



Elderly swagman.

The Swagman: Icon of the Australian Outback **By Joe Cline, Amanda Ruble, and Sonny Rae Thomas**

Unlike the American cowboy or the Argentine gaucho, there is not one specific persona that qualifies as the iconic Australian hero. Dr. George Parsons, professor of modern history at Macquarie University, has compiled a loose list of qualifications for an Australian hero, “The classic Australian hero is young, blossoms to his peak at a young age, and then dies in a way that can be seen as suspicious or unfair” (Newton). One figure that embodies these qualities is the bushranger, the Australian term for an outlaw.

Much like Jesse James or Billy the Kid in America, Ben Hall and Ned Kelly have achieved heroic status in Australia. In 1865, Ben Hall was arrested as a suspected accomplice of bushranger Frank Gardiner, and, though innocent, while he was awaiting trial, his wife ran off with an ex-policeman, his house was burnt down by an arsonist, and his cattle were stolen. As a result Ben Hall decided he might as well become a bushranger. About 15 years later Ned Kelly gained national prominence as a bushranger. After a series of relatively minor brushes with the law, Kelly formed a gang of bank robbers, killing a number of policemen in pitched battles. His heroic stature (deserved or not) came from his outspoken defiance of authority, a defiance that he carried to the gallows. His last words, reputed to be “Such is life,” became the title of what many consider the quintessential book about the Australian Outback and the national icon: the bushman.

The bushman may be a swagman (a hobo-like person wandering the outback), a stockman (the Australian term for a cowboy), a bullocky (a freighter hauling supplies with teams of oxen), a fossicker (a prospector), or any other occupation surviving in the country’s harsh rural stretches. The men who lived and worked in the Outback represented

Joe Cline is a senior English major at Emporia State University
Amanda Ruble received a Master of Arts in English in May, 2007.
Sonny Thomas received a Bachelor of Science in Education in English in December, 2007.

the qualities of bravery, fortitude, strong character, and generosity of spirit. Additionally, they represented a resistance to authority, especially British authority, and a distrust of wealth and power.

The classic representation of Outback figures are found in Joseph Furphy's, *Such Is Life: the adventures of Tom Collins*. Collins is a minor governmental functionary who is a sort of swagman himself. *Such Is Life* represents many facets of life in Australia during the late 1800s. While it is not an easy text to read and understand, due to its lengthy allusions to the works of Shakespeare, the Bible, and other literary texts, it is clear in its praise and depiction of cultural icons of Australia. Unlike frontier novels from other parts of the world, *Such Is Life* highlights several cultural icons of Australia, including the bushman, the bullock driver, the squatter, and the swagman. Furphy makes it clear in his text that each of these men has an extreme sense of pride, a strong work ethic, a deep devotion to the land, and no fear of death; it is also clear that the swagman, in particular, holds a special place in Australian history.

The swagman is a central figure in *Such Is Life*. Because Furphy includes several swagmen within his text, he creates a sense of mystery around the nature and characteristics of a swagman. The swagman is both a friend and a foe; he is a well-known face but an unknown person. Even though the lines of distinction are fuzzy, one aspect is clear through Furphy's description: the swagman is not the gentleman one finds in English fiction:

Remember that our present subject is not the 'gentleman' of actual life. He is an unknown and elusive quality, merging insensibly into saint or scoundrel, sage or fool, man or blackleg. He runs in all shapes, and in all degree of definiteness. Our subject is that insult to common sense, that childish slap in the face of honest manhood, the 'gentleman' of fiction, and of Australian fiction pre-eminently (Furphy 33).

It is important that Furphy makes the distinction between a "gentleman" and a swagman, because while a swagman could possess the characteristics of a gentleman, a "gentleman" could not possess the capabilities of a swagman. Tom Collins, the narrator of *Such Is*

Life, makes it known that while a swagman is hard to limit to certain characteristics or checklists, a “gentleman” is much easier to pin down, for a gentleman is always “genteel but not necessarily gentle” (33). Furphy reiterates this difference through an extensive discussion of the swagman and the “gentleman:”

[...]the man with a shovel in his hand, a rule in his pocket, an axe on his shoulder, a leather apron on his abdomen, or any other badge of manual labor about him--his virtues else be they as pure as grace [...] is carefully contradistinguished from the ‘gentleman’. The ‘gentleman’ may be a drunkard, a gambler, a debauchee, a parasite, a helpless potterer; he may be a man of spotless life, able and honest; but he must on no account be a man with broad palms, a workman amongst workmen (Furphy 33).

The distinction becomes clear: a swagman is a man of trade with virtues that are neither mentioned nor significant; he lacks the education, the honor, and the taste of a “gentleman,” yet he makes up for his shortcomings, especially his education, through his trade and work habits. Part of the “gentleman’s” goodness comes from his education, and while it is obvious that Furphy and Tom Collins both value education, it seems that education is one of the permanent divisions between the swagman and the “gentleman.”

If the swagman is inherently good, then it seems that education must be considered bad simply because the swagman lacks an education and the “gentleman” has a formal education. Logically, this argument makes sense; however, Tom Collins informs the reader that it is not education that is the curse of the “gentleman,” instead it is his technical ignorance:

Of such ‘gentlemen’ it is often said that their education becomes their curse...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; it is a curse only to the person whose interest lies in exploiting its possessor (Furphy 34).

A swagman has a practical (i.e., technical, in Furphy's terms) knowledge of the skills needed to survive in the Australian bush, yet he lacks a formal education. Likewise, a "gentleman" lacks this practical knowledge, but has a formal education that is valued by his society. We see the lines of distinction between the types of education blurred through the character of Rory. A man with both a limited formal and practical education, Rory serves as the ideal intellectual in Furphy's text. "Poor Rory, in spite of his willingness, was naturally awkward with the splitters' tool, nor did he know how to harness a horse. All this, he explained to me, was a penalty adherent to people who, by reason of their social-economical position, are emancipated from manual labor" (Furphy 57). Here again, Furphy makes the distinction between an educated man and a worker. However, Rory is not a "gentleman" because he was not born into his position; instead, he worked his way up the social hierarchy.

Rory represents both worlds: a worker and an intellectual. While it is refreshing to see a character that molds the two worlds together, Furphy does not allow Rory to live a happy life. Instead, Furphy suggests, through the death of Rory's daughter, Mary, that one cannot disregard the distinctions between the swagman and "gentleman." Mary is a representation of a new Australia, a new form of life, a merging of two worlds, the educated "gentleman" and the practical bushman. This melding of the two, however, does not come to pass, for Mary dies when she becomes lost in the bush. Thus the two worlds do not come together.

Furphy initially establishes the characteristics of the swagman through his comparison to the 'gentleman' and he continues to create a clear depiction of the swagman through random appearances wanderers. An additional characteristic of the swagman is his generosity toward other swagmen and workers. We see this subtle characteristic through several disconnected instances in *Such Is Life*, "... Mr. Thompson kindly lent me a supply this morning; but, unfortunately, I had a hole in my pocket that I was not aware of, and--Thanks. I'll just take a pipeful'--'No, no; shove it in your pocket. I've got more in my swag'" (Furphy 34). The kindness that one man shows to another in sharing his tobacco is just

one example of the camaraderie among swagmen. Another example is revealed through the friendship between Rory and Tom Collins. Tom realizes that he must allow Rory to experience the life of a swagman. Through his generosity and friendship, Tom encourages Rory to have an adventure:

I gave him my Shakespeare as a keepsake, with a billy and pannikin, and a few day's rations. I made up his swag scientifically while he lay heart-broken on his bunk; then I walked with him to the Echuca road. [...] and, as I watched his diminishing figure, I prayed that he might be enticed into the most shocking company in Echuca, and be made fightably drunk, and fall in for a rememberson hammering, and get robbed of everything, and be given in charge for Majesty's jail. It seemed to me that no milder dispensation of Providence would satisfy his moral requirements. Drastic, but such is life (Furphy 63).

While some may view Tom's hope for Rory's journey anything but friendly, it resonates with the generosity among swagmen. Rory is Tom's friend and Tom realizes that Rory needs this kind of character-building experience. Tom does what he can to keep him safe by packing his swag and then allows Rory to leave. The generosity of the swagman is distinctive, for the swagman has very little to begin with, only what he can carry in his swag, but for a friend or fellow swagman he is willing to give what he can be it tobacco or advice. In times of hardship, his type of generosity further establishes the swagman as a cultural icon of Australia.

In addition to the generosity of the swagman, apparent in *Such Is Life*, it is the swagman's tenacity and unyielding determination that further establishes him as the cultural icon. The swagman is a cultural pioneer in Furphy's text:

This futureless person is the man who pioneers all industries [...] whose heavy footprints mark the waterless mulga, the wind-swept plains, and the scorching sand; who leaves intaglio impressions of his mortal coil on the

wet ground [...] and whose only satisfaction, in the cold which curls him up like cinnamon bark--making him nearly break his back in the effort to hold his shoulders together--is the certainty that in six months will scrape away the hot surface sand, in order to sleep comfortably on the more temperate stratum beneath (Furphy 86).

Furphy elevates the day-to-day activities of the swagman and it is relevant to know that much of the time the swagman spends in the bush consists of walking the extreme distances between stations. On these grueling walks between scattered stations, the swagman must persevere through the tough elements of the Australian outback.

If the swagman can be considered an iconic hero of Australia, it is because of his ability to live off of the land and not be driven mad by the isolation that comes with the lifestyle and because of his moral superiority over authority figures that oppress the common man. Perhaps the best definition of Australia's iconic hero is that of a man who does the best he can with what is set before him. Furphy has illustrated this best in the novel by proving that the underdog will remain the hero come tragedy and oppression.

Works Cited

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