

# Furphy as (Metafictional) Aboriginal Ethnographer

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Although Furphy can take the breath of a contemporary reader away with what is, by modern standards, casual racism—with his talk of ‘chows’ and his tendency to find comedy in racial stereotypes—this paper argues that he can perhaps be enlisted in the thin ranks of those who in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were curious about Aboriginal culture and more than benevolently admiring of it, and who were critical of frontier violence. Although violence did occur on properties which adjoined those on which the Furphy family lived and worked in the Yarra Valley in the 1830s, he did not witness such violence at first hand in Victoria in the 1840s and 1850s, and registered only the indirect fall-out from it. But he was clearly reading reports from the violent Queensland and West Australian frontiers during the period he was writing the *Bulletin* pars, and, I would argue, he was disturbed by them.

Furphy’s writing on Aborigines has been little noticed by literary scholars, with the exception of J. J. Healy (and the present writer). This may be because most of the evidence of his engagement exists in his *Bulletin* pars, and in his lesser known novella, *The Buln-buln and the Brolga* (published posthumously in 1948). While Healy is unusual among literary critics in being aware of these works as a form of engagement with Indigenous Australia, and concedes that Furphy cast ‘a broad reflective net over the social history of the country’, he nonetheless criticises him for approaching ‘the Aborigine as an intellectual-moral problem, in an impersonal manner’ (115).

In *This Whispering in our Hearts*, Henry Reynolds documents how individuals like the Protector, George Augustus Robinson in Victoria and Lancelot Threlkeld in New South Wales, in the 1830s and ’40s, and later John Gribble in Western Australian in the 1880s, all evangelists, took public issue with the violence and sexual depredations against Indigenous people, and how they were marginalised for their outspokenness (28-37, 60-71, 137-60, 163-7, 170-4). By the 1880s, however, Reynolds makes it clear that the arguments from natural justice were much harder to sustain, as social Darwinism became the orthodoxy. These arguments did not begin to be questioned until the late 1920s, long after Furphy’s death (216-

44). Furphy's engagement with Aboriginal culture, then, covers a long period, beginning with an idyllic childhood of interracial games with Yarra Valley Wurundjeri children and hero-worship of strong Aboriginal men in the 1840s, and ending with his revisions of *Buln-buln* in 1906. The arcadian and racially innocent drama of his childhood was played out against a muted background, of which he was only dimly aware as a child, of internal conflict within the Aboriginal community and devastating loss of Aboriginal lives as a result of lack of resistance to European diseases. It was doubtless also counterpointed by his reading about events on the more violent northern frontier.

The Yarra Valley legacy had an intriguing long-term influence on the short pieces he wrote for the *Bulletin* from 1889 onwards, and for the fiction he wrote in the 1890s and the first decade of the twentieth century. It tended to put him in a contestatory position with the ethos of the 'all-[W]hite'-Australia *Bulletin* (Lawson 148), which was to become both a forum for his early work, and the unlikely publisher of his mature novel, *Such is Life* (1903). This early contact history of the Furphy family inclined him to humanitarianism, to direct advocacy in the form of essays for the *Bulletin*, and a subtler form of advocacy in his fiction.

Like many of his peers, Furphy has uncomplimentary things to say about the Irish, 'Chows' and Aborigines. He typically draws on race-based stereotypes as a source of comedy, including British and Scots, though, even as he works his satire, he often concedes cleverness (to the inconvenient Chinese impounders in Chapter V of *SL*), or high-spiritedness and good nature (to the Aborigine, Toby, in *SL*, see below). His final publication embraced White Australia without qualification (*OT* 376-7). He could, for instance, joke, along with most of his scientifically educated contemporaries, about a time when knowledge of the Bible will be 'more extinct and less regretted than the Tasmanian blackfellow' ('The Teaching of the Bible'). This careless and inaccurate aside seemed at the time it was written to be already a fact, and G. A. Robinson's relocation of the remnants of the Tasmanian Aborigines had already proved disastrous for Aboriginal people in Tasmania and Victoria. By the time Furphy was beginning to write, in his late forties, the 'Doomed Race' Theory, which was scientific orthodoxy in this period, had seemingly been validated by science (McGregor 60; Evans, Saunders and Cronin 80-4), and in 'A Vignette of Port Phillip', he could comment magisterially that:

No benevolence could have preserved the indigenous race. Born into a narrow horizon of life, their fatal contentment had paralysed initiative so effectually that all individual potencies of innovation—never lacking where man is found—died with each brain so endowed. (*Vignette* 180)

Furphy's theory about the fatal consequences of cultural conservatism, first raised in 'Black Australia' and repeated in 'A Vignette of Port Phillip' and *Buln-buln*, were not questioned by him, but they did not prevent him from acknowledging in both the essay and his fiction the intellectual capacity of the men he knew. Like Threlkeld, cited by Meston in a response to Furphy's 'Warrigal' contribution for the *Bulletin* (15 April 1893, 18), he resisted the 'phrenological view that Aboriginal people were innately unintelligent and incapable of instruction' (van Toorn 51). Furphy lauded 20-year old Baradyuk's deep intelligence: he accords him 'ardent receptivity and clear intellect', an 'enquiring mind', a 'love of truth and the rapture of discovery' and, as well, linguistic brilliance (*Vignette* 181-2). He is valued as one who has deployed skills as an ethnographer in order to operate within the alien western culture. According to Furphy, it was Baradyuk's 'fatal contentment' in his country, his courage and fearlessness, and his acting as an equal of white men that proved to be his points of vulnerability. In the story he is brought down by a less 'civilised' Aborigine, Yilinbo, a Gunai man from the less settled and more violent districts in Gippsland. Yilinbo was motivated to blame and kill Baradyuk for the death of his child (the kind of superstition Furphy found incomprehensible):

Doubtless, [the custom of removing and eating the kidney fat of an adversary] was a survival from some state of savagery far lower than that which prevailed in Port Phillip at the time of settlement. For the spontaneous kindness of these children of Nature was conspicuous. But from some cause their moral sense seemed strangely in abeyance concerning the revolting rite referred to; indeed, it was a subject which they would discuss with perfect artlessness and indifference. And now, by the irony of circumstance, the only aboriginal who held the custom in abhorrence was probably its last victim. Moreover, the one tribesman whose balanced mind repudiated the besotment of witchcraft was probably the last sacrifice to that delusion. For all such beliefs and observances vanished in the racial paralysis which heralded a virtual extinction. (*Vignette* 185)

The disgust, bewilderment and cultural superiority of this account is to a small degree mitigated by the awareness that the practice probably had a ritual basis, a rare concession in this period. Such thinking bespeaks the influence of his anthropological reading (he had read Roth, Meston and Brough Smyth). This thinking is also underpinned by colonialist assumptions about the civilising influence of colonial contact, and the culturally imperialistic belief in the ability of some Aborigines to adapt to 'higher' western values. However, the collocation in Furphy's writing of such 'Doomed Race' theorising with Biblical teachings (specifically that humans are equal in God's eyes) goes to the heart of his ambivalence about not only biological Darwinism (see below), but also, more significantly, his inner conflict about Aborigines, evident even in the extracts quoted. Admiration for individuals like Baradyuk and Sam, and a generous recognition of athletic prowess, intelligence and moral courage, coexist with a refusal to see such outstanding individuals as less than equal, and to value their embrace of the assumption of equality with white men. Such personal contact and his emotional investment in his own and his family's experiences tested his theoretical assumptions about the doomed race theory. As I have argued elsewhere (Devlin-Glass), his Christianity led him to embrace monogenist assumptions about race (all men are equal in the sight of God, and biologically have a single origin) and in this, his view comes close, I believe, to that of Darwin in *The Descent of Man*. But Furphy also struggled with Social Darwinism, and in particular, polygenism, which after 1860 increasingly became the intellectual orthodoxy, which posited different origins for races and organised them in a hierarchy (McGregor 19-20, 24).

We know for certain that Furphy was familiar with Darwin, in particular his treatise on earthworms (*BBB*, 12 and 123n), the idea of natural selection and the survival of the fittest ("Tom Collins" dives in again', and see Croft 251-3). This familiarity is confirmed in a letter to William Cathels, where in an aside he half-jokingly notes: 'my idea of dissipation is the reading of such writers as Swedenborg, Darwin, Matthew Arnold, &c' (*Letters* 47). Further, in defining himself as an 'Optimist and a Christian', he commented to A. G. Stephens, that he was 'a Biological Agnostic because Darwinism is unduly boomed' (*Letters* 95). The use of a term (*agnostic*) taken from religious discourse is telling, revealing his allegiance to Christian Socialism and some disquiet about biologist assumptions. However, there is no evidence, as far as I am aware, of his having read *The Descent of Man* (1871). In chapter seven of this work, Darwin objects strenuously to Social Darwinists applying his evolutionary ideas to race theories. He was firmly of the view that men were not so different one from another as to

constitute different species, and he tended to put race extinctions down to competition, warfare, disease and lowered fertility ('the law of the susceptibility of the reproductive system to changed conditions of life' (Darwin 723) was the most potent factor in his view), rather than to innate inferiority. Furphy, like many of his contemporaries, whether of the monogenist or polygenist camp, accepted without question the scientific orthodoxy of his day that the extinction of Aborigines was inevitable, believing that Aboriginal conservatism doomed them to 'the racial paralysis which heralded a virtual extinction' (*Vignette* 185).

Furphy was, of course, not a theorist but a chronicler of sorts (but not of the Tom Collins variety) and an outstanding, even brilliant novelist who chose to explore ideas in his fictions. His naturalistic habit of mind, open, enquiring, somewhat scientific in orientation, and committed to documenting the real makes him a compelling comparative ethnographer: he is uncomfortable about generalising about anything, whether it be types of squatters, or how children die in the bush. Similarly, on the matter of Aboriginal 'savagery', Furphy avoids over-generalisation, and in answer to Lilian's probing question, ' "...aren't the poor creatures often treated cruelly by new settlers?"' (*BBB* 70), puts into the mouth of the arch-exponent of Aboriginal primitivism, Barefooted Bob, these qualifications:

'Course, the New South Wales blackfellers is all right now—what's left o' them— but when you git at the Queensland fellers in their raw state, you'll mostly fine some bullies among 'em—same as among whitefellers.... If there was no bullies among the blackfellers, they wouldn't want dispersin'. White bullies wants dispersin' too.' (*BBB* 70)

Later in the same exchange, Bob will commit to an even more radical amoral anarchism:

'...it don't do blackfellers any good to civilize 'em. There's no gittin' over the fact that people naturally inclines to sin, an' wickedness, an' rascality—blackfellers an' whitefellers, just the same—an' civilizin' makes people worse.... An' see how birds goes in for swearin', as soon as they git civilized.' (*BBB* 70-1)

Furphy certainly did not subscribe to Bob's notion that 'they don't bother much about manners an' customs, so there ain't much to study...' (*BBB* 98) in Aboriginal culture, or to his philosophy that 'civilizin' makes people worse'. His personal crusade was 'ignorance

shifting’, as his letters and pars clearly indicate. Furphy was no simple-minded subscriber to the theory that Aborigines were an inferior species, savage and brutal, or even childlike as Edward M. Curr, a contemporary amateur ethnologist, characterised them in *The Australian Race: Its Origin, Languages, Customs, Place of Landing in Australia* (1886), a book Furphy does not list as part of his reading on Aboriginal Australia (though he was aware of another work by E. M. Curr, his *Pure Saddle Horses and How to Breed them in Australia* (1863), see SL 279). Like Bob, he knew of white men, like ‘Wingy’ Sheldon in ‘A Vignette of Port Phillip’, ‘lower’, ‘more servile and degraded than any aboriginal of the Upper Yarra tribe’ (*Vignette* 188). He is an admiring advocate of individuals within the culture, like Baradyuk and Wurundjeri Sam, and for many aspects of their culture. He disagreed with British and Imperialist assumptions about Aborigines, biting rebutting them in these terms:

...all British textbooks, in their large, offhand way, placed the Australian aborigines lowest in the scale of humanity. And what argument from fact or experience can withstand a British platitude? (‘Black Australia’)

Furphy makes it his project in writing many of his *Bulletin* pars to fill in some ethnographical gaps in the record and in doing so he recognises his own and his family’s privileged place in being first settlers in the Yarra Valley. Sylvia Lawson notes that, despite Archibald’s passionate defence of individual Aborigines,

the black Australian was given a rare degree of editorial notice: he was of so little account, as the *Bulletin* generally perceived things, as to be unworthy of mention, and would have appeared in its columns less often than the kangaroo, snake and wombat who shared his contracting wilderness. (149)

Furphy was not alone in attempting to fill this near-silence. He attempted in the columns of the *Bulletin* to make Archibald Meston, a prolific journalist and a Protector of Aborigines in Queensland, a collaborator and found in his writing inspiration for new contributions. Focus on Aboriginal culture is a persistent thread in Furphy’s ‘pars’ for as long as he wrote for the *Bulletin*, and they demonstrate a close interest in Aboriginal languages (‘Warrigal Controversy’, and [The Warrigal Controversy Revisited]), customs (‘“Tom Collins” dives’; [Aboriginal Customs]; ‘Re fire-raising’), artefacts, culture and social organisation (‘Black

Australia’). In relation to certain customs, which he wanted to record as much as anything because experts like Brough Smyth had overlooked them, he comments:

None but the earliest settlers of our older districts could accurately note the primitive characteristics of this unique race. And the pioneer settlers of our older districts have let the opportunity slip. For one thing, there was no money in ethnology. (‘Black Australia’)

There is a powerful sense of the injustice of race-stereotyping implicit in his critique of Imperialism and its low valuation of a race that he felt he appreciated more fully, and it empowers his work as an amateur ethnographer, filling in some of the detail he felt the ‘professionals’ like the self-educated and self-promoting ‘expert’, Meston (see Lergessner 71), and also Smyth might have missed. He does not deal in any detail with the most scientific ethnologist of the period, W. E. Roth, though he had encountered him in his reading.

Furphy is aware that his remembered testimony may be compromised by his age at the time that he witnessed the decimation of Aboriginal people in the Yarra Valley (he was only nine when the family moved from Yering to Kyneton). In the decade before Furphy’s birth and his first decade of life, Richard Broome calculates that the Aboriginal populations of Victoria were reduced by 80 per cent (*Aboriginal Victorians* 91), mostly as a result of diseases that were transmitted down the songlines even before settlement, but also as a result of internecine violence and sorcery. It was a crucial period in white/black relations on the frontier.

Furphy enlists a Shakespearean quotation to defend the judgments he came to in his boyhood and, typically, he inverts it when he says in self-defence that he was ‘old only in judgment and understanding’ (*Henry IV, Part II*, I, ii, 1.115). He is firm about the quality of his testimony: his memory might be ‘childish’ but what he recalls is a ‘perfectly distinct recollection’. Although it has to be said that both the essay and story are marked by sentimental nostalgia for a lost Eden of youth, his recollections are, unlike Curr’s similar romantic revisitings of his early pastoral life in Victoria in the 1840s, uncompromised by the imperatives of land acquisition or personal gain (see Samuel Furphy, especially chapters 7-11). Joe Furphy several times asserts that his memory was corroborated (‘checked and authenticated’) by several discussions with his parents much later in his life. This testimonial constitutes a revealing glimpse into Furphy family life in that these discussions about their collective first-

hand contact with Aboriginal groups continued over at least five decades. A letter to his mother indicates that he was still seeking to talk about the Yarra Valley Aborigines in (probably) 1906:

Now is the time I would like to have a long talk with you, for a mean and selfish motive. Fact is, I am writing an Aboriginal story, which naturally places itself on the Upper Yarra, and dates itself immediately after the settlement of that locality. (*Letters* 218)

This suggests that the family knew the importance of their moment in history as first settlers in Wurundjeri country, and perhaps a need to understand what they had witnessed. As a family, what they thought they were observing was internecine strife between Aboriginal communities (and this was certainly a factor in killings on the frontier—see Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians* 86) and Furphy is careful to note that neither he, nor his family presumably, witnessed any violence on the Ryrie estates:

...the shadow of extinction had not perceptibly closed round what was virtually the last generation of that primeval race.

... This took place not more than 30 miles from Melbourne, early in '51—say 15½ years after Fawkner's *Enterprise* was moored in the Yarra. At that time the blackfellows had entirely vanished from many districts of Victoria. No historian has had access to the details of their passing. Doubtless, sheep were occasionally speared; doubtless, poisoned flour was occasionally dropped from station drays. But let it be recorded, to the honour of the Ryries and other pioneer settlers on the Upper Yarra, that, from first to last, their treatment of the blacks was irreproachable. ('Black Australia')

Michael Cannon documents an affray in 1840, before the Furphys arrived in Yering, in which the Ryrie station was the centre of an action to disarm Aborigines with firearms (30), and also a period in 1845 when Ryrie reported alcohol-induced violence on his property (159) and the station was being used as a refuge by children escaping from schools in Melbourne (163-4), but not any serious violence. It is clear that Furphy was not, as Healy claims, closing his eyes to violence in Victoria, 'softening away or shading off the edges' (118, 121), but rather

asserting that his family did not themselves witness affrays between white settlers and Aborigines. His essay for the *Bulletin* reveals a willingness to name settler violence in Victoria rather than simply disavow it.

Further evidence of his awareness of violence in Victoria is his response to an ironic anecdote by Archibald Meston (*Bulletin*, 15 April 1893, 18) about an unjust ‘judicial’ execution of the wrong Aboriginal men in Queensland. It may be this article which elicited the request from Furphy for more information about the Faithful massacre of Pangeray people that had occurred on 11 April 1838 on the Broken River near Benalla:

Talking of blackfellows, can anyone furnish the true history of the Faithful massacre? I have three records, each differing widely from the others, and possibly from the truth. (*Bulletin*, 6 May 1893, 19)

His willingness to name a massacre, his compiling of accounts, and his questioning of the historical accuracy of reports is worth noting.

For modern taste, Furphy’s construction in ‘Black Australia’ of interracial violence as motivated by mutual revenge on both sides, may constitute a failure to judge settler acts as murderous. However, there is a certain courage in naming them at all, especially in the pages of the *Bulletin*, and the context of his family’s trying to understand what in fact happened in the Yarra Valley is implicit in these admissions. What has been made much clearer by subsequent researchers, like Richard Broome in our own time, is the unwitting role played by amateur ethnographers like his father Sam in putting traditionally hostile tribesmen in mortal peril of violence and sorcery by collecting weapons that were in fact essential for personal safety. Joe Furphy’s accounts of two Aboriginal deaths (‘Black Australia’ and ‘A Vignette of Port Philip’), one the victim of a vendetta, and the other a result of cultural misrecognition of acts of sorcery between the warring Wurundjeri and Gunai, document exactly what Broome’s historical research revealed much later. Furphy’s essays, short story and *Buln-buln* also subtly register the differences, a distinction Healy fails to draw (see 119), between the Victorian frontier where disease and interracial conflict were more significant and lethal, and that of the far more violent northern frontier, especially Queensland, where punitive expeditions were frequently mounted. Furphy probably derived his information about these in part from book learning (mainly Meston and Roth), and possibly from bushmen’s tales. Furphy’s stories and

pars are compassionate, and they enact the genre of race-conscious testimonial. In reading these pars as on balance more sympathetic than not, I challenge Barnes's claim that Furphy's 'imaginative sympathy never seems to have extended to them, and his strong sense of social injustice never seems to have embraced the position of the Australian Aborigines in their own land' (*OT* 17), and Healy's claim that 'Furphy [in 'Vignette'] biased the edge of the narrative' (119). If the *Bulletin* essay can be read as accurate testimonial, Wurundjeri Sam and Irish Sam were good friends. The essay also reveals that the boy Joe saw life in the camp and especially women's work at close range, and as a child viewed men like Sam and Baradyuk as heroes. The perspective is hardly as 'remote' (120) as Healy suggests when one notes the artefacts Furphy has studied and realises that his appreciation is probably informed by the women and children with whom he was associating.

While Furphy clearly believed what we no longer accept about the inevitable extinction of the Indigenous people in Australia, he constructed himself as a sympathetic ethnographer of Aboriginal life. Like Meston, and without a trace of his trademark irony, he celebrated what in Aboriginal culture seemed admirable to him—skills in athleticism, weapon making, bushmanship, and customs unfamiliar to westerners. He goes into extraordinary detail, in the manner of the close observer/naturalist/ethnographer, to give shape and form to his admiration in promoting the idea that the culture was sophisticated. What's more, he demonstrates in the *Bulletin* pars a will to enter the national conversation about Indigenous matters, to enter into colloquy with men who passed as authorities in his own day, especially Archibald Meston, Dr Walter Roth (a medically trained ethnologist, who succeeded Meston as Protector of Aborigines in northern Queensland) and the better-known Victorian ethnographer, Brough Smyth. Indeed, I'd claim more: that in writing as he did, he was implicitly rebutting, point for point, the highly negative account of Australian Aborigines in *Chambers's Encyclopaedia* (possibly the new edition of 1888, which Barnes (*OT* 172) notes was added to the Shepparton Mechanics' Institute in 1890). In particular, he appears to be implicitly contesting the writer's claims, based on a long list of 'authorities', that they were lacking in intelligence and affect (Vol. 1, *s.v. Australia*, 591-2). Furphy's essay is an ambitious and grounded project, self-consciously limited in scope, and based on the lived experience of an observant person (something amateur ethnographers like himself, including Meston and Curr, often insisted on), and one with much generosity of spirit, who knew that, for example, bullies exist in every culture, a point made in both *Bulletin* essays, in *The Buln-buln and the Brolga* (70), and in 'A Vignette of Port Phillip' (188). To criticise Furphy's and his peers' articulation of the doomed

race theory, and to reduce his vision of the Baradyuk/Kunuwarra romance to romantic sentimentalism as Healy does (120-1), is to impose much better-informed twenty-first century perspectives on ideas that were naturalised in the nineteenth-century discourses that formed him, and to ignore what in the fiction and the essay is celebratory of Aboriginal culture.

It is perhaps instructive to digress by way of *Such is Life* before circling back to *Buln-buln*. What motivates this periphrasis is the representation of the ‘half-caste’ boundary rider, Toby, a self-assured and cocky young man. He is referred to by a variety of honorifics—as ‘the prince’ (*SL*, pp.226, 230), ‘HRH’, (*SL* 229, 292), and as ‘the descendant of a thousand kings’ (*SL* 292). Challenged by Tom Armstrong who assumes that Toby is of slave stock and labouring under the ‘curse o’ Canaan’ (*SL* 292), Toby wears his Aboriginality with pride, and makes his claim: ‘Why, properly speaking, I own this here (adj.) country, as fur as the eye can reach’ (*SL* 292). Tom, wearing his bell-topper and unkindly revelling in ‘mistaken identity’ in Chapter VII, may already have implicitly touched on Aboriginal sovereignty when in Chapter III he talks of ‘[n]ice customs curtsy[ing] to kings’ and having spent ‘peaceful years’ under the ‘mild sway’ of Jacky XLVIII and of ‘the divinity that doth hedge a king’ whether or not he wears clothes (*SL* 114). The context for both acknowledgements of prior Aboriginal claims is jocular, but that does not necessarily make them insincere or not serious, and these small gestures are of a piece with his writings on Aboriginal subjects in the pars.

Furphy’s most equivocal and difficult use of Aboriginal material is to be found in *The Buln-buln and the Brolga*. Barefooted Bob’s tales of the notoriously vicious Palmer goldfields in far north Queensland (where violence towards both Chinese and Aborigines was common, see Broome, *Aboriginal Australians* 110 and Loos) touch on Aboriginal attacks on ‘friendly settlers’, a defensive shooting in which one Aboriginal is killed and the others scattered (which is not condoned by the settler whom Bob and Bat imagine they are defending). There are also accounts of the prostitution of Aboriginal women by their menfolk and the selling of Aboriginal babies to white women (*BBB* 68-9), and even more disturbingly, first-hand accounts of cannibalism of two Chinese ‘[kept] fresh for when [they] are wanted’ (*BBB* 81) and the near-murder of a lubra, supposedly kept for subsequent eating (*BBB* 82), and her mercy-killing by Bob. The material could not be more lurid and sensational, and it makes interpretation difficult. Despite Bob’s certain knowledge that his material is offensive and his ‘mal-du-mulga sigh’ (*BBB* 74), his subject-matter takes us deep into what is, even today, morally compromising and even taboo subject-matter. Is Furphy perhaps endorsing Bob’s

value system, or asking the reader to accept the low valuation put on the lives of Aboriginal people and their customs that Bob's narrative suggests? It could easily be misread as a catalogue of denigration. The answer is complex and requires some analysis of Furphy's narrative method and how this novel is structured. It is by far the least morally directive of Furphy's three novels (*Such is Life* and *Rigby's Romance* are full of morally serious sermons), and this also adds to the interpretive difficulty.

Because of Furphy's clear commitment to being a chronicler rather than a romancer, Bob's (and Tom's) stories are generally privileged in the story competition between Bob and Fred, but as I've argued elsewhere, even the naturalist/chronicler Bob can be as deficient in truthfulness and as given to exaggeration as the romancer Fred ('Envoi', *BBB* 110). In this essentially metafictional narrative, the duelling stories cast light on one another, and to make sense of Bob's back-country Aboriginal narratives, one must look at how the stories are collocated. More importantly, one needs to take account of the forensic questions posed by the lady journalist, Lilian, which are the more-than-casual impetus for some of the narratives about Aborigines. Like Joe Furphy himself, Lilian accepts without question that Aboriginal people as a race are doomed, but her project is quite explicitly that of ethnography: she pumps Barefooted Bob for information about frontier violence, prostitution, and Aborigines selling their children, as well as eating habits, cuisine, and weaponry (especially the unique engineering of the boomerang). It is a clear-eyed, unsentimental fact-finding mission, which, in almost every particular, overlaps with Furphy's project in the *pars*.

The reason Lilian is so interested in Bob and is prepared to endure the reiteration of her husband's well-rehearsed stories (even maybe pretend to be enthralled by them) is that as a married woman with children she cannot enjoy access to traditional Aboriginal people, and she needs material for her journalistic projects which Bob can provide. When Bob blanches at the intelligence that she is a journalist of some standing (he experiences 'unspeakable longing for a private earthquake of a yard in diameter, immediately underneath his chair,' *BBB* 100), it is perhaps more than the bashfulness of the 'bushie' face to face with urban sophistication. One could speculate that Bob is concerned about the unspeakable finding its way into the public domain: after the successful prosecution of the white perpetrators of the Myall massacre in 1838, there were reasons for a conspiracy of silence about violence on the frontier (Broome, *Aboriginal Australians* 46).

When Bob tells of returning to shoot the crippled Aboriginal woman in the back of the head to save her from the agony of an inevitable slow death and losing her eyes to the crows, it is significant that the entire company is silenced ‘for a minute’ (BBB 82). The subject is changed by Tom, and the talk turns to the Franco-Prussian war and to talk of dead and wounded numbering 100,000 men. Tom’s comment on Bob’s question in response to this immense tally is telling:

‘How many head o’ fellers was there in the other army?’ asked Bob, embarrassed by numbers which would have been big, even in connection with sheep. (BBB 83)

The serious question and the subsequent jocular editorialising which functions as an implicit comment on it, require the reader to mark the dissonance, and to do the work of comparison and interpretation. Fred is not, of course, detained by the question, because acceptance of the rules of formal warfare between nations is, for him, as a hero of wars, beyond questioning. But Bob, who is able to enjoy a good story, is struck by the enormity of the human cost of the war, and, limited by his bushman vocabulary, he translates it in terms of the abattoir, which is, of course, the point. But this story of warfare, with its horrendous human cost, performs even more work in casting light back on Bob’s tales of the fractious frontier, and points to a different, and perhaps modern, perspective—might the frontier be understood as a warzone? And might Bob’s accounts of his and Bat’s exploits be considered to owe more to *Boy’s Own* Imperial discourses than is at first evident? In the case of the story of the attack on Moorfield, it is ironic that Bob and Bat make assumptions about a situation that the settler had assiduously avoided in his attempt to share the land with Aboriginal people. It is also revealing that Bob fails to count Aboriginal Paddy as a human being of equal value to himself (BBB 81). It is important to note in passing the forensic and morally urgent quality of Lilian’s clarification of that point: ‘There were three of you in the party, Mr Bruce?’ (BBB 81). Counting Paddy, there are four. Nonetheless, and despite his dehumanisation of Paddy, Bob attempts to relieve the dying woman by giving her water, seeks ways to minimise her pain and her death, and, most significantly, accords her a soul which he doesn’t imagine ‘risin’ up in judgment agen [him]’ (BBB 82). But the most significant aspect of Furphy’s careful juxtaposition of unlike stories is the implication that one set of massacres is so naturalised that it invites no moral scrutiny, by being transmogrified, even apotheosised, into the Heroic, whereas the subjects of Aboriginal cannibalism and murders by whites are barely able to be enunciated in polite society. Cannibal discourses, and Bob is surely aware of this, tended in

nineteenth-century ethnography and fiction to be the ultimate marker of alterity, and the defining trope of the ‘primitive.’<sup>1</sup> That such practices might have had very different and sometimes ritual meanings, or be elicited by conditions of starvation, is still rarely publicly canvassed. That an unspeakable act of violence (cannibalism) is juxtaposed with a highly speakable act of mass violence (European warfare) is a measure of both Furphy’s boldness and the radicalism of his critique of imperial and settler violence.

Which brings me back to the claim I made earlier about Lilian Falkland-Pritchard being perhaps an avatar of Joe Furphy, amateur ethnographer. It is clear that Furphy’s revisions of the 1898 Typescript performed a major transformation in the representation of the lady novelist, making her more central, more serious, and less an object of satire. There are significant changes in the revised version to the role of Lilian: Rigby’s patronising behavior towards her disappeared with the elimination of Rigby as a character; she is a successful magazine writer rather than a failed novelist, and the forms of address used (‘lady’ and ‘missus’) appear more respectful than ‘authoress’ and ‘mem’. Croft (248), using different evidence, also argues that Furphy edited out satire in his representation of Lilian in successive drafts.

Obliquity is the hallmark of *Buln-buln*, and this novella exhibits it to a degree unparalleled in *Such is Life* and *Rigby’s Romance*, the two more substantial novels in Furphy’s corpus. They announce their ideological preoccupations with social justice issues far more directly than *Buln-buln*. As I read *Buln-buln*, it is Lilian Falkland-Pritchard, the lady journalist for the *Bulletin* and the *Australasian*, who is the locus of moral authority in the narrative.<sup>2</sup> Although mocked by the central narrator (who is himself mocked by Furphy), the lady writer’s question (“aren’t the poor creatures often treated cruelly by the new settlers?” 70), and both her comments (“How dreadful to think of a mother selling her child!” 68, and “we boast of our civilization but the mark of the serpent is over it all” 71) are to be taken seriously. Those questions point in the direction of understanding Aboriginal culture as sophisticated and constitute the central (and destabilising) moral core of the debate over the Aboriginal question. Given the moral urgency of her questions and comments, it is questionable that romantic journalism will ensue (Croft contends this, 253).

Tom (and Furphy) further reinforce Lilian’s social justice agenda when, in the context of a discussion of Aboriginal men prostituting their women and the women selling their babies to

white women, he draws on Steele's *Spectator* tale of Inkle and Yarico (1711) to point out that it is not only black men who sell and betray women (*BBB* 69). That she was sold for thirty shillings underlines again Furphy's Christian critique. I would argue (against Lever 35 and Croft 253), that far from being a romantic and conservative, Lilian's interventions, understated as they are, are forensic, and cut to the heart of the colonialist debates of the period, in socially progressive ways. She, like Furphy in his parts, contests the low cultural valuation of Aborigines. Furphy's representation of Lilian, and his placing her at the heart of this novella and Aboriginal questions at the climax of it, reveals him to be anxious about the race orthodoxies of his time, and also simultaneously to be articulating socially just and compassionate understandings about a race he and his family could admire, and simultaneously believe to be doomed to extinction.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Dixon (2001: 114-5, 117) speaks of the European obsession with cannibalism, head-hunting and captivity as being fed by phrenology, anthropometric measurement, ethnology and by travel literature and orientalism. It was, he claims, blind to the ritual imperatives of anthropophagy. See also Brown and Tuzin.

<sup>2</sup> Croft, in a manoeuvre that reads against the grain of Tom's narrative and properly contests much criticism of the novel, argues that she is the most important member of the story-telling group, and comments on her high degree of sensitivity, intellectual superiority and culture (p.256).

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