

**‘The Secret of England’s Greatness’:
A Note on the Anti-Imperialism of *Such is Life***

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Thomas Jones Barker's 'The Secret of England's Greatness' (image courtesy British National Portrait Gallery)

Standing in front of a painting in the National Portrait Gallery in London a few years ago, for the first time I grasped the import of a seemingly inconsequential conversation in the first chapter of *Such is Life*. Like others who have been reading and re-reading the novel over the years, I find that from time to time phrases and sentences come to mind unbidden, and sometimes one of Joseph Furphy's 'secret intentions' (Frank Dalby Davison's phrase) that I had not recognised, or perhaps only partially understood, is unexpectedly revealed.

The painting that I was looking at was Thomas Jones Barker's 'The Secret of England's Greatness', first exhibited in 1863 in England. It depicts a youthful Queen Victoria in the Audience Chamber at Windsor, Prince Albert and the Duchess of Wellington by her side, with Lord John Russell and Lord Palmerston looking on as she presents a Bible to an African ruler who is bowing down before her. There was an apocryphal story that an African prince (in some versions an Indian) who was visiting the English court asked the queen what was the secret of England's greatness. She is said to have picked up a Bible, saying, 'That is the secret of England's greatness'. Carved at the base of the frame of Barker's painting is an open Bible with the painted text: 'Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path. I love thy commandments above gold; yea, above fine gold'.

There could hardly have been a more powerful and attractive expression of the moral claim for British imperialism than Barker's painting, and it is not surprising that it was widely reproduced. According to the National Portrait Gallery the painting was taken on a national tour designed to promote a mezzotint reproduction, which was simply entitled 'The Bible'. In his popular novel, *No. 5 John Street* (1899), Richard Whiteing describes a city missionary distributing copies of a coloured lithograph of the painting among the poor in the East End of London. By the time that Furphy was writing *Such is Life* the phrase 'the secret of England's greatness' was so common as to need no annotation. He and his 'disciples' at the Shepparton Foundry would undoubtedly have seen and discussed the *Bulletin* cartoon on the London Dock Strike in 1889, in which Livingston Hopkins used it to devastating effect. 'Hop's' cartoon, which represented the misery of an impoverished docker's family, with the mother lying on a bed of straw, perhaps dying, was captioned "'The Secret of England's Greatness" Fivepence per Hour'. (The dockers were striking for an increase in their wages from five to six pence an hour. They won their 'tanner', thanks to an extraordinarily large sum of money donated by a sympathetic Australian public). Others who wished to influence public opinion used the anecdote to enlist the prestige and authority of the monarchy for their cause. An example is a widely circulated pamphlet, *Dark Deeds in a Sunny Land* (1905), by the 'Blackfellow's Friend', the Rev J. B. Gribble, in which he ends his indignant exposure of the ill-treatment of Aborigines by reminding readers what Victoria, 'the greatest Sovereign the world has ever seen', was supposed to have said.

The phrase was a favourite with nineteenth-century preachers, especially Protestants, who expatiated on the theme that Britain's strength was its moral foundation; and it retains its potency for Protestants in Ulster today. On the occasion of Queen Elizabeth's Golden Jubilee last year the Evangelical Protestant Society in Belfast presented a Loyal Address, which included the statement that 'we strongly believe that God has blessed the United Kingdom over the years because of its faithfulness to the Bible'. The address appears on the Society's website, along with a reproduction of Barker's painting. Orange Lodges have long featured the painting on banners, which are so much a part of the political culture of Ulster. Another and even more common image used on banners is that of the Crown resting on a Bible, with the phrase 'The Secret of England's Greatness' beneath. That image was still in circulation in Australia after the First World War, when 'England's greatness' was less easy to discern. A lantern slide with that image was part of a 1926 lecture series by Presbyterian clergyman, John Flynn, founder of the Australian Inland Mission, whose lantern slide collection is now in the National Library of Australia [<http://nla.gov.au/nla.pic-an24377768>].

Queen Victoria's jubilees were celebrated throughout the colonies and 'the secret of England's greatness' was affirmed from many a pulpit and platform. One example not far from Shepparton is worth noting. At Violet Town and Euroa a local clergyman delivered a Golden Jubilee sermon that the *Euroa Advertiser* thought 'created a powerful impression, the effect being greatly intensified by the preacher's splendid oratorical powers'. The climax of the sermon came when the preacher described 'a good old picture' that always interested him:

It is a picture of a Bible upon a cushion, and upon it rest the sceptre and the crown.
What does that bespeak? Why, that England's glorious Constitution rests on the
Word of God. That is the secret of England's greatness. (24 June 1887)

The eloquence of the Euroa preacher in 1887 did not go unchallenged, however, and under the heading, 'The Secret of England's Greatness', the newspaper published a critical article by a correspondent using the nom-de-plume, 'Quietist', who began by noting that during the jubilee celebrations 'we have been "assured" from thousands of pulpits and platforms that "the Bible is the secret of England's greatness"'. The writer remarked pertinently that the phrase was:

one of those parrot phrases which pass from mouth to mouth, and in the course of time have all the authority of axiomatic truths, simply because people are too ignorant or too indolent to examine not only whether they contain the slightest modicum of truth, but whether they have any meaning whatever. (29 July 1887)

It is a comment worthy of the author of *Such is Life*.

In Shepparton, as in other parts of the Australian colonies, the parrot phrase would certainly have passed from mouth to mouth, and Joseph Furphy would have heard and read it in a variety of contexts—and almost certainly within the family circle, where his political views made him the odd man out. His uncle John was a member of an Orange Lodge in Ulster and then in Shepparton; his brother John was ‘an enthusiastic loyalist’; and his father was so devoted to Queen and Country that on the occasion of Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee he planted a row of pines and changed the name of his property from ‘Sandhills’ to ‘Jubilee Pines’, commissioning a set of cast-iron gates with the new name from the foundry in Shepparton. Like the rest of his family, Joseph knew his Bible thoroughly, as all his writing testifies; but he differed from them in the way in which he interpreted it. As Tom Collins he wrote in the *Bulletin* that the New Testament, ‘rightly read’, would become the ‘textbook of ideal socialism’; and that ‘In the interests of moral progress, the Bible must be read; and in the interests of honest interpretation, the parson must go’ (27 January 1894). The Tom Collins persona made it easier for him to voice such radical and unconventional opinions without bringing him into open conflict with his ‘right-thinking’ relatives; but even when writing as the supposedly offensive Tom Collins, he expresses his dissent from established views in terms of general principle, and avoids giving offence to his contemporaries (except perhaps to Orangemen who read the long reflection in Chapter II of *Such is Life* on the history of Ulster).

Through the narrative and the reflections of the narrator in *Such is Life* Furphy quietly but consistently undermines the claim for the moral authority of the established imperial political and social order, so neatly encapsulated in the phrase about England’s greatness. The phrase itself surfaces in Chapter I during the midday conversation of a group of bullockies who have met on the Riverina plains. There are five bullock-teams, and the issue is where the bullocks could get the best feed of grass that night.

‘I think Cooper and I had better push on to the ram-paddock,’ suggested Thompson. ‘You three can work on the selection. Division of labour’s the secret of success, they say.’

‘Secret of England’s greatness,’ mused Dixon. ‘I forgit what the (irrelevant expletive) that is.’

‘The true secret of England’s greatness lies in her dependencies, Mr Dixon,’ replied Willoughby handsomely; and straightway the serene, appreciative expression of the bullock-driver’s face, rightly interpreted, showed that his mind was engaged in a Graeco-Roman conflict with the polysyllable being uppermost.

(4)

Tom Collins tells the reader that Dixon, ‘a magnificent specimen of crude humanity’, is ‘just such a man as your novelist would picture as the nurse-swapped offspring of some rotund or rickety aristocrat’ (3). Willoughby, who bears a striking resemblance to Dixon, was born into the English upper class but is now a penniless remittance man, in ‘rags and dirt’, out of place in the Australian bush. He does not have the ‘suggestion of latent physical force and leathery durability of the bullock-driver’ (4), but has ‘a certain air of refinement’, and has had the sort of education—manifested in his Latin quotations—that Dixon lacks. In this brief exchange Dixon cannot remember the key part of the pious platitude, and Willoughby, surprisingly, does not supply it. The Englishman’s interpretation—the ‘true secret’—is very much to the point: England’s ‘greatness’ comes from her having an empire; that is to say, her ‘greatness’ is economic, derived from her possessions in other parts of the world. He makes no claim for the moral purity of the motives of the colonisers.

Furphy assumes that his reader will know the full quotation, and will register what is missing; but he makes no attempt to draw out the implications of the exchange. The focus shifts from Willoughby’s pronouncement to Dixon’s bemusement at the word ‘dependencies’. The naivety and lack of formal education of the bullockies is a recurring source of comedy, and Tom Collins’s description of Dixon’s difficulty in understanding Willoughby’s vocabulary is what stays in the memory. For most readers, certainly for readers today, this moment is no more than incidental comedy because Furphy does not, as it were, show his hand.

A strikingly different handling of the anecdote about Queen Victoria is to be found in Joyce's *Ulysses*, where the Citizen in Barney Kiernan's pub reads a skit from the *United Irishman* about a Zulu chief visiting England. The key sentence is:

The delegation partook of luncheon at the conclusion of which the dusky potentate, in the course of a happy speech, freely translated by the British chaplain, the reverend Ananias Praisegod Barebones, tendered his best thanks to Massa Walkup and emphasized the cordial relations existing between Abeakuta and the British Empire, stating that he treasured as one of his dearest possessions an illuminated bible, the volume of the word of God and the secret of England's greatness, graciously presented to him by the white chief woman, the great squaw Victoria, with a personal dedication from the august hand of the Royal Donor. (332)

Throughout the boozy talk there is mockery of the English and 'the great empire they boast of'. Bloom's earlier attempt to defend 'their colonies and their civilisation' leads the Citizen to produce the brilliant pun, 'syphilisation' (323). And the reading of the skit is followed by talk of Casement's report on the horrors of imperialism in the Congo ('Raping the women and girls and flogging the natives on the belly to squeeze all the red rubber they can out of them', 333).

All this is a world away from *Such is Life*. One would not look for Joycean attitudes in the work of a middle-aged Victorian (in both senses of the word), writing in a colony during the heyday of British imperialism. Furphy's text includes no conversations which might offend the prevailing notions of propriety. Introducing the last chapter of *Such is Life* Tom Collins decides that an account of a night spent in a shanty 'is not a desirable text'. 'It would do you no good', he tells the reader, 'to hear how the old Major (he was an ex-officer of the Imperial army) fawned on my officialship, and threw himself in rapport with my gentlemanship' (263). A glancing criticism of imperial attitudes such as this avoids overt criticism of contemporary personalities and events, but Furphy's anti-imperialist sentiment is not the less real or deeply felt for being quietly worked into the texture of the whole book.

The brief exchange between Dixon and Willoughby about 'the secret of England's greatness' introduces a thread in the closely woven pattern out of which emerges the 'offensively Australian' perspective of *Such is Life*. As in the pages of the *Bulletin*, the notion that colonial life is inferior is overturned, and it is the representatives of the imperial order who are found

wanting. The theme becomes apparent early in the narrative with, ironically, the down-and-out Willoughby—'Poor shadow of departed exclusiveness' is Tom Collins's view of him—standing up for the values of the English establishment. Against the crude, ungentlemanly bullockies like Mosey, Willoughby affirms the principle of hierarchy, declaring that 'the man who is a gentleman by birth and culture—by which I mean a man of good family, who has not only gone through the curriculum of a university, but has graduated, so to speak, in society' is one who has 'every advantage in every conceivable situation'. 'The records of military enterprise, exploration, pioneering and so forth, furnish abundant evidence of this obvious fact', he naively tells the bushmen, who soon put him right. Having named the explorers Burke and Wills as 'gentlemen—gentlemen remember—who have exhibited in a marked degree the qualities of the pioneer', he is disconcerted to hear the bullockies ridicule Burke, for his incompetence and his attitudes ('a bully and a snob'), and he tries ineffectually to defend Burke's behaviour on the grounds that 'to maintain subordination, a commander must differentiate himself' (27). Earlier, when Collins, mischievously, suggests that Bum ('that strapping red-haired galoot') 'is what you would call excellent war material', Willoughby readily agrees, saying: 'Nature produces such men expressly for the rank and file' (7).

Willoughby is the first of the several Englishmen through whom Furphy pinpoints the class attitudes of the Mother Country that he finds objectionable. As an aside, one might note the further irony that in his own behaviour Willoughby does show the gentility which Collins tells the reader is the only 'qualification' of the 'gentleman'. He and Dixon become 'the most attached and mutually considerate friends on the track' (46), a striking contradiction of the class attitudes that Willoughby has expounded. There are no such redeeming features revealed in the two representatives of the extremes of the imperial social order: the servile lower-class boundary rider, Sollicker, and the insolent upper-class Folkestone, who is 'a gentleman by the grace of God and the flunkeyism of man' (239). Another exemplar of England's 'greatness' is the socially pretentious Mrs Beaudesart, the husband-hunting widow, who has a special relevance in the pattern of *Such is Life* because she is identified as the daughter of Sam Buckley, the hero of Kingsley's *Geoffrey Hamlyn*. 'She possessed', so Tom Collins tells the reader, 'a vast store of Debrett-information, touching those early gentleman-colonists whose enterprise is hymned by loftier harps than mine, but whose sordid greed and unspeakable arrogance has yet to be said or sung' (211).

'Mrs Beaudesart was intended to serve as a sequel to *Geof. Ham*', Furphy told his friend Cathels (July 1898). In appropriating—one might say, misappropriating—a character from

Kingsley's novel, he 'wanted to get a cowardly welt at Henry Kingsley *a la* Fielding Richardson'. (Henry Fielding's *Shamela* is a burlesque of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*). 'I hate that beggar as I hate O. W. Holmes', Furphy explained. In Kingsley's novel Major Buckley (ex-Imperial army!), the last of an old county family whose fortunes have declined, migrates with wife and son to the New World where he becomes a successful landowner. His son Sam, in every way a model of the Christian gentleman, having made his pile in the colony reclaims the family estate in England. Sam's attitude is:

What honours, what society, has this little colony to give, compared to those open to a fourth-rate gentleman in England? I want to be a real Englishman, not half a one. I want to throw in my lot heart and hand with the greatest nation in the world. I don't want to be young Sam Buckley of Baroona. I want to be the Buckley of Clere. (*Geoffry Hamlyn*, vol III, 209)

In Furphy's version of the Buckley family history, Sam becomes Hungry Buckley of Baroona, 'a gentleman addicted to high living and extremely plain thinking' (SL 209), loses his property, and goes to an early grave; his son is imprisoned for counterfeiting; and his daughter, after a fling with a visiting 'German prince' (a reference to Queen Victoria's son, Prince Alfred) and burying three husbands, is the housekeeper on Runnymede station and has Tom Collins in her sights as a future husband. This travesty is Furphy's contemptuous response to what was the most popular of the romances of Australian settlement.

In *Geoffry Hamlyn*, which both Marcus Clarke and Rolf Boldrewood had acclaimed as 'the best Australian novel', the English coloniser is idealised as a high-minded Christian gentleman. One squatter in *Such is Life* who might seem to fit Kingsley's bill is Stewart, whom everyone regards as 'a (adj.) Christian' (165). However, Stewart, so Tom Collins declares, is 'no gentleman'. Although born 'the younger son of a wealthy and aristocratic Scottish laird' (164), he has lost the right to 'the fine old title' because during forty years in the colonies he has lived up to the Christian ideal, and 'Christianity postulates initial equality, and recognizes no gradation except in usefulness'. Stewart is rich, but his wealth is the result, not of his Christianity, but of his shrewdness in managing his affairs and the fact that 'his *mana* never failed' (that is, his luck never ran out) (165). He stands out as an exception among squatters. Tom Collins assures the reader that he has met many different types of squatters, 'any type conceivable, in fact, except the slender-witted, virgin-souled, overgrown schoolboys who fill

Henry Kingsley's exceedingly trashy and misleading novel with their insufferable twaddle' (164).

Like Kingsley's novel, the anecdote about Victoria helped to sustain a self-congratulatory fiction of an English (British) empire based on Christian principles. It reinforced the ideology of imperialism that Furphy aimed to discredit and displace. One might steal Furphy's phrase and say that it is an example of 'insufferable twaddle'; but, as anyone who searches the internet can now demonstrate, it was 'twaddle' that had a wide currency.

However, in Australia it had been forgotten by the time a group of scholars annotated *Such is Life* in the 1980s, and they could not identify the source of the phrase, 'the secret of England's greatness', when they came across it in Chapter I. They did note that the phrase appears also in Chapter VII, where Collins spends time with the sailor who has jumped ship and become a boundary rider, Jack the Shellback, whose conversation is marked by 'profanity and indecency'. As he rides away Collins, who has been hearing Jack's views on the degeneracy of 'these young Colonials', refers to him mockingly as 'this secret of England's greatness' (277). There is one other reference that has been noted: in the *Bulletin* paragraph I quoted earlier, Furphy as Tom Collins tells an anecdote from his own Riverina experience to illustrate the ignorance of the Bible, remarking wryly that this shows 'that the Bible is not the secret of Riverina's greatness'.

Frances Devlin-Glass, Robin Eaden, Lois Hoffmann and George Turner undertook the mammoth task of annotating Furphy's text without the electronic aids that have become available to scholars in recent years. Now it takes only seconds to discover the sources of phrases such as 'the secret of England's greatness' and to call up images of paintings such as Barker's. Previously a scholar who was trying to track down a quotation would begin by looking into the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* or some other reference book (which might well mean a visit to a well stocked library); now one begins (and possibly ends) with Google or Trove on one's own computer at home. The digitisation of Australian newspapers on Trove is of especial value in documenting the mental atmosphere—what was 'in the air'—when Furphy was writing. To take a small example which bears on the theme of England's 'greatness': in Chapter I one of the amusing euphemisms that Tom Collins employs to indicate the 'ensanguined' vocabulary of the bullockies is the phrase, 'the crimson thread of kinship', which Henry Parkes coined in a speech in February 1890 at a banquet for the

delegates at a conference on federating the colonies. This image of the imperial bond ('Even the native-born Australians are Britons, as much as the men born within the cities of London and Glasgow' said Parkes) was an instant hit. Not only was it repeated over and over in newspaper articles and in speeches in various parts of Australia, but the London correspondent of the Melbourne *Argus* (15 June 1897), reporting on preparations for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, noted that the phrase was 'often heard at Imperial banquets' in England. This sort of information is not essential for reading *Such is Life*, but it alerts a reader to a resonance that would otherwise be missed. As more and more newspapers and journals are digitised, we may gain a fuller understanding of how *Such is Life* relates to the world in which Furphy lived and thought.

With the development of studies in imperialism Barker's painting has once again become widely known. Appropriately, it is reproduced on the cover of Peter Childs' anthology, *Post-Colonial Theory and English Literature*, published by Edinburgh University Press in 1999. Post-colonial readings offer the prospect of fresh insights into Furphy's text. But increased availability of facts about the historical context does not diminish the challenge that the reader faces. The text of *Such is Life* is so crowded with allusion, and Furphy so often keeps several balls in the air at the same time, that it is not always easy to see which way the narrative is going. It is, however, all too easy to mistake what is significant for what is incidental, and to miss the subtle relationships between apparently trivial details. Furphy's text was the work of a very reflective man, who had carefully pondered what he wanted to say; it requires, and in the same measure rewards, a reflective reading.

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