
UNIT 4: THE AUSTRALIAN NOVEL OF THE FEDERATION PERIOD

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

After a study of this unit, you should be able to discuss

- the events that led to the creation of the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901.
- the growth of nationalism during the later decades of the nineteenth century.
- the writers of the Federation period

4.1 INTRODUCTION

After the arrival of the First Fleet on the eastern coast of Australia in the late eighteenth century, more and more areas of the continent were settled during the nineteenth century, and eventually there were six independent colonies. As pointed out in the *Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*, Federation was the movement which promoted the union of the six Australian colonies - New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania and Western Australia. “A number of writer politicians were involved in the Federation movement, notably Alfred Deakin and Sir Henry Parkes. ‘Price Warung’ was active as publicist throughout the eighteen nineties”. Many writers were attracted to the idea, including John Farrell, George Evans, A. B. Paterson and A. G. Stephens and J. B. Stephens (*Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* 270). The Commonwealth of Australia came into being on 1st January, 1901, and as Edmund Barton, who later became the first Prime Minister of Australia declared, “For the first time in history, we have a nation for a continent, and a continent for a nation”(quoted in Dixon: 2014, 2).

4.2 Moving Towards Federation

The historian Franke G Clarke recounts the events that led the colonies towards Federation. Referring to the late 1890s, Clarke points out that “the decision to convert the independent and isolated colonies into a single nation made the decade an indisputable watershed”. Federation was not unanimously welcomed by all the colonies, in fact, substantial minorities in all colonies voted against federation in 1898 and 1899. Some preferred “an imperial federation, in which the colonies would become provinces in a Greater Britain” and the second and more popular support was for maintaining the status quo. Several factors were pointed out in favour of this perspective: the colonies had been settled at different times and for different reasons; there were differences in stages of economic development, and the capital cities were thousands of kilometres apart. The smaller colonies feared that they would be overwhelmed by larger ones. Moreover, there had been decades of rivalry between Victoria and New South Wales. On the other hand, several factors favoured federation. Improved communication and transport such as the electric telegraph and the advent of railways broke down the psychological isolation of the colonies. In 1888, the first intercolonial conference of the Chambers of Commerce issued strong demands for uniform legislation in certain areas. In 1889, it was suggested that all the colonial armies should be joined into one federal army, and that a national Australian Government, as distinct from the local Governments, should be created. A conference of colonial premiers met in Melbourne in 1890, and later Sir Samuel Griffith drafted a proposed constitution outlining the sharing of powers between federal and state governments; “Griffith is in a very real sense the founding father of Australian federation.” The bill was put to referendum in all states except Western Australia, and was eventually passed in all six states. “The Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act received Queen Victoria’s assent after it had passed through the British Parliament in July 1900, and in September, the queen proclaimed that on the first day of the new century the people of the Australian colonies would be united as the Commonwealth of Australia. It was to be the first continental nation in the world” (Clarke, Frank G. *History of Australia*, 89-95).

Check your progress 1

Write a short note analysing the events that led up to Federation and the creation of the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901.

4.3 THE 1890S

Historians mark out the 1890s as being a decisive decade in the political and cultural history of Australia. It is sometimes pointed out that the 1890s marked “a significant and even legendary decade in Australian literature and history” (579, *Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*). Bruce Bennett makes the same point in his remark: “Literary historians are prone to create and sustain special formative periods in a nation’s literature, which then act as a turning point in their narratives. The Renaissance plays this role in histories of British literature. In Australia we have the 1890s. ... there was a ‘quickenings’ of Australian culture in the 1890s, especially in its literature, and that this was informed by the expression of national ideals leading to Australia’s formation as a nation in 1901” (Bennett, 158). Here Bennett emphasises the point that just as the Renaissance was a key formative period in British culture, the 1890s were a significant decade for Australian cultural life.

The 1890s were a decisive decade in several ways. Politically, it was a period when cultural nationalism became dominant in Australian life; “ a national self-awareness found expression in the Federation movement, climaxed by the proclamation of the Commonwealth of Australia on 1 January, 1901”. The decade also had its share of troubles – it was marked by economic depression, financial crisis, industrial conflict, massive unemployment. This was a time when Australia ‘modernised’, with motor cars, electric lighting, cinema, and improved communications becoming common (579, *Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*). It was a significant period in the literary history of Australia as well:

“Norman Lindsay’s *Bohemians of the Bulletin* (1965) helped foster the legend of the nineties as a ‘golden’ decade in the development of Australia: a decade when specifically, Australian writers and artists looked inwards and found an authentic identity distinct from the cultural models of Great Britain. As articulated by ... Vance Palmer in *The Legend of the Nineties* (1954), A.A. Philips, Russel Ward, and H. M. Green, Australian literature was finally born in the 1890s. The midwife was the *Bulletin* which under J. F. Archibald and A. G. Stephens encouraged writers and illustrators to discover a ‘real’ Australia in which the importance of the bush was stressed, and to affirm, in short sketches and ballads written in a natural idiom, certain distinctive values: national pride, egalitarianism, republicanism, collectivism, Utopianism, scepticism. A major symbol in this version of the Nineties is the pastoral worker; the major creative publicists are Henry Lawson, ‘Banjo’ Paterson and Joseph Furphy. Furphy’s famous ... description of his novel *Such is Life* (1903) ‘temper democratic; bias, offensively Australian’ has been taken as a motto for the spirit of the age” (580, *Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*).

Thus, the 1890s were significant not only in quickening the political forces of nationalism that eventually led to Federation at the beginning of the twentieth century, but also for developing a distinctly “authentic Australian’ style in literature that was free from British models. Themes such as egalitarianism and mateship, the figure of the bush worker etc. which are now seen as characteristic markers of Australian identity, became prominent during this period.

4.3.1 The Sydney Bulletin

Australian cultural life in the 1890s was dominated by the *Sydney Bulletin*. Bruce Bennett explains the role that this magazine played in nurturing the nationalist spirit.

“Legends of the 1890s attach themselves to the *Bulletin* magazine, and with good reason. Taking its name from the *San Francisco Bulletin*, the *Sydney Bulletin* was founded in 1880, by J.F. Archibald and John Haynes. The *Bulletin* became known as a vehicle for vernacular ‘bush realism’ during the Archibald years, and particularly from 1896-1906, when Archibald was assisted by A. G. Stephens as editor of the literary section known as the Red page.... Yet, the ‘Bushman’s Bible’, as the bulletin was sometimes called, was much more than this... A. G. Stephens brought an international flavour, critical acumen and flair to the Red page. ... Stephens also exhorted teachers and parents to instil a love and respect for Australia... this grafting of an Australian cultural nationalism with an international outlook set a pattern for later cultural nationalists” (Bennett, 160-161).

The *Bulletin* played a clear role in building up the nationalistic temper of the 1890s. As pointed out in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*,

The *Bulletin*, with its rallying cry of “Australia for the Australians,” was ardently nationalistic. It urged its contributors to “write Australian” and to celebrate above all the virtues of the Australian worker, especially the bush worker. It endorsed the egalitarian myth of mateship rather than the independence of the little man, the battler, who struggles on his own against the odds. It espoused a cheerful, somewhat larrikin (Australian word meaning, among other things, “rowdy,” or “irresponsible”) brashness, and in this it revealed its underlying urban orientation. ... it favoured themes of national pride, the values of rural life, and sympathy for the struggles of small-scale farmers.

Kirstine Moffat explains how the *Bulletin* played a key role in articulating and fostering Australian nationalism. According to Moffat, A. G. Stephens, the literary editor of the famous ‘Red Page’ during 1894–1906, was particularly influential in promoting literature that was ‘authentically’ Australian. “His editorials praised the poetry of Banjo Patterson and the stories of Henry Lawson for their evocation of the bush, the shearing-shed, the campfire, and the road. Likewise, *My Brilliant Career* met with his approval, hailed as ‘the very first Australian novel to be published. The author has the Australian mind, she speaks Australian language, utters Australian thoughts, and looks at things from an Australian point of view absolutely’ (Stephens 1901)” (Moffat, 17). Thus the *Bulletin* encouraged local writers and celebrated writing that focused on authentic Australian landscapes and experiences.

Check your progress 2

In what ways did the 1890s become a decisive decade in Australian political and cultural history? Discuss the role played by the Sydney Bulletin in Australian cultural history of the 1890s and the Federation years.

4.4 NATIONALISM AND THE NOVEL

Several writers at the beginning of the twentieth century, passionately voiced their support for the growing mood of nationalistic fervour. Vance and Nettie Palmer and Miles Franklin were prominent among those who called for a national literature. According to Robert Dixon, at the time of Federation, “ ‘Perhaps the chief possession of Australian writers in the year 1901, was this consciousness of nationhood What Australia was to mean ... lay in the hands of her writers above all to discover.’ ... In that year, two of Australia’s most famous authors published major works: Miles Franklin’s *My Brilliant Career* and Henry Lawson’s *Joe Wilson and his Mates*” (Dixon, 2009: 227).

Miles Franklin’s *My Brilliant Career* ends on a clear note of national pride: “I am proud to be an Australian, a daughter of the Southern Cross, a child of the mighty bush”. Franklin espouses the cause of an authentic Australian literature in other writings also: in *James Furphy: The Legend of a Man and His Book*, she expressed her view that a national literature must emerge from ‘the soil of its origin’ (1944, 2). Other prominent writers who sounded an authentic Australian voice were A. B. Banjo Paterson who composed “Waltzing Matilda” and other bush ballads, and Henry Lawson, best known for short story collections such as *Joe Wilson and his Mates* (1901), *While the Billy Boils* (1896) and *Children of the Bush* (1902).



Portrait of A. B. Paterson, created around 1890. (source [www. Wikipedia.org](http://www.Wikipedia.org))

Kirstine Moffat notes that “Nationalism was the central cause of many Australian novelists from the 1880s onwards ... The novelists associated with this movement believed that literature should be of and about the nation, capturing the thoughts and dreams of ordinary people, and written in an idiom that was vernacular and authentic rather than imported and derivative. In seeking to find this local voice, Australian and New Zealand writers and literary critics favoured realism over romance, action over emotion, external locations over domestic worlds, and egalitarianism over privilege.” (Moffat, 17). Recent critics who have attempted a gendered reading of late nineteenth century and early twentieth century nationalism, remark on its celebration of masculinist values. Kerryn Goldsworthy points out that turn-of-the-century Australian nationalism was profoundly masculinist in its values and expression (107). Elizabeth Webby also remarks that “the image of the ideal or the typical Australian, associated with the new nationalism of the 1890s, was a decidedly masculine one, whether conceived as pioneer, gold-miner or bushman” (Webby 9).

Check your progress 3

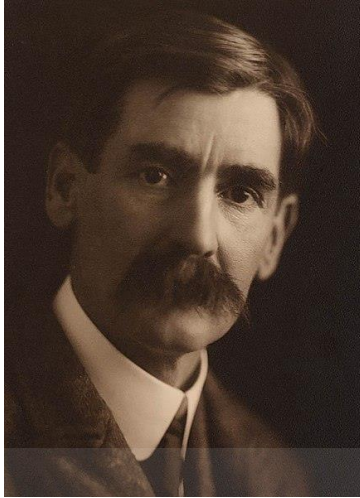
Explain how Australian literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries participated in the discourse of nationalism.

4.5 WRITERS OF FICTION DURING THE FEDERATION YEARS

4.5.1 Henry Lawson

Henry Lawson (1867-1922), one of the outstanding Australian writers of the 1890s and the early decades of the twentieth century, began his literary career as a writer of verse, and continued to write verse, but became more famous as a writer of short stories. His stories such as ‘The Drover’s Wife’, ‘The Bush Undertaker’, and ‘The Union Buries its Dead’ are some of the classics of Australian short fiction. His collections of stories include *Where the Billy Boils*, *Joe Wilson and his Mates* and *The Country I Come From*. Lawson became a legend in his lifetime: “The extent of the Lawson legend in his lifetime can be measured by the fact that he was the first Australian writer granted a state funeral.

Since his death, he has remained Australian literature's most famous son" (*Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*, 455).



Portrait of Henry Lawson (source Wikipedia.org)

Lawson is seen as a writer who played a major role in creating an authentic Australian literary voice. He is regarded as “a poet of the people, a folk-writer whose galloping rhythms and facility for rhyme articulate the voice and attitudes of Australians” (*Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*, 456). Bruce Bennett points out how A. G. Stephens “pronounced that Lawson was the voice of the bush and that the bush is the heart of Australia” (Bennett, 165-6). Lawson was seen as embodying in his writing all the values that Australian nationalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, stood for. As Robert Dixon points out, “the new Australian writing was associated internationally with the social and moral development of the new nation, and Lawson was hailed in London as its epitome.” (Dixon, 2009: 229).

Kerryn Goldsworthy explains how Lawson's writing may be seen to construct Australian national identity in the early twentieth century: “By 1901 when he published *Joe Wilson and his Mates*, he was already “being Henry Lawson”, and his name had already come to be associated with what was “Australian”. Some of the qualities that endured for many years in the received version of the national character were those exemplified and celebrated in the Joe Wilson stories.... mate-ship, class ... egalitarianism, and a kind of laid-back stoicism. Lawson's stories and characters have been a major influence in the construction of that traditional “national identity”. (Goldsworthy 106). Goldsworthy here underlines the role played by fiction during the Federation years in shaping what has come to be seen as an “Australian” national identity.

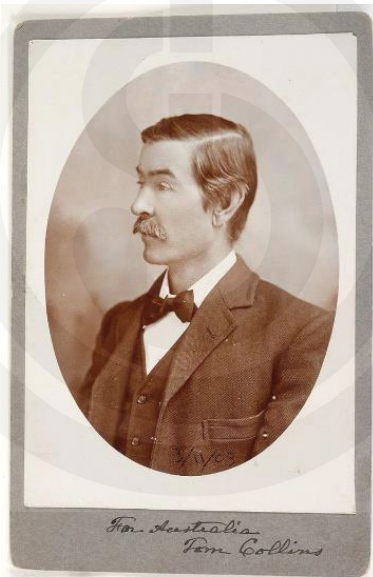
4.5.2 Miles Franklin

One of the most distinguished writers of the early decades of the twentieth century, was Miles Franklin (1879 -1954), in whose name one of Australia's most prestigious literary prizes has been instituted. (We will be studying the writing of Miles Franklin in detail in the next two units of this block). Franklin wrote several of her novels under the pseudonym ‘Brent of Bin Bin’. Her most famous novels include *My Brilliant Career* (1901), *Some Everyday Folk and Dawn* (1909), *All that Swagger* (1936), and *My Career Goes Bung* (1946). Miles Franklin spent several years in the USA and in England. As Robert Dixon points out, the writer Joseph Furphy urged Franklin not to leave Australia, “use her talent in

developing an Australian tradition of democratic literature: ‘stay among the eucalypts Miles,’ he urged, ‘and earn the adoration of your countrymen by translating the hosannas and elegies of the bush into vernacular phrase’” (Dixon, 2009: 230).

My Brilliant Career, which we will discuss in detail in the next two units, was written under her own name at the age of nineteen. Henry Lawson wrote the preface to the novel, which tells the story of a young girl Sybylla Melvyn. The sensitive descriptions of Australian landscapes in the novel prompted Lawson to remark that the novel was “true to Australia, the truest I ever read”. The novel has a strong feminist orientation, while also participating in the nationalist discourse of the period. Franklin’s work stands out among nationalist Australian fiction of the Federation period in this regard. As we have already mentioned, Australian nationalism was marked by masculinist values and Franklin’s work departs from this tradition. Robert Dixon points out, ““Drusilla Modjeska describes *My Brilliant Career* as “a feminist intervention into the nationalist tradition in the literature of the 1890s.” On the one hand, it points to the harshness of life for women in the bush, the drudgery, the anti-intellectualism, the stifling of their creativity. On the other, it uphold the traditions of nationalism through its depictions of bush landscape and characters” (Dixon, 2009: 230)

4.5.3 Joseph Furphy



Portrait of Joseph Furphy (from the collection of the State library of New South Wales. Source: Wikipedia.org)

Joseph Furphy (1843-1912), was according to Miles Franklin, a “founding father of the novel”. Though he wrote two other novels and several shorter pieces, his fame rests on his “nationalist novel” *Such is Life*. John Barnes says, “*Such is Life* has survived the ultimate criticism that all literature faces, the test of time, and it seems to me that it is no mere empty gesture to call it an Australian classic.... Miles Franklin and Vance Palmer have emphasised its cultural role in promoting and sustaining a sense of national identity, and so helping to free Australians from a state of what Miles called ‘mental colonialism’” (Barnes 17). *Such is Life* was not a popular novel in its time, and it was only in the 1940s that its significance as a classic of the Federation period came to be widely recognised.

Furphy was born in the Yarra valley, Victoria, as the son of Irish Protestant parents “from whom he inherited a capacity for hard work and a love of literature” (*Oxford Companion* 304). He worked for a while on his father’s farm, and in various other capacities in the goldfield, as a machine operator, as a labourer and so on, and eventually he moved to his brother’s foundry in Shepparton in Victoria. Though this move cost him his independence, he got the opportunity to read at the local Mechanics institute. In 1889, he began contributing short items to the *Bulletin*. By 1897, he had finished writing a complete novel, and sent it to the editor of the *Bulletin* for comments. A.G. Stephens the editor suggested corrections and revisions which Furphy worked on and carried out. He eventually published the novel in 1903 with the title *Such is Life: Being Certain Extracts from the Diary of Tom Collins*. He later completed two other books *The Buln-Buln and the Brolga* and *Rigby’s Romance*. In 1905, Furphy moved to Western Australia to join his sons, and died there in 1912. Furphy was eventually recognised as a major writer of the Federation period, and by the 1940s, his stature was well secured. Miles Franklin wrote a full-length study *Joseph Furphy: the Legend of a Man and his Book* (1944) (*Oxford Companion* 304-5).

Furphy led a hard labouring life for several years, and it was magazines like the *Bulletin* that gave him the opportunity to participate in the intellectual debates of the time, and explore his own creativity. John Barnes explains the significance of the *Bulletin* in shaping Furphy as a writer:

We who live in an age of instant communication can hardly appreciate the significance that a paper like the *Bulletin* had for someone as isolated as Furphy. Published weekly in Sydney, it identified itself as ‘The Australian National Newspaper’ and carried the slogan ‘Australia for the Australians’. With its team of talented journalists and black-and-white illustrators, it was lively and entertaining, and had a wide circulation throughout Australia. As its red cover indicated, it made no pretence of being neutral on political and social issues. ...The *Bulletin*, which Joe read every week, was a sort of lifeline for him, keeping him in touch with the world beyond the foundry. It was important in shaping his thinking on the issues of the day; and even more importantly, it offered him the possibility of publication.” (Barnes, John. JASAL 7).

Furphy seized the opportunities offered by the *Bulletin* to local writers and sent his novel to them for publication. Furphy famously described his novel *Such is Life* as: ‘Temper, democratic; bias offensively Australian’. The novel is experimental in several ways.

Although he had a store of impressions, reflections and anecdotes that could have been shaped into standard reminiscences, Furphy chose to write fiction, not memoirs or autobiography. *Such is Life* has the appearance of being memoirs and was taken as such by some early readers, but Furphy’s Riverina is as much a literary creation, a fictional place, as Thomas Hardy’s Wessex or William Fawcner’s Yoknapatawpha County. While the book gives an authentic representation of bush life, accurate in all its details, describing the customs and protocols of the bush with the understanding of an insider, it is concerned with much more than the life of a region. ... Furphy’s account of bush life is not a simple, straightforward telling of a story but a most elaborately constructed narrative with philosophical implications about human understanding of the pattern of our existence (Barnes 11).

The form of the novel borders on formlessness: as John Barnes points out above, it appeared to early readers to be some sort of memoirs. It is not a straightforward description of bush life either, but a complex questioning of the realities of human life.

The introduction of Tom Collins as the narrator, is again a structural device that adds to the novel's complexity. John Barnes explains how originally, Furphy had called himself 'Warrigal Jack' in his writing (warrigal' being an Aboriginal word for the dingo, and 'jack' meaning 'knave'). From 1893 he signed his contributions 'Tom Collins', a name which in current slang signified idle rumour. "... the exuberant, irrepressible 'Tom Collins' became an alter ego, another self, not just a pseudonym. Writing as Tom Collins, the opinionated, cocksure, philosophical and pedantic bushman, Furphy had a degree of ironical detachment from his own experience, and seems to have felt a kind of freedom. He was like an actor who is most himself when playing a role (Barnes 13).

The novel also writes against the form of the colonial romance that was popular in the late nineteenth century. "*Such is Life* is significant for the part it played in turning Australian fiction away from the colonial romance, and Furphy remains one of the most significant writers of Australian fiction before the First World War" (*Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* 305). Furphy articulates his objection to the colonial romances popularised by Boldrewood and Kingsley, by making *Such is Life* "as little in form like a conventional novel as possible, and as much like the 'jumble of incident, dialogue, reflection etc.' that he described life to be ... In this sense *Such is Life* is an experiment in realism... Tom Collins is the principal narrator..." (*Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* 728) Kirstine Moffat also focuses on the strategies adopted by the novel to oppose and satirise the colonial romance novels: "The narrator, Tom Collins, shares the story of his encounters with the bush and the land in a distinctively Australian idiom. Rejecting plot, the narrator purports to expand on a series of diary entries that he kept over a seven month period in 1883–1884, choosing the ninth day of each month for extended comment. In both *Such is Life* and *Rigby's Romance* (1905), Furphy satirizes the romance mode of earlier Australian fiction, parodying *Geoffrey Hamlyn* and *Robbery Under Arms*." Thus, by rejecting a conventional plot and by using a series of diary entries to unfold his narrative, Furphy satirises conventional romance novels. "With its rejection of colonial modes and values and its overt, aggressive nationalism, *Such is Life* seemed well timed on its publication in 1903 to reflect the birth two years earlier, of Australia as an independent nation" (Goldsworthy 108). The novel *Such is Life* is experimental in several senses: it departs from conventional plot structures and relies on a series of diary entries for the narrative and adopts a narrative point of view which is detached from the author.

4.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have looked at the unfolding of historical events that led to Federation and the creation of the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901. We also considered the 1890s as a significant decade in the political and cultural history of Australia. We also focused on the ways in which the nationalist spirit developed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the role of the Sydney Bulletin in fostering such nationalism. The ways in which literary texts participate in this nationalist discourse have also been discussed. The Unit also focuses on the writing of some of the outstanding writers of the Federation years, such as Henry Lawson, Miles Franklin and Joseph Furphy.

Check your progress 4

1. Discuss how the writing of Henry Lawson and Miles Franklin contributed to the spirit of nationalism.
2. Write a short note critically analysing the significance of Joseph Furphy's novel *Such is Life* in the history of the Australian novel.

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