Kunapipi

Volume 25 | Issue 2 Article 14

2003

Colonialism, Nationalism, Modernism: Rethinking Furphy's Such Is Life

Stephen Cowden

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Recommended Citation
Cowden, Stephen, Colonialism, Nationalism, Modernism: Rethinking Furphy's Such Is Life, *Kunapipi*, 25(2), 2003.
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol25/iss2/14

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Colonialism, Nationalism, Modernism: Rethinking Furphy's Such Is Life

Abstract
'Offensively Australian' Joseph Furphy completed the first draft of his magnum opus Such Is Life in 1897, and, being unsure where to have it published, submitted the 1,125 pages of hand-written manuscript to the Bulletin magazine, of which he was an inveterate admirer. In a now famous covering letter he wrote to the magazine's editor J.F. Archibald : 'I have just finished writing a full sized novel: title 'Such Is Life'; scene Riverina and northern Vic; temper democratic; bias, offensively Australian' (Barnes and Hoffman 28). These latter phrases have come to be seen as expressive of the 'legendary' nationalist discourse of the 1890s.1 Though critical attitudes have never endorsed this view unconditionally, the predominant perception of the novel remains that expressed in the blurb on the 1991 Angus and Robertson edition of Such Is Life, which reads:

This journal article is available in Kunapipi: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol25/iss2/14

STEPHEN COWDEN

Colonialism, Nationalism, Modernism: Rethinking Furphy's *Such Is Life*

'Offensively Australian'

Joseph Furphy completed the first draft of his magnum opus *Such Is Life* in 1897, and, being unsure where to have it published, submitted the 1,125 pages of hand-written manuscript to the *Bulletin* magazine, of which he was an inveterate admirer. In a now famous covering letter he wrote to the magazine's editor J.F. Archibald : 'I have just finished writing a full sized novel: title 'Such Is Life'; scene Riverina and northern Vic; temper democratic; bias, offensively Australian' (Barnes and Hoffman 28). These latter phrases have come to be seen as expressive of the 'legendary' nationalist discourse of the 1890s.[1] Though critical attitudes have never endorsed this view unconditionally, the predominant perception of the novel remains that expressed in the blurb on the 1991 Angus and Robertson edition of *Such Is Life*, which reads:

> Here are the real Aussies of the 1880s ... the bullockies, swagman, squatters and 'foreigners' who eked their existence from a harsh begrudging land. Purporting to be the diary of one Tom Collins, an ex-government official, a bushman and former bullocky with literary leaning and impulse to reminisce, SUCH IS LIFE has come to be regarded as a classic Australian novel, which, perhaps more than any other richly captures the spirit and humour of the legendary characters of the outback.
>
> (back cover)

Thus *Such Is Life* comes to us as part of a body of work that celebrates the emergence of the 'real Aussies'. My essay is an attempt to disrupt this nationalist narrative and to offer some new points of departure on the novel. I begin this by re-reading the debate over the book that took place in the post-War period between the Radical Nationalist critics and the New Critics — a debate now seen as largely irrelevant within contemporary Australian literary criticism. My reason for doing this is to suggest that the criticism of 'new times' can still learn a substantial amount from looking at the debates from 'old times'. I then sketch out some new frameworks through which *Such Is Life*, alongside other works of 'the 1890s', could be reconsidered. The reason for doing this is not just to forward an argument for the continuing relevance of *Such Is Life* as a work of literature, but also to reveal the novel as one that has as much to tell about Australia's past as it does the present. Instead of seeing this past in terms of a celebratory nationalist narrative, I have sought to locate the novel within the historical *conflicts* of the period — conflicts which revolve around issues of class and

property ownership, feminism and suffrage, and conflicts around 'race', racism and Aboriginal dispossession. All of these issues are still very much with us. In this sense, the re-reading of *Such Is Life* may help develop a greater understanding of the historical contours through which 'Australian' identity has been shaped. The centenary of the publication of *Such Is Life* is a great opportunity to re-read Furphy in the light of these contemporary concerns, which I would argue were present in the book all along.

A.G. Stephens and the Emergence of Literary Nationalism

One hundred years after it was first published *Such Is Life* still comes to us as a highly unconventional novel; indeed one of the things most worth celebrating is that it was published at all. A.G. Stephens undertook to have the novel published by the *Bulletin* as it was rejected by all other publishers, and considered this was worth doing because the novel was 'an Australian classic or semi-classic' which 'embalms accurate representations of our character, customs, life and scenery' (Barnes 254). It is interesting that a critic as well-read as Stephens should have perceived the story in such literal terms, in spite of fairly substantial hints to the contrary from Furphy himself,[2] but even more significant was the way this literalism became linked with the perception of the novel as an affirmation of 'national character'. The Sydney *Bulletin* magazine occupies a place of greatly reiterated significance in the history of this period largely as it was the first forum to articulate an explicit relationship between nationalism and literature in Australia. Not only was the *Bulletin* the main forum for publishing the 'new' literature of the 1890s, its main editor, J.F. Archibald and particularly its literary editor, A.G. Stephens, had a clear and self-conscious agenda concerning the need for a distinctively Australian literature. In his many essays and reviews in the *Bulletin* and in other literary journals, Stephens sought to express a sense of the potential for a significant shift in the way that 'Australianess' was represented. Though he saw Australia of his own time as 'still a suburb of the Cosmopolis, where men from far away lands perpetuate in a new environment the ideas and habits acquired far away' he also felt that 'the literary work which is Australian in sense and spirit, as well as scene and incident' was just beginning to be written (Stephens 9). He expressed this succinctly in *The Bookfellow* in 1907: 'Let us restate the familiar universe in terms of Australia, and our literature will be Australian, and will be literature in the proportion that we make it universal' (Cantrell 1977b 310). In seeking to 'restate the universe in the terms of Australia' Stephens was arguing for a transformation in the way literature portrayed the Australian landscape. He wanted Australian writing to be unapologetically local instead of perceiving it as colonial and therefore inferior or imitative.

The 'Return' of Radical Nationalism: Russell Ward and A.A. Phillips

Stephens' sense of *Such Is Life* as a story which expressed fundamental truths about Australia and Australians re-emerged in the Radical Nationalist literary

criticism that developed in the post-World War II period. One of the key texts of this period was Russell Ward's *The Australian Legend*. Ward described his book as an attempt to 'trace and explain the development of this national *mystique* based on the powerful impression that the "Australian spirit" is somehow intimately connected with the bush and that it derives from the common folk rather than the more respectable and cultivated sections of society' (1). He saw this as having given rise to a notion of the 'typical' Australian male, whom he described as:

> a practical man, rough and ready in his manners and quick to decry the appearance of affectation in others. He is a great improviser, ever willing to 'have a go' at anything, but willing to be content with a task done in a way that is 'near enough'.... He believes that Jack is not only as good as his master but, at least in principle, probably a good deal better.... He is a fiercely independent person who hates officiousness and authority ... yet he is very hospitable and will stick to his mates through thick and thin. (Ward 1–2)

For Ward, these ideal-typical qualities came to be manifested in the character of the Bushman, who represented not 'Australians in general, or even country people in general' (2) but rather an essence of Australianness (and particularly of Australian masculinity, though gender issues did not figure hugely in his argument).

A.A. Phillips' *The Australian Tradition*, also published in 1958, offered a similar, though more sophisticated view of the 1890s than Ward. Philips also saw this period as the point of origin for a literature which was distinctively National: 'Before the nineties there was no such thing as Australian writing, no continuous stream of creative work; there were only occasional books, standing like waterholes in a sandy bed of apathy. From the nineties, the creek has often run feebly, has never swelled to flood level, but it has never run dry' (Phillips 38). For Phillips the key feature of the 1890s was the emergence of the essentially Australian values that were characterised by the 'Democratic theme':

> the same belief in the importance of the Common Man, the same ability to present him without condescension or awkwardness, the same square-jawed 'dinkum' determination to do without the fripperies, the modes — and sometimes the graces — of aesthetic practice, the same unembarrassed preference for revealing the simple venities rather than the sophistications of human nature. It is by such qualities that an Australian writer usually reveals to the knowledgeable reader his national ethos. (56)

However Phillips also sought to situate this work in a global context through an emphasis on its working class standpoint. With Lawson and Furphy: 'For the first time in centuries Anglo-Saxon writing has broken out of the cage of the middle-class attitude. Dickens, Hardy and Bret Harte had, it is true, written sympathetically and knowledgably of the unpossessing; but they had written for

a middle class audience.... To Lawson and Furphy it was the middle class who were the foreigners' (38).

This latter is interesting not least for the way it suggests a new way of looking at the 'legendary' 1890s which is rarely taken up in Australian literary criticism.[3] However one of the reasons this insight has remained buried under the weight of nationalist sentimentality relates to the theoretical weaknesses of Philips' work; most notably his elision of 'class' and 'nation'. Throughout Radical Nationalist criticism one sees this constant slippage between the representation of 'class' and the arrival of the plucky Australian 'national character' on the historical stage. Despite the leftist sympathies of Phillips and Ward, issues of class power and class struggle were almost always subsumed within nationalism, making their working class sympathies largely gestural. The consequence of this is that though notions of Australian national identity based on the 1890s encode a celebration of the 'working man', these discourses are now just as available to those on the political Right as elsewhere, as evidenced by the claims of the Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, to be on the side of 'the battler', while at the same time slashing the protection which the welfare state offered to such 'battlers'. These images of national identity were similarly mobilised by Pauline Hanson's 'One Nation' party, which sought to speak up for the 'battler' as a group of forgotten people, politically and economically marginalised by the 'politically correct' preoccupations of liberal bourgeois urban elites.

Critics of Radical Nationalism: New Criticism

The post-war period also saw the emergence of a school of criticism which sought to challenge the hegemony of the nationalist model. Known as New Criticism, its principal exponents were G.A. Wilkes, Harry Heseltine, Vincent Buckley and Leonie Kramer, for whom the English critic F.R. Leavis was influential. The central theme of New Criticism was a critique of nationalist interpretations of Australian literature as limited and stereotyped. In a 1962 article, Gerald Wilkes was positively churlish about the significance of Furphy's famous covering letter:

> While [*Such Is Life*] may have a temper that is democratic and bias that is offensively Australian, these are surface features and inessential to its permanent literary worth.... *Such is Life* is memorable not as showing a stage in the evolution of the Australian democratic ideal, but as exploration of the abiding problems of destiny and freewill, moral responsibility, and the operation of chance in the universal scheme.
>
> (Wilkes 39)

And as he argued in his 1981 book *The Stockyard and the Croquet Court*:

> Australian cultural development has normally been seen in terms of an emergent nationalism.... It has normally been assumed that Australian cultural identity was achieved during the 1890s ... and that the typically egalitarian spirit of the day is reflected in the writing of such men as Henry Lawson, Joseph Furphy and

> A.B.Paterson. As a model of cultural development this has had unfortunate consequences. Nationalistic leanings in the earlier part of the twentieth century, in Harpur or Kendall, have naturally been seen as strivings toward the Lawsonian ideal, and their true nature has passed unnoticed. Nationalism itself has been assumed to take only one form —the form familiar in Lawson and Furphy — and other significant manifestations of it have been overlooked.... A parallel assumption is that Australian cultural development should be measured against the standard of English culture, and Australian nationalism by its departure from English values and loyalties. (2)

What Wilkes proposes in the above statement is very important, particularly when one looks at the fate of Radical Nationalist ideas politically. What he is arguing is that the Nationalist paradigm has failed to see the 'otherness' of the writing of the 1890s, reading some writers (such as Lawson and Furphy) in a one-dimensional 'celebratory' register and dismissing others altogether. His final point about the limitations of reading these novels purely as expressions of 'Australian cultural development' points to the fact that the novels of the 1890s need to be also understood as much in terms of *international* developments in literature, and I would add politics. A.G. Stephens' famous characterisation of Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* as 'the first Australian novel' as opposed to the work of Marcus Clarke, Charles Kingsley and Rolf Boldrewood which was only 'written in Australia' (Lawson 172), encodes a distinction between the 'National' and the 'Colonial' which has been reproduced by most subsequent literary criticism. Following the logic of Wilkes' argument I would suggest that we can understand this distinction itself as representative of a shift in the novel internationally, manifested in 'Australian' terms. While accepting the idea that the writing of 'the 1890s' was different to that which preceded it, I would like to argue that this writing needs to be conceived in broader terms than those specifically set up by critics who have advocated both 'for' and 'against' the period. I would characterise these in terms of three separate but interrelated factors: firstly, a change in the social perception of the artist; secondly, a crisis of confidence in Victorian reason and rationality; and thirdly, the rise of urban social movements concerned with issues of inequality in terms of class (trade union and socialist groupings) and gender (particularly suffragism). My argument will be exemplified through a comparison of Boldrewood's *Robbery Under Arms* (1888) and Furphy's *Such Is Life* (1903).

The Changing Role of 'The Artist'

In *Culture and Society* Raymond Williams delineated a number of fundamental changes in the perception of 'the artist' in the first half of the nineteenth century in Europe. These took place as 'the production of art was coming to be regarded as one of a number of specialised kinds of production, subject to much the same conditions as general production. [Alongside this] the theory of a "superior reality" of art, as the seat of imaginative truth, was receiving increasing emphasis' (Williams 32). This resulted in a 'system of thinking about

the arts [which placed] an emphasis on the special nature of art-activity as a means to 'imaginative truth', [as well as] an emphasis on the artist as a special kind of person … a specially endowed person, the guiding light of the common life' (Williams 36). Australia's isolation and small population delayed the impact of these shifts: however Richard White has noted that by the 1880s a professionalised class of writers and artists had emerged who for the first time sought to present their work to a mass audience: 'Science, art and literature were increasingly the province of full-time professionals rather than educated amateurs or men of letters with a private income' (White 1981 88–89). The '1890s' can thus be seen as the time when this new attitude to art and to the artist first became manifest in Australia. The difference can be seen if one compares a writer like Rolf Boldrewood, as an embodiment of the older attitude, with the writers of the 1890s. Boldrewood began his career as a writer quite by accident; his first published story, an account of a kangaroo hunt, was written while recovering from a leg injury which occurred after a riding accident (Brissenden ix). This piece was published by the *Cornhill Magazine* in London, which subsequently carried other short sketches of Australian life that he went on to write. His most famous work, *Robbery Under Arms*, was written as a serial in the *Sydney Mail* in 1882–83, at the same time as he was Police Magistrate in the goldrush town of Gulgong in NSW. Boldrewood was thus an 'educated amateur' who, in spite of his success, never saw his writing as a vocation. It was this latter notion which was central to the way Lawson, Franklin and Furphy saw themselves. The idea of having to dedicate oneself to writing *above all else* resonates in Lawson's early piece 'Pursuing Literature in Australia' (1899). Describing his feelings after his first poems were published he wrote, 'I was in print, and in the Xmas number of the journal I had worshipped and devoured for years. I felt strong and confident enough to clean pigsties, if need be, for the rest of my natural life — provided the *Bulletin* went on publishing the poetry' (110). The notion of the precariousness of writing as a profession builds into a lament for the writer in a place such as Australia:

> When out of graft in Sydney I helped turn the old *Republican* machine, and wrote 'Faces in the Street' for which I received a guinea. Along in those times I wrote Bush ballads for the *T. and C. Journal*, but only got an occasional half sovereign. 'Tom' Butler of the *Freeman's Journal* … told me that they didn't pay for poetry…. (111)
>
> My advice to any young Australian writer whose talents have been recognised, would be to go steerage, stow away, swim, and seek London, Yankeeland, or Timbuctoo - rather than stay in Australia till his genius has turned to gall, or beer. (115)

Despite the bitterness of the struggle, Lawson was part of a generation of writers who saw writing unequivocally as a vocation. In Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* (1901) the process whereby the artist comes into being is the subject of the work of art itself (she later went on to satirise this mode of writing in *My Career Goes Bung* [1946]). Though Furphy's writing was in one sense a

spare-time activity, he always described the job in his brother's factory as an act of painful necessity, the 'Adamic penalty of each day' which preceded his 'labour of love': reading and writing (Barnes and Hoffman 23). As he wrote to his friend and fellow auto-didact William Cathels in 1894:

> I trust your penetration has discovered I'm not like the common herd. Fact is that in my younger days I dabbled in poetry and accustomed myself to personify all feelings, passions and habits — just as my ancestor, William does in his ode to the Passions (When Music, heavenly Maid! Was young etc.) and by this means am able to shift the blame of neglect referred to from my shoulders to those of Ignorance.
> (Barnes and Hoffman 19)

Furphy's work illustrates the crossover between the notion of the specialness of the artist and the rise of socialist politics, with its particular nineteenth-century emphasis on self-education, a background he also shares with Lawson and Franklin.

The Crisis of Victorian Reason in the Nineteenth-Century Novel

Terry Eagleton has argued that the key shift which distinctively established the 'newness' of the writing of *fin de siecle* Britain was the way it emerged out of a crisis of 'Victorian Reason'. He has noted that in Britain in the 1890s

> the era of Victorian prosperity is now over; the oldest capitalist nation in the world is now being shamefully outpaced by its juvenile rivals; the mid-Victorian bonanza has bred a minatory underworld of urban lumpenproletariat and the unedifying spectacle of too much Western capital chasing too few colonial territories is about to lead to the conflagration of the first imperialist world war. But the spiritual correlative of this human waste and wretchedness is a cataclysmic crisis of Victorian rationality itself. (13)

The ending of the hegemony of the doctrine which had dominated the public sphere in Britain and its colonies for most of the century created a situation which made possible new ways of thinking about the past, present and future. As Ledger and McCracken have noted, 'The process of cultural fragmentation that characterised the *fin de siecle* threw the norms of the Victorian age into crisis: empires were threatened, feminism was on the march, and the first socialist parties in Britain were formed' (1). Both the socialist and feminist movement which developed at this time were profoundly marked by this utopian spirit of re-thinking the familiar. Eagleton has noted that this idealism was as much concerned with the personal as the social:

> What characterised the era was an astonishing amalgam of spiritual and material ferment; the boisterous emergence of new political forces to be sure, but also a veritable transformation of subjectivity.... The period is at once more concrete and more cosmic than what came before, either searching anxiously for some sure foundation or making do with the frail limitations of the infinite. (112–13)

Eagleton's work offers a fertile way of understanding the shift in writing which happened in Australia at this time, and this can be illustrated further through a comparison of the opening passages of *Robbery Under Arms* and *Such Is Life.*

Robbery Under Arms opens as follows:

> My name's Dick Marston, Sydney side native. I'm twenty-nine years old, six feet in my stocking soles and thirteen stone weight. Pretty strong and active with it, so they say. I don't want to blow — not here, any road — but it takes a good man to put me on my back, or stand up to me with the gloves, or the naked mauleys. I can ride anything ... swim like a musk duck and track like a Myall blackfellow.... But its all up now; there's no getaway this time; and I, Dick Marston, as strong as a bullock, as active as rock-wallaby ... have been tried for bushranging — robbery under arms they call it ... and I must die on the gallows this month. (29)

The novel begins with an announcement of the age, physical description and social class of its narrator, situating him clearly and definitively in time and space.[4] It is also highly significant that the major drama of the book — Dick's 'fall' into crime, capture and search for redemption — are revealed immediately to the reader. The passage captures in embryo the order of things in the novel as a whole — the difficult childhood, the move from small time into big time theft, and Dick's capture, punishment, repentance, of which the writing of the book itself is the most significant part. In this way the book functions as a Victorian morality tale, the story of the basically decent man who is lead astray by bad company and whose punishment and repentance returns the world to order.

There could not be a greater contrast between this and the opening passages of *Such Is Life:*

> Unemployed at last!
>
> Scientifically such contingency can never have befallen of itself. According to one theory of the Universe, the momentum of Original Impress has been tending toward this far off, divine event ever since a scrap of fire mist flew from the solar centre to form our planet. Not this event alone, of course; but every occurrence, past and present, from the fall of captured to Troy to the fall of a captured insect. According to another theory, I hold an independent diploma as one of the architects of our Social System, with a commission to use my own judgement, and take my own risks, like any other unit of humanity. This theory, unlike the first, entails frequent hitches and cross-purposes; and to some malign operation of these that I should owe my present holiday. (1)

The phrase aptly illustrates Eagleton's characterisation of the mood of the *fin de siecle* being simultaneously 'more concrete and more cosmic' than the Victorian period. Furphy's opening statement foregrounds the real material circumstances of his writing; the dilemma between the fact of wage labour, which gives him an income but no time to write, and unemployment, which gives him unlimited time but nothing to live on. Furphy's opening phrase, at one level so simple, is infused with an irony which captures the ambivalent class and cultural location

of the working class auto-didact. But from this statement of 'the concrete' he leaps to 'the cosmic' through an exploration of that which caused his unemployment. This becomes the basis of a philosophical debate between determinism and free will, themes that will resonate throughout the rest of the novel. As this passage indicates, the book's narrator Tom Collins sees his purpose as *excavating meaning* in a world where acts of interpretation are inherently problematic, another of the novel's major themes. The opening page of this book is thus one which suggests an openness to an exploration of the 'relation between reading, interpretation and writing' (Devlin-Glass et.al, 315), which, as other commentators have noted, anticipates the high modernist literature of writers like James Joyce. Eagleton has spoken of the *fin de siecle* writer as one for whom: 'Every formula or social arrangement must now be provisional or self-ironising.... If God exists, then he would figure as the metaperspective which unified all others; but in fact he does not.... There is now an empty space which he once occupied, in which individuals collide and mutually misperceive, desire all the way through one another and out the other side' (15–19). In *Robbery Under Arms* God, embodied as the classically Victorian representative of Order and Reason, is omnipresent. Dick's journey through the novel concerns his dawning realisation of this, though the reader is made aware of 'His' presence from the very first page. The structure of *Such Is Life* by contrast operates around contingencies, such as Tom's unemployment, random events and chance meetings, though of course this whole process is highly organised and structured in a way which looks forward to a novel like *Ulysses*.

Social Movements and Literature in the 1890s

I noted that A.A. Phillips' most important insight was his understanding of the importance of the working class perspective in Lawson and Furphy's work, and I would suggest that this insight is more useful if the development of a working class subjectivity in literature is located in an international, rather than an exclusively national, context. In the third re-framing of the 'new' writing of the 1890s I would like to suggest that this can be seen as an Australian manifestation of an *international* shift in literature which occurred as a result of the rise of socialist and working class politics and movements during the latter decades of the nineteenth century. As H. Gustav Klaus has argued in *The Rise Of Socialist Fiction*: 'As Socialism got under way in the 1880s and 1890s in Britain, a variety of rival notions and doctrines ... successfully infiltrated imaginative literature.... To see the interest of this line of socialist narratives merely "in the illumination it casts on the mainstream of English fiction" ... is to miss its essence, which is its radical otherness' (Klaus 2–3). A 1914 review of Lawson's work from *The Scotsman* described him as a writer 'who set a high value on the brotherhood of man, seeing nothing but virtue in the attitude of Trade Unionism in its long war against capital' (qtd in Wilding 204). This illustrates that Lawson was being read in the context of an international socialist readership. The rise of

the socialist, and in the case of Franklin, feminist movements, at the end of the nineteenth century was for each of them bound up in their decisions to become writers. In 'Pursuing Literature in Australia' Lawson describes this in the following terms: 'I watched old fossickers and farmers reading *Progress and Poverty* earnestly and arguing over it Sunday afternoons. And I wished that I could write.... Then came the unexpected outburst of popular feeling — called the Republican riots.... And I had to write then — or burst' (1899 109).

In a similar vein Franklin stridently states her class allegiances in the first chapter of *My Brilliant Career*: 'To me the Prince of Wales is no more than a shearer, unless when I meet him he displays some personality apart from his princeship — otherwise he can go hang' (5). Franklin's concern with her independence, both as a woman and as an artist, would not have been possible without the changes in attitude brought about by the feminist movement.[5] Furphy, with his constant references to Shakespeare, the Bible, and debates concerning matters both scientific and philosophical, all in the context of a story about bullock drivers in the Riverina, equally epitomises the working class auto-didact. These movements provided a space for a new kind of writer to emerge on the scene, a writer who, in the words of A.A. Phillips, was able to 'break out of the cage of the middle class attitude' (38) affecting a radical shift in both the content and form of the novel.

The newness of these representations of class come out even more clearly through comparison, and I would do this through a further comparison of *Robbery Under Arms* and *Such Is Life,* focussing on the relationship between class and criminality. This theme closely relates to the way questions of ethical responsibility are posed by the two authors, and I suggest that the opposed positions the two authors take reflect the breakdown of certainty within the Victorian moral framework as it was affected by the rise of socialist politics as occurred at the end of the previous century. Michel Foucault has noted that one of the major achievements of the socialist movement was to create a link between the capitalist system, as a form of social organisation, and forms of human behaviour which were adopted as a consequence. Socialists argued that unemployment, poverty and criminality, were not failings of individual 'character', but were a product of the immiseration created by capitalism. In its day this link offered a profound and fundamental challenge to ideas about 'character' which were cornerstones of Victorian morality. Foucault has described this as a moment in which a 'discourse of morality was displaced by one of politics' (Foucault 1989 287). It was across this divide that *Robbery Under Arms* and *Such Is Life* were written. In his study of the prison system, *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that as this system consolidated in the early part of the nineteenth century, it became apparent to its administrators that in most cases prisons 'turned the condemned into lifetime offenders'. Reformers thus sought to introduce a distinction between those seen who were capable of returning to society, the reformable, and those

for whom this was not thought to be possible, the incorrigible. The effect of this distinction was to make the criminal's attitude toward the crime of central importance (1977 120–22).

These distinctions resonate throughout *Robbery Under Arms*, which is perhaps not surprising as Boldrewood was serving as Police Magistrate at the time he was writing the book. Central to Dick's repentance is the fact that he is not completely without good 'character'. His initial turn to crime is seen to stem from the bad example set by his father and though his father's criminality involves nothing more than small scale cattle-rustling, his transgressive attitude is revealed when he says: 'But we must live as well as other people. There's squatters here that does as bad. They're just like the squires at home; think a poor man hasn't a right to live' (62). Boldrewood thus equates crime with acts of class resistance, as for him both represent challenges to the 'natural' basis of society. These themes are also present in the incident when Jim Marston rescues the squatter Falkland's daughter. Though Jim emerges a hero, this is tainted by the fact that the rescue was achieved using a stolen horse. In discussing the question of how Jim came to own such a horse Jim asks:

> 'It's not a bad thing for a poor man to have a fast horse now and then, is it, Mr Falkland?'
>
> 'I don't grudge a poor man a good horse ... it's the fear I have of the dishonest way that horses of value are come by, and the net of roguery that often entangles fine young fellows like you and your brother.'
>
> ... I looked him in the face, though I felt I could not say he was wrong ... if more gentleman were like Mr.Falkland I do really believe no one would rob them for very shame's sake. (91)

As well as revealing the book's didactic paternalism, Dick and Jim's 'shame' suggests their redeemability to the reader, even though they are not yet ready to give up their criminal careers. For this to take place they must become reconciled to the 'naturalness' of class inequality. In these terms a worker should not aspire to the wealth of the squatter, but to the 'steady' life, values epitomised by George Storefield, whose gradual and incremental ascent from small time farmer to Police Magistrate is paralleled by the rise and fall of Dick's criminal career. By the conclusion of the book Dick has not only repented, but has located his moment of original sin: 'If I had stopped dead and bucked at father's wanting me and Jim to duff those weaners, I really believe I might have come right' (419). Having demonstrated his internalisation of the disciplinary basis of class society, Dick finds his death sentence rather miraculously commuted through pleas from Falkland, representing the benevolent upper class, and the 'steady' George Storefield. The irony of the constant reiteration of the Victorian values of respectability and conformity lie in the fact that the most exciting and charismatic character in the book is Captain Starlight who, as the book's romantic hero, is allowed to break all the rules attached to private property on the basis of a

punctilious observance of upper class social etiquette. Unlike Dick and Jim, Starlight spends very little time agonising over the loss of the 'steady' life, with the result that the book can only conclude for him with a death which is as every bit as dramatic as his life.

The relationship between class and crime is brought out in a radically different manner by Furphy. In place of Boldrewood's paternalistic certainties, Furphy advances the idea that the laws which govern pastoral Australia exist solely to maintain the power of the owners against the propertyless. The image of the bullock drivers who are unable to do their work without obtaining grass for their teams, and unable to have access to this grass as it is the property of the squatters, expresses metaphorically the wider situation of the working classes who are cut off from access to the means of production and are therefore forced to engage in wage-labour.[6] This is particularly shown in the chain of events in Chapter 5, which opens with the Chinese boundary rider Sam Young directing Collins to a place where ample grass can be obtained, the Trinidad paddock. Collins initially thinks he has fallen on an incredible stroke of luck, as do all the bullockies who subsequently arrive. It only becomes apparent during the evening with the suspicious appearance of 'Barefoot Bob', that they have fallen into a trap set for them by the squatter, Smyth. Next morning Collins and Helsmok awake to find that their animals have been impounded as a form of punishment for their trespass, and that they must pay Smyth to recover them. Furphy satirises the processes of bourgeois justice describing the drivers as 'outlaws' and 'culprits' and their animals as 'evidence' (201–203). However neither are the bullockies prepared to passively accept this state of affairs, as the conclusion of this episode reveals. In the mêlée of counting out and paying for their animals, the drivers Baxter and Donovan manage to make off with two bullocks belonging to Smyth. Collins, on meeting these two some months hence finds they both 'have a good conscience regarding the transaction. They maintained, with manifest sincerity, that Smyth's repudiation of the bullocks, and his subsequent levy of damages upon them as strangers and trespassers, gave themselves a certain right of trover…. Not equal to a nine pound receipt, but good enough for the track' (203).

What Furphy presents here are two opposing notions of morality; the first represented by the system of private property, administered by powerful property owners and the state bureaucracy, and the second based on the needs of ordinary working people. While in Boldrewood transgression against the social order can only result in chaos and anomie, Furphy presents the working out of an alternative moral code as an essential part of a humane existence. As Ivor Indyk has noted: 'Furphy's bullockies are intensely moral, and their morality is a complex affair. They have to feel that their actions are right, but since there is no acceptable code or standard by which the rightness of their actions might be judged, they have to work by feel or impulse' (313). Furphy clearly saw these acts of sabotage as a form of working class resistance, and hence the newness of his perspective

is both literary and political; in a political sense he is trying to work out on an intuitive basis how a different form of morality might operate. In a literary sense he is trying to work out a new way of telling a story that will reflect this, and it is this sense that I would understand what Klaus has called the 'otherness' of socialist fiction in this era (Klaus 2–3).[7]

CONCLUSION

Ledger and McCracken have argued that the nineteenth-century *fin de siecle* can be seen 'from the vantage point of the late twentieth century' as the period in which 'many of the concepts and conflicts around issues of "race", class and gender ... have emerged' (3). My focus in this piece has been largely on questions of class, but this process of re-engaging with the 1890s with a view to problematising the self-referential and taken-for-grantedness of nationalist narratives also enables other questions about literature of the 1890s to be raised. Joseph Furphy was a passionate reader and writer and my hope is that we try to remember him through reading and re-reading his work, but also to continue to teach reading and writing as he saw them — as critical tools for understanding the world we live in.

NOTES

1. The significance of this phrase in Radical Nationalist criticism was exemplified in the way it became the motto of the leftist literary journal *Overland* when it began publication in 1954, appearing on the mast-head of every issue.
2. In Furphy's letter to A.G. Stephens of 2 March 1897 he writes, in a passage that is itself redolent of the ironic tone in the text, that: 'a certain by-play in plot and eclairessment is hidden from the philosophic narrator, however apparent to the matter of fact reader' (Barnes and Hoffman 1995 29).
3. Micheal Wilding's *The Radical Tradition* (1993) is a notable exception to this.
4. Given that this novel has been classified as belonging to the 'Colonial' rather than the 'National' within Australian literary criticism it is interesting to note the plethora of culturally localised signifiers in this passage; swim like a *musk duck*, track like a *blackfellow*, active as a *rock-wallaby*, strong as a *bullock*. Alan Brissenden has noted that, in relation to the other two 'Colonial' novels — *For the Term of His Natural Life* and *Geoffrey Hamlyn* — the book is set entirely in Australia and its narrator, Dick Marston, uses a more colloquial and vernacular voice with the 'consequence [that] the tone is more Australian' (xiv). Though Boldrewood opposed, as a supporter of the monarchy, the republican nationalism of the *Bulletin*, his presentation of the self-defined Australian voice as working class exactly concurs with developments in that journal. It is curious to note that in creating Dick as an authentic Australian character Boldrewood has employed the very same elision of class and the National that runs throughout Radical Nationalist criticism.
5. For reasons of space I have not been able to pursue this issue regarding the influence of feminism as a social movement and the way this affected the form of the writing of the 1890s, however this argument could be made in an analogous manner to that of class. In this sense the discourse of gender in the 'new' writing of the 1890s can be seen to contain both elements that were overtly feminist, such as seen in the work of Franklin and Baynton, which represented a break from previous approaches to

these issues by male and female writers, alongside a *fin de* siecle emphasis on instability and uncertainty.

6 In Furphy's second book *Rigby's Romance*, the socialist 'hero' of the book, Rigby, expresses this view even more explicitly:

> I tell you that from the present social system of pastoral Australia — a patriarchal despotism, tempered by Bryant and May — to actual lordship and peonage, is an easy transition, and the only thing that can prevent this broadening down is a vigorous rally of every man with a clear head and heart in the right place. (98)

Michael Wilding has commented on this passage that 'the uncritical reference to arson as a ready reprisal against the squatters — Bryant and May's matches "tempering" the "patriarchal despotism" — is as radical an account of the class wars as will be found in Australian fiction' (40). Wilding's central argument in this 1993 essay concerns the way this second book was originally part of the main text of *Such Is Life* and that it only became an additional, and thereby marginalised, book after A.G. Stephens called on Furphy to make substantial cuts in the book's length so as to make it publishable.

7 Wilding has noted similarly that the theme of the economic exploitation of one class by another is the basis of his attack on the 'colonial romance':

> The objection to these is not that they are the products of English writers, or that they are 'unrealistic', as commentators have tended to assume. The point is that these colonial romances are written from a remorselessly patrician or bourgeois standpoint. Furphy's literary critique is at the same time a radical political critique. (43)

WORKS CITED

Anderson, Benedict 1991, *Imagined Communities*, Verso, London.

Barnes, Julian 1990, *The Order Of Things: A Life of Joseph Furphy,* OUP, Melbourne 1990.

Boldrewood, Rolf [1888] 1947, *Robbery Under Arms,* Cassell, Melbourne.

Brissenden, Alan 1979, *Rolf Boldrewood,* OUP, Melbourne.

Buckridge, Pat 1988, 'Intellectual Authority and Critical Traditions in Australian Literature 1945–1975', *Intellectual Movements and Australian Society,* ed. Brian Head and James Walter, OUP, Melbourne.

Burgmann, Verity 1985, *In Our Time: Socialism and the Rise of Labour*, Allen & Unwin, Melbourne.

Cantrell, Leon 1977a, *The 1890s,* U of Queensland P, St Lucia.

——— 1977b, *Selected Writings of A.G.Stephens,* Angus & Robertson, Sydney.

Devlin-Glass, Francis et al (eds) 1991, *The Annotated Such Is Life,* OUP, Melbourne.

Eagleton, Terry 1995, 'The Flight to the Real', *Cultural Politics at the Fin De Siecle,* ed. S. Ledger and S. McCracken, Cambridge UP, Cambridge.

Foucault, Michel 1977, *Discipline and Punish,* Penguin, London.

——— 1989, 'Who Calls for Punishment', *Foucault Live,* ed. S Lotringer, Semiotexte, New York.

——— 1989, 'The Politics of Soviet Crime', *Foucault Live,* ed. S Lotringer, Semiotexte, New York.

Franklin, Miles [1901] 1990, *My Brilliant Career*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.

——— 1954, *Laughter, Not For A Cage: Notes on the Development of Australian Literature*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.

Furphy, Joseph [1903] 1991, *Such Is Life*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.

——— 1995, *Bushman and Bookworm: Letters of Joseph Furphy*, ed. John Barnes and Lois Hoffman, OUP, Melbourne.

Indyk, Ivor 1986, 'Reading Men Like Signboards: The Egalitarian Semiotic of *Such Is Life*', *Australian Literary Studies*, 12.3, pp. 303–315.

Klaus, H.G. 1977, *The Rise of Socialist Fiction*, Harvester, Brighton.

Lawson, Henry 1899, 'Pursuing Literature in Australia', *Henry Lawson: Autobiographical and Other Writings 1887–1922*, ed. Colin Roderick, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, pp. 109–115.

Lawson, Sylvia 1983, *The Archibald Paradox*, Penguin, Melbourne.

Ledger, Sally and Scott McCracken 1995, *Cultural Politics at the* Fin De Siecle, Cambridge UP, Cambridge.

Phillips, A.A. 1958, *The Australian Tradition*, F.W. Cheshire, Melbourne.

Stephens, A.G.(ed.) [1901] 1973, *The Bulletin Story Book*, (this edition re-titled as *The Old Bulletin Reader*) Landsdowne Press, Melbourne.

Ward, Russell 1958, *The Australian Legend*, OUP, Melbourne.

White, Richard 1981, *Inventing Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

Wilding, Michael 1993, *The Radical Tradition: Lawson, Furphy, Stead* (Colin Roderick Lectures 1993), Foundation for Studies in Australian Literature, James Cook University, Townsville.

Wilkes, G.A. 'The Eighteen Nineties', *Australian Literary Criticism*, ed. G. Johnston, OUP, Melbourne.

——— 1981, *The Stockyard and the Croquet Court*, Edward Arnold, Melbourne.

Williams, Raymond 1985, *Culture and Society*, Hogarth Press, London.