

‘Riverina rasped the scales from my eyes’: Riverina politics in Furphy’s *Such is Life*

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In response to a request from A.G. Stephens for some biographical notes for *Such is Life* publicity, Joseph Furphy implored him:

In casting these into form, for heaven’s sake don’t go into detail. *I* daren’t. For one thing, I was widely known as a crawling Conservative, till I met the Lord in the way to Damascus, and the usages of Riverina rasped the scales from my eyes. Even now, I can never live down the fact that I have been a Vic. squatter’s land-dummy. My old Dad—whom heaven assoilzie!—used to boast that no Liberal vote had ever been recorded by a son of his. In fact, politically and sociologically—“O lord! Thou knowest what a blanker I’ve been!” (14 January 1902) (*Letters* 84-5)

Furphy declares his own political shift from a Conservative in the 1860s to a Socialist in the 1890s and *Such is Life* records some of the conditions that instigated this shift in allegiance. It is set in the last year that he worked as a bullocky from Hay, extending a few months beyond his abandonment of bullock-driving. It is, in part, an examination of the experience that ‘rasped the scales’ from his eyes, leaving him a political radical. The political context for the novel is particular, rather than the generalised notion of a rising labour movement that we often ascribe to the 1890s. Read in this perspective the novel marks some of the important changes in attitudes to land in Australia.

John Barnes speculates that Furphy had dummied a selection in 1866 on the Campaspe River near Kyneton on behalf of a family friend, Charles Young. Young later became a minister in the Conservative government that dismissed the reform government of Graham Berry in 1881 (*OT* 80, Serle 9, ‘Charles Young’). As Minister for Water Supply he was still close enough to Furphy’s father to appoint him as government representative on the Echuca and Waranga Waterworks Trust (*OT* 104). For all Furphy’s self-mockery he was certainly not misrepresenting his father’s politics to Stephens, and probably not exaggerating his own

Conservative past. Both *Such is Life* and *Rigby's Romance* reference Graham Berry's ideas—Tregarvis, the selector who falls foul of the squatter McGregor in *Such is Life* is a Berryite, and in *Rigby's Romance* Steve Thompson declares himself 'a Berryite to the bone' in opposition to Collins's 'rotten' Conservatism (*RR* 70). Through the 1870s Berry and other liberal reformers battled against the entrenched power of the squatters whose property franchise allowed them to control the Victorian Upper House. The Furphys must have been aware of this political crisis which 'took on a violent class aspect' (Serle 8). It also marked the shift in Australian political attention 'from trade and the rights of property to the labour theory of value and the dignity and equality of manual work' (Croft *TC* 230).

The long-standing debate about the significance of the absence of shearers from *Such is Life* and the relative political merits of *Such is Life* and *Rigby's Romance* is often imbued with a retrospective understanding of Australian labour history (Phillips, Barnes 1956, Wilding). We now regard the formation of the labour movement in the wake of the shearers' strikes of the 1890s as the beginning of the struggle for wage justice and are likely to forget that, until the 1880s, liberal thinkers saw land ownership as the key to social justice. Though Furphy was revising *Such is Life* through the 1890s, his political perspective is still coloured by the dream of land ownership that drove Australian political debate from the 1860s. Migrants excluded from landowning in Scotland and Ireland, like Furphy's parents, were particularly inclined to see land as the source of future wealth and political power. It was a liberal individualist or even Conservative goal to become a member of the landowning class. Indeed, in *Such is Life* the new Irish immigrant, Rory O'Halloran, meeting Tom Collins in the 1860s is amazed that his ownership of a selection doesn't make him wealthy: 'At home iv a body hed twenty English acres o' good lay lan', at a reasonable rent—let alone a great farrum like thon—he needn't do a han's turn the year roun', beyant givin' ordhers' (62-3).

As Tom Collins's experience suggests, this dream had died by the 1880s. Beverley Kingston notes: 'The Australian dream of the 1860s, a small farm in a fertile valley, by the 1880s was a small cottage on its own block of land not too far from a suburban railway line' (269). Furphy's own life followed this shift in Australian aspiration—from the dream of a small landholding or an individual business to working for wages and, eventually, to a small cottage near the suburban railway line in Perth. His politics shifted accordingly from the Conservative position of the hopeful landholder to a member of the newly formed Labor Party.

Furphy's novel is set in an important transition period in attitudes to land and politics. It is precisely dated from the ninth of October, 1883 to 29 March 1884, just before the 1884 land legislation forced the Riverina squatters to open half their runs for a new round of selection, and to pay increased rents. At the same time, a series of droughts began to weaken their profits. Julian Croft has suggested that Tom Collins may be one of the inspectors checking on rental returns and stocking levels under the old Land Act ('Hay and Booligal' 155-6). His unemployment, then, would follow from the new legislative regime.

In the early 1880s, the Riverina squatters were potentates, controlling vast runs of land for nominal government rents. When new rents were being settled under the new Land Act, the Hay correspondent for the *Town and Country Journal* warned the Land Board not to believe their claims of impoverishment: 'the runholders in that province [Riverina] are uniformly wealthy and have palatial residences in Melbourne, residing there nine months out of the year' (7 Aug 1886). When Harold Mackenzie toured the area in the 1890s he still could describe James Tyson—'Hungry' Tyson to the *Bulletin* (Denholm)—as the owner of 'vast territorial possessions that would not disgrace the Czar of Russia himself; with millions of sheep and bullocks and horses that driven in single file might possibly put a girdle round the earth' (122).

In the Riverina Furphy encountered at first hand the political power of the squatters with their domination of the land at the expense of workers and itinerants. He travelled to several of these great runs while working as a bullocky out of Hay. In letters he mentions Mossgiel, Paddington, Coan Downs and Conoble stations, and he refers to Willandra Station in a *Bulletin* piece ('The Mythical Sundowner'). As well, he describes the track from Hay to Wilcannia, now known to tourists as the Long Paddock heritage trail, the road from Hay to Hillston and north to Nyngan. All these roads were bordered by massive squatting runs. The present Wealbah bridge on the Lachlan river must be close to where Furphy imagined Dead Man's Bend in Chapter IV, about a day's horse-ride from Booligal on the Booligal/Hillston road. It still marks the convergence of three pastoral properties.



Near Wealbah bridge where three stations meet, the tree line indicates the course of the Lachlan river (in flood, March 2012)

Until the 1890s union organisation in the Riverina was sporadic (Merritt). There were intermittent strikes by a range of workers during the 1870s and 1880s, usually over pay rates or conditions such as rations. Barnes tells us that Hay bullock drivers went on strike in 1880 over lower rates of cartage (*OT* 125), and it is possible that Furphy participated. There was a brief shearers' strike on Willandra Station in 1882 and another at Toorale in 1884. John Merritt suggests that the resolution of these strikes depended on the management skills of those in charge of the shearing, whether squatters or managers (76-88). But A. A. Phillips noted the absence of the shearers in *Such is Life* as an anomaly given Furphy's socialist commitment (20). More recently, Michael Wilding has deplored the excision of *Rigby's Romance* from the original *Such is Life* and the collusion of Australian literary critics in reading Furphy's subversive socialism out of the record (120-121). Certainly, *Such is Life* does not propose socialism directly. It is a novel based on experience rather than political theory—but it was a crucial experience for its author, the turning point of his political allegiance.

Such is Life places land monopoly rather than union action as its central political question, with the desperate need for grass for hungry animals as its metaphor. Certainly, in the context of European history of oppression of the landless, the novel's concentration on access to land and thereby livelihood might be considered as politically important as any interest in the rise of organised labour. The novel begins with the desperate efforts of the landless to access feed for their livestock but it gradually accumulates a broad perspective on the squatters' role in land alienation. While Tom Collins spends much of the novel in the company of boundary riders and bullockies, the squatters hold the key to social justice in the Riverina. Collins, the travelling public servant, has access to both the bullockies' camps and the squatter's or manager's office; but there are limits on his experience, as on his understanding. *Such is Life* never ventures inside the Holy of Holies of the squatter's homestead. Unlike the novels that Furphy despised and, indeed, almost all novels of colonial Australia which view the world from the homestead veranda, *Such is Life* observes and interprets the squatters mainly from a distance.

In Chapter IV Tom declares: 'Lacking generations of development, there is no typical squatter. Or, if you like, there are a thousand types. Hungry McIntyre is one type; Smythe—petty, genteel and parsimonious is another; Patriarchal Royce is another; Montgomery—kind, yet haughty and imperious—is another; Stewart is another' (164). He assures us there are another 995 types he might have cited, excluding the type represented by Sam Buckley in Henry Kingsley's *The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn* who we later learn was known as 'Hungry' Buckley of Baroona (209).

This chapter gives us the clearest consideration of the power of squatters as a group. As Collins rides from station to station attempting to accommodate Warrigal Alf's bullocks he gives us an account of the different policies on Mondunbarra, Yoongoolie and Avondale. The three boundary riders exemplify their lowly status in the order of each station, and a general incapacity for rebellion that has much to do with their foreign birth—the obstinate Englishman 'Sollicker' (Edward Stanley Vivian), the servile Chinese Paul Sam Young and the poverty-stricken Scot, Tom Armstrong. Yoongoolie is owned by the resident Roderick McIntyre, Avondale is managed by a new man, Wentworth St John Ffrench, for its absentee owner Captain Royce in Toorak, and Mondunbarra is owned in partnership between the absentee Donald McGregor (of Kew, we learn in *The Buln-buln and the Brolga* though that novel has him owning Avondale) and the timid, 'hysterically excitable' (154) Smythe who manages it with the help of his younger brother, Bert.

Their employment policies and attitudes to travellers indicate their morality most clearly. ‘Hungry’ McIntyre has married off Helena, the station bullock driver’s daughter and former housemaid, to Sollicker and is clearly the father of their child, young Roderick. Two bullock drivers have selected land within sight of McIntyre’s woolshed with the result that all bullocks are impounded immediately when found on his property: ‘there was nothing there but Highland pride and Highland eczema and hunger’ (153); the annotation suggests ‘eczema’ relates to ‘scabby’ and the employment of non-union labour, though unions were not well-organised in the Riverina at the time (399).

On Mondunbarra McGregor and Smythe’s meanness sinks even lower than McIntyre’s in that they employ Chinese boundary riders at presumably much cheaper rates. In Chapter I we learn that McGregor has employed Barefooted Bob and Bat to dummy land for him, in a manner so clever no one can understand it. The many stories of Chapter V include Bob’s account of McGregor outwitting the Berryite selector Tregarvis over the killing of a bullock—a ruse that ends with the incarceration of Tregarvis’s son for perjury and Tregarvis selling out to McGregor after being pursued ‘like the last dingo on a sheep station’(185). In *The Bulbuln and the Brolga*, Bob visits McGregor in Melbourne seeking a considerable amount (more than £ 150) in unpaid wages after Bat’s death. After confronting McGregor, he is put up in Kew and encouraged to buy new city clothes and visit the theatre. But McGregor will not allow Bob to take one of the servant girls to the opera with him: ‘Fearful strict, God-fearing man, he is’ (BB 44). Clearly McGregor’s sexual scruples are greater than his concern for honest business deals. Bob declares that he’s never been a ‘master’s man’ (BB 40), but agrees to head off for Queensland to scout out yet more land on behalf of McGregor. (In keeping with the political shifts of the times, Collins tells us that Bob’s loyalty to ‘Capitalism and McGregor’ shifted in the 1890s to ‘the Queensland strike leaders and Socialism-in-our-own-time’ (BB 102).) It is interesting that the epithet ‘Hungry’ isn’t applied to McGregor, perhaps because his cunning is more evident than his greed. He has outwitted partners in the past, and is expected to consume Smythe as well (SL 184). As Bob tells us in *Such is Life*, ‘he goes-in for big things an’ little things, an’ he goes-in to win, an’ he wins; an’ all he wins is Donal’ McGregor’s. Comes-out a bow constructor’ (184).

On Avondale new employment is a rare event as Captain Royce prefers a patriarchal system where no faithful retainer can ever leave, harking back to a feudal notion of loyalty to property owners. But this idea of lifelong fealty does not apply to Royce’s own loyalty to managers; he’s sacked Angus Cameron (variously Cochrane) for failing to bring in an

adequate wool cheque in the previous season. Royce's idea of gentlemanliness is simply to move any animal found trespassing across to the other stations, thus preserving his men from the 'dirty' work of impounding them.

But the most telling moment in Chapter IV is the arrival of Stewart of Kooltopa. Collins tells us, 'Stewart, it must be admitted, was no gentleman' (164). His acceptance of the 'isocratic principle' denies him this title: 'For there is no such thing as a democratic gentleman' (164). While we might see as gentlemanly his willingness to share his food and wine with Tom Collins and Bob Stirling, the swagman they meet on the way—he politely offers the single glass to Tom, then Bob before drinking from it himself—this is clearly isocratic Christianity rather than good manners. Stewart deplores Tom's deceit of a Scotsman, and expresses the squatters' general contempt for Warrigal Alf, telling the story of Alf shooting a boundary rider on Mirrabooka: 'think of the cold-blooded calculation and d—d unscrupulousness of Morris. He's a man to be avoided, Collins' (173). Nevertheless, by the end of their gossip, Stewart has accepted his duty to look after both Warrigal Alf and Bob, providentially put in his way for this purpose.

By some miracle, Stewart is both Christian and rich. He's astute in business but, most of all, his 'mana' never failed. But we learn that the reason for Stewart's presence on the track is the need to travel north to Queensland to take up more land. He's sold Kooltopa after every poor traveller on the Riverina had gathered there to eat his grass. He has been Christian to the letter in his treatment of these interlopers—acting in precisely the opposite way to the squatters in the earlier part of the chapter. As a result they've lingered, enjoying a kind of holiday, and several have selected the best parts of his run. When he tours his Mia Mia paddock he saw:

five miles of wagons, wagonettes, spring-carts, buggies, tents, women, children, dogs, cooking utensils and masculine laundry. He saw fellows patching tarpaulins, mending harness, making yokes, plating whips, fishing, pig-hunting, reading Ouida, yarning round fires, or trying to invent some new form of gambling; but he only saw their backs, and they didn't see him at all. He took a tour round the paddock, and found a racecourse duly laid out in a suitable place with a few fellows training their bits of stuff for a coming event. Others were duck-shooting in the swamps, and others after turkeys on the plains, whilst a few diverted themselves by coursing rabbits on the sand-hills. (166)

But the signal element of Stewart's Christianity is his interpretation of this invasion as 'a clinching argument against land-monopoly' (167). His very democracy is the mark of his Christianity.

At the same time readers will note that Stewart, now in his sixties, is driving north to start again, presumably by alienating more land from its Indigenous people. In Chapter VI, Collins suggests that Stewart's 'dirty-flash' son is unlikely to share his Christian attitude to staff (250). Stewart's admirable personal charity offers no future security to the oppressed. If all the squatters adopted Stewart's kindly concern for his fellows, would their mana, too, be utterly reliable? Or would the whole system of pastoralism end in a land free-for-all? The game is unjust—the land has been alienated in a land-grab with the grabbers determined to keep their spoils. The selection acts have been abused in the interests of keeping the runs large, and the climate seems to insist that there is only room for a few. The whole economic system of the Riverina is based on the success of these runs. But, as Furphy demonstrates, this is an attempt to replicate the landowning practices of Europe, with large landholders practising various benign or cruel practices on their servants and any travellers. When an individual, like Stewart, attempts to practice a more democratic form of management he is forced to abandon his land.

There is a further squatter to consider—Montgomery, the Australian-born managing partner of Runnymede, the central squatting run of the novel. Runnymede is offered as a prime example of a well-managed pastoral run, with the firm but fair Montgomery in charge. Yet the novel demonstrates that it operates successfully only by tolerating a degree of rule-breaking and social assertion. Privilege is under constant challenge there. As Collins approaches Runnymede in Chapter VI, he sets up an argument about the inevitable social revolution that will bring a political one:

The Folk-lore of the Riverina is rich in variations of a mythus, pointing to the David-and-Goliath combat between a quiet wage-slave and a domineering squatter, in the brave days of old. With one solitary exception, each station from the Murray to the Darling claims and holds this legend as its own. On Kooltopa alone, the tables are turned, and the amiable Stewart makes a holy show of the truculent rouse-about. (204)

Furphy is not offering us the means of revolution, just an assurance of its inevitability. It is education, the demolishing of ignorance, that leads to democracy. At the heart of this social

revolution is a growth in self-opinion that comes with knowledge: ‘between the self-valuation of the latter-day squatter and that of his contemporary wage-slave, there is very little to choose. Hence the toe of the blucher treads on the heel of the tan boot, and galls its stitches’ (205). The employees on Runnymede proceed to demonstrate some of this heel-treading, despite the station’s orderly separation of the classes. While Collins swims in the waterhole and lazes around waiting for instructions he observes a series of deceits and disruptions to the station’s good order: Ida backchats Mrs Beaudesart in a comic scene of mutual womanly outrage; Moriarty, the storekeeper, tries Mrs Beaudesart’s approach out on Toby the ‘half-caste’, only to be ridiculed; Martin, a former station owner, insists on his rights to be fed at the narangies hut though he’s sunk to boundary rider level. At night, the humble grafter, Priestley, is grazing his team in the cemetery, while the saddler, Joseph Pawsome, sets his horses up in the stables to feed on the station hay. Priestley also stands up to Montgomery’s upper class English guest, Folkestone, in an enjoyable confrontation between bullying snobbery and poverty driven to its limits.

Montgomery has the only direct speaking role for a squatter in the novel apart from Stewart (if we discount Smythe’s minor appearance at the end of Chapter V). He is the one who set Mrs Beaudesart onto Collins by introducing him years before as the lineal descendant of Commander David Collins R.N. (the note tells us Governor Collins only had illegitimate children) revealing a kind of humour close to Collins’s own. And he has trouble keeping a straight face when Moriarty explains the fabrication of the backfiring scandal intended to turn Mrs Beaudesart off Collins. ‘Montgomery never laughs’ in front of his men, but we have ample evidence of his sense of humour (289).

His finest moment is the confrontation with Priestley. Like Stewart, Montgomery is quite prepared to enjoy Collins’s loquaciousness, lighting his pipe and settling in to ‘flagitious procrastination of his managerial duties while I remained a butt for his ill-timed chaff’ (237). But the discovery of Priestley sneaking across the run with his bullocks brings out his eloquent anger. Even here, Collins’s adjustment of Shakespeare to plead that ‘It is noble to have a squatter’s strength, but tyrannous to use it like a squatter’ (239) brings ‘something like a smile’ to Montgomery’s face. It is only the intervention of Folkestone (‘a gentleman by the grace of God and the flunkeyism of man’) that leads to trouble, giving Collins the opportunity to describe Montgomery as a ‘gentleman, but only by virtue of his position’ (239). That is, if Montgomery wasn’t a squatter he wouldn’t be a gentleman, and might even share some democratic ideas.

Like the other creatures at the bottom of the Runnymede hierarchy Priestley argues back; he ‘had never been taught to order himself lowly and reverently to all his betters’ (238). When Folkestone offers to thump him, Montgomery acts to ensure Priestley’s safe passage through the run by assigning Nelson as escort, indicating by the bye, that he’s heard a word for word account of Nelson’s opinion over breakfast that the boss ‘ought to spring a bit in a season like this’(242). He knows Nelson will let Priestley feed his animals across the run, but because he’s a ‘white man’ he’ll let that pass without comment (243).

Chapter VI creates a wonderful sense of an active society on Runnymede, encompassing a wide range of characters and several dramatic (rather than the more commonly narrated) scenes. Some of this dramatic sense is instigated by the two most clearly fictional characters in the novel—Mrs Beaudesart (the progeny of one of Kingsley’s fictional characters) and Folkestone, the upper-class Englishman gaining colonial experience (a stock figure in novels by Franklin, Cambridge and many others). These two serve as foils for the irreverent lower classes, and allow Furphy to demonstrate the isocratic principle in action.

The two squatters, Stewart and Montgomery, demonstrate Thompson’s opinion in *Rigby’s Romance* that, ‘Most of the squatters are fine, straight men—a lot better than we are, if it comes to that’ (RR 113). And the fluidity and ambition of the lower orders to become squatters is hinted at in Collins’s remark to Thompson in that novel: ‘You’ll be a man of acres—like Binney, over there—with a good-natured toleration for the lower classes’ (RR 70). Henry Lawson’s poem ‘Middleton’s Rouseabout’ supports Furphy’s argument about the fluidity of class, though Andy the rouseabout presents a kind of insolent ignorance rather than democracy in action. Or, as Furphy puts it: ‘the toe of the blucher treads on the heel of the tan boot’ (205). The squatters cannot keep themselves as a class apart from the men who work for them. In *Such is Life*, there is a boundary rider, Bendigo Bill, determined to buy the property from the boss, and there is a boundary rider, Martin, who once was a squatter. Furphy’s characters accord with Lawson’s suggestion that the rouseabout may be no more enlightened than the squatter.

Furphy clearly likes Stewart and Montgomery, and Collins has a particularly sociable relationship with them, quoting and misquoting Shakespeare for their entertainment. This novelist prefers not to portray outright villainy, so the McGregors and McIntyres are kept at a distance with plenty of derisive wit. Yet, whether Christian, ‘white man’ or ‘boa constrictor’ the squatters have a duty to make profits from the land; their individual ethics can make little

difference in a system based on forms of land theft. Furphy never falls into the cliché of the ‘good’ worker and the ‘evil’ boss. From the novel’s beginning we encounter the thieving red-haired galoot Bum, learn about Mosey Price’s various sharp practices—and we are, after all, among a group of grass-stealers, horse and bullock thieves, haystack burners, boat sinkers, fence breakers, horse-race cheats. Thompson represents a fine moral compass, though based on superstitious notions of providential revenge. Our narrator himself proves an accomplished liar and trickster though we understand his fundamental goodwill and charity. The novel maintains its good humour, driven, perhaps, by the author’s optimism about the inevitability of socialist democracy in Australia.

Furphy’s letters and his revisions to *Rigby’s Romance* confirm his own conversion to a socialist and a Christian conviction—though he shifted further away from Christianity in his last years, towards Theosophy—what Barnes calls a ‘melancholy transcendentalism’ (*OT* 382). His later letters declare his determination not to make or keep money and his belief that thrift was a sin against Christianity, though it seems to be a sin that was not difficult to resist in his case. Jefferson Rigby’s expatiations, presumably expanded from the original Chapter V, provide the logic behind such a determination. Rigby classifies socialism as a political form of Christianity: ‘Socialism, of course, simply aims at realising the Christian’s provision, per medium of an endowment policy endorsed by the whole community’ (*RR* 164). And Rigby’s sermons on the subject are allowed to go on so long that it would be difficult to maintain that Furphy did not agree with him, whatever half-hearted objections Collins and Rigby’s other listeners may make.

As late as March 1902, Furphy could write to A. G. Stephens:

But I will *not* swim with the stream—with any stream. Partly because Pessimism and Scepticism are the correct capers just now, I am an Optimist and a Christian—just as I am a Biological Agnostic because Darwinism is unduly boomed.

Optimistic, in the sense that I see in the future a type of humanity further above present attainment than the latter is above conceivable savagery. Christian, inasmuch as I believe Jesus (or His inventor) to have given us a Square, which obviates any necessity for working out a mathematical problem when we wish to gauge the Absolute Morality (or Ultimate Expediency)—in a word, the

Squareness—of this or that action. Christian, also, in the sense that I'm prepared to give the world every dam tap of work that is in me, whilst leaving to posterity the expense of digging my grave. (*Letters* 95)

Furphy's Christianity is an ethical standard, devoid of any belief in an afterlife or even in a literal Christ. He became increasingly devoted to a kind of monastic sainthood after the publication of *Such is Life*. Certainly, he did work till he dropped without accumulating any funds, just as he promised. Yet he was a novelist, not a political agitator or a religious leader—and *Such is Life*, in particular, complicates any clear classification as a Christian Socialist writer. In addition, Rigby's eloquent discursion on the morality and ethics of State Socialism is gently undercut in the second last chapter of *Rigby's Romance* when an exhausted Tom rides into Deniliquin to find that the teenage Sam has joined Rigby in his socialist agitation. Sam is a ludicrous figure in an oversized ulster over his 'scanty' Echuca Juniors football uniform (250), and Tom is disconcerted to discover that the avid listener to older men's love stories already has a wife. With his customary enthusiasm Sam, 'the petrel of State Socialism' (259), believes that it will only take ten years 'at the outside' to bring the revolution, especially once 'the man with the rifle' joins them (256). Christianity seems to have disappeared from the equation as Sam imagines a violent revolution. Given that *Rigby's Romance* was finally published as a serial in 1905-6 this has a certain prescience for twentieth-century socialism.

Rigby espouses socialism with a logic that convinces us that it expresses the author's views. Collins, on the other hand, returning destitute from an attempt to round up animals for sale, is ready to take the job that Rigby has lost because of his reputation as an 'agitator'. Collins remains a more politically conservative character, more alert to the exigencies of practical survival, than the idealistic Rigby or enthusiastic Sam.

The politics of these novels is complicated by their comic interest in human failure and, perhaps, by Furphy's determined optimism. Furphy's approach to the novel, with its attempt to strip falsity from the narrative, and a desire to contain everything that is known—at least, by the novelist—demonstrates his particular political conviction that knowledge is a source of freedom, that the novelist should let the reader learn from the multiple narrative and character examples before her. His comedy often rests on the impossibility of complete, or even sufficient, knowledge—on the perpetual gap between human aspiration and ability. But the

subject matter of *Such is Life*—the ownership of property that should belong to all—is as political as any study of unionism might have been.

Merritt explains that land legislation eventually broke up the large Riverina runs so that, with drought, rabbits and disease, its Golden Age of Squatting was over by 1911. Of the two options predicated by Collins—that ‘the anachronistic tradition must make suicidal concessions, or the better-class people must drown all plebeian Australian males in infancy and fill the vacancy with Asiatics’ (205-6) the first came to pass in the form of state intervention and natural causes. In the end, Riverina squatters did not set up an aristocracy on the European model that would provide generations of families with millions of dollars gleaned from the land while others starved.

In 2012 the Riverina was sparsely populated, with cattle the main livestock and more evidence of feral goats, pigs and rabbits than sheep. Towards the end of the year, the Black family sold Uardry Station and the new owner announced that it would no longer operate as a merino stud (‘End of an era’). Yanga Station, also once owned by the Black family and situated on a beautiful lake outside Balranald, offers a residual insight into this squatting history. Its homestead was the exclusive province of its absentee owners and resident manager, and is surrounded by outhouses providing a hierarchy of accommodation like Runnymede. Its great shearing shed sits on the banks of the Murrumbidgee, ten kilometres from the house, to provide access to the long-vanished river transport. In 2005, after years of drought had kept the lake empty, the Blacks sold the property to the National Parks and Wildlife Service allowing access to land that had been alienated from the public for 150 years.



Accommodation outbuildings on Yanga station, March 2012

Writing in the 1890s, Furphy could still allow Tom Collins to propose that soil fertility would be improved by the pounding of cloven-hooved animals (*SL* 67) and he could imagine that squatters would continue to reap the wealth of the land for years to come. We now know that this was not the case (Gammage 103-108), and that the Riverina could not sustain the numbers of livestock loosed upon it by greedy settlers, let alone the rabbits and other introduced feral animals and diseases (Waterhouse 73-74).

Land rights no longer figure in the political concerns of European-descended Australians who are more likely to work for wages or in business, and who do not see land as the primary source of wealth. After the cycle of European dispossession, exploitation and despoiling of the land, the phrase 'land rights' has become associated exclusively with the rights of Indigenous people to reclaim their land (as Toby asserts: 'Why, properly speaking, I own this here (adj.) country, as far as the eye can reach' (*SL* 292)). The non-Indigenous radical focus on wage and social justice in the twentieth century may erase memories of the time when access to land was the most urgent political issue for most Australians. *Such is Life* examines

the moment when such attitudes began to shift, the moment when Furphy's own political allegiances changed.

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