

# ***Clarence Michael James Stanislaus Dennis***

*better known as*

## ***C.J. Dennis***



*“..... the Robert Burns of Australia .....”*

Like Joseph Furphy, poet C. J. Dennis, (*nom de plume* Tom Collins), wrote during one of the most prolific periods of Australian literature and a time when a whole new Australian idiom (now known as *`strine`*) was developing. (He wrote a series of poems under the heading *Culcher and Lingo!*)

Dennis was born on 7 September 1876 at Auburn, South Australia, first of three sons of James Dennis and his second wife Katherine (Kate) Frances, née Tobin. His father had been born in County Cork, Ireland and came to Australia in 1860s. Dennis was educated St Aloysius' College, Sevenhill, and Christian Brothers' College, Adelaide,

Clarence (Clarrie or Den) Michael James Stanislaus Dennis was born in Auburn, South Australia on September 7, 1876, to James Dennis and his second wife Catherine (Kate) Tobin. In 1883, James Dennis took up the lease on a hotel in Gladstone in South Australia's mid-North and, a couple of years later, moved again, this time seven miles further north to the township of Laura, and the Beetaloo Hotel.

Dennis's mother died in 1890 leaving his father with 3 sons and a hotel to look after. This was never going to work successfully so two of Kate's unmarried sisters left their home in Mintaro (in the Clare Valley) and moved to Laura to help with the children's upbringing. For some time in his teens Dennis attended the Christian Brothers' College in Adelaide but had returned to Laura by the age of 17. At that time he took a job as a clerk to a local solicitor, and it was during this period that he published his first poem, when 19, titled "The Singular Experiences of Six Sturdy Sportsmen" - which concerned the exploits of Dennis and a group of his mates when lost in the Beetaloo Hills just outside Laura. The verse was published in the local Laura newspaper *The Laura Standard*. Some time later he worked on the staff of the *Critic*, an Adelaide weekly newspaper. By the age of 21 he was back in Laura working as a barman in his father's hotel, and a year or so later left Laura for Broken Hill in New South Wales.

In the early 1900s he was back in Adelaide and back on the staff of the *Critic*, finally ending up as the journal's editor. In 1905 he started a threepenny weekly newspaper with A.E. Martin called the *Gadfly*, which was to have a life-span of about three years. About 18 months into that time, however, Dennis left the paper and Adelaide and headed to Melbourne. He kept himself employed (though not very well) as a freelance journalist until he came under the influence of the artist Hal Waugh who took him off to a camp he had established in the Dandenong Ranges about 40 miles east of Melbourne at a place called Toolangi. Dennis was to remain here or in this vicinity more or less for the rest of his life.

Over the next five years Dennis published a series of poems in various publications, one being the influential *Bulletin*. These would later be incorporated in his first book, *Backblock Ballads and Other Verses*, published in 1913. Although the book received favourable reviews, it did not sell very well and Dennis decided to try his luck in Sydney where he joined the staff of the trade union journal, *The Call: The Ha'penny Daily*. Again this sojourn didn't last very long and he returned to Melbourne where he took a position in the Public Service.

Shortly after leaving Sydney he wrote to the publisher Angus and Robertson with ideas for a book he titled *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke*. After a series of misunderstandings between Dennis and George Robertson, the book was published in mid-October 1915. By 5<sup>th</sup> November 1915 the first edition of 2,480 copies was sold out. Second and third edition were equally popular and after nine months the book had sold approximately 51,000 copies in Australasia alone. The book was also published and sold well in Britain, Canada and the USA. *The Bloke* had obviously struck a nerve with Australians. *The Bloke* was dramatised and hit the stage in both Sydney and Melbourne. He had obviously struck a nerve with Australians.



**The Bloke and "is Doreen"**

On 4<sup>th</sup> October, 1919 a silent film version of *The Sentimental Bloke* was screened for the first time in the Melbourne Town Hall. It featured Albert Tauchert as *The Bloke* and Lottee Lyell as Doreen (see above)

A copy of the film is held in the National Sound and Film Archive, Canberra.  
(To view the film visit: <http://dl.screenaustralia.gov.au/module/1008/>)



**Ginger Mick**

On 9th October 1916 Dennis published *The Moods of Ginger Mick* based on a character from *The Sentimental Bloke*. 42,349 copies were sold within six months. Dennis had become, by sales and by general sentiment, the Laureate of the Larrikin, the best-known poet in Australia.

His next book, *The Glugs of Gosh*, broke with the tradition of *The Bloke* and presented a mixture of satire and fantasy masquerading as a book for children. It originally started life as a gift for the son of a close friend who was recovering from a shooting accident. The book was a major departure in style for Dennis and aptly showed the breadth of his talent, although the author is on record as doubting whether the majority of his readers "got the point" of the political and social satire.

In 1917 Dennis married Olive (Bidly) Herron of Melbourne. He and his wife successfully applied for the lease of the property on which he had been living in Toolangi. Subsequently he bought it. Dennis had originally wanted to

name the place "Seaview", which, given the distance from the sea seems something of a joke, but finally decided on the name "Arden". As he wrote later: "There's the lit'ry association, there's the forest, there's my pen-name in the second syllable, and there's a character called Dennis in *As You Like It*. So 'Arden' it had to be."

Dennis's attachment to *The Bloke* continued with the publication of *Doreen* and *Digger Smith, Jim of the Hills*. and several years later, of *Rose of Spadgers*. In 1922 he became attached to the staff of the Melbourne *Herald* in and the bulk of his work from that time on was devoted to pieces written for that newspaper. Over the next sixteen years Dennis was to produce some 3,000-odd pieces of poems and prose pieces, the vast majority of which were never collected in his lifetime, with the exception of his last book *The Singing Garden* published by Dennis's wife, Margaret Herron. Since his death two collections have been published: *Random Verses* (1952) and *The C.J. Dennis Collection* (1987).

CJ Dennis died on 22 June, 1938 at the age of 61. He is buried in Box Hill cemetery. The inscription on his tombstone reads:

*Now is the healing, quiet hour that fills  
This gay green world with peace and grateful rest.*

After his death, J.A. Lyons, Prime Minister at the time, said: "I am sure that I speak for all Australians in expressing deep regret at the death of CJ Dennis. He was the Robert Burns of Australia. He created characters which have become immortal and he captured the true Australian spirit. Already his works are world-famous. We Australians will treasure it."

Since his death some sixty-five years ago, Dennis has probably fallen to third on the "classic" Australian poetry list behind Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson. Both of these poets have appeared on Australian currency notes. It

might well be time to start a campaign to have Dennis so honoured when next the Reserve Bank decides to change the ten dollar bill.

Now it's time to sample some C.J. Dennis.

From *The Sentimental Bloke*:

"'Er name's Doreen ...Well, spare me bloomin' days!  
You could er knocked me down wiv 'arf a brick!  
Yes, me, that kids meself I know their ways,  
An' 'as a name for smoogin' in our click!  
I just lines up 'an tips the saucy wink.  
But strike! The way she piled on dawg! Yer'd think  
A bloke was givin' back-chat to the Queen....  
'Er name's Doreen.

I seen 'er in the markit first uv all,  
Inspectin' brums at Steeny Isaacs' stall.  
I backs me barrer in - the same ole way --  
An' sez, "Wot O! It's been a bonzer day.  
'Ow is it fer a walk?" ... Oh, 'oly wars!  
The sorta look she gimme! Jest becors  
I tried to chat 'er, like you'd make a start  
Wiv *any* tart."

[However, the Bloke is quite a philosopher.]

"This ev'nin' I was sittin' wiv Doreen,  
Peaceful an' 'appy wiv the day's work done,  
Watchin', be'ind the orchard's bonzer green,  
The flamin' wonder of the settin' sun.  
Another day gone by; another night  
Creepin' along to douse Day's golden light;

Another dawning when the night is gone,  
To live an' love--an' so life mooches on."

And The Bloke also had the eye of a poet. Consider the following from *The Moods of Ginger Mick*. (The Bloke's close mate, Ginger Mick, had enlisted and gone to war.)

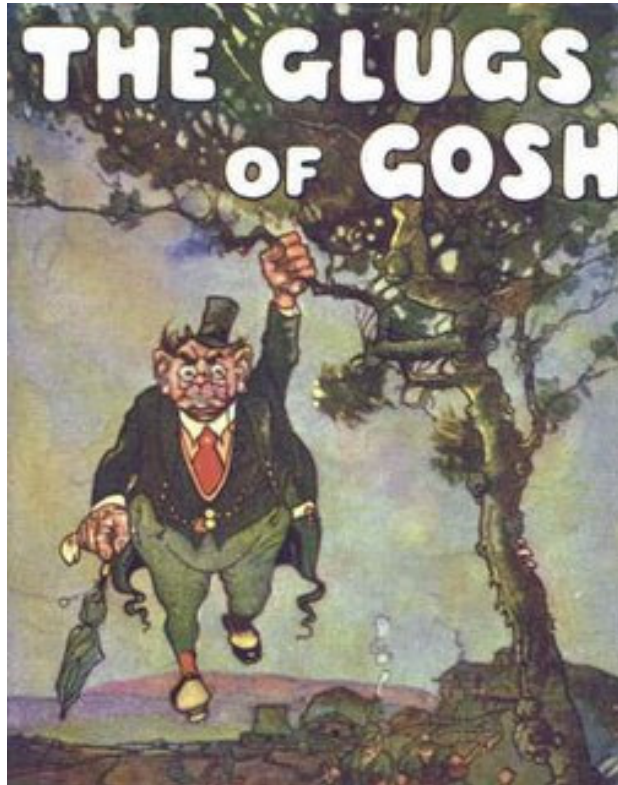
I 'ave written Mick a letter in reply to one uv 'is,  
Where 'e arsts 'ow things is goin' where the gums an' wattles is -  
So I tries to buck 'im up a bit; to go fer Abdul's fez;  
An' I ain't no nob at litchure; but this is wot I sez:

I suppose you fellers dream, Mick, in between the scraps out them  
Uv the land yeh left be'ind yeh when yeh sailed to do yer share:  
Uv Collins Street, or Rundle Street, or Pitt, or George, or Hay,  
Uv the land beyond the Murray or along the Castlereagh.  
An' I guess yeh dream of old days an' the things yeh used to do,  
An' yeh wonder 'ow 'twill strike yeh when yeh've seen this business thro';  
An' yeh try to count yer chances when yeh've finished wiv the Turk  
An' swap the gaudy war game fer a spell o' plain, drab work.

Well, Mick, yeh know jist 'ow it is these early days o' Spring,  
When the gildin' o' the wattle chucks a glow on everything.  
Them olden days, the golden days that you remember well,  
In spite o' war an' worry, Mick, are wiv us fer a spell.  
Fer the green is on the paddicks, an' the sap is in the trees,  
An' the bush birds in the gullies sing the ole, sweet melerdies;  
An' we're 'opin', as we 'ear 'em, that, when next the Springtime comes,  
You'll be wiv us 'ere to listen to that bird tork in the gums.

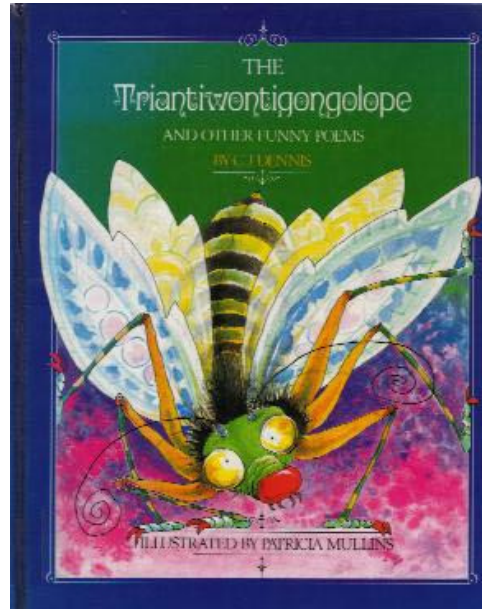


Late in his career Dennis wrote for children. He created strange creatures called Glugs who lived in a land called Gosh. They were **The Glugs of Gosh**



Now, here is a tale of the Glugs of Gosh,  
And a wonderful tale I ween,  
Of the Glugs of Gosh and their great King Splosh,  
And Tush, his virtuous Queen.  
And here is a tale of the crafty Ogs,  
In their neighbouring land of Podge;  
Of their sayings and doings and plottings and brewings,  
And something about Sir Stodge.  
Wise to profundity,  
Stout to rotundity,  
That was the Knight, Sir Stodge.

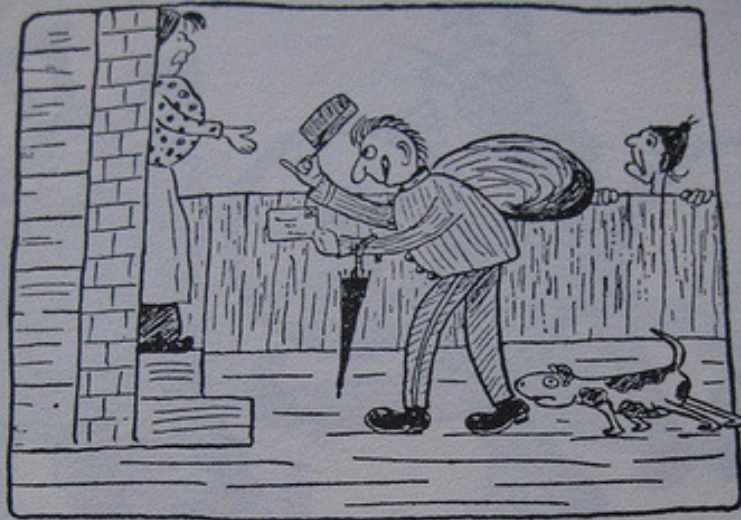
Dennis loved experimenting with language, so we have *The Triantiwontigongolope and Other Funny Poems* from his *Books for Kids*



## **The Triantiwontigongolope.**

There's a very funny insect that you do not often spy,  
And it isn't quite a spider, and it isn't quite a fly;  
It is something like a beetle, and a little like a bee,  
But nothing like a wooly grub that climbs upon a tree.  
Its name is quite a hard one, but you'll learn it soon, I hope.  
So try:

Tri-  
Tri-anti-wonti-  
Triantiwontigongolope.



### THE POSTMAN

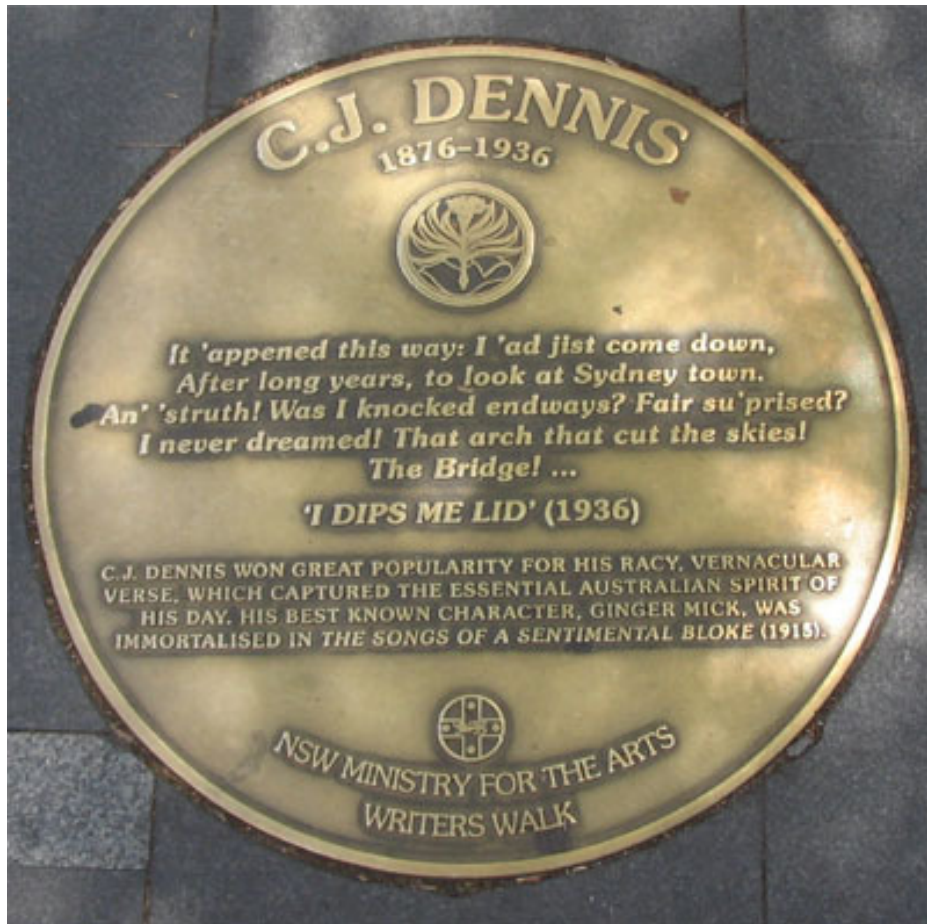
I'd like to be a postman, and walk along the street,  
Calling out, "Good Morning, Sir," to gentlemen I meet  
Ringing every door-bell all along my beat,  
In my cap and uniform so very nice and neat.  
Perhaps I'd have a parasol in case of rain or heat;  
But I wouldn't be a postman if . . . .  
The walking hurt my feet.

Would you?

On reading C.J. Dennis today one is prompted to ask, along with Mark Latham,

*"Where have all the blokes gone? ..... When, for example, did you last hear a waiter in a cafe say 'What are you blokes having?' instead of the ubiquitous self-inclusive 'Hey, guys, what are we having?'"*

To quote further, this time from an article published in *The Age* on September 6, 2006, (titled *The Sentimental Bloke*) : *"Blokedom, along with our language, is too special to lose. Bonzer!"*



Plaque, Writers' Walk, Circular Quay, Sydney

## Reference

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