

‘One week in each opening’: Furphy and the use of the diary form

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One of the central conceits of Joseph Furphy’s novel *Such is Life* is the idea that the narrator, Tom Collins, has taken extracts from his diary and presented them to the reader as unvarnished truth. This conceit gives the novel its form. The full title of the book is *Such is Life: Being Certain Extracts from the Diary of Tom Collins*. Initially Collins offers the reader ‘the annotation of a week’s record’, selected at random from a collection of diaries, in order to most carefully guard against any danger of plot or romance: ‘I shut my eyes while I open the book at random. It is the week beginning with Sunday, the 9th of September [1883]’ (SL 2).

After the first day’s chronicle, in Chapter I of *Such is Life*, however, this promise of ‘limpid veracity’ is diverted, and the record of a week is turned (temporarily) into the account of the calendar ninth of each consecutive month for seven months. The narrator explains, at length:

When I undertook the pleasant task of writing out these reminiscences, I engaged, you will remember, to amplify the record of one week; judging that a rigidly faithful analysis of that sample would disclose the approximate percentage of happiness, virtue, &c., in Life. But whilst writing the annotations on Sept. 9th (which, by the way, gratuitously overlap on the following day), I saw an alpine difficulty looming ahead. At the Blowhard Sand-hill, on the night of the 10th, I camped with a party of six sons of Belial, bound for Deniliquin, with 3,000 Boolka wethers off the shears. Now, anyone who has listened for four hours to the conversation of a group of sheep drovers, named, respectively, Splodger, Rabbit, Parson, Bottler, Dingo, and Hairy-toothed Ike, will agree with me as to the impossibility of getting the dialogue of such *dramatis personae* into anything like printable form. The bullock drivers were bad enough, but these fellows are out of the question. (52)

The deviation from faithful adherence to diary time, then, is identified as the encounter with the real—or the impossibility of representing the real—its unprintability. Although this is an expression, of course, it also registers a literally marked distinction in the passage from the

experience, to the hand-written entry and then to the printed page, from the written to the ‘printable form’. Already, the transparent transference of life to diary to page is shown to be impossible—parts of life are unprintable, and as this passage goes on, the expanded is described as also capable of contraction. ‘Then it occurred to me’, Collins continues, ‘that a wider scope of observation might give in perhaps fewer pages, a fairer estimate of that ageless enigma, the true solution of which forms our all-embracing and only responsibility. I therefore concluded to skip one calendar month, dipping again into my old diary at Oct. 9th in the same year, namely, ’83’ (SIL 52).

Ultimately the deviation is summarised thus:

I shall pick out of each consecutive month the 9th day for amplification and comment, keeping not too long in one tune, but a snip and away. This will prospect the gutter of Life (gutter is good) at different points; in other words, it will give us a range of seven months instead of seven days. (SL 52)

One of the questions to ask about *Such is Life* is why, of all forms, in a moment of modernity and on the cusp of modernism at the turn into the twentieth century, should Furphy choose to put *Such is Life* in such an apparently pre-modern form as a diary?

Furphy was a *Bulletin* writer, a writer of bush ballads and bush realism which have come to be seen as explicitly masculinist. Sections of *Such is Life*, starting with the opening, as is well known, specifically disavow romance fiction, equate it with ‘flowery’ lies, and associate it with women writers such as Ouida (who, according to Collins, writes about ‘what a sweet, spicy, piquant thing it must be to be lured to destruction by a tawny-haired tigress with slumbrous dark eyes’ 130). It seems, then, a man’s book in masculine Australian language, but it is framed in a form—the private diary—which by the late nineteenth century was largely associated with women, girlish intimacy, and hidden sexuality.

Such is Life is also a very modern novel for its time, engaging with contemporary philosophy and in various ways playing with form and narrative in a very contemporary manner, as many commentators have pointed out (Barnes 1993; Croft; Lever). Nevertheless it is using a narrative form—the diary—very much associated with the old-fashioned, and even with some faint resemblance to gothic novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with their journal entries, and not with modernity, experimentation, and the new.

The specific diaries from which Collins selects his entries are '[t]wenty-two consecutive editions of *Letts's Pocket Diary*, with one week in each opening... all filled up, and in a decent state of preservation' (2). These in themselves are significant to the way a contemporary reader might have understood the narrative.

Diaries, as literary critic Rebecca Steinitz has recently pointed out, flourished in the nineteenth century. The English firm of Letts had been founded in the late eighteenth century, in 1796. Early in the nineteenth century they sold one type of diary only. By the early Victorian period (1836) they had 28 varieties for sale, and 'by 1862 there were 55' (Steinitz 3). People kept diaries long before the production of custom diaries, but the manufacture of diaries with lined pages, dates, almanac sections, and allocated compartments for each day inflected the ways in which life was recorded, and perhaps even understood. One week in each opening also suggests a particularly modern contraction of time, and a limitation of the meaning (or discursive space) allowed to be allocated to this temporal space. Molly McCarthy notes of one user of the Pocket Diary in late nineteenth-century America that the 'dictates of...form...controlled her speech', but also points out that users, particularly women, ultimately 'adapted the form to meet their own needs' (277, 295).

Although the pocket diaries were quite widespread, the variety of Letts's diaries available showed the potential mapping of time across professions to a minute degree. Letts's advertisements at the end of *Fortune's Epitome of the Stocks and Public Funds* from the 1850s offers a breakdown of which of the diaries (identified by their numbers) are most suited to which professions or activities; so the Clergyman will be most suited with 'Nos. 9, 10 and 12', Physicians, Solicitors, the 'Army and Navy', 'Merchant Bankers and Gentlemen in Official Capacities'; Tradesmen and Mechanics are all recommended to try particular numbers, with some overlap, although only the mechanics are directed to the 'Cheap Editions' and 'Sporting Men' are pointed solely to the 'Betting Diary'. The 'Pocket Editions' are described as 'indiscriminately used by all' (Fortune [323]). A variety of the large range of Pocket Editions offer a week at an opening (or, more exactly '1/2 a week in a page'—some with an unruled page, some with six days).

One potential reason for Furphy, or his character Tom Collins, to use Letts's diaries, beyond their popularity, perhaps ubiquity, would be their common usage by writers. Perhaps most famously, W. M. Thackeray commented on his use of Letts's Diary number 12 in *Cornhill*

Magazine in 1862.¹ This piece, ‘On Letts’s Diary’, was reprinted in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in April 1862:

Mine is one of your No.12 diaries, three shillings cloth boards; silk limp, gilt edges, three-and-six; French morocco, tuck ditto, four-and-six. It has two pages, ruled with faint lines for memoranda, for every week, and a ruled account at the end, for the twelve months from January to December. (3 April 1862, 5)

Tom Collins’ diaries are almost certainly not so fancy but the connection to authorship is surely intentional—ironic, perhaps, given that Collins’ ‘limpid veracity’ does not go as far as he hopes. Another famous fictional appearance of the pocket diary in the period is the diary Jonathan Harker keeps in shorthand, and conceals, in that textually obsessed, multi-vocal novel, *Dracula*.²

In some ways, the diary form *is* perfect for *Such is Life*, and in other ways, incongruous. It fits as a discursive practice for ‘tracking’ the days—connected to the trope and philosophy of the train on alternating tracks which Furphy uses—and as a somewhat vain attempt to track (and order and control) the trajectory of life and life narrative. Tom Collins’ description of the railway track of life stresses its one-way direction—a feature it shares with narrative (or at least the reading of narrative) and with ‘lined’ diaries:

The misty expanse of Futurity is radiated with divergent lines of rigid steel; and along one of these lines, with diminishing carbon and sighing exhaust, you travel at schedule speed. At each junction, you switch right or left, and on you go still, up or down the way of your own choosing. But there is no stopping or turning back; and until you have passed the current section there is no divergence, except by voluntary catastrophe. Another junction flashes into sight, and again your choice is made; negligently enough, perhaps, but still with a view to what you consider the greatest good, present or prospective. (70)

Like the train (track, journey), the diary is linear, scheduled, with no turning back. Various recent critical discussions of women and diaries have commented on the appropriateness of the diary form to *women’s* lives: diaries render the ‘dailiness’ and repetition of women’s experience, according to Katie Holmes (Holmes x). They are characterised by the ‘personal, trivial, private’ (Gannett, in Steinitz 8). They contain repetitions, gaps and silences (Hampsten 4), representing lives which may be lived on terms controlled by others, or requiring forms of

discretion. By nature they are not shaped retrospectively, although many commentators point out that they can have distinctive narrative rhythms and shapes (Bunkers and Huff 5). They can be seen as organic, or even incoherent, although they may have a coherence of their own. In a discussion of the form and content of nineteenth-century women's diaries in America Judy Lensink suggests the careful recording of daily trivial routine might be a way for an individual to keep 'tally of how she did indeed account for something' (52). One might see some of those same identifications of the feminine life fitting the lives of the working-class men in *Such is Life*—powerlessness, repetition, meaninglessness.

Nevertheless this set of features—privacy, dailiness, ordinariness, repetition, lack of narrative development and closure—particularly for nineteenth-century diaries, have come to be associated with women. Certainly diary keeping was a common practice for women in the nineteenth century. This was particularly so for middle-class women who tended to be literate and were often leisured for at least some period of their lives. This literacy and leisure was combined with the social expectations around daily order and self-examination. Rebecca Steinitz argues that by the 1880s the diary was 'conceptually stabilised as a feminine genre' (9).

The practices associated with diary keeping—regular habits, order, recording, reflection—were generally and widely valued by the middle classes, and of course many men kept diaries across this period also, although, as they were often engaged in business, the diary keeping tended to be very different, and certainly differently understood. As Steinitz points out, contemporary (both nineteenth-century, and present-day) understandings of diary practices in fiction, criticism and popular circulation 'represent less actual nineteenth-century diary practices than the distillation of those practices by, among other things, fiction' (Steinitz 2).

Diary keeping also fitted with Victorian (British nineteenth-century) empiricism 'the enactment of Enlightenment observation and organization' (Steinitz 2). The extensive organising range of Letts's diaries affirms this (Fortune 323-329), and Tom Collins' '22 consecutive diaries' also accord with this, in that they exist as a careful record of a collection of events. Letts's description of their diary range in the mid-century promises, that in 'addition to':

a ruled space for every day in the Year according with the arrangements described on succeeding pages, and accompanied with Notices of all remarkable events to

be provided for (such as Public Holidays, Dividends due, Eclipses, &c.), they contain (with one or two exceptions) a general *summary* of an entire page or opening for each month, *blanks* for casual memoranda and the following important Tables... (Fortune 323. Italics and capitals in original)

The tables mentioned include a ready reckoner, British weights and measures, 'Foreign Weights compared with English'; 'Foreign Money compared with English', 'Birth Days of the Royal Family', 'House of Peers &c.' (323). The diary, then, comes ready fitted with Imperial empirical fact, centring British money, weights and measures as the norm against which others are to be compared. This was the case with the colonial diaries also.

Collins' brief entries are a shorthand which is almost infinitely expandable, as he threatens, and then demonstrates, but primarily into the sameness of days. At the opening he promises they will offer more: 'I purpose taking certain entries from my diary, and amplifying these to the minutest detail of occurrence or conversation. This will afford to the observant reader a fair picture of Life' (2).

There is an interesting kind of resonance in the phrase '*week in each opening*' when taken in alignment with the Chapters in *Such is Life*: which start with almost incomprehensibly condensed shorthand entries and then open out. Thus Chapter III, and the entry: 'FRI. NOV. 9. Charley's Paddock. Binney, Catastrophe.' expands into Tom's extensive journey through New South Wales and Victoria, naked and in search of trousers.³

Most of the novel consists of expansion, of course, but inevitably the expansion only confirms the impossibility of such expanded representation ever fully encapsulating experience. Like the Pocket Diaries, it is a paradox—the more that it attempts to enclose and compress between its card or silk or morocco covers the more it exposes the vast extent of information, the blanks which cannot be filled or contained.

Rebecca Steinitz, as noted above, connects the empiricism of the nineteenth-century diary specifically to empire, and although Collins, and Furphy, seem unlikely purveyors of Imperial power, it is worth remembering that Collins acts as a government agent, an integral part of a Dickensian and intangible bureaucracy assessing the squatters. In his capacity as a Deputy-Assistant Sub-Inspector for the New South Wales Civil Service, Tom spends his time delivering and collecting mysterious documents of compliance such as the K form he drops off at Mondunbarra at the opening of Chapter V. In another capacity Collins has been a

deliverer of fencing wire (the measurement and marker of Imperial boundaries—the ‘faint lines’ of Imperial demarcation). The novel parodies Imperial power, as represented by Collins’ job, his immediate superior, and the mysterious K-Forms, at the same time as it maps the range and impact of imperial lines and measures: squatters’ holdings, selection acts, stock routes, compliance with regulations. The novel shows both the hegemonic reach of Colonial bureaucracy and the fissures and gaps which riddle and undermine it.

Thackeray, in his piece on Letts’s diaries, like Collins uses the metaphor of life as a railway line (or perhaps a tram line), in referring to the inevitability of the end of the line:

As we go on the down-hill journey, the mile-stones are grave-stones, and on each more and more names are written; unless haply you live beyond man’s common age, when friends have dropped off, and, tottering, and feeble, and unpitied, you reach the terminus alone. (*Sydney Morning Herald* 3 April 1862, 5)⁴

Or, as Furphy puts it, of an earlier choice of line, ‘Single line to the next junction, or double line to the terminus?’(71).

The lines of the diary pages, for both writers, reflect the linear progress of life and time, and its restrictions. The metaphor of the train or tram appears at first to be a private and personal one, about individuals and their singular journeys, but of course both vehicles are forms of public transport, or freight carriage. In reality they would be taking groups of people, or goods, down the same track together. Thackeray’s metaphor elaborates on personal loss, but Collins’ contemplation on the power of lines is on the limitations of free will. The frameworks which shaped life’s possibilities: lines of power, lines of sight, lines of writing, are all integral to this.

Letts’s diaries themselves were products both shaped by imperialism and literally shaping the writing and experience of empire, as already noted. An 1871 regional Australian advertisement for one model of the pocket diary, ‘the pocket Diary and Bills due Book [sic]’, indicates the ways in which the space for writing was enclosed in the framework of imperial knowledge and data in the colonial issue:

This handy little volume is in pocket book form, convenient in size, and neatly got up, and contains, besides a well arranged almanac, a mass of valuable information calculated to prove of much interest and service to colonial readers. In the

columns of the almanac are recorded many of the principal events in the history of the British colonies, and at the foot of each page of this portion of the diary is some tabulated information relating to emigration, rates of postage and postal regulations; together with a list of colonial banks embracing every known branch acting through London firms, and many other items of memoranda that frequently become a subject of reference by the professional and business man in almost every rank of life. (*Gippsland Times* 28 December 1870, 3)

Whatever text the colonial resident chose to write on their pocket lines, then, it was footnoted and margined by imperial data. An advertisement for Letts's 1880 'Australasian Diaries' notes that 'No. 51 was used by Dr. Livingstone' (Lyon & Blair 12).

Steinitz claims that by the nineteenth century the conceptual nature of diaries set them up very often for practical failure, because they had 'totalizing objectives' which it was impossible to meet (17). The expectation of a diary was that it would give a 'thorough representation of experience in time'; the realisation of a 'fully improved self'; and 'the full and authentic representation' of that self (17). Steinitz suggests that the diary form reached its peak in the mid-nineteenth century as it attempted to address central British concerns about the keeping of modern time, achieving and mapping self-improvement, and a belief in a full romantic self.

Such things were beyond the capacity of a diary to hold—the daily recording of a self-improved, fully-realised personality is obviously impossible, and by the end of the nineteenth century this was abundantly clear. Furphy, surely, is playing around with all of these disappointed expectations, not least in the set off of the truncated entries against their expansions; expansions which promise temporal breadth, and scope and development, and disappoint them all. In his work on time and diaries in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, *Telling Time*, Stuart Sherman points out (in relation to Samuel Pepys) that the modern diary helped produce Benedict Anderson's 'homogenous empty time', which then appeared to need filling with specificity and fullness, 'a plenum of narrative within each day, and a plenum of narrated days within the calendar' (Sherman 34-35). As Steinitz points out in her study, actual diaries from the nineteenth century, like Pepys earlier diary, served an *idea* of dailiness and order, not a reality. They were not filled out on a daily basis, and never with the plenitude demanded, promised or striven for (23-24). An example of this existed in the Furphy family. John Barnes records a Letts's 1857 pocket diary given to John Furphy by

Isaac, used as a ‘literary album’, and including entries about family movements for part of 1866 (Barnes *OT* 76).

Diaries are certainly understood as temporal. They record days and sometimes hours. They divide weeks and years; they record passing seasons, and divide time into meaningful measures. They are, however, also profoundly spatial. One of the things that Furphy does in *Such is Life* is turn time into space. The short annotations of passing time become expanses of geographical space. In every chapter Tom covers considerable distances, and/or describes them, and elaborates on the spatial implications of each entry (Steinitz 8).

One brief, straight written line in each ruled line diary entry in the enclosed and controlled space of the diary—week to an opening, inch by inch—becomes an uncontrolled physical and discursive meander. So ‘SUN. SEPT. 9. *Thomp. Coop. & Co. 10-Mile Pines. Cleo. Duff. Selec.*’ expands not only into Chapter I, but also into the beginnings of narratives which span the entire novel. At the heart of the book, as I have argued elsewhere, are a set of lost child stories (Martin). The stories are recounted in Chapter V, in which much meandering takes place across country crossed with the straight lines of fences which cannot contain the tracks of the children (who invariably cross the fence lines; the tracks of the stories) any more than they control the tracks of writing. As Julian Croft has pointed out, the shape and emphasis of the novel/s also shifted over time with accompanying editorial shifts in length and shape (Croft, and see Osborne June 16, 2012).

As in Chapter V, in Chapter III the line of the Murray, rather than sets of delusive tracks, winds down the middle of the Chapter. But this is not a reliable line. Tom spends the night running around naked trying to figure out whether he is in Victoria or New South Wales, going North or South, East or West, trying to tell men from women and most importantly trying to find a pair of trousers—to regain perhaps that full Romantic diaristic identity. In every chapter the narrative explodes from the brief linear diary entry and scatters like bullocks in a forbidden paddock.

The way that diaries set up the expectation of dailiness and measurable time as a construct and a way of understanding an imperial British world is repeatedly undone by Joseph Furphy in this opening up of days without measure or context, in the loss of time and place and meaning, with space repeatedly overwhelming time. This process was set up in the seventeenth century, according to Stuart Sherman, with diarists after Pepys gradually

adopting new temporal frameworks, the dailiness, and the ‘double fullness—within the day and across the days’; full entries, for every day—bringing time into order, each day into equivalence, and dailiness into the forefront. Such dailiness reached its heyday and its crisis in the nineteenth century, according to Steinitz and others, when the logic of this form and its demands came into irreconcilable conflict.

Conclusion

Using the diary format enables Furphy to both invoke and satirise a number of social and literary conventions: Victorian and imperial (indeed human) control, and measure of [Australian] space and time; the elusiveness of clear reading and representation, and with it the difficulty of tracking anything which ostensibly travels along lines: writing, human fate, travellers.

The diary entries are like the ‘signboards’—simple advertising boards—which Tom initially promises us are so clearly readable to him, and therefore translatable to us. In fact Tom cannot read ‘men like signboards’ as he promises, nor translate a ‘good business hand’ nor any of the other diary-interpretation skills he claims to offer (1, 189). The promises of realism, that a ‘fair picture of Life’ will result—if sufficient amplifying [of] minutest detail of occurrence or conversation takes place—is both celebrated and exposed. We get a fair picture of life, but with plenty of gaps still. It is proven impossible to ever fill out the diary entries adequately, even if life were not deliberately edited by shifting the date-posts, and editing out the (adj.) language. The Victorian mission of the private diary, to aid self-development and self-knowledge, is another one of the jokes of the novel. John Barnes long ago argued that *Such is Life* was not a modernist novel because it did not explore the human psyche (Barnes 1956). Tom Collins, already the name of a mythical character—an impossible type—learns nothing from writing his diary, and nothing particularly apparent from re-reading and expanding upon it, including spotting clues to the mysteries he encounters and misreads, or does not read at all. The one-way linear track of the diary is disrupted by its retrospective rewriting by Collins, and by the end of that writing, Collins’s unreliable narration shines a different light on the expansion, the concision of the original entries, and perhaps on diary keeping in general.

The only other diary mentioned in the novel is that of dead explorer Robert O’Hara Burke:

‘Did you ever read Burke’s Diary, Willoughby?’ asked Thompson. ‘It’s just two or three pages of the foolishest trash that any man ever lost time in writing; and I’m afraid it’s about a fair sample of Burke’. (28)

Rather than the diary working to improve the man (or his reputation), this is reversed and here Burke is identified with the diary, making him the ‘foolishest trash’.⁵ Explorer journals were supposed to embed the imperial I/Eye as the culminating vision (Ryan, Carter, but see also Genoni 22) but the scornful reference to Burke’s diary here so early in the narrative is perhaps one of the early alerts about the form and its delusive promise of vision and linearity. The ‘diary-plan’ (OT 243) is both a way of holding the ‘novel’ together, and a way of highlighting the fact that it was always falling apart.

NOTES

¹ Although anonymous in the *Cornhill* and the *SMH*, because of Thackeray’s editorship of the *Cornhill* at the time, and the context of the article, it is likely that the authorship was understood.

² Famously, the Furphy Water Carts advertised Pitman’s shorthand, along with temperance—but not until 1920: <http://www.furphys.com.au/the-furphy-water-cart.html>

³ One of the odd things about this particular contraction is the one expansion. ‘Binney’ is, presumably, the ‘Mr B ___’ referred to in coy Victorian style within the chapter and throughout – in fact the only expansion of ‘Binney’ is in the chapter heading. Binney appears more extensively by his full name in Chapter 13 of Furphy’s *Rigby’s Romance*. Expansion and contraction change places here, but to little effect.

⁴ See also his closing comment, which ties together the traditional, perhaps feminine form of the diary with the increasingly modern masculine technology of contemporary daily media: ‘may I conclude this discourse with an extract out of that great diary, the newspaper?’

⁵ Furphy’s first teacher, Andrew Ross, published his reminiscences of the school that Furphy and his siblings attended in the *Evelyn Observer*, and *South and East Bourke Record* (Barnes OT 28). Earlier Reminiscences of his life as a teacher explicitly state that his reminiscences were based on diary entries: ‘We stayed for the night at the inn, and my diary records that we were very comfortable’. The diary entry here apparently does not so much jog memory as replace it (*Evelyn Observer*, and *South and East Bourke Record* Friday 18 November 1887. 2).

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