

Reading the Three as One: *Such is Life* in 1897

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No doubt many scholars have been intrigued by the nature of the original manuscript of *Such is Life* which A G Stephens read in 1897. In my 1991 study of Furphy's works I grappled with the textual difficulties of reconstructing it from what remains of the manuscript, Furphy's typescript revision of it, the final printed version of 1903, and the two novels *The Buln-buln and the Brolga* and *Rigby's Romance*, which were recast from excised sections of the manuscript (Croft Ch.3). What I now find more intriguing than the physical shape of that text, is what the experience of reading that original manuscript would have been like. We have a record of the response of several of Furphy's relatives and friends, of Stephens' opinion, and hints from Furphy's correspondence of other responses (Croft 47-53). But what would the 1897 *Such is Life* be like to a reader 110 years after the publication of its slimmed-down descendant? What follows is an account of an attempt to read that original novel from what remains in accessible print form.

The task entailed reading Chapter I of the 1903 text using the modern annotated edition, then the Halstead annotated edition of *The Buln-buln* (based on the original Chapter II from 1897), Chapter III of 1903, Chapter IV of 1903, the Seal edition of *Rigby's Romance* (based on the original Chapter V), and Chapters VI and VII of 1903. Of course, what we now have of *The Buln-buln and the Brolga* and *Rigby's Romance* are much different from the 1897 chapters, but they are as close to them as present scholarship allows. In doing so I hoped to be able to read the assembled sources as a continuous whole and experience it as an unfolding novel, not as a series of textual cruces. This reconstructed 1897 *Such is Life* runs to about 223,000 words, whereas the 1903 *Such is Life* is a minnow of about 140,000 words. I say 'about' because my calculation is not based on a computerized word count, but a rough-and-ready manual reckoning. Interestingly the two new chapters written for the 1903 version are about the same length, roughly 13,000 words, almost as if they were written to a formula.

I took as my motto the challenge Tom Collins gives his childhood friend Steve Thompson, as Steve recalls it: to read the ten masterpieces of poetry ‘that nobody on earth, except yourself [Tom], had ever read clean through’ (RR 53). One of those works is ‘*Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, counting the two as one’ (RR 53). And so, I challenged myself to read the three Tom Collins memoirs as one novel, and to note the differences which arose between 1897 version and the 1903 novel. The result was rather unexpected.

The 1903 *Such is Life* was mostly read by its contemporary audience as a realistic account of life and work in the outback of Australia in the 1880s. It was valued as a record of the male world of itinerant workers in the remote and difficult country ‘out west’. By the generation which followed, it was read as another manifestation of Russel Ward’s ‘Australian Legend,’ and as a classic of proletariat literature. In the second half of the twentieth century critical opinion has concentrated on the narrative complexities of the 1903 text, its self-conscious unreliable narrator, the dislocations and hidden stories, the foregrounding of illusion over representation, and the difficulties and contradictions in its central character, Tom Collins (Croft Ch. 2).

Surprisingly, reading the 1897 *Such is Life* reconstruction revealed neither a bush epic nor a proto-modernist narrative. The two texts are quite dissimilar in at least three ways: location, argument, and the character of Tom Collins himself.

To start with its setting. For most of the twentieth century the 1903 text has been seen as a work of the backblocks and the rural backbone of Australia, a classic of the ‘bush,’ a place where real Australian values reside, and celebrated as such in Australian popular culture for most of that century. It is certainly true that any reading which followed could not deny the novel’s ‘outback’ origins, its analysis of the mores and culture of the bush in the 1880s, and its self-proclaimed realistic account of that culture. Yet the 1897 amalgam is as much a novel of the town as of the country; in fact more than fifty per cent of the action of my crude reconstruction of the ur-*Such is Life* occurs within or near a country town. Chapters II, III, and V are located in or within striking distance of Echuca in a quite densely settled district along the banks of the Murray River. And when you think about it, Chapters I, VI and VII, being set on Runnymede Station (admittedly in a very sparsely populated plain), are concerned with the interactions of a small group of people in a small village—the sort of content and dynamic of a Jane Austen novel. Only Chapter IV is set in an isolated no-man’s land on the Lachlan

River at the intersection of three large sheep stations. The ‘bush’ is certainly there in set-piece descriptions in Chapters I, IV, VI and VII, and in the stories told in the various conclaves, but the homely atmosphere of Nosey Alf’s hut, the swimming pool at Runnymede, its store, the barracks, its collection of servants and menials, and the presiding genii of Montgomery and Mrs Beaudesart make it a place of refuge away from Wilcannia showers and grassless, waterless, sandy plains, and more like Cranford than Bullamakanka.

Most of Chapter II, the Falkland-Pritchard romance, occurs in a female space indoors (Mrs Ferguson’s boarding house) in Echuca, in a drawing-room comedy of manners where Tom, Fred, Barefooted Bob, and the ‘lydy’ authoress illustrate and debate the issues of fiction and fact, of romance and reality, of the lie and the truth. It is also about marriage, that most domestic of subjects, a theme which is also dealt with at length in Chapter V 1897 (*RR* [Fritz]) and in the long-running story of Tom and Maud (in both versions); and also about courtship and flirting which figures in Chapter II 1897, Chapter III tenuously (both versions), Chapter V 1897 *Rigby’s Romance* (*passim*); and finally fidelity, Chapters I, VI and VII — Nosey Alf, Alf Morris, and Lilian’s bond to Fred.

Chapter III, common to both versions of the novel, takes place not far from Echuca and involves wanderings in a densely populated farming area. It too is a comedy of errors, which while it does not end in marriage at least ends in a possible romance with Jim Quarterman—though one denied by Tom later in Chapter VI (if my identification of the origin of the love letter Tom receives is correct). Here the mode is farce and the manners are broad and carnivalesque, a chapter of rustic comedy set in a tight rural community.

Chapter V, *Rigby’s Romance* is a symposium, and, by contrast with Chapter II, like ancient symposia it is held in the men’s quarters: though in Australia, at *Al Fresco’s* place, on the bank of the river of Time just outside the pub some miles up-river from Echuca. Although it is outdoors, it too is a comedy (and tragedy) of manners, the tragedy being Jefferson Rigby’s own romance, and the comedy in various shades, from Thompson’s courtship of Agnes Cameron, Dixon’s bullyragging of Miss Coone (à la *Jane Eyre*), to the heavy satire of Fritz, Mina and Mrs Maginnis, all of whom have local connections. The kangaroo hunter’s story of rape and revenge casts a dark shadow on the comic romances, but like Shakespeare’s problem comedies, the darkness is dispelled by marriage at the end in the revelation that Rigby’s acolyte Sam Brackenridge, unlike his hero, has accomplished a successful romance and

married—while most of the contributors to the symposium on romance seem to be celibates, in the old sense of bachelors (Binney is the exception). The action of the chapter ends on the outskirts of Deniliquin at a football match with an invitation from Sam to Tom to stay with him and meet the missus: a fine urban domestic resolution to a symposium on romance.

My contention therefore would be that as far as setting and genre are concerned, the 1897 *Such is Life* is more of an urban (country town) comedy of manners novel, than a sprawling bush epic, while the 1903 *Such is Life* tips the balance the other way with its two new chapters set in the empty spaces of a station far to the north of Runnymede, and the contested paddock of Mondunbarra of Chapter V.

The next point to consider is the difference the changes to the 1897 version made to the basic argument of the work. In 1992 I made this summary of what I thought had happened when Furphy shortened the 1897 text:

When comparing the two versions of 1898 and 1903 it is possible to see what Furphy did in his rewriting of the original typescript. The major deletions were Chapters Two and Five, and in their place were put the present Chapters Two and Five: Chapter Two, the story of Mary O'Halloran and her father; and Chapter Five, the conclave in the Trinidad paddock at Mondunbarra at which are told a number of lost child stories, one of which completes the story of Mary O'Halloran. Chapters Two and Five are insulated from the other chapters and develop a new theme: the theme of alternatives, choice, and determinism. In order to integrate this new theme into the work as a whole, digressions would have had to have been inserted at various points, possibly at the beginning of Chapter Three and in Chapters Six and Seven. These digressions, evident in the 1903 text, develop the ideas of the 'controlling alternative' and the rigid necessity of causality, and are often expressed through the memorable metaphor of railway lines, locomotives and switching points. With such radical surgery, *Such is Life* became a much different book. (Croft 60-1)

It is possible to see an example of that kind of insertion in the common Chapter III where Tom refers to 'a former chapter' where he had occasion 'to notice a great fact, namely, that the course of each person's life is directed by his ever-recurring option, or election' (*SL* 1903,

98). That 'former chapter' is the newly written Chapter II (1903) which includes in square brackets a long digression on choice and controlling alternatives (*SL* 1903, 68-71).

But what drove those changes? Socialism and Sydney is the short answer. In April 1901 Furphy visited Sydney and the *Bulletin* offices before he undertook the rewrite of the 1898 typescript. I described what happened there in my book:

In 1901 Furphy had to cut *Such is Life*, but he did not have to change the basic argument of the book. Yet he did. Why?

If we look at the letters he wrote about his trip to Sydney and his meeting with "the boys" of the *Bulletin*, it might be possible to reconstruct why he changed his mind so totally about cutting the work (remembering that he had held out for four years against doing so), and for whom the restructured work was to be written.

Furphy's conversion to socialism probably dated from the late 1880s when he returned to live permanently in Shepparton. His change in circumstances from a self-employed minor entrepreneur to a 'wage-slave' to his brother—he described his duties as 'working for wages as a general mechanic in a foundry, with the special commission of Binder Expert'—probably fanned the fires of socialist enthusiasm, but I suspect that his conversion was not as total as those experienced on roads which lead to Damascus. It was not until Furphy reached Sydney that the audience which he communed with through the pages of the *Bulletin* was made real:

Nothing could exceed the cordiality of my reception by the *Bulletin* men. Archibald invited me to lunch, and was polite enough to say more of my writing than I would like to repeat. I had three interviews with him altogether, and thought more and more of him on acquaintance. A man apparently about my own age, with grand aquiline features and soft womanly eyes. Macleod was with us at lunch—the pleasantest man I ever met, and brainy along with it. He was for years on the literary staff before being appointed business manager. Also I had tea with Stephens, and a long evening with some

boys invited to meet us—Albert Dorrington, Norman Lindsay (artist), Victor J. Daley, and a bright young journalist named Clarke. I also fraternised with Alexr. Montgomery. (You ought to know more of these names than you do); and the same may be said of Edmund Fisher and Edward Dyson, both of whom I colloqued with in Melb., having obtained their addresses from Stephens. (Furphy to Kate Baker, 29 April 1901)

These were the men for whom the changes in *Such is Life* were made. It was for them that *Rigby's Romance* was cut from the 1898 typescript, and the romance turned over the anvil until the political debate dominated the work; and it was for them that Tom Collins's ideas on the great intellectual issues of the nineteenth century—historical necessity and individual choice—were developed. It was for them also that the urban domestic comedy of the Falkland-Pritchards was replaced by the bush domestic tragedy of the O'Hallorans. (Croft 61-2).

So these were the changes which gave us the 1903 version. The discussions of art and artifice, of fiction and fact, of the play of human discourse in shaping life through the illusion of narrative, are replaced by a philosophy based on railway lines, where there is no room for the play of fantasy, and the willful distortion of reality (whatever that is); where hard determinism, an almost Marxian dialectic directs the locomotive along the 'ringing grooves of change' towards an ineluctable terminus of historical necessity—a very different world entirely from that of the romances of a Murray River township and its environs of the 1897 version.

The 1903 *Such is Life* consequently exhibits a strange amalgam of a philosophy of stern reality and causal determinism at odds with the basic narrative of romance and coincidence. This might be a contradiction but it is also a creative friction which draws the reader into the narrative gymnastics of a narrator at odds with his narrative, which have provided several generations of commentators with ample room for playful participation. The reconstructed 1897 text, I feel, is a much more straightforward and integrated narrative. As I argued in 1992 it was 'more concerned with the relationships of men and women, and far more concerned with the notions of art, artifice, realism, and romance ...' (Croft 61). The reconstructed text reveals several hints of how the original narrative might have unfolded in a more open and

obvious way. Examples which struck me in my exploratory reading were: the preparation of Bob and Bat's back story in Chapter I, which sets the scene for Bob's conversations with Mrs Falkland-Prichard in the old Chapter II (*BB*); the link between Chapters III and IV in 1903 (and presumably in 1897) with Tom's sexual reveries after his flirtation with Jim Quarterman carrying over into ruminations on 'tawny-haired tigresses'; and the sense of continuation between the end of Chapter IV where the practical Christian squatter Stewart promises to look after the sick Alf Morris thereby demonstrating, as Tom has noted, that Stewart was never 'spoken of as a gentleman—always as a Christian' (*SL* 1903, 164), and the original Chapter V (*RR*) which is an extended treatment of Christian socialism.

The changes also had an effect on the character of the novel's narrator/diarist, Tom Collins. The experience of reading the three novels as one gave me the impression of a rather effete, if not foolish, know-all and show-off, who is class-conscious, conservative in his politics, and rather superior to those he considers his intellectual inferiors. All that, however, is tempered by recurrent bouts of humility and honest ironic self-criticism. He has fixed ideas: wives do not love their husbands (Chapter II), despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary in front of him; transvestites are seldom met with in life (Chapter III), despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary (Chapters VI and VII); that men are the victims of faithless women (Chapter IV), despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary (Chapters I, IV, VI and VII); that charity and love are the basis for personal conduct and for a just society—admittedly that is the pipe speaking—despite overwhelming, but carefully hidden, evidence to the contrary at the end of the novel in Tom's treatment of Andy Glover.

The end of the 1903 *Such is Life* has always surprised me and made me feel very uncomfortable about the moral bearings of the work: Tom's callous treatment of Andy, and the deeply ironic scene which Furphy has structured to end his novel. Tom dressed in top hat, banker's long coat, and sunglasses—the very picture of a plutocrat — keeping silent about his responsibility for the crime for which the innocent Andy has been imprisoned, then capping the atrocity by handing the almost blind man his clouded glasses and addressing him as 'mate'. Tom ends his memoirs with a tart moral: we are all actors, hypocrites, playing out our social roles. Then forestalling the equally cynical reader, he adds 'But let me not hear any small witticism to the further effect that its story is a tale told by a vulgarian, full of slang and blanky, signifying—nothing.' (*SL* 1903, 297) Yet, as every (adj.) schoolgirl knows, this is precisely what it has been. Apart from the slang and blanky, all the signifying signboards, as

many critics have pointed out, have been comprehensively mis-read by Tom, who, if he is not a vulgarian then, at least, we may consider him a parvenu. Therefore, to use the critical terminology of the late twentieth century, for the reader of these memoirs every sign is under erasure, its signification forever provisional and unresolvable: a mirage, ‘one of nature’s cheerless jokes’, which promises meaning where none exists—in other words, signifying nothing.

This is especially the case with the 1903 text where the inconsistency of Tom’s character destabilises the ending. I say inconsistency because one of the distinguishing features of the ersatz 1897 text that I read for this paper is the remarkable consistency of Tom’s character. His actions at the end of Chapter VII are not surprising at all, and the moral confusion I experienced with the 1903 version vanished when I read my three volume omnibus. Tom in this version, as I said earlier about the 1897 text, is deeply conservative; a flippant, sometimes heartless, commentator on the romances and tragedies of others (perhaps this was not so much the case in 1897, but it is certainly the case in the re-written minor novels, and this seems to have persisted partly into 1903—witness his treatment of Ida); and a boring know-all, acknowledged by all his friends. This fits better with the Tom of Chapter VII than the Tom in the interpolated chapters of 1903 who seems less of a playful bore than his earlier incarnation, and more of an earnest lay philosopher who is treated seriously by his acquaintances.

To return to the final words of *Such is Life*: ‘signifying nothing’. Although they were shared with the 1897 version, it is the 1903 text which actively demonstrates the claim in its remarkably modern play on narratorial uncertainty, constant self-reference to the artifice of writing (especially diaries), and the destabilised moral centre. By contrast the 1897 version contains debates on these issues but does not enact them, and, more importantly, on the moral front, Chapter V is supposed (from the author’s own admission—every man will want to be like Rigby) to be an unalloyed endorsement of Christian Socialism told in this instance by a true hero (Rigby) and not a hypocrite actor (Tom, 1903).

The 1897 novel, then, I believe, is a conventional novel of the late nineteenth century; one which has an urban centre, and a greater concentration on the intricacies of male female relations. It might still have had a hidden romance story, but I wonder, given the greater weight of narrative between its introduction in Chapter I, the hints in Chapter IV, and its denouement in Chapter VII, if the 1897 version was more explicit in its revelation of Nosey

Alf's identity—but I have not found any evidence of this. What I can say is that the 1897 novel was less concerned with grass, bullockies, and associated dirty transactions, and more concerned with personal rather than social ethics.

Reading the three novels as one, and comparing the 1897 and 1903 versions, made me more convinced that in the re-writing Furphy lost control of the novel, and there are indications of contradictions and errors in the 1903 text which show that some of the lines of narrative surviving from 1897 slipped from his hands. But in losing control, letting chance or the general 'cussedness of things' to erupt, or, we might even use a contemporary term from 1903, the subconscious to speak, the 1903 *Such is Life* became a true novel of the twentieth century. By some amazing alchemical transition in the re-writing, *Such is Life* became a more Protean text and a touchstone of early modernism in the novel.

I would have to say, though, that while I enjoyed reading the omnibus *Such is Life*, I do not believe it is a better novel than its refashioned 1903 cousin. Perhaps that is because I am a late twentieth-century reader, and brought to the 1903 version a sensibility based on relativism and ambiguity which responds to its mystery and attraction, a product of its open and contradictory structure, a mirage, unlike the well-defined and enclosed spaces of a conventional nineteenth-century, mainly urban, comedy of manners.

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