owner later wrote to me that he was sure that it was to his station that Furphy was referring in a paragraph he contributed to the *Bulletin* about the Bible in the Riverina (Bruce Cullenward to John Barnes, 12 December 1983; *Bulletin*, 27 January 1894). Furphy, it

should be remembered, was never in the Riverina again after he came to Shepparton, so that when he wrote he was working with his memories of the place and the people.

In drawing on those memories of the Riverina Furphy was very selective. For example, in taking incidents from his working life, which involved bringing down the wool after shearing, he mentions shearers only in passing. Nor did he write of his personal and emotional experience as a husband and father. Joe and his wife were not well matched, and although they stayed together, they were far from being a happy couple when they came to Shepparton. In the Riverina town of Hay Leonie Furphy was often alone for months while her husband was on the track. It was there that two of her children died in infancy, one of them while she was on her own. Lawson, who had never been a drover, wrote a memorable story of the hardship of a drover's wife; but Furphy, who knew at first hand the emotional strain which being a bullocky could bring to a couple, avoided the subject. As for the physical hardships experienced by the bullock drivers, he represented them as unremarkable, part of the everyday world. *Such is Life* is a work of fiction grounded in quotidian bush experience of bushmen, with no attempt to create picturesque scenery or exciting action. There is, for instance, only a passing reference to the dreadful effects of the drought that ruined Furphy and other bullockies. A paragraph in Chapter IV of *Such is Life* that begins with the laconic remark, '83 was a bad year', matter-of-factly records what he saw: 'The mile-wide stock route from Wilcannia to Hay was strewn with carcasses of travelling sheep along the whole two hundred and fifty miles'. And again, he remembers 'noticing once, in a fifty mile stretch of that route which bisects the One Tree Plain, I was never out of sight of dying cattle and horses—let alone dead ones' (165). This is undoubtedly from Furphy's own observation. It is the sort of detail that a journalist or a writer of popular fiction would have highlighted—but not Furphy.

Although he had a store of impressions, reflections and anecdotes that could have been shaped into standard reminiscences, Furphy chose to write fiction, not memoirs or autobiography. *Such is Life* has the appearance of being memoirs and was taken as such by some early readers, but Furphy's Riverina is as much a literary creation, a fictional place, as Thomas Hardy's Wessex or William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. While the book gives an authentic representation of bush life, accurate in all its details, describing the customs and protocols of the bush with the understanding of an insider, it is concerned with much more than the life of a region. The narrative method and the stylistic characteristics of *Such is Life*,

which mark it out from everything else written about the bush by those who had experienced it, signify large literary ambitions.

Furphy's account of bush life is not a simple, straightforward telling of a story but a most elaborately constructed narrative with philosophical implications about human understanding of the pattern of our existence. Consider the odd beginning of *Such is Life*. 'Unemployed at last!' says the narrator. When the book was in proof A. G. Stephens, as publisher, queried the opening paragraphs, and Furphy replied: 'If the first 3 pars of S. is L. compel the reader to *think*, their purpose is duly served' (14 January 1902). What Furphy wanted his readers to think about were the two opposed philosophical explanations of all happenings, Determinism and Free Will, which he summarised in the second paragraph. The third paragraph offers a familiar orthodox religious explanation for the narrator being unemployed: 'The Devil finds work for idle hands'. Tom Collins declares that whatever the theoretical explanation for his being unemployed, he has a responsibility to write about his life for the benefit of others who 'have led lives more sedentary than my own'. (You could almost think that he had academics in mind). All writers enter into a contract with the reader, as it were, when they begin. The narrator of *Such is Life* tells us that he is offering a sample of his experience: he will write out in full entries selected at random from his diary. It is a sort of experiment; the pretence is that the narrator doesn't know what will follow, any more than the reader does. Tom Collins promises us: 'This will afford to the observant reader a fair picture of Life, as that engaging problem has presented itself to me'. The reader, you will note, has to be 'observant'. If you are not observant you will not grasp the 'fair picture of Life' that is being offered.

We don't know exactly when Furphy decided that what he had thought of as 'a collection of lies' should become 'one involved lie in 7 chapters' (To Cathels, 10 August 1897). His own later version of how he came to write *Such is Life* was that the process had begun with his thinking that he would write a yarn:

Before this was finished, another motif had suggested itself—then another—and another. And I made a point of loosely federating these yarns (if you understand me); till by-and-by the scheme of "S'Life" suggested itself. Then I selected and altered and largely re-wrote 7 of these stories, until they came out as you see. (To Winter, 23 September 1903)

For Furphy a yarn meant not only incident and character but reflection. His whole approach was discursive, expansive, the opposite of Archibald's advice to *Bulletin* contributors: 'Boil it down'. Archibald's preference was for the economical sketch, of which Lawson was the master. When Furphy wrote to him in 1897 asking for advice on how to get his book published, he indicated its setting ('Riverina and Northern Vic.') and, in a phrase that has become famous, defined its attitudes ('temper, democratic; bias, offensively Australian'). That was a way of telling the *Bulletin* editor that the novel had the same outlook as the weekly, but said nothing about the formal characteristics. When Archibald passed the letter to Stephens, who eventually published the book for the *Bulletin*, Furphy found himself explaining what he had attempted. 'The plan of the book is not like any other that I know of—at least I trust not', he told A. G. Stephens (2 May 1897).

Furphy had no mentors, no writers or critics at hand with whom he could discuss what he was writing. The only person whose criticism he accepted was the Melbourne blacksmith Cathels, who read drafts and later went through the completed manuscript. Cathels' interest was not literary, though, and he was even more bookish, more absorbed in learning, than Furphy himself. Furphy corresponded with Kate Baker, the young schoolteacher who hero-worshipped him; her belief in his ability strengthened his determination to write, but he did not show her *Such is Life* until after it had been completed. There was no one in his small circle of Shepparton friends who understood what he was attempting, however sympathetic they may have felt towards his literary ambitions. There were '3 or 4 Bulletinists in the shop' (his phrase) (To Winter, 28 July 1904) with whom he could discuss politics, but they were completely unsophisticated in their literary understanding, and their comments of no help. Whether he showed John anything we don't know, but his youngest brother, Samuel, did read his work in manuscript, and his comments were probably representative of how the work was received in his circle. Furphy reported to Cathels: "'Who's going to wade through your reflections on religion, and pigs, and sociology, and dirt?'" asked my brother Sam; "strike out the reflections, and you'll have a good Australian yarn"' (May/June 1898). Many readers then and since have reacted much as Samuel did, but Furphy was unmoved by his brother's criticism. The extended reflection on pigs was struck out when the book was typed, but Furphy was simply not interested in writing 'a good Australian yarn' without the reflections: they were part of the 'scheme of S'Life', which has at its centre Tom Collins, the philosophic narrator.

Furphy had started using the pen name 'Tom Collins' for his *Bulletin* contributions in 1893. Originally he had called himself 'Warrigal Jack', 'warrigal' being an Aboriginal word for the dingo, and 'jack' traditionally means 'knave'. So from the start he identified himself as an outsider. Then from early 1893 he signed his contributions 'Tom Collins', a name which *Bulletin* readers were familiar with: in current slang 'Tom Collins' signified idle rumour. For Joe Furphy, the quiet, self-effacing foundry worker, the exuberant, irrepressible 'Tom Collins' became an alter ego, another self, not just a pseudonym. Writing as Tom Collins, the opinionated, cocksure, philosophical and pedantic bushman, Furphy had a degree of ironical detachment from his own experience, and seems to have felt a kind of freedom. He was like an actor who is most himself when playing a role; as Tom Collins he was no longer 'poor old Joe', who had failed at everything he had attempted. 'As T. C. I can make myself objectionable with a better grace', he replied when Stephens proposed that he should publish under his own name (9 January 1902).

The 'scheme of S. is L' took shape when Furphy realised how he could make the intelligence of Tom Collins central to the narrative strategy of the novel. It was a brilliant and original conception: the bookish narrator, whom the reader naturally trusts at first, is a serious thinker and an accurate observer of reality but proves at times to be an unreliable interpreter of what he observes. At key points in the narrative Tom Collins simply gets things wrong—as the 'observant reader' is meant to notice. His major misunderstanding concerns the two characters called 'Alf', the names themselves being a tip to the reader that there may be a connection between them. The reader has to construct the story from different sources in different chapters. You might say that *Such is Life* is an interactive text, which requires the reader to take on the responsibility of narrator in places, and part of the pleasure of reading the book is in making the connections and arriving at the right version of events. In one very significant episode Collins himself realises and draws our attention to the fact that he has misjudged circumstances, and that it has cost a man his life. Near the hut of the boundary rider Rory O'Halloran, he sees a man lying with his eyes closed in the shade of a tree, and assumes that he is a sundowner—that is, waiting till nightfall before going to the hut. Following bush etiquette he doesn't approach him. That proves to be what Collins calls 'the controlling alternative' in the man's life. If Collins had approached him, he would have realised that he was blind with sandy blight and near death by exhaustion. Next morning the man is found dead. Months later Tom wonders whether the finding of the dead man was the decisive factor in causing Rory's little girl to go looking for her father: she becomes lost and dies in the bush.

Tom's mistake was one that anyone could have made; and, like the errors that result from Tom Collins's overconfidence in his ability to read character and events, this episode shows the limits of human understanding.

Clearly *Such is Life* is not for readers with idle minds. Furphy's remark about wanting to make the reader think with the opening paragraphs could be applied to the whole book. *Such is Life* contains plenty of stories—but what marks it out from anything else written about bush life in Australia is its intellectuality. It is a novel of ideas, not only in terms of its structure. Furphy uses the narrator as the vehicle to present his own thinking about human existence, about Christianity, about the injustices of contemporary society, about the illusion of English superiority, about his sense of his Australian identity. There are what are virtually essays—almost secular sermons, you might say—on subjects that mattered to Furphy, passages where the distinction between the author (who was not named on the original title page) and the supposed narrator, Tom Collins, tends to fade. However fallible the narrator may be, his reflections on serious issues of morality and society are to be taken seriously.

In a very real sense Tom Collins is the major character of the novel. He is the most learned person in the book, knowing his Shakespeare better than the squatter Stewart and able to match the Latin of Willoughby, the university-educated English remittance man. At the centre of the Riverina microcosm, he mixes with different groups, chameleon-like giving the sort of performance that he thinks is required of him, using his knowledge and his understanding to his advantage. We see him in a variety of relationships in which he acts various parts—to the bullockies, the boundary riders of different nationalities, to the snobbish Mrs Beaudesart, and others. On hearing how, in order to stop a dour Scottish boundary rider from impounding Warrigal Alf's bullocks, he pretended to be a Scotsman, the Scottish squatter Stewart tells him that he has a talent for 'low-comedy acting'. Every reader of *Such is Life* remembers the ending of the novel with its allusion to famous passages in *Macbeth*:

Now I had to enact the Cynic philosopher to Moriarty and Butler, and the aristocratic man with a 'past' to Mrs Beaudesart; with the satisfaction of knowing that each of these was acting a part to me. Such is life, my fellow-mummers—just like a poor player, that bluffs and feints his hour upon the stage, and then cheapens down to mere nonentity. But let me not hear any small witticism to the further effect that its story is a tale told by a vulgarian, full of slang and blanky, signifying—nothing. (297)

The sense of performance, not just physical but linguistic, runs through the text; and his linguistic facility, as in this use of Shakespeare, gives him a kind of power and authority, whatever the situation.

Furphy was unmatched among his contemporaries for his command of a variety of styles. When he is expounding his views, the prose can become stiff and formal, as if he is wearing his best bib and tucker and is in the pulpit. But when the Tom Collins personality comes into play, with its sense of absurdity and irony, the prose is imaginative and witty. None of the bullockies would have been able to say the sort of thing that Tom Collins says: for instance, it is he who tells us: 'A metaphysical question keeps slipping away from the grasp of a bullock driver's mind like a wet melon-seed' (30); and reports 'a loud, pompous, bank-director cough from one of the bullocks' (238). Apart from highly quotable original phrases of Tom Collins, the text is rich in his quotation or deliberate misquotation from other writers. His conversation is larded with phrases from history and literature. As a swagman approaches he hails him, 'How fares our cousin Hamlet?' and, when Hamlet doesn't stop, he shouts, 'Come on! come on! why should the spirit of mortal be proud?' (91) When he loses his clothes in the Murray and in the darkness tries to undress a man he encounters, he reels off a string of quotations from the Bible and Shakespeare as he does so: no wonder that the man thinks he is being attacked by a lunatic.

Unlike writers of today, a nineteenth-century writer does not pollute our ears with the swear words. The bullockies were notorious for their language (which the bullocks are said to have become so used to that they didn't obey unless the orders were accompanied by the appropriate obscenities), and that does create a problem for a narrator aiming to be realistic. An unimaginative approach would have been to use dashes to indicate the unprintable. The exuberant Tom Collins, however, has his cake and eats it. He doesn't reproduce the taboo words, but he ingeniously and wittily indicates that they are being used. For example, early in the first chapter instead of reporting the use of 'bloody' he draws attention to 'the thin red line of the puissant adjective', and 'the crimson thread of kinship' in the speech of the bullockies (4; 5). These phrases were in circulation when he wrote: the 'thin red line' was a war correspondent's description of the heroic British infantry in the Battle of Balaclava in the Crimean War, and 'the crimson thread of kinship' was Henry Parkes's evocation of the blood ties among the colonists whom he was trying to persuade to federate Australia. At other times Tom Collins substitutes a word or notes the parts of speech, as in this exchange: 'Why the

(compound expletive) don't you rouse roun'?' 'How the (same expression) ken I rouse roun? I got the screwmatics in my (adj.) hip' (42). You don't need a B.D.—that is, a degree in Bullock Driving—to get the point, though I suppose that it might be a help.

The conversation of the bushmen, especially when around the campfire they tell stories and discuss their ideas about life, is an aspect of *Such is Life* to be savoured. Repeated re-readings have impressed upon me how keenly Furphy registered speech rhythms and idioms, and how completely he understood the psychology of the bushmen. *Such is Life* is a book that demands re-reading; at the very least, a second reading is needed to grasp the major ironies of the narrative structure, and successive readings bring out the linguistic and intellectual richness of the prose. True, for some readers the passages in a slow, polysyllabic nineteenth-century style, the welter of allusions, and the extended reflections, along with the intricate concealment of plot, prove too much. The very elaborateness of the book, which some of us find so fascinating, is, for others, a drawback. Furphy was genuinely surprised by complaints that *Such is Life* was 'hard reading'. It is a fair criticism that he underestimated the demands he was making upon readers. The two smaller and more simply structured works, *Rigby's Romance* and *The Buln-buln and the Brolga*, which are re-workings of chapters from the original *Such is Life*, are certainly more immediately accessible to readers. From our perspective, though, what seems most remarkable is that Furphy, working in isolation, had the self-confidence and the dedication to undertake such an ambitious and complex literary work as *Such is Life*. He took hints from earlier writers, but he ignored fashion and all forms of cheap popularity, and followed his own ideas about how to write fiction. It is really astonishing that, working under conditions that most writers today would consider near-impossible for creative work, he produced a book of such originality of form and such vitality of thought and language.

Furphy has never has the sort of readership that his contemporaries, Lawson, Steele Rudd and Paterson, enjoyed; but, equally, he has never lacked readers who value him highly. For Australians *Such is Life* will always have an interest as a portrayal of a phase of the life of a settler colony that was passing, even by the time the book was published. Writers like Miles Franklin and Vance Palmer have emphasised its cultural role in promoting and sustaining a sense of national identity, and so helping to free Australians from a state of what Miles called 'mental colonialism'. Australia is no longer a small Anglo-centric society in which clergymen preach sermons revealing that the secret of England's supposed greatness is the Bible. In a



time of unprecedented change in almost every aspect of life, it is inevitable that as we read *Such is Life* today we are conscious of its period characteristics. But after more than a century the book still entertains and still challenges us to think about the ‘engaging problem’ of the human condition, its comedy and its pathos. *Such is Life* has survived the ultimate criticism that all literature faces, the test of time, and it seems to me that it is no mere empty gesture to call it an Australian classic. I first read *Such is Life* when I was in my last year at high school, and have been re-reading it ever since. For what it is worth, my testimony is that *Such is Life* is a book to live with.

The story of how Joe Furphy, foundry worker in Shepparton, wrote one of the enduring works of Australian literature is without parallel in our history. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk about it.