

The End of the Road: Joseph Furphy and Tom Collins in Western Australia

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The circumstances of the last seven years of Joseph Furphy's life, from 1905 until his death in 1912 at 69, spent in Western Australia, are well known—largely because of the extent of Furphy's correspondence during that time. He wrote regularly to his mother and some others, including Kate Baker and Miles Franklin, occasionally to his great friend William Cathels, as well as to editors and publishers. Thus these years yield 'more circumstantial detail than any other period of his life' (*Letters* 187). The effects of the move from Victoria to Western Australia on Furphy's writing life, as well as its broader consequences for him are interesting in themselves. However, there is a related story, regarding the ways his literary reputation was recovered in the West some years after his death, then preserved and memorialised there, through the agency of several local writers and through Furphy's son Sam. Furphy's last home, the cottage he built, was given by Sam Furphy to the Western Australian branch of the Federation of Australian Writers (FAWWA); he then established a Deed of Trust between himself and the University of Western Australia (UWA) to found both an annual literary prize and to purchase works of Australian art, both in the name of Tom Collins. Those bequests were later amplified by Sam Furphy's will, which left his modest estate to UWA for those original purposes. I want to first sketch in some of the detail of Furphy's life in WA, then describe that posthumous history.

By 1904, Furphy's three children had all resettled in Western Australia, following perhaps what was not an uncommon trend at the time. While Victoria was still suffering economically, the West was in a boom period following the discoveries of rich deposits of gold in Kalgoorlie and surrounding areas, mainly in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Between 1891 and 1905 the population of the State, though still very small, trebled. Furphy's daughter Sylvia (Shovel to Furphy) had migrated three years earlier and was now married with a baby and living in the West. Samuel and Felix Furphy and their wives had moved to WA in 1903 when their Shepparton foundry failed. They set up another foundry in Fremantle, one that was still working until quite recently. It is not clear exactly what prompted Furphy and his wife, Leonie's decision to follow the rest of their family to Western Australia, but Furphy's life at the time was in a kind of hiatus, caught between the aftermath of the success of the publication of *Such is Life*, sales of which had almost dried up by 1904, and his failure

to persuade the *Bulletin* to publish *Rigby's Romance*. However the decision was made, he was able to write to Miles Franklin on 21 November 1904: 'I am leaving for the West any time after Dec. 12, the sooner the better. That date is the 87th birthday of my Mam ...' (*Letters* 183).

After his arrival, in early January 1905, Furphy named his new environment in a typically jokey fashion, characteristically addressing his letters from 'Gropeland'. It was a place inhabited by 'Gropers'; a region, he wrote to Franklin two or three days after his arrival, 'flowing with sand and limestone. A good country, nevertheless, with enormous possibilities' (*Letters* 189). Furphy appeared to enjoy the place, writing to Franklin in June 1905 in both aesthetic and practical terms: 'In many respects it is a beautiful country; but sandy—sandy—therefore good for nearly all kinds of fruit; ... and the worst pasture land on earth' and later to William Cathels, in August 1909, 'I love this sandy region' (*Letters* 208, 249). Yet though he reports, in that same letter to Cathels, that he is 'squalidly happy in having no history for the last 4½ years,' there are indications that he was less content than this and other remarks indicated. In an earlier letter to Cathels, in 1908, Furphy wrote: 'I don't think I'll ever become acclimatised to the West' (*OT* 361).

For someone who had lived most of his life in the Murray Valley and the Riverina and who identified so strongly with that area, the shift late in his life to a very different environment must have been difficult. Most significantly though, the routine Furphy had established for himself in Shepparton of reading and writing every evening in his sanctum proved almost impossible to reconstruct in the West. Working often for 12 hours a day in the foundry, six days a week, and at other times to clear scrub and build houses for his sons and for himself and Leonie, he had, as he often wrote, 'scant leisure' and struggled to re-establish a writing life. During those WA years Furphy was gradually isolated from the few literary contacts he had made while *Such Is Life* was being published, and his correspondence with such friends—even with Kate Baker—dwindled. Increasingly frustrated with his inability to find a publisher for *Rigby's Romance* and with the little time he had for writing, he described his quite hard and often unrewarding daily life in a letter to his mother late in 1906: 'For myself, I have deteriorated. The change in conditions of life, with irregular hours, have broken me off literary work; and I have become a grafter, pure and simple' (*Letters* 226). While he delighted in his growing family, his sons' increasingly prosperous business, and the skills he acquired as he built shacks—later houses—for Samuel, Felix and himself on blocks of land they bought early in 1905 in a new sub-division in 'a wild bush spot' (*Letters* 199), now the

salubrious Perth suburb of Swanbourne, his life, he wrote to his mother in 1911, had been reduced to ‘delivering castings and improving the three homes ...’ (OT 379).

Nevertheless, Furphy read widely in the Perth Literary Institute library and at home, and continued his habit of walking, taking day-long, solitary walks on Sundays, telling his mother: ‘Of all the places where I have lived, this is the best for a meditative walk on Sunday’ (*Letters* 238). Determined to recapture his writing routine, he wrote in that first letter to Miles Franklin that ‘I’ll have my new sanctum established in a few days, and then I’ll straightway become my old interminable self’ (*Letters* 189). The pattern of setting up a sanctum was repeated as he moved from a room at the foundry to rented accommodation then to the house he built for himself and Leonie; but somehow, the sanctums no longer enabled him to become consistently productive. However, his letters do record his attempts to do so, and to get work published. In June 1906, he writes that he had ‘an oil-drum stove installed in my sanctum; and every evening sees something attempted With the fixed resolution of getting an accumulated mass of crude, half-finished rot into printable form’ (*Letters* 221). He seems to have brought to the West the mss of *Rigby’s Romance* and the 10,000 word story ‘The Whirligig of Time’, and in August/September 1906 he reports that he has ‘just finished typing and sewing together another book—“The Buln-buln and the Brolga”’ (*Letters* 223).

The letters give an insight into Furphy’s long struggle to get those two novels and the long story published, as well as his attempts to write new, publishable material, often mentioning letters sent to potential publishers; packages posted and returned; the many disappointments and the occasional successes. In mid-1905, he tried the Sydney *Worker*, ‘offering the book free gratis for nothing’ (*Letters* 205) for *Rigby’s Romance*, then when they did not reply, a Broken Hill paper, the *Barrier Truth*. At the same time he was rewriting ‘The Lyre Bird and the Native Companion’. By September, the *Barrier Truth* had agreed to serialise *Rigby’s Romance*, which they did from 20 October 1905-July 1906, but he was unable to find a publisher for the book. In May 1907, after *Steele Rudd’s Magazine* refused ‘Whirligig’, he wrote to the Melbourne firm T C Lothian offering all three works (OT 368). Eventually, they turned them all down. Meanwhile, Furphy had entered a story, ‘The Discovery of Christmas Reef’, for a *Western Mail* competition. He was dismayed that it did not even win a place, but it was published, serially, early in 1908. He was hopeful at the same time that *The Lone Hand* would serialise ‘Whirligig’, but again this did not happen. By mid-1910 he wrote cheerfully to his mother that he had ‘taken to literature again’ and was writing ‘doggerel for the *Bulletin*—[a] set of “psalms”’ (*Letters* 256). The *Bulletin* did publish ‘all five [‘Psalms’] ... submitted’

(OT 375). Thus, while writing remained ‘a necessity of life’ for Furphy, the combination of the demands of his working life, and the lack of response from publishers or readers as well as his anonymity as a writer in the West meant that when in 1910 *Rigby’s Romance* and *The Buln-buln and the Brolga* were both rejected by yet another publisher (OT 378) this activity seems to have ceased.

Furphy collapsed and soon afterwards died, on the morning of Friday, 13 September, at the house of his son Sam Furphy and Sam’s wife Mattie. He was on his way to pick up a load of iron grave railings to be delivered to Karrakatta Cemetery, where he is buried. At the time, and for many years afterwards, his reputation as a writer was virtually unknown in Western Australia. Even his family did not think of him, as Sam Furphy much later and famously said, as ‘a literary cove ...’ (Drake-Brockman vii). His occupation on his death certificate was recorded as ‘Mechanic’ and his typewriter was the only possession of value that he left. Yet decades after his almost anonymous death, Furphy’s reputation and name—or that of Tom Collins—is remembered in Western Australia, initially through the efforts of a local short story writer and teacher, John K Ewers (1904-1978). As a boy, Ewers had been encouraged to read Australian writers by an aunt, Elizabeth Gray. She had met Sam and Felix Furphy and their families the year after Furphy’s death. They introduced her to his writing, of which she became a great admirer, and she read to Ewers out of a 1917 edition of *Such is Life* which Sam Furphy had given her. Ewers became an ardent enthusiast for Australian literature and a writer with a solid reputation in the small but energetic literary community in the West.

In 1929, Ewers persuaded the editor of the *West Australian* newspaper to publish a series of articles he had written on Australian writers. Called ‘Pioneers of the Pen’, the third was on Joseph Furphy. A copy, Ewers writes in his autobiography, *Long Enough for a Joke* (1983), ‘found its way’ to Furphy’s close friend and champion, Kate Baker, and they struck up a correspondence. With her first letter to him Baker sent Ewers a copy of C Hartley Grattan’s *Australian Literature* ‘with its 2 pages on Furphy’ (*Long Enough* 116). From then on, Ewers became ‘willingly the slave of Kate Baker in the service of Joseph Furphy’ (*Long Enough* 116). Then in 1938 Hartley Grattan himself briefly visited Perth and a small group of local writers (pictured here) entertained him at dinner. Inspired by this meeting, they went on to establish a West Australian branch of the Federation of Australian Writers (FAWWA), with Ewers as its Foundation President.



Writers at dinner with C Hartley Grattan

Over the next decade or so, Ewers continued to advocate Furphy's writing. He gave two lectures in Australian Literature at UWA in 1942 and '43 as part of an initiative of the Commonwealth Literary Fund to bring Australian writers into universities with Furphy as one of his subjects (Ewers was a mature-age part-time undergraduate student in English at the time). In 1943, he published a pamphlet, *Tell the People! An examination of the little-known writings of Joseph Furphy—(Tom Collins)—in the light of their value for Australia today*, dedicated 'affectionately to Kate Baker, O.B.E.', with the epigraph: 'Toleration of a growing inequality is treason of the first degree—Tom Collins'. A set of eight short essays, comprising longish quotations from *Such Is Life* and *Rigby's Romance*, and Ewers's commentaries on them, the book has a Preface where he acknowledges 'the debt he ... has long owed to Joseph Furphy,' and which announces his 'hope that it will prove a stimulating force in Australian thought and action'. Ewers writes in particular against social complacency, which he fears will make Australia 'one of the last strongholds of a reactionary, capitalistic system' (10). Over 'the past two years, [he writes] whenever the opportunity offered, [he has] given lectures and readings from Joseph Furphy's two books' (13) in which Furphy sets out a 'clear statement of the rights of man'. Ewers argues, ambitiously, that Furphy's thought offers Australians 'a plan of action for post-war reconstruction' (14). In another small book,

Creative Writing in Australia (1945), Ewers charts the rise of interest in and knowledge of Australian literature and presents *Such Is Life* as the ‘first real Australian novel’ (1).

In 1946 and ’47 Ewers was again president of FAWWA and, when Mattie Furphy died suddenly in 1948, a shocked Sam Furphy began thinking about how he might dispose of his modest estate: he and Mattie had no children. He turned to Ewers for advice about establishing a trust fund in his father’s name and making sure the modest house in Servetus Street, Swanbourne, that Joseph designed and built for himself and his wife, and where Sam and Mattie had lived since 1939, was preserved. After much discussion the house was offered to the FAWWA and accepted at a meeting on 23 February 1949. Ewers wrote to Kate Baker that it was ‘the most momentous motion that has ever been passed at a meeting of the Fellowship in this, or I think, any other State’ (*Long Enough* 110).

The house needed restoration and Henrietta Drake-Brockman, who had opposed accepting it for FAWWA, aware of the drain such a bequest could be on a small organisation, began a fund intended to restore and maintain it, seeking donations from Perth businesses. She also edited an anthology, *West Coast Stories*, to which writers contributed without payment. Proceeds went to the house maintenance fund. Drake-Brockman had visited the house in 1949 before Mattie’s death and wrote of it in her Introduction to the anthology as, ‘Scarlet-roofed, with white-painted walls, the house sits well back from a quiet suburban road, secure behind a random garden of rose-bushes rising from a sweet-scented carpet of petunias, phlox, multi-coloured geraniums, and lavender ...’ (vii). This romantic description is far from its initial incarnation, described by Furphy’s granddaughter Emily in a conversation with Jean Lang as being on a ‘narrow, unmade track of dark grey sand, winding through tall timber and thick scrub ...’, of unlined weatherboard and with only packing case furniture (Lang 12, 9).

The decision to call the house ‘Tom Collins House’ was reportedly made shortly after its dedication (25 September 1949) at a General Meeting of the FAWWA, when Ewers appeared to channel Furphy, ‘[speaking] as if he had been directed to do so by Joseph himself: “Joseph is the name I was given. Tom Collins is the name I gave myself. Joseph Furphy is dead, but Tom Collins the writer lives on and dwells among you as you may observe. ... I name this place TOM COLLINS HOUSE. And may God bless all who meet in her!” (Lang 33). A plaque later placed on the House records its history:



Plaque on Tom Collins house

In 1982, when the WA State Government began resuming property along Servetus Street, which was to be widened to a six-lane highway, the house was threatened with demolition. After a lot of controversy and public protest about its historic significance, Furphy's cottage was shifted to its present site in Allen Park, down the hill from Servetus Street, to a precinct which the local council has declared historic. This is how it looks today:



Tom Collins House

Tom Collins House is now joined by what is known as Mattie Furphy's House, the big original house built for Sam and Mattie between 1908 and 1920, which the FAWWA acquired and in 2005 relocated to Allen Park and began to restore.



Mattie Furphy's House

Furphy referred to this house (a lovely example of the Australian Arts and Crafts Movement) many times in his letters to his mother, most amusingly in 1909: 'I am still working on Sam's house, ... It is the beginning of a very elaborate house, for both Sam and Mattie are lovers of Home, and Mattie is painfully artistic. She spends all her spare time in repousse work—which is the hammering of sheet copper into grotesque and ugly relief of dragons, griffins, imps, &c. Which is the very highest Art' (*Letters* 248). Some of Mattie's work exists in both houses, samples here are a lion decorating the overmantel and copper panels in doors, both in Tom Collins House:



Copper lion on mantelpiece



Copper doors

At the same time that Sam Furphy was making a gift of Joseph Furphy's house to FAWWA he made a will and had a Deed of Trust drawn up between himself and UWA. Initially the Deed stated that two funds, each of 500 pounds, would be established. One, a Trust Fund, to be devoted to 'promoting and encouraging the study and development of Australian literature in the State of Western Australia', and the other, a Memorial Fund was similarly devoted to 'promoting the study and appreciation of Australian art in the State of Western Australia'. The Founder of these bequests was desirous of 'perpetuating the memory of his late father JOSEPH FURPHY by his said father's pen name of TOM COLLINS' (Deed of Trust, UWA Archive, OG141 Part 1, Folder 2). Sam Furphy's will left all his property as well as the copyright on Furphy's publications (although this is not specifically mentioned) to UWA. The will stipulated that all proceeds from Sam Furphy's estate were to be held in a 'Tom Collins Bequest Fund' for the same purposes as that of the initial gift (to the Memorial

Fund). John K Ewers was named as Executor and Trustee of the will. After Sam died, in 1953, the UWA Senate Minutes recorded ‘that an amount of 1,561 pounds had been left to the University to establish “The Tom Collins Bequest Fund”’ (21 Sept 1953, UWA Archive, OG141 Part 1, Folder 2). All these—the Trust Fund, the Memorial Fund and the Bequest Fund—were to be administered by a committee comprised of the Vice-Chancellor (then Professor Prescott), the Head of the English Department (then Professor Alan Edwards) and John K Ewers or the President of the FAWWA. The UWA Archives hold a fascinating if erratic record of the administration of the Trust and the Bequest Funds.

After some discussion about how best to use the Trust Fund (and some suggestions from Kate Baker that Prescott deflected politely) the Committee resolved in 1950 to establish a Tom Collins Prize for an annual essay on an Australian literary topic, of not more than 5,000 words, to be administered by a committee, originally the same group as that of the Bequest Fund. The amount of the prize would be determined by the interest received from the capital of the original Trust Fund of 500 pounds. All enrolled students at UWA would be eligible and the prize was worth 15 pounds. Its history has some interest. The initial topics were ambitious; the first was ‘The novels of Eleanor Dark’ (1950), then ‘The Poetry of Christopher Brennan’ (1951), ‘Louis Esson’s Contribution to Australian Drama’ (1954), ‘Rigby’s Romance’ (1955), ‘The Poetry of Judith Wright’ (1956), won by Randolph Stow, and ‘The Novels of Randolph Stow’ (1963) won by Mrs Dorothy Lilley [the writer Dorothy Hewett] (all information from UWA Archives, cons 1002 (1)). That prize still exists.

On the other hand the Memorial Fund to buy art works, initially 500 pounds and by the proceeds of the will amplified through the Bequest Fund, was largely spent on the acquisition of a major collection of Australian art at UWA. Professor Edwards had an intense interest in and knowledge of Australian art as well as good contacts in the art world in Australia. He had a major influence on the establishment of the whole UWA collection and according to the archives had a wonderful time negotiating, dealing and buying for what became the Tom Collins Collection. The Committee first discussed whether to put the money to one or two ‘substantial works of art of modern Australian painters rather than dissipate moneys on smaller purchases’ (26 April 1950, UWA Archive, OG141, Part 1). At some time in the early 1950s the Committee, through Edwards, decided to buy twelve Sidney Nolan paintings some of which seem to have broadly represented the country and life depicted in *Such Is Life*. Although there is no evidence in the records of a direct link between the paintings and the novel, Nolan wrote to Edwards on 24 August 1953, thanking him for the advice that ‘the

Furphy Committee has decided to purchase twelve paintings’, going on to say: ‘I regard it as a privilege to be represented in a permanent collection in this context’ (UWA Archive, OG141 Part 1). And more specifically, writing from London about a long loan of some of the paintings which UWA had made to the British Arts Council to tour in England, and asking if that loan could be extended for a proposed exhibition at the Smithsonian Institute in the USA, Nolan speaks of the ‘Tom Collins paintings [as] a fundamental part of the exhibition’, and ends: ‘they have attracted a lot of attention & in some way I expect, have communicated something of Australia in a way that I hope Furphy would have approved of’ (26 April 1958, UWA Archive, OG141 Part 1).



Sidney Nolan, On the Murray, 1948

Above, ‘On the Murray, 1948’, and below, ‘Perished, 1949’ are two of the Nolan paintings that were part of that initial purchase, and which are reminiscent of settings and events in *Such Is Life*.



Sidney Nolan, *Perished*, 1949

Just prior to this, on 10 December 1957, in a memo to the Vice-Chancellor of UWA regarding the Tom Collins Memorial Fund, Edwards raises the issue of ‘selling off two or three of the duller Nolans’ (UWA Archive, OG141, Part 1). Two were sold at that time through the Terry Clune Galleries in Sydney for fifty guineas each, less commission. Later, a statement from those Galleries, 28 September 1959, reports the sale of a third painting, on behalf of UWA, ‘Sidney Nolan’s “Portrait of Tom Collins” for 52.10.8 less commission 13.2.6’ (UWA Archive, cons 1002 (1), misfiled here). This too must have been one of the original twelve. Over the years there are records of Edwards’s recommendations to the Memorial Fund Committee for purchases, including an Arthur Boyd sculpture (‘Mother and Child’), now a prized item in the Tom Collins collection but despised at the time by most who saw it and left languishing in a basement at the University until Edwards took it to his own home, and paintings by numerous well-known artists. By 1974 the Tom Collins Bequest Fund Committee had ceased to operate in the same way and all monies due to the Fund were handed over to the University Art collection Board of Management ‘to purchase a picture or

pictures by an Australian artist without specifying any one particular work' (UWA Archive, cons 2173 (1)). Edwards, though, was still buying and recommending artists' work—at that time a Robert Juniper, a 'Self Portrait' by Margaret Olley for which there was not enough money and a Stanislaus Rapotec (UWA Archive, cons 2173 (1)).

The impact of these material reminders of Joseph Furphy through the name of Tom Collins is, I think, varied. While the annual Tom Collins essay prize in Australian Literature does not extend Furphy's reputation much beyond UWA, the Tom Collins Bequest Collection is an extensive and important acquisition, with work of those artists already mentioned and many others, including Leonard French, Brian McKay, John Passmore, Fred Williams, John Perceval, Guy Grey Smith and Elizabeth Durack. Now housed at the Lawrence Wilson Gallery at UWA, individual works from the collection are often used in exhibitions. Recently the whole collection was exhibited, with Dennis Haskell speaking about the legacy of *Such is Life* at the opening. But Tom Collins House is the most lasting and always present reminder of Joseph Furphy, widely known among writers and the very broad writing community in WA. The FAWWA is an active organisation, and the House is used for meetings, workshops, book launches and so on. It hosts an annual writer-in-residence, while the acquisition of Mattie Furphy House has widened the scope of FAWWA activities. Further, Tom Collins House holds a curious and chaotic but fascinating museum of Furphy memorabilia, including his typewriter, a couple of pieces of packing case furniture said to have come from the original dwelling, the Furphy family bible, and other items, comprising quite poignant reminders of Furphy's last years in Western Australia.



Furphy's typewriter

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