

Joseph Furphy and the Aims of Education



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Britain's nineteenth century Australian colonies had little time for the concerns of European high culture. Indifference to liberal education was even more marked on the Left than the Right of Australian politics. Yet Joseph Furphy, author of *Such Is Life*, perhaps the most important Australian fiction written during the nineteenth century and regarded for most of the twentieth century as, together with Henry Lawson, the founder of Australian radical nationalism, valued not only practical skills gained from experiences of working life but also liberal knowledge gained from wide reading.¹ Although Furphy's novels rarely describe formal schooling, they probe deeply into fundamental educational issues, most notably into which kinds of knowledge are of most value and how such knowledge can best be gained. This article examines how Furphy dealt with the difficulties of combining instrumental and liberal aims in education.

Furphy's Importance

Within the Australian Left for most of the twentieth century, the 1890s was the decade most frequently thought to have displayed 'traditional' labour values. Central figures include William Guthrie Spence, William Lane, Henry Lawson, and Joseph Furphy. Australian intellectuals of the Left especially esteemed Furphy, a bullock drover who became a frequent contributor to the radical Sydney journal, *The Bulletin*, under the pen-names of Warrigal Jack and, more famously, Tom Collins.

Miles Franklin, for many years the leading woman writer on the Australian Left, and Kate Baker wrote, in 1944, 'By his feeling for it [*Such Is Life*], any literary Australian betrays whether he lives in a state of Australian grace or in one of mere mental colonialism'.² Miles Franklin described his best work, *Such Is Life*, as 'so much more than a novel ... it is our *Don Quixote*, our *Les Miserables*, our *Moby Dick*, our *Vanity Fair*'. Franklin and Baker praised Furphy because in his

novels 'the doctrine of State Socialism and the importance of the common man are forcefully promulgated' and enthused that Furphy's 'creed was the brotherhood of men, as taught by Christ, and to be put into effect by State Socialism'.³ Vance Palmer, a leading Left-wing novelist and critic, praised Furphy's 'robust egalitarianism', radical populism, and anti-authoritarianism, and found in Furphy's bullockies 'a passion for social equality' among 'the men who pioneered unionism'.⁴ Lloyd Ross, son of the proprietor of the Broken Hill *Barrier Truth*, who first published Furphy's *Rigby's Romance*, thought its strength was that 'the ethical case for socialism is blended with the rich deep humour of an open-air Australian': it was 'propaganda for socialism woven into a series of short stories'.⁵ Ian Turner, an influential Marxist critic, praised Furphy for his dedication to the revolutionary proletariat and the socialist future, and his belief that 'the individual is powerless to determine his own destiny', since 'collective humanity holds the key to the kingdom of God on earth'.⁶ J. K. Ewers, a prolific left-wing author, commended Furphy, not only as a socialist and a republican, but as an advocate of 'the 'common humanity of the Slav and the Mongol'.⁷

When the radical journal *Meanjin* first appeared in 1940, it regularly featured 'Letters to Tom Collins'. Contributors included Kate Baker, Nettie Palmer, Kylie Tennant, Jim Devaney, James Duhig, John McKellar and Manning Clark, later to become the historian most celebrated on the Australian Left. In 1943 Manning Clark criticised Furphy for failing during his many years on the track to notice the vile effects of the presence of the White Man on the land: 'how he treated her as a harlot, frequently raped her for her wealth—wool, gold, wheat'. The wretched colonists had stuck their spades into Mother Earth and grazed their sheep on her! However, Clark forgave Furphy because he and Henry Lawson had 'almost canonised the word "mate"'.⁸ When the Marxist journal *Overland* appeared in 1954, it took, and retains as its motto, Furphy's self description: 'temper democratic, bias Australian'. There can be no doubt in Furphy's high standing on the Australian Left.

Furphy's Own Education

Furphy's parents, Judith and Samuel, were recent Protestant immigrants from Ulster, and before that their families came

from Scotland. After their arrival in Melbourne in 1841, they provided their children with a classic example of persistence in the face of adversity: Judith bore eleven children, eight of whom survived to adulthood and all succeeded well in life. Samuel worked as a labourer for others for several years before becoming a farmer, storekeeper and a pillar of his local community. Both parents were devoutly religious and strong Sabbatarians but far less sectarian than many of their co-religionists.

The Furphys lived in Yering, a pioneer settlement about twenty-five kilometres to the north-east of Melbourne, for the first seven years of Joseph's life. As Yering had no school, Joseph and his siblings were taught by their mother, one of whose brothers had been a teacher in Armagh. Furphy's first biographer described Judith Furphy as 'a born teacher' and claimed that 'at seven years of age Joseph Furphy could recite quite fluently pages of Shakespeare and chapters of the Bible'.⁹ At that time there was little else to read in the Furphy household, but they accumulated more books over the years. Kate Baker, a young schoolmistress who came to board with them in 1886, noted that alongside the Bible and Shakespeare stood 'Emerson, Mark Twain, Bret Harte, *The Flora and Fauna of Victoria* by Baron Von Mueller; but works of theology predominated ...'.¹⁰ Samuel Furphy had a systematic interest in botany and collected local specimens of flora for the distinguished German-born naturalist Von Mueller. Samuel tried to ensure that his children were practical as well as highly literate: the boys helped on the farm from an early age and, when he set up as a shoemaker, waxed the leather and carried out other menial jobs. Their other children had their parents' practicality in full measure, especially their oldest son John who became a successful manufacturer and pious orthodox Christian in Shepparton, a more substantial town. It was through John that the family name first passed into Australian folklore when his water carriers became centres of gossip among soldiers on battle fronts of the First World War.

In 1851 Samuel and Judith Furphy moved to Kangaroo Ground, a few kilometres away from Yering. There Scottish and Ulster immigrants soon afterwards opened a school which Samuel may have helped to build and whose first pupils included Joseph. This Presbyterian, or Church of Scotland,

school was very modest in size, consisting, apart from outside 'dunnies' (toilets), of a 40 by 20 foot unlined slab hut which served as a church on Sunday and a schoolmaster's residence throughout the week, as well as a school. Fees charged ranged between five and ten shillings a quarter, according to the age of the child, and evidently no family in the district was unable to pay. The schoolmaster was Andrew Ross, an Edinburgh man who stayed at his post during the 1851 gold rush when most teachers joined other male citizens in rushing off to the diggings. Ross later wrote a valuable account of the history of Kangaroo Ground. In his 1851 report a young school inspector, Cambridge graduate Hugh Childers, who was later auditor-general of Victoria and after his return to England a leading Liberal parliamentarian and Chancellor of the Exchequer, noted 'a great want of books', but attendance was good—20 out of 24 pupils on an unannounced inspectorial visit—and he was impressed by Ross's enthusiasm for learning. The lack of books was soon made good and in 1862 James Bonwick, later a prominent historian of colonial Australia but then employed as a school inspector, found Kangaroo Ground 'a moral oasis as well as a physical one', noting that 'a well assorted library is attached to the school'.¹¹

Meanwhile, the Furphy family had moved in 1852, to Kyneton, half way between Melbourne and the goldfields around Bendigo. At Kyneton the Furphy children first attended the only school available, a private school based on the doctrines of the Church of England. This school, attended then by some 70 children, enjoyed 'the patronage' of the Victorian Board of Denominational Education but received no grant from it and could not afford to pay for a qualified teacher. Kyneton Orangemen and Ribbonmen were waging sectarian struggles just as if they had never left Ireland and it was not until 1856 that a National School, based on the Irish National system, opened.¹²

After much wrangling, first, over whether a National School should be opened at all and, later over who should become its schoolmaster, the Board of Local Patrons appointed Robert Begg, a Scottish Congregationalist and zealous religious controversialist. Begg was a flogger and, although he had a genuine ability as a tenor and music teacher, his influence may have contributed to the indifference to music displayed by Tom Collins. Begg was recaptured by Furphy as 'the dominie'

in *The Buln-Buln and the Brolga*, but more informative is a report on Begg's teaching written in 1856 by A. B. Orbelar, yet another distinguished school inspector. Orbelar provides an insight into the workings of a 'monitorial school' in which the sole teacher gave information from time to time to monitors aged twelve or thirteen, each of whom then passed the information on to a group of younger children. Orbelar noted that in less than four and a half hours Begg caned 26 pupils, some severely, but that the chastisement had little effect and no attention was paid to the master's frequent calls for silence. After one boy was caned on the hand for having failed to learn the task set for the class, he complained to Begg that he had been absent when it was set. Begg's reply was, 'Then you should have not have held out your hand'. Children read from books in a noise which ensured that neither Begg nor Orbelar could tell whether the passages were repeated with any degree of accuracy. Whilst this class was thus engaged, several were 'all at play' and one was 'disputing the authority of the monitor'. Orbelar noted that 'during the morning the 1st and 2nd classes had no lessons whatever'.¹³ Joseph Furphy was aged fourteen at this time and was very likely present during Orbelar's visit. Begg was dismissed from his post in the National School in 1857, but immediately opened a rival school in the Independent (Congregationalist) Chapel and somehow persuaded many parents of his former pupils to support his new venture.

Educational Ideas

Educational ideas may be divided into five clusters, each defined by its own priorities in aims and values. Two of these clusters, the instrumental and the transcendental, preceded the other three by countless generations. Instrumentalism is here defined as education which gives its priorities to protection or advancement of whatever may be thought to be in the best interests of an existing society and/or to equipping individuals to succeed in that society; these two priorities may themselves, of course, conflict, since success by some in their aims and ambitions may well be regarded by others as detrimental to social equilibrium. Transcendental education is here defined as giving priority to the promotion of religious beliefs and/or to fostering the spiritual insights of children. The other three clusters of educational ideas, liberal, reconstructionist and

child-centred only emerge in 'open societies'. The priorities of liberal, reconstructionist and child-centred educational ideas are, respectively, development of the mind, transformation of society as it exists to one of a significantly different and supposedly better character, and concern for the interests of children, whether individually or as a group with supposedly common interests.¹⁴

These five clusters are thus separated from each other by offering fundamentally irreconcilable answers to essentially contestable educational questions. Contestability means that there is no existing or conceivable body of empirical evidence which must persuade thoughtful and experienced persons who adhere to one cluster that they are mistaken in their basic priorities, although it can frequently be demonstrated that particular varieties within a cluster fail and must fail to achieve their stated ends. What was Furphy's position in respect of these competing educational ideas?

Transcendental Education

Furphy's experience of sectarianism at Kyneton powerfully influenced his later thinking. Tom Collins describes the importation of Orangeism as the equivalent for Australian men of hydrophobia for dogs and glanders for horse.¹⁵ On the Roman Catholic side, the religious hatred burning within Rory O'Halloran, who is an incompetent bushman but usually mild and long-suffering, leads him to forbid his Protestant wife to accompany him to Hay for their daughter's Roman Catholic burial in consecrated ground.¹⁶

Although the sonorous tones of the Authorised Version and extensive references to Biblical stories were fully integrated into Furphy's novels, this was usually accomplished in ways likely to disturb conventional Christians. In *Such Is Life* the ribald bullocky Dixon, who only reads the bible because it was all he could get in a swap for a sensationalist novel, becomes fascinated by 'the blaggard places in the Bible' and comments on Exodus and other texts in the satirical vein Furphy derived from Tom Paine. Yet Furphy was a sincere Christian and served as a lay preacher in one of the Churches of Christ. His socialism was in some ways an attempt to adapt the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount to social organisation.

Furphy favoured education about but not in religion. He held that Bible reading should be a compulsory part of the

curriculum of government schools, arguing the Bible-hater is no less irrational than the Bible-faddist' and that 'The Old Testament is the most interesting, instructive, and authentic section of ancient history, within the range of literature, and an inexhaustible mine of fearless philosophy and sublime forecast.¹⁷ He shared the delusion that an undenominational Christianity based on simple Bible readings might be devised which would satisfy all the churches. However, the many attempts made in Great Britain and Ireland, and subsequently in Australia, to devise a common system that might satisfy all branches of Christian opinion, if not non-Christians, all failed. Although Furphy wanted to raise levels of understanding among Australians, he had little time for disputes about the financing and control of schools. It is doubtful whether he would have come to coherent conclusions had he spent more time on 'Church-State' questions. He was attracted to the Churches of Christ because they were anti-hierarchical and defended individual interpretation of Scripture, but he was also a 'state socialist' and supported massive extensions of governmental power.

Child-centred Ideas

Furphy possessed ample inner resources of the type that child-centred educators consider present, at least potentially, within each child. His independence of family and school influences were displayed early when at fifteen, just after leaving school, he produced a burlesque Byronic ballad of about five hundred lines called 'Childe Booth's Pilgrimage', with mock newspaper reviews to supplement it. His experience of Begg's classroom methods may well have contributed to his hatred of cruelty to children, a dominant trait in Rory O'Halloran who protects his daughter from the beatings his wife wishes to administer. But Furphy never showed any interest in Rousseau's ideas or similar approaches to child-centred education.

Reconstructionist Ideas

There is also very little evidence of radical-reconstructionism in Furphy's educational ideas. His conscious aims as a writer were propagandist but his love of a yarn and fascination with the particulars of life in the Riverina district helped to contain excessive didacticism in his novels. Although he hoped that

young Australians would be educated to foster intelligent and sympathetic mateship in a new egalitarian society, he never suggested that direct political education was a suitable method to achieve this purpose. 'Tom Collins' argues that extended elementary education has already increased upward social mobility and weakened class barriers, so as to become a danger to the possessing classes:

In our democracy, the sum of cultivated intelligence, and correspondingly sensitivity to affront, is dangerously high and becoming higher.¹⁸

The extension of liberal knowledge might, on the basis of this view, be sufficient to stimulate challenges to a class-ridden society without any need for teaching overt radical ideology in the schools.

Furphy wanted a radical reconstruction of society. He also valued the skills and common sense acquired by many, although by no means all, working men and women from their struggles with nature and social disadvantages. However, he did not consider skills and common sense of this kind sufficient to enable them to overthrow the existing social order and, equally importantly, to create the kind of egalitarian society he hoped to see emerge. The building of such a society would require working people to gain and apply liberal knowledge, whilst at the same time retaining the skills and sense acquired from labour. They needed to become, in one of Furphy's favourite expressions, 'ambidexters'. Furphy did not wish to undervalue the ideas and attitudes developed among drovers and other working men, but he wanted them to become possessed of a good part of the liberal knowledge largely confined so historically to privileged minorities.

Practical Experience and Liberal Knowledge

Furphy's main educational problem was therefore how to reconcile respect for the way in which the mass of workers felt and acted in a society which restricted their intellectual potential, with the liberal educational aim of initiating them into the best that has been said and written. Had he been born a century later, he would probably have had a full secondary education, gone to university and become a teacher, journalist or the like, with ready access to libraries and people of similar

intellectual interests to his own. Instead, he started adult life by helping his father on his small property and he worked with his hands all his life. Many of his earliest admirers singled out for praise his defence of the practical skills and common sense of working people. In *Such Is Life* the bullockies are extremely resourceful in difficult situations, both physical and legal.¹⁹ The contrasts drawn by Furphy between relevant practical knowledge and irrelevant book learning are often linked with contrasts between present and past, Australia and England, the New World and the Old.²⁰

Furphy placed a high value upon practical experience and useful knowledge, but he was also consumed with a passion to understand 'The Order of Things'. Miles Franklin thought that he wrote his novels primarily as a conduit for his erudition: 'Furphy agglomerated some of his encyclopedic storage into a novel—of sorts.'²¹ When he met Kate Baker, he was impressed that she 'knew who Belisarius was' and could use the word 'laconic' correctly in ordinary conversation. She was even more impressed by Furphy's erudition. She wrote later that she had heard many fine speakers 'but none spoke like Joseph Furphy ... he brought out of his treasury things new and old, and with his lambent wit and mellow philosophy, flashed new light on hidden or obscure subjects ... At the time of meeting him I compared him in my mind to the gentle scholar in Longfellow's *Tales of a Wayside Inn*. Later, knowing him more perfectly, I likened him to Leonardo da Vinci.'²²

A. Lee Archer, a union organiser who met Furphy in the bush, considered 'his knowledge of all the classics was simply wonderful' and his retention of historical detail 'prodigious'.²³ Furphy playfully confessed:

My idea of dissipation is to revel in some new volume of one of my favourite sciences—Ethnology or Astronomy. Also I have a weakness for History, ancient or modern, and in my untruthful moments I claim to know off by heart all the Poetry in the English language.²⁴

In 1907 Furphy wrote from far-away Western Australia to his very aged mother in Kyneton that he spent each evening 'in poring over some book that nobody else ever even pretended to read—all in a desperate attempt to get rid of part of my ignorance.'²⁵ Two years later he wrote:

We are all slaves. One man is the slave of fashion; another the slave of Mammon; another the slave of some appetite or drinketite; another the slave of his temper—and so forth. But I am the slave of the printed book.²⁶

The chief ambition of 'Tom Collins' as a boy was 'to emulate, or even excel, Macaulay's erudite "schoolboy"'.²⁷

Furphy was highly sensitive to possible cultural deficiencies since his own formal education was so limited and he was essentially an autodidact. The excessive displays of learning in his novels alleged by some critics may have been a defence against snubs from people of superior formal education. He was mortified by criticism of his erudition in a London review of *Such Is Life*:

Mr Collins has evidently done a deal of reading in his time, but in this, as in everything else, he suffers from want of discipline. His active mind appears to be a receptacle crammed almost to bursting with a mass of unclassified, undigested knowledge—a chaotic jumble, the hopeless confusion of which robs him of all sense of perspective.²⁸

The reviewer touched on a sensitive nerve, since Furphy had learned mainly from encyclopedias and unsystematically, not from sympathetic teachers. But Furphy was frank with his friends, confessing to A. G. Stephens, the Literary Editor of *The Bulletin*, 'I find myself continually blocked by my own infernal ignorance, so that I have worn a path from my sanctum to the Ency. Brit., at the Mechanics {Institute}'.²⁹ Alec Hope claimed, with James Joyce as the comparison, that 'Furphy's is the mind of an intelligent schoolboy flying an intellectual kite' and described his mind as 'a magpie's nest even though it is the nest of a magpie of genius'. Yet Furphy's mind was well stocked with much of the best literature of several great cultures, as well as strengthened by considerable direct experience of life. His wide, if unsystematic, range of knowledge also enabled him to confront major questions of meaning and purpose in life in ways utterly beyond the reach of even the most intelligent schoolboy.

Furphy certainly made extensive use in his novels of his own wide reading. As well as copious quotations and direct allusions, he also frequently placed Collins in situations designed to remind the 'attentive reader' of scenes depicted by Homer, Virgil, Dante or Milton. Miles Franklin recognised

Such Is Life as Australia's *Les Miserables*, but she failed to understand that it is also Australia's *Ulysses*. In addition, the subtle hidden plot also qualifies *Such Is Life* as Australia's *Tristram Shandy* and *Furphy* as its *Sterne* as well as its *Victor Hugo* and *James Joyce*. Few of his readers, however, proved as highly attentive as those a little later of *James Joyce*.

As with *Furphy* in real life, *Collins* in the novels always shows respect for education, even that of self-styled 'gentlemen' despised for their inability to cope with harsh realities, He wrote:

It is such men's ignorance—their technical ignorance—that is their curse. Education of any kind never was, and never can be, a curse to its possessor ... Erudition, even in the humblest sphere of life, is the sweetest solace, the unfailing refuge, of the restless mind; but if the bearer thereof be not able to *do* something well enough to make a living by it, his education is simply outclassed, overborne, and crushed by his own superior ignorance.³⁰

Although *Collins* sometimes advocates the superiority of practice over theory, he also doubts whether everyday experience can reveal the ultimate purposes and meaning of existence. He praises the knowledge that the old sailor *Jack the Shellback* has gained from observation and experience yet notes that it coexists in the old sailor's mind with 'childlike simplicity'.³¹ The roguish 'Old Price' is an excellent bushman yet this does not make him a laudable character: he is abject, incoherent and dominated by his own brutish son. *Furphy* knew several Aboriginal families well in his childhood but he did not hold any 'noble savage' conceptions of them, and did not consider that the highly developed skills they possessed as hunters and food gatherers were an adequate springboard for a wider understanding of the world.

When comparing the difficulties a 'semi-barbarian' bushman such as *Barefooted Bob* would meet if 'launched into polished society', with those of *Willoughby*, or any other 'bookish student or city dandy' in the bush, *Collins* asserts:

Without doubt, it is easier to acquire gentlemanly deportment than axe-man's muscle; easier to criticise an opera than to identify a beast seen casually twelve months before; easier to dress becomingly than to make a bee-line, straight as the sighting of a theodolite, across strange country in foggy weather; easier to recognise the various costly vintages than to live contentedly on the smell of an oil rag.³²

Nevertheless, when Collins reflects on Bob's brief sojourn in Melbourne, he is forced to admit that just as 'the society man—"gentleman", slum-denizen, or intermediate—turned adrift in the silences of the Never-Never, will be forlorn as any alien derelict', so 'the born-and-bred nomad of Out-Back, drawn into the maelstrom of civilised society, is desolate also, and worse, for he feels himself in the way'.³³

The ridicule to which Willoughby, an English 'black sheep' of an aristocratic family, is subjected is gentle, even though his knowledge of Latin tags has done nothing to prevent him from being down-and-out in the Riverina, where he is by far the least competent of all around him in every skill and form of knowledge requisite for survival, let alone prosperity. Collins sneers that 'urbane address, faultless syntax, even that good part that shall not be taken away, namely the calm consciousness of inherent superiority, are of little use here', but Furphy himself was no enemy to elegant diction, nor an exponent of reverse-snobbery in language or culture.³⁴ In *Rigby's Romance*, like *The Buln-Buln and the Brolga*, a novel extracted by Furphy from his original massive and rejected manuscript of *Such Is Life*, the endeavours of Rugby, an American radical immigrant with the personality and political gifts which Furphy wished he possessed himself, are aimed overtly at extending political and intellectual enlightenment throughout the bush by means of doctrines and didactic and literary arts which did not emerge from there.

How Powerful is Education?

Furphy only knew of Marx through British Marxists and was what Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels contemptuously termed a Utopian Socialist. Furphy's utopianism, in the sense used by Marx and Engels, lay in his belief that the main force behind the building of a new type of socialist society would be ideas derived from education, rather than proletarian experience of capitalist exploitation, as Marx argued in his 'economist' vein, or the dedicated activity of professional revolutionaries, as espoused by Lenin. In a 1890 essay on World Federation, Furphy misread the times and grossly inflated the power of the pen:

Ours is pre-eminently the age of goodwill; it is the age of goodwill because it is the age of enlightenment; it is the age of

enlightenment because throughout the civilised world a thousand pens, such as petrified prejudice and vested interests can never hire, are writing in varied style and phrase the unchallengeable charter of human brotherhood.

In *Such Is Life* Collins' meerschaum pipe assures him that the world is about to see 'a revolt of enlightenment against ignorance, of justice and reason against the domination of the manifestly unworthy'.³⁵ The pipe, often the conduit of Furphy's own political beliefs, argues that 'if social-economic conditions fail to keep abreast with the impetuous, uncontrollable advance of popular intelligence, the time must come when, with one tiger-spring, the latter shall assail the former'.³⁶

Yet the type of schooling Furphy had received did not enable large numbers of children to engage in a revolt against ignorance and he had little evidence on which to base his optimism. Indeed, Furphy was painfully aware that very few people he met in his youth in Kyneton, or later as a bullocky in the Riverina or as a foundry worker in Shepparton, were interested in acquiring education or a wider culture. The Shepparton Mechanics' Institute possessed *Chambers' Encyclopedia* and later the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, but its resources were rarely used by mechanics or anyone else. Furphy wrote of 'the superficiality of townsmen's thoughts and conversations'³⁷ and Tom Collins describes his fellow bushmen as 'grown-up children'.³⁸ Furphy's mates in the bush recognised how different he was from them even though he sought to speak for them and to represent their experiences to the world. The union leader C. W. Sullivan described him as 'the most learned bushman I have met', adding that he 'was of us but not one of us'.³⁹

'Tom Collins' holds with Furphy that many working men can and should acquire 'social culture' since 'it is in no way necessary that the manual worker should be rude and illiterate'. Tom claims that he 'can count no less than three men of this stamp among my ten thousand acquaintances', but even this small number may be a start.⁴⁰ Does Furphy imply that Collins has achieved a proper balance between practical experience and wider cultivation, thus becoming an 'ambidexter'? After all, Furphy had himself to a considerable extent achieved such a balance and could fairly describe himself as 'half bushman and half bookworm'.⁴¹

Collins combines considerable experience in the Bush with much wider reading than that of any other Bush-dweller. In a self-satisfied moment he compares himself to 'the fantastical duke of dark corners' of *Measure for Measure*.⁴² Tom can depict acutely the O'Halloran household, interactions among bullockies, the hierarchical structure at Runnymede station, and much else, but more often he is in error, especially when full of self-confidence.⁴³ He derides the Scottish immigrant Tom Armstrong as 'one of your practical, decided, cocksure men; guided by unweighed, unanalysed phenomena and governed by conviction alone and who are easily deceived in their interpretations of evidence since they fail to use all their faculties particularly that knowledge that is inborn or divined'.⁴⁴ Yet Collins is even more cocksure than Armstrong, since he mistakenly believes he has mastered a realm of thought of whose existence Armstrong is totally unaware. His mishaps illustrate that even liberal knowledge and practical experience combined are insufficient to produce a fully educated person, if moral fibre is lacking. Furphy's letters and poems make it clear that he considered that moral qualities are needed before liberal knowledge and practical experience combined, can have significantly beneficial results, but that truth does not, of course, make either knowledge or experience any less important.

Moriarty, a Roman Catholic storekeeper at Runnymede Station, has also had a reasonable schooling and the opportunity to acquire valuable practical experience in the bush, but fails at every turn. His special strength is in mathematics and accounting but he misuses his knowledge and gambles his earnings away. The bullocky, Thompson, a friend of Collins since boyhood, seeks to become 'the best educated fellow of the track' and disciplines himself to read ten masterpieces of literature recommended to him by Collins.⁴⁵ Furphy's account of Thompson's courtship is suffused by references to Dante, Spenser, Milton and Goethe but the poets are of no avail when Thompson loses his bullock teams and is shown the door by his beloved's father.

After Dixon, a foul-mouthed but capable bullocky, befriends the English black-sheep Willoughby, each tries to teach the other, with Dixon proving the better learner. Dixon can soon quote numerous Latin tags, but Willoughby remains inept when confronted with practical tasks. Dixon's newly

acquired learning is sometimes used to good effect but can also lead him badly astray as when his interpretation of *Jane Eyre* leads him to believe that educated women like a masterful man of the Rochester type. Dixon's masterful tactics with Miss Coone, a schoolmistress he fancies, only provoke an even greater show of force from the lady. Thompson fears that Willoughby 'can no more help his own infernal uselessness than Dixon can help his own infernal ignorance'.⁴⁶

Warrigal Alf Morris is the most cultivated of the bullockies, apart from Collins, but he has become morose and reclusive since he wrongly jilted his fiancée because she was badly disfigured after a kick from a horse. Instead, he married a tart. The Warrigal combines practical skills, 'such as splicing a loop on a wool rope, or making a yoke, or wedging a loose box in a wheel ...', with good manners—he 'sticks a napkin, in a bone ring, alongside your plate at dinner', with wide reading.⁴⁷ The American Jefferson Rigby seems at first sight to be an ambidexter supreme. He knows even more literature and history than Collins, who envies his talents, and is an expert on rural and urban economies, as well as a prophet of socialism. Unfortunately, Rigby is much stronger on the general than the particular, and much better on world systems than on personal relationships, such as love and affection. Furphy mistakenly thought that the character of Rigby would be universally admired, especially by women readers, but his hero's insensitivity to the feelings of those immediately around him antagonise rather than attract. It is to Furphy's credit that he subordinated ideological to artistic imperatives by exposing the contradictions between Rigby's general compassion for humanity and his coldness to individuals. Rigby, like Plato, is suspicious of fictional works. He argues that 'an exclusively plutocratical or aristocratical fictitious literature would, sooner or later, doom any populace in the world to vassalage, or worse'.⁴⁸ In *Rigby's Romance* he elaborates the argument that the illusions created by fiction help to maintain capitalist domination. Schools in Rigby's system of 'state socialism' would, like those in Plato's *Republic*, have little time for poets or novelists.

Although Furphy's Riverina is predominantly a male world, perhaps women will prove the true ambidexters. The 'authoress', Mrs Lilian Falkland-Pritchard, is widely-read and has genuine intellectual interests, including a wide range

of world history, but she fails the test because of her impracticality. She reveres Aboriginal artifacts and customs, including relics of fancied Aboriginal kings. She argues that 'the map of this young land is already defaced by ugly and incongruous names, transplanted from the other side of the world.'⁴⁹ White deeds have been worse than white names in her view. She asks her antagonist, Barefooted Bob, who has spent many years in the Outback, 'Aren't the poor creatures often treated cruelly by new settlers?'. Then she exclaims 'we boast of our civilisation but the trail of the serpent is over it all'.⁵⁰ Lilian's views became dominant a few decades after Furphy's death, but it is the illiterate Bob whom she favours in their verbal disputes. Highly pertinent to her own life, Lilian's learning does not enable her to detect the outrageous lies habitually told by her husband.

The best combination of education and practical knowledge is displayed by Molly Cooper, the jilted fiancée who has taken on male identity as a boundary rider known as 'Nosey' Alf. Molly's hut contains over fifty volumes of poetry, novels, plays and reference works. She is also a skilled musician and very good in what was generally taken to be 'a man's job'. She has the moral fibre to survive serious injury, permanent impairment and jilting without bitterness. Feminists would be justified in seeing Molly as the true ambidexter who best combines liberal knowledge with practical competencies. The school in Sydney she attended as a girl must have done a good job.

A recurring theme in Furphy's novels is the relative power of heredity and environment. Rigby is the most ardent advocate of the force of environment. Collins uses the metaphor of a railway train that proceeds on a determined track until from time to time it arrives at junctions where critical choices can be made, after which no return is possible. Once taken, the choice becomes the 'controlling alternative'. Although not explicitly stated by Collins, schooling constitutes one of those key times at which one or other very different tracks may be chosen. In *Rigby's Romance*, in which Collins plays a more reactionary role than in *Such Is Life*, he argues against Rigby's belief that social institutions can effect vast changes in human nature: 'You can't make men virtuous by Act of Parliament'⁵¹ Despite his greater faith than Rigby's,

in the power of literature to move the human spirit, Tom is much less confident in the potential power of education.

Furphy faced a dilemma experienced by many cultivated radicals: the knowledge in which he delighted and which he wished to extend to the masses, for their pleasure as well as their emancipation, is rarely prized highly by the intended beneficiaries. He knew all too well that leading horses to water does not in itself make them drink. Yet, although he did not expect many bullockies or mechanics fully to share his literary interests, he saw no reason why they should not value books and learning more highly than they did. Furphy sought to persuade the educated to respect the value of physical labour and the practical knowledge it creates and to persuade working people to reach for a range of understandings beyond those which arise from common experience. He wanted their supposedly cultural superiors to acknowledge the value of the knowledge derived from the world of work by bullockies and others, but at the same time to imbue workers with respect for, and desire to acquire, the knowledge found, if at all, mainly among those frequently guilty of condescension towards them.

Such Is Life demonstrates that practical experience and personal acquaintance with hardship constitute essential preconditions for the getting of wisdom, however well one is schooled, but also that much knowledge of great value can be acquired best in, and perhaps only in, schools and through structured study. Indeed, the full value of Furphy's novels can only be secured by readers who can follow his literary and historical allusions. Furphy also shows that, even if possessed of liberal knowledge and practical skills, we still often get things wrong. *Such Is Life!* No programme or policy is foolproof.

Despite all these considerations, Furphy was not a pessimist. Although he realised that even our best endeavours may fail, he may well have identified the conditions for maximum success. He respected muscle and physical labour, but considered science and the arts, with history and literature in pride of place, as indispensable for an adequate understanding of the suchness of life. In addition, he demonstrated in his own life and his books that a love of literature and history was not alien to bushmen and others who work with their hands, and that books and talk about them can provide an inexhaustible supply of interest and delight, even if

we fail to become wise. Furphy regarded the broad western cultural tradition of the Classics and Christianity, brought to Australia in British and Irish moulds, rather than the experiences of the Australian colonies or the Aboriginal past, as the main source from which Australians could derive intellectual enjoyment as well as enlightenment. The Bible and Shakespeare, the gifts of his mother, towered above all in Furphy's eyes. From that rich basis Furphy had extended his interests to embrace social and political structures, religious and moral beliefs, and mathematical and scientific concepts. What he had done, he supposed others could do as well.

The educational systems of Australia have greatly expanded since Furphy's time. He would surely applaud the increase of students in secondary and higher education but he might well feel deep disappointment at the results of educational expansion. The wider concern with significant literature, art and general culture he looked for from education has not materialised. It is unlikely that any Australian journal with a large circulation would give as much space to book reviews and literary articles as did the Sydney *Bulletin* of Furphy's time, most notably in its 'Red Pages' edited by A. G. Stephens, who was a great source of encouragement to Furphy. The 2002 *Bulletin* has far less confidence in its readership. It is possible that Furphy would be gratified that higher education, at least in university humanities and social science departments, has proved conducive to political radicalism. Student and faculty radicalism today is very different in spirit from that of Furphy. Indeed his 'White Australia' values, shared by both the Labor Party and trades unions of his day, are often key targets for current radical critique in Australia. On the other hand, a century later, a reborn Furphy might embrace the new radicalism and reject the cherished beliefs of his own time. What is certain is that the problem of how best to encourage respect for manual labour, together with an aspiration towards mastery of liberal knowledge, still bedevils educators in Australia and other western societies. Furphy's writing is a valuable source in the search for a solution.

NOTES

1. 'Tom Collins' (Joseph Furphy). *Such Is Life: Being Certain Extracts from the Diary of Tom Collins*, (1903), Sydney: Bulletin Newspaper Company.

2. Miles Franklin (in association with Kate Baker) (1944) *Joseph Furphy: The Legend of a Man and his Book*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, p.3.
3. Franklin, 1944, pp.164; 127.
4. Vance Palmer, Preface to Tom Collins' *Such Is Life*, third edition (abridged) (1937). London: Cape.
5. Lloyd Ross, 'Socialist Ideals: Comments on Rigby's Romance', *Meanjin Papers*, 1947, 6 (1), p.40.
6. Ian Turner, *Communist Review*, (1954) June, p.37.
7. J K Ewers, *Tell the People: An examination of the little-known writings of Joseph Furphy Tom Collins) in the light of their value or Australia today*, (1943) Sydney, 1943, p.7.
8. C. M. H. Clark, 'Letter to Tom Collins', *Meanjin Papers* (1943), II (3), pp.40-1.
9. E. E. Pescott(1938). *The Life Story of Joseph Furphy*. Melbourne: Hawthorn Press, p.4.
10. Franklin, 1944, p.6.
11. Anon (James Bonwick). (1862). *Rides out and about: Rambles of an Australian School Inspector*. London: Religious Tract Society, p.74 (cited in Barnes, John. (1990). *The Order of Things*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, p.25).
12. The sectarian disputes of Irish Protestants, 'Orangemen' and Catholics, Ribbonmen, were renewed in Australia, much to Furphy's disgust. Although a Protestant, he was a severe critic of the Orange Order. The Irish National system of education attempted to combine shared secular education with separate doctrinal teaching for Protestant and Roman Catholic children. In Australia it attracted relatively few Protestant, and even fewer Roman Catholic families. It was rejected officially by the Roman Catholic hierarchy in Australia.
13. Report dated 8 Nov. 1956, Public Record Office, Victoria (cited in Barnes, 1990, pp.46-51).
14. For a more extensive treatment of this five-cluster classification see Geoffrey Partington. (2001) 'Educational Contestability' in *Oxford Review of Education*, 27 (3).
15. Furphy, 1903, pp.59-60.
16. *Ibid*, p.193.
17. 'Tom Collins', *Bulletin*, 27 January, 1894.
18. Furphy, 1903, p.205.
19. See Dawn, Partington (1996). 'Truth out of error: Furphy and Knowledge' in *Journal of Australian Studies*, 50/51, p.29.
20. Partington, 1996, pp.29-30.
21. Franklin, 1944, p.50.
22. *Ibid*, 1944, p.9.
23. A. Lee Archer (1941) *Tom Collins (Joseph Furphy) as I knew him*. Melbourne: Bread and Cheese Club, p.5.
24. Letter from Furphy to Winter, 12 October, 1903, State Library of Victoria, H159790.
25. Barnes, 1990, p.367.
26. *Ibid*, p.372.

27. J. Furphy. (1948). *The Buln-Buln and the Brolga*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, p.89.
28. *Athenaeum*, 9 January, 1904.
29. Letter from Furphy to Stephens dated 6 June, 1901, National Library of Australia, MSS 2022.
30. Furphy, 1903, p.34.
31. *Ibid*, p.274.
32. *Ibid*, p.32.
33. Furphy, 1948, p.140.
34. Furphy, 1903, p.32.
35. *Ibid*, p.90.
36. *Ibid*, p.91.
37. Letter from Furphy to Winter dated 28 July 1904, State Library of Victoria.
38. Furphy, 1903, p.20.
39. T. J. O'Sullivan (1946). *Charles William Sullivan: The History of the Man and his Union Ticket*. MS, Mitchell Library, pp.9-10.
40. Furphy, 1903, p.34.
41. Letter from Furphy to Miles Franklin, 28 March, 1904, SLV.
42. Furphy, 1903, p.280.
43. Partington, 1996, pp.35-6.
44. Furphy, 1903, pp.296-7.
45. J. Furphy (1946), *Rigby's Romance*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, p.54.
46. Furphy, 1946, p.73.
47. Furphy, 1903, p.25.
48. In the 1898 typescript of *Such Is Life*, p, 164, Miles Franklin Papers, Mitchell Library (quoted by Julian Croft 1991, *The Life and Opinions of Tom Collins, St. Lucia*: University of Queensland Press, p.247.
49. Furphy, 1948, p.71.
50. *Ibid*, p.91.
51. Furphy, 1946, p.201.