

THE SCHOLAR'S *SUCH IS LIFE* – A REVIEW ARTICLE

Joseph Furphy, *The Annotated Such is Life*, Introduction and Notes by Frances Devlin-Glass, Robin Eaden, Lois Hoffmann, and G.W. Turner. Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1991. pp.xi, 592, ISBN 0 19 553086 9.

AT THE BEGINNING OF JOSEPH FURPHY'S *Such Is Life* the narrator, Tom Collins, explains his narrative method to the reader. He has in front of him twenty-two consecutive editions of his pocket diary:

I think I shall undertake the annotation of a week's record. A man might, if he were of a fearful heart, stagger in this attempt; but I shut my eyes, and take up one of the little volumes.

Such is Life, then, is offered to the reader not as a narrative that is known in advance to the narrator, but as 'Certain Extracts from the Diary of Tom Collins' arbitrarily chosen for amplification. The text is the annotation of seven days (not a single week as originally intended, but seven days from a period of six months, October 1883 to March 1884) in the life of one man, a 'slice of life'. That man feels 'the responsibility of extending a ray of information, however narrow and feeble, across the path of such fellow-pilgrims as have led lives more sedentary than my own'. His 'chronicle' of events is embellished by passages of reflection and exposition; his speech and his narrative style are spiced with allusions; and he constantly invites the reader to collaborate in the linguistic play that he alone among the bushmen is capable of (puns, phonetic renderings of speech, euphemisms, quotations and misquotations). It is not a book for the lazy reader, and with the dating of aspects of both the thought and the style, even latter-day enthusiasts find themselves needing help.

The task of annotating Tom Collins's diary annotations is a daunting one, as I can testify, having made a modest attempt in *The Portable Furphy* some years ago. Now, thanks to the patient, dedicated research of a team of scholars – Frances Devlin-Glass, Robin Eaden, Lois Hoffmann and George Turner – we have *The Annotated Such is Life*.

In this attractively presented paperback the original *Bulletin* edition of *Such is Life* (297 pages) is reproduced, followed by the annotations, which occupy a further 266 pages. Additional scholarly material and the preliminary pages bring the total to 603 pages. There is a map of the Furphy country, a list of printings of Furphy's novels, and an index – of people, places and some topics – which is immensely helpful, especially to the reader who thinks that he 'knows' *Such is Life*. Here, indeed, is God's plenty; and, as one who has been reading Furphy for forty years, I feel a debt of gratitude to those who have assembled these riches.

The annotators set out 'to indicate to the reader some of the subtleties of plot and details of social and historical background and literary allusions that enrich the experience of reading and rereading Furphy's work'. There can be no doubt that they achieve their first aim: this book gives the fullest explanation of Furphy's plotting that is to be found anywhere. The reader who is a little hazy about what is going on in the first chapter of *Such is Life* now need only consult the excellent appendix in this volume, where what Furphy ravelled, perhaps too intricately, is clearly unravelled. The attention to detail pays off handsomely, enabling the annotators to cross the 't's and

dot the 'i's of the narrative. For example, what seems to be an inconsequential point — whether or not the manager is present on the station in Ch IV — is shown to be of central importance to what happens because of the law of impounding animals. Frank Dalby Davison once wrote that the pages of *Such is Life* were webbed with 'secret intentions'. Thanks to the *Annotated* today's readers are more likely to grasp those secret intentions, and so come closer to making sense (on one level at least) of the text than readers of previous generations.

So far so good. The annotation of 'background' and literary allusion is a less clear-cut undertaking. Here all sorts of fine judgements are called for about what details should be annotated and, even more difficult, what kind of annotation should be attempted. Explanations of plot detail, translations of foreign words and dialect speech, definitions of unusual words and things, clarifications of idiomatic expressions, notes on changed meanings of familiar words: annotations in these categories are increasingly common in pre-twentieth-century texts. In the case of *Such is Life*, as the annotators recognize, there is the problem that the bush life which the novel undertakes to represent is now history, and a history which has little connection with the life now lived by most Australians.

The annotators can go only so far in making that lost world of bullockies more comprehensible, but as a source of information about the period and the locality, the *Annotated* is undoubtedly valuable. The annotators, though, sometimes feel compelled to elaborate what is adequately established in the text (the drought of 1883; the swearing by bullockies; the geology of the Riverina; the state of the wool industry). They demonstrate the inaccuracy of the claims made by the bullockies and Tom Collins about Burke and Wills, but this seems to me to be a non-issue in a work of fiction.

The annotators have aimed at completeness, noting not only clear literary allusions but possible allusions and occasionally mere likenesses. One must admire the effort that has gone into tracking down sources; but I have found myself, somewhat to my surprise, starting to wonder whether this scholarship will have the effect of enriching the experience of reading Furphy's text. Few of the younger readers of *Such is Life* will have a thorough (or even a cursory) knowledge of the Bible or a knowledge of more than a handful of Shakespeare's plays or the English poetry which was lodged so firmly in Furphy's memory. The knowledge that the *Annotated* offers will in many instances be dead knowledge unless the readers are prepared to read the sources for themselves. The annotators have done their best, quoting extensively in some instances in order to suggest the force of the allusion, but to identify the source, or likely source, of a word or phrase is not the same as to convey to the reader the significance of that allusion.

The whole issue becomes more complex when the phrase being annotated is widely used. An interesting example is the phrase 'the fitness of things', the entry for which reads as follows:

the fitness of things A phrase (referring often to external fitness) extensively used in the eighteenth century with reference to the ethical theories of Samuel Clarke (1675-1729), whose *Discourse Concerning the Being and Attributes of God, the Obligations of Natural Religion, and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation* (1705) defines the quality of moral rightness as a consisting in a 'fitness' to the relations inherent in the nature of things (see *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*,

ed. Paul Edwards, New York, Macmillan and the Free Press, 1967, I and II, s.v. Clarke, Samuel).

One cannot say for certain that Furphy was as well informed as the annotators, but one can be sure that he encountered the phrase in Fielding's *Tom Jones* ('I class Fielding among my favourites — I decidedly like the man', he once told his friend, William Cathels), where the philosopher Square comfortably justifies actions by appealing to 'the unalterable rule of right and eternal fitness of things' (Bk II, Ch III). But the phrase was so much part of the common currency that it is not necessary to identify a single source. I suspect that Furphy heard it more than once in Wesleyan sermons. In his *Narrandera Shire* (1986) Bill Gammage quotes a Wesleyan visitor to the Hospital fete in November 1893 complaining that it was 'scarcely in the fitness of things' that the committee 'should have lent themselves to an organized desecration of the Sabbath' (p.189). That example of contemporary usage does, I think, evoke the state of mind to which Tom Collins is alluding when he ironically characterizes himself as 'a mere annalist, and a blunt, stolid, unimaginative one at that; *therefore* not entirely lost to all sense of the fitness of things' (*Such is Life*, p.278; my emphasis.)

Further, the context in which one encounters a quotation may be as important as the original source. An example of this is the allusion to *Measure for Measure* II, ii, 107-9 on page 239 of *Such is Life*. Concluding an appeal to the squatter Montgomery to excuse the trespassing bullocky Priestley, Tom Collins says:

'... Of course the matter rests entirely in your hands; but to me it appears in the light of a responsibility. It is noble to have a squatter's strength but tyrannous to use it like a squatter.'

On the face of it this appears to be an instance of a local application of Shakespeare's lines, and one registers pleasure at how deftly it is done. But, as is often the case in *Such is Life*, there is a serious idea expressed in what looks like a stylistic flourish. In this episode, the text draws attention to the contrasting values of the squatter Montgomery (who is a gentleman 'only by virtue of his position') and his English visitor Folkstone (who is '... a gentleman *per se* ... a gentleman by the grace of God and the flunkeyism of man'). It is a contrast not only between the attitudes of Australian and English landholders but between the true and the spurious, between the social and the moral concepts of a gentleman. Folkstone is, like the pretentious Mrs Beaudesart, a bully, who exploits his position of strength in relation to the weak. This is underlined when Folkstone, having argued Montgomery to make an example of Priestley, 'the trespassing scoundrel', responds to an angry outburst from the bullocky by preparing to 'thump' him: Folkstone is physically twice the size of his opponent, and the text offers an ironical commentary on the notion of 'English fair-play'. Montgomery behaves like a true gentleman in stopping Folkstone and in responding to the appeal made by Collins.

The lines from *Measure for Measure* were familiar — and perhaps still are — to many unacquainted with Shakespeare's play. Furphy had read all of Shakespeare, but his use of the lines suggests that this particular application was influenced by a source that he would probably not have been keen to acknowledge in his later years. Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help* (1859), one of the most widely-read books of the nineteenth century, quotes the passage to illustrate the mark of a true gentleman:

There are many tests by which a gentleman may be known: but there is one that never fails — How does he *exercise power* over those subordinate to him? . . . He who bullies those who are not in a position to resist may be a snob, but cannot be a gentleman. He who tyrannizes over the weak and helpless may be a coward, but no true man. The tyrant, it has been said, is but a slave turned inside out. Strength, and the consciousness of strength, in a right-hearted man imparts a nobleness to his character; but he will be most careful how he uses it; for

It is excellent

To have giant's strength; but it is tyrannous
To use it like a giant.

Montgomery passes this test but Folkstone fails it.

This may be an instance where the author is not conscious of the text that is, in some measure, shaping his own at a particular point. The *Annotated* correctly identifies the Shakespearian allusion, and one could hardly expect more. However, the above example illustrates just how important 'background' is in understanding the intertextuality of *Such is Life*. Furphy's text is especially susceptible to misreading by those of us who have a little learning and can be regarded as professionals in areas where he was an amateur — and conscious of being an amateur. Unlike the literary scholar with a library at hand, and the opportunity to pursue a topic systematically and master it, Furphy was dependent upon the scanty resources of the local mechanics' institute and the assistance of a fellow-autodidact (William Cathels); he was able to read only in his spare time; and he was continually oppressed by the thought of his ignorance on a wide range of subjects. On most issues of the day he took his orientation from the *Bulletin*, which was his only regular reading during the years that *Such is Life* was being written.

As I pointed out in *the fitness of things*, there are places in the text of *Such is Life* where one can pinpoint ideas and phrases that come from the *Bulletin*. At the same time, Furphy was never part of the *Bulletin* circle in the way that Lawson was; he was, indeed, never part of any circle, literary or intellectual. He was isolated, at a remove from the centre of such intellectual life as existed in the Australian colonies. One could say that he created his own version of the nineteenth-century world of ideas, and the very eccentricity of his creation makes it hard for us to form an idea of it and see its true proportions.

On the whole, the *Annotated* does not offer the reader much help with the social and political attitudes of *Such is Life*. Given the unfamiliarity of most readers today with religious thought, the notes seem disappointingly brief on that aspect of the text. For example, the phrase 'a Wesleyan converging of the whole vast order of the universe towards the happiest issue' (p.290) is glossed as: 'A reference to Providence', with no comment on 'Wesleyan', which is likely to puzzle future readers. The notes on Furphy's racial attitudes are also disappointingly brief and tend to be overly defensive. Ethnology was one of Furphy's 'favorite sciences'; *Such is Life* includes comment on racial types; and Furphy's enthusiastic endorsement of the ideal of White Australia ('There is nothing else I am so thankful for as for White Australia', he wrote in a letter in 1911) is beyond question. The annotators are excellent on linguistic points, such as Furphy's representation of the speech of the Chinese boundary-riders, but they are too

anxious to defend him against the charge of racism. They claim that Furphy's xenophobia 'was a very mild version of an attitude common in his time' (p.474). Perhaps; but I should like to have seen a franker acknowledgment of, for example, the stereotyped representation of the Chinese in *Such is Life*. The contrast between the behaviour of the Chinese station-hand and that of the independent-minded Australian, Barefooted Bob (who refuses 'goin' partners with opium and leprosy'), in Smyth's plot against the bullockies confirms the common view of the Chinese. (Incidentally, Furphy has added an extra dimension of irony to the tricking of Collins and the others by Paul Sam Young, the Chinese who so enjoys his revenge over Collins. He is, as he tells Collins, a Christian, having been sprinkled with water — that is, baptized. Rev. Paul Young opened the Chinese Mission Chapel in Bairnsdale in 1895, and is said to have converted a number of his fellow-Chinese to the Presbyterian faith. The Chinese boundary-rider in *Such is Life* has learnt the ways of Christians, and Collins's praise, 'You allee same Christian', takes on a new significance when he discovers that 'the friendly Asiatic' has been lying.)

Furphy's attitude towards Aborigines is another topic on which I would question the interpretation of the *Annotated*. For all his appreciation of their skills (as in the story of the old lubra tracking Mary O'Halloran) and 'the undeniable brain-power of the blacks', he saw them as a primitive race doomed to extinction ('Black Australia', *Bulletin*, 30/10/02). In the affirmation of Australian nationality, which he puts into the mouth of Tom Collins in Chapter II of *Such is Life*, the Australian continent is imaged as waiting through the centuries, 'her history a blank', until the white man brings civilization to 'this recordless land'. Furphy was voicing a commonplace of Australian nationalist thought: Australia was for the (white) Australians. The only named Aborigines to appear in *Such is Life* are two half-castes — Billy, who works for the Irish contractor M'Nab 'for his tucker and rags', makes a passing appearance in Chapter I, and Toby, who is a rouseabout on Runnymede station, appears in the last two chapters. Toby is an amusing minor character, intelligent, good-humoured, and likeable. The presentation is, however, within a fairly familiar comic frame: Toby wears a cast-off dress-coat of Montgomery's, he steals 'an enormous cockroach of black sugar' from the kitchen, he is described as having a 'gun-metal skull', and he is referred to variously as 'H.R.H.', 'prince', and later 'descendant of a thousand kings'. He is, in fact, more quick-witted than Moriarty, the Irish storekeeper, who regards Aborigines as 'the inferior race' and would like to deny that they belong to the human race at all. In the final scene of the novel Toby is present, and clashes with the Scotsman Tom Armstrong: he mocks Tom's Scottishness, and Tom replies that he will not talk with 'the produc' o' hauf-a-dizzen generations o' slavery', which leads to the following exchange:

'A'll haud nae deeskission wi' the produc' o' hauf-a-dizzen generations o' slavery,' replied Tam haughtily. 'A dinna attreebute ony blame tae yir ain sel', laddie; bit ye canna owrecam the kirse o' Canaan.'

'Cripes! do you take *me* for a (adj.) mulatter?' growled the descendant of a thousand kings. 'Why, properly speaking, I own this here (adj.) country, as fur as the eye can reach.'

'Od, ye puir, glaikit, misleart remlet o' a perishin' race,' retorted Tam — 'air ye no the mair unsicker? Air ye no feart ye'se aiblins ee yon day gin ye'se thole waur fare nir a wamefu' o' gude brose? Heh!'

'Oh, speak English, you (adj.) bawbee-hunter!' muttered H.R.H. 'Why, they're a cut above brose in China — ain't they, Sling?'

'Eatee lice in China,' replied the gardener, with national pride. 'Plenty lice — good cookee — welly ni.'

(For those who have not read *Such is Life*, I should mention that the Chinese gardener's name is Sling Muck.) No-one in the world of the novel takes seriously the notion that Toby has any rights. The idea of Aboriginal kingship is a tedious period joke, much favoured in the *Bulletin* cartoons, but the annotators rather obscure the point of the mockery by their gloss: 'There are numerous references to Toby as one of the deposed rulers of the land' (p.527).

The place of Aborigines in a future Australia was something that Furphy did not think about: they were a dying race. Nor did he choose to represent the conflict of black and white in the present or near-past. An indication of what he chose to leave out of his version of Riverina life can be found in this paragraph which he contributed to the *Bulletin* in 1901:

Happened to be loafing for grass along the north bank of the Murrumbidgee in the summer of 80-1, when late Rev. J.B. Gribble was mustering Riverina for blackfellows, and drafting them into the old Coolibah homestead, which he had characteristically commandeered for that purpose. One day when the good man was out foraying the stations for tucker, two bullock-drivers on the south bank enticed a couple of lubras to swim the river; and the landlord of an adjacent pub., with an imprudence equal to his callousness, supplied liquid refreshment to these sons of Belial and their guests. (I was on the northern bank, remember, and the river between me and the liquor.) However, Gribble returned, and his flock, like the servants in the parable, came and told their lord all that was done. Whereupon, Gribble's buggy merely touched the tops of the claybanks as he careered down to the punt and up the other side of the river to the bullock-drivers' camp. Those vessels of wrath, now penitent and apologetic, hoisted their somnolent wild-flowers into the buggy, and the apostle scorched back to his Mission, where he immediately administered a powerful emetic in each case. Afterwards he vehemently and successfully pressed a charge against the publican. But the idea of the emetic was what fetched us; it was *so* like the man as we knew him.

Gribble is mentioned (though not named) in *Such is Life* (p.166), and is honoured in the text as a 'good man'. His connection with Furphy goes beyond the Riverina: he officiated at the marriages of Furphy's brother Isaac and of Furphy's mother-in-law (her fourth) in the United Free Methodist Church at Rushworth, both ceremonies taking place in 1872, at which time Furphy was trying to earn a living as a selector at nearby Corop. Gribble later joined the Congregational Union, and was an itinerant preacher in the Riverina. While living at Jerilderie he earned himself a footnote in Australian folklore by castigating the Kelly gang face to face and persuading Kelly to return his watch that had been stolen at gunpoint. In 1880 Gribble established a mission for Aborigines in the Riverina — the first of its kind — and joined the Anglican

church, in which he was ordained three years later. The following year he was invited to Western Australia, where his efforts to help Aborigines led to conflict with white settlers and to his eventual removal from his post. After his death in Sydney in 1893 a tombstone was erected with the inscription 'the friend of the blackfellow'.

Gribble was a Riverina identity during the years that Furphy was there; and he was even more widely known as a result of the very public and acrimonious controversy in Western Australia. Gribble's account of what he found in the West, published in 1886 as *Dark Deeds in a Sunny Land*, was a damning indictment. The concluding paragraph reads:

In the preceding pages quite sufficient has been adduced to show unmistakably that even in Australia, under its sunny skies, deeds, the most dark and horrible in their nature, have been committed, and are still being practiced, and that, too, not only under the British flag, but even in the face, so to speak, of the representative of the greatest Sovereign the world has ever seen, and who emphatically declared that the justice and righteousness of the Word of the Living God constituted 'The Secret of England's greatness'.

Now, it may be asked, what has all this got to do with the *Annotated Such is Life*? Part of the answer is Gribble's final phrase. The annotators note the phrase in *Such is Life* on two occasions, and note also a variant of the formula ('secret of these old fellows' greatness') on p.219, and another ('the true secret of Riverina's greatness') in a piece Furphy contributed to the *Bulletin* in 1894, but they are unable to identify its origin. From Gribble's text one would assume that the phrase came from Queen Victoria herself, and that it was in general circulation. Whether or not Furphy read Gribble's pamphlet — the odds are that he at least knew of it — the passage quoted above identifies the congratulatory attitude which it summed up. (As Gribble gave his celebrated lecture, 'Only a Blackfellow', in Shepparton in 1890 — with John Furphy in the chair — Furphy could well have heard the phrase from Gribble's own lips.) In the background of *Such is Life* is the ideology of imperialism, of which such 'gentlemen' as Willoughby, the remittance man, and Folkstone, the tourist, are spokesmen and the slow-witted Sollicker the loyal adherent. Their Englishness is associated with class-distinction and an attitude of moral superiority, to which is opposed an irreverent and democratic Australian independence.

The ways in which *Such is Life* is a response to nineteenth-century imperialism, and the ways in which it is conditioned by it, do not emerge at all strongly from the *Annotated*. There are several reasons for this, chief among them the difficulty already mentioned of establishing Furphy's own relationship to the ideas and attitudes of his time. But the method of the *Annotated*, which is to track down as far as possible the books to which some form of reference is being made, does tend to emphasize the bookishness of Furphy's prose. Thus when Furphy has Tom Collins reflect on Folkstone's threat to thump the bullock-driver, the method requires annotation of the foreign author mentioned (Varnhagen von Ense) but not the concept of 'English fair play'. Of course, one may rightly claim that this author was unlikely to be known by the reader, and that the reflections on the class aspects and the novelistic use of the notion of 'English fair play' are there in the text for all to read. Yet Furphy can hardly have expected his readers to have known the works of Varnhagen von Ense — and the

bibliographical details provided in the *Annotated* don't enrich one's enjoyment or understanding of the text. The obscure reference establishes Collins's pedantry and the annotation merely confirms it.

The annotators confess to adding 'a touch of pedantry of our own' as a result of 'our years of friendship with Tom Collins'. It seems churlish to want to deny them this indulgence. The notes radiate their enjoyment in their task. They are lucid and lively, ready to enjoy a joke with the reader. 'We have not traced a source for these enigma variations' reads one note. A reference in Furphy's text to a nineteenth-century novelist provokes the comment: 'The interested reader might seek this remark in the twenty-one volumes of James's novels (London, Smith, Elder, 1844-9)'. The annotators are less playful when it comes to dogs, and provide long solemn notes on the name of Collins's dog ('Pup' or 'The Eton Boy') and the characteristics of a Smithfield collie (I suspect one of the team of being a canine fancier).

Yet the very bulk of the annotations is a problem. My concern is that they may have the opposite effect from that intended. For those of us who have been reading Furphy's text for years and struggling with small points they are a boon. But what will be their effect on those approaching the novel for the first time? It would be unfortunate if they encouraged the notion that this is a novel only for the learned. As Dr Johnson wisely observed in his edition of Shakespeare, 'Notes are necessary, but they are necessary evils'.

The work of Devlin-Glass, Eaden, Hoffmann and Turner represents a kind of scholarship that is not always given its due. What they have done is an incentive to all of us who are interested in *Such is Life* to go back to the text once more and ponder it afresh in the light of what this book tells us about Furphy's sources and artistic procedures. The *Annotated* is a thoroughly reliable work of reference — one might quibble here and there, but it undoubtedly maintains the very highest standard of scholarship. Furphy would have approved of this labour of love — ignorance shifting (the annotators will know the origin of my concluding phrase!).

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