

**Roger Osborne, *The Life of Such Is Life: A Cultural History of an Australian Classic*
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Roger Osborne's *The Life of Such Is Life* lives up to its title. After finishing this book, it's hard to disagree with that descriptor of Furphy's novel. It is alive. That inert object we have on our bookshelves is a living entity, and possibly more than most literary texts, the history of the origin of that physical text shows many similarities to the evolution of a species under selective pressure, to use some of the terminology Furphy would have been familiar with from his reading of Darwin. Moreover, for us in the twenty-first century, hypersensitive to the insights of ecology, we can see that the physical evolution of the printed text depended on the physical ecologies of the publishing and printing industries of Australia, Great Britain, and the United States of America, as well as the metaphysical environment of the "ecology of minds" (to use Gregory Bateson's term) of the readers whose recorded and unrecorded readings over the past 120 years have created the text(s) (we have to include *Rigby's Romance* and *The Buln-buln and the Brolga*) as we know them today. Osborne gives us a comprehensive account of the physical and metaphysical milieux which produced the phenomenon of Furphy's grand opus in both its trinitarian and singular manifestations. If that sounds somewhat theological, it might not be out of place, given the number of claims that *Such Is Life* is our foundational literary narrative, akin to *Don Quixote* or *Moby Dick*, claims that surface regularly in the various attempts to keep *Such Is Life* in print, as Osborne shows.

Given this status, it's not surprising that its textual history should be of interest, but there are not many novels that require the depth of annotation and textual apparatus as *Such Is Life* does, *pace* works such as *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, or more recently, *Infinite Jest*. For anyone not acquainted with the evolution of *Such Is Life* as it exists today, Osborne's book is the most complete and accessible way of getting one's head around its origins. The original 1897 manuscript of *Such Is Life* is "*Such Is Life, Jim*, but not as we know it"—a portmanteau containing the present *Such Is Life*, *Rigby's Romance*, and *The Buln-bulb and the Brolga*, some short stories, and material that exists nowhere else. That manuscript was typed out in 1898 by Furphy, with changes made in the process, and submitted to the *Bulletin*, which accepted it, but asked for radical changes. The second typescript was prepared by Furphy with major changes, and the 1903 edition was set from it. None of this typescript survives, while fragments of the earlier versions do. From there on, the printed version has its own history, in an abridgement in 1937, the 1903 edition reset in 1944, and subsequent printings have either been of the 1903 or the 1944 editions. The problem then facing the textual editor is—can the original 1897 *Such Is Life* in its full more than a quarter-of-a-million words' glory be brought back to life for the benefit of modern readers? Then it might be possible to see if Furphy's description of it in his accompanying letter to the *Bulletin* that "The plan of the book is not like any other that I know of . . ." is justified. I think I sense it might have been, but Osborne's book makes me realise the futility of the process of recreating it. What we have is the "mutilated" (Furphy's word) version, and it is that which has developed its own ecology in the Australian and wider bibliosphere.

I've argued in the past, that, from surviving evidence, the 1897 *Such Is Life* would have been a very different novel—more an "urban (country town) comedy of manners" than a bush epic; and more concerned with art and artifice, with romance and personal relationships, than the current version which was so lionised by left-wing groups in the 1940s and 1950s for its realistic representations of the rural working poor. Many of these issues are addressed by Osborne in the very fine Introduction. Drawing on Paul Eggert's work and writings, Osborne explores the intricacies of the relationships between writer, editor, and reader, and their

implications for Furphy's work. Much like the conundrum of Quantum physical reality, the books exist as a field (or wave) of potentialities which collapses into a point of sensed reality when they are read. That argument is well made in the Introduction when Osborne positions himself to answer the call from the Academy Edition of Australian Literature for a critical edition of *Such Is Life*. After reviewing what would be involved in a critical edition, he ends up with a conclusion which many less rigorous readers have reached "Where and what the (adj. sheol) is Joseph Furphy's *Such Is Life* anyway?" At the end of the present work Osborne does give an answer: it is in the repository of resources, the field which surrounds the work, "the network of fellow readers," which when marshalled together "afford the observant reader a fair glimpse of the work—and themselves—as they read." To arrive at this point, though, the repository needs to be constructed, both in digital resources and in the print of a book such as the one under review. Perhaps this is a better way of constructing an ever-evolving textual edition of a work, and Osborne needs to be congratulated on the labour he has spent on the digital resources offered in the Joseph Furphy Digital Archive and Tom Collins and Company.

The Academy Edition of *Such Is Life* did not happen, not only because of the inherent difficulties of the project, but also because of its cost and the decrease in research funds over the past fifteen years. Osborne canvasses the concern that such a costly volume, had it occurred, would have had a very small audience indeed, and given that many copies of non-critical editions of *Such Is Life* grace Australian bookshelves unread, it does seem an indulgence, despite Paul Eggert's defence of such editions as enriching the reading experience and providing greater cultural depth to important national literary works, as, I might add, the "Higher Criticism" of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries did for the Bible, in its attempt to show the "world behind the text." Happily, we still have Osborne's book, with its running commentary on the textual resources and cruces in Furphy's work, as well as the digital resources. If anyone finds themselves "Unemployed at last" and with idle hands, they will have plenty of accessible resources to make their own individual edition of the 1897 *Such Is Life*, as far as that is possible.

Novels such as *Such Is Life*, and Furphy's work in general, attract a certain class of reader, just as *Finnegans Wake* has done, not as a mark of intellectual one-upmanship, but for the genuine attraction of an object that satisfies extended contemplation. Such works do not appeal to everyone, as I know from long experience of reluctant students who found plodding their way through Furphy's elaborate prose and arcane interests quite alienating. I am sure they would find it bewildering that so much labour over the past 120 years has gone into commenting on and promoting it. In Osborne's book we can see that the reasons for *Such Is Life*'s "fatal attraction" changed from period to period. I'm not sure any of the early readers (say to the 1940s) really recognised the extent of the narrative games and hidden jokes in the text (and how many more are there still to be found?), and were content to enjoy the yarns, the dialogue, the description of rural life in the 1880s, the philosophising, and socialist preaching. Amazingly, whatever the cultural preoccupations of the times—socialist agitation, national identity, close reading of the text as cultural icon, ethical concerns, gender, or race, there has been much to be found in Furphy's writings. For an autodidact, with limited education, but a profound knowledge of Shakespeare and the Bible, and an intense intellectual curiosity, Furphy's achievement in writing the quarter-of-a-million words of his "magnum opus" (his words) in 1896–97 while employed in his brother's foundry, unlike his superannuated or sacked alter ego Tom Collins, was a remarkable feat, and one of the high points of Australia's late-nineteenth-century literary culture.

Who did he write it for? The dedication to *Such Is Life* is clear: "For Australia"—a new nation on the cusp of becoming a federated entity, and the novel is a condensation of many of the forces at work in the cultural milieu of the time. In order to understand that, and to understand where we have come from as a nation, we need the combined resources of the

annotated editions of Furphy's work, and the textual resources assembled in Osborne's book and the digital resources he has created. A lot of work has gone into these achievements, and we are the richer for them. The next time I read *Such Is Life* it will be a different and yet more satisfying experience for all that labour. Osborne's book is indeed a gift, and a worthy reply to the challenge of Tom Collin's final words in the novel that it is a tale: "signifying-nothing."

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