

SUCH IS LIFE, REVISITED

ANDREW FURPHY HAS MADE A FILM OF PART OF THE SEMINAL NOVEL, *SUCH IS LIFE*, AS A TRIBUTE TO THE WRITER, HIS GREAT-GREAT-UNCLE JOSEPH.

STORY **ANSON CAMERON** PHOTOS **MARGIE MCCLELLAND**

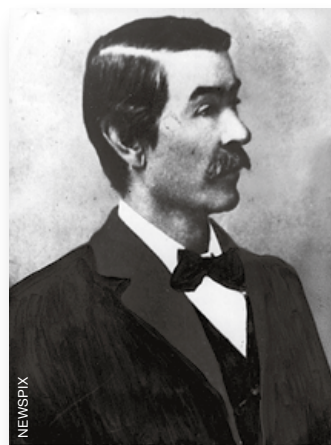
ANDREW FURPHY is justly proud of the novel written by his great-great-uncle Joseph. But he is frustrated that so few Australians have read it. *Such Is Life* is recognised as an Australian classic: part novel, part philosophy and part poetry. Joseph Furphy has become a mythical presence in Australian literature, a silhouette standing behind Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson – a little more difficult to read and a little more intellectually ambitious than both. Yet his book is crafted with simple bush tales sewn together. “I had the idea that one of these stories might stand alone as a film and reflect the book’s wonders,” Andrew says.

Joseph was a bullocky for almost 10 years in the 1870s and ’80s, operating out of the railhead and port of Hay on the Murrumbidgee in southern New South Wales. He carried wire and corrugated iron and other farm equipment north and east up to Wilcannia, Cobar, Hillston and Mossgiel, bringing wool back down to the town. “It was a tough life,” Andrew says. “His wife, Leonie, suffered the death of two children while he was away. They’re lying in the Hay cemetery.”

Drought eventually killed Joe’s bullocks and his business and sent him down south to work at his brother John’s foundry in Shepparton, Vic. After long working days in the foundry, Joe spent nights with a kerosene lamp in his shed at the bottom of his garden writing *Such Is Life*.

First published in 1903 when he was 60, the novel is a series of tales told by a bullocky about bullockies. They were private contractors, harried and despised by the pastoralists in colonial Australia, and the book features many clashes between squatters and bullockies.

Andrew spent his working life at J.Furphy & Sons, the Australian engineering icon established in 1864 by his great-grandfather John Furphy. It is renowned for its links to rural Australia and most especially for that vital piece of colonial equipment and folklore, the Furphy



water cart. “I ran the firm with my brother Roger for 40 years, until my son Adam took over, becoming the fifth generation of the family to head the business,” Andrew says.

In retirement, Andrew decided that rather than buy a beach house, boat, holiday or racehorse, he would produce a film based on *Such Is Life*. “All my friends warned me against making a film,” Andrew says. “But I’m not too good at listening to what I don’t want to hear.

“I soon found out that stories, and particularly cinematic stories, are made of more working parts than any of the machines we’ve manufactured at the ironworks over the years. Films are intricate pieces of apparatus and their smooth running depends on many experts working cohesively.”

Joseph changed the names of the people and the stations in his novel, so “it’s impossible to tell exactly where each scene was set”, Andrew says. “We scoured the country around Hay before finding Edwina and Derek McFarland on ‘Thelangerin’ on the Lachlan River. They, and their beautiful country, became the gracious hosts of the film set.”

Andrew co-opted fellow Furphy-phile, Australian actor John Derum, to be the driving force behind the film. John recently finished recording the spoken version of *Such Is Life* on CD, so has intimate knowledge of the novel. Cinematographer and editor Steven Ramsey came on board as well. But for the actors Andrew sourced local talent. “The people of Hay really came on board,” Andrew says. “They were wonderful.” Hay Jockey Club identity Ted Circuitt was put in charge of horses and horsemen. His grizzled countenance also appears in the film.

In the heat of summer out at Thelangerin they framed shots and built sets and floated in horses, while actors in period clothes wandered around waiting to be called. Elaine Jackson from Balranald, playing an indigenous tracker, sat serenely waiting to play her part, the hope and spirit of the film. ►



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Steven Ramsey and Andrew Furphy on set; Bob Gaston, Bill Ryan, Ivan Job (at the back) and Ray Miller “looking for tracks”; Katie Schiller on the search for dad on day two of the shoot. **OPPOSITE:** Joseph Furphy, author of *Such is Life*.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Elaine Jackson, Bob Gaston and Ray Miller; Andrew Furphy (right) and son Adam beside a Furphy water tank; Andrew Furphy, Richard Cannon and wife Sarah Cannon at the film launch, held at Shear Outback in Hay, NSW.



The film’s launch was held at Shear Outback, the museum in Hay devoted to the wool industry. Jack Terblanche, manager of tourism and economic development at Hay Shire Council, and tourist officer Gaylene Stephens embraced the tourism potential of the film and arranged a superb night. About 200 people gathered from many stations for hundreds of kilometres in every direction.

On the verandah, rows of seats faced into the night towards an enormous white semi-trailer parked under a ceiling of stars. The truck became a cinema screen. “It took me two hours to hose the thing down,” says Tony Lauer, owner of the truck. “Andrew kept ringing me, ‘Where’s the truck? Where’s the truck?’ But I couldn’t turn up with a dirty movie screen.”

Mistress of Thelangerin, Edwina McFarland, fulfilled the Hollywood convention of film premieres by looking resplendent in a mink coat. “It’s the first time it’s been out of the freezer for years,” she says.

After preliminary speeches, in which it was noted that some of the local actors in the film were likely descendants of the very people Joe Furphy was writing about, the lights were dimmed and *Child Lost On Goolumbulla* began screening. A colonial scene of bullockies sitting around a campfire

bloomed on the truck’s side. The film, narrated by John Derum, tells of a little girl lost in the Australian bush. In Joseph Furphy’s day, settlers felt a constant anxiety that a child might disappear into the unmapped and unforgiving reaches of the bush. As a young man he was involved in two bush searches for four lost children. None of them was found alive.

The film’s end was met by a resonant silence in which cinephiles and rouseabouts alike were seen to dab at their eyes. Then, as the poignancy of the experience began to ebb, there was applause, cheering and two-fingered whistles, and it became clear Andrew Furphy had a triumph on his hands. Fireworks supplied by the Hay Shire began to burst above the venue. Crowds rushed the bar and bookshop and brandished bottles and books, swearing to finish both.

Andrew Furphy doesn’t know if he will try his hand at filmmaking again. “It’s an enormous enterprise,” he says. “A two-year labour to birth a half-hour child. For the moment I’m focused on getting *Child Lost On Goolumbulla* uploaded onto the net and YouTube, and to getting grey nomads bending an ear to the CD of *Such Is Life* as they cross the One Tree Plain.”

Anson Cameron wrote the script to Child Lost on Goolumbulla and, like Andrew Furphy, is a great-great-nephew of Joseph Furphy.