C.J. Dennis’s *The Book for Kids* (1921) remains my all-time favourite kids’ book. It’s the one I unfailingly buy for young friends and relatives, and I have never had difficulty finding a copy, so presumably it has stayed in print. I can’t be the only child of the baby boom whose mental furniture was in some measure organised by ‘The Traveller’ and ‘The Triantwontigongolope’.

Undoubtedly, however, Dennis’s more high-profile claim to fame is *The Sentimental Bloke* (1915), and *The Book for Kids*(118,452),(872,996) is accorded scant attention in Philip Butterss excellent new biography of Dennis. Cleverly titled *An Unsentimental Bloke*, it places the Bloke phenomenon in its historical and cultural context, as an example of larrikin masculinity domesticated by the attractions of his Doreen and the kid. It remains the biggest selling book of poetry in Australian publishing history. Without mentioning the war and the Gallipoli, Dennis carefully crafted the book to appeal to a nation at war: it was circulated among the troops and ‘treasured by soldiers keen for a taste of Australia’ (83). It became known as ‘the trench bible’ and John Monash instructed his chaplains to use passages from the book as the basis for a series of sermons to the troops. Later, its sequel *The Moods of Ginger Mick* ‘became one of the great pieces of pro-recruitment writing from World War I’ (118), and was ‘the first and most popular of the mythologising accounts’ (114) of the ANZACs. Despite, or perhaps because of, their overwhelming popularity, the Bloke and *Ginger Mick* were not well-received in the more high-brow art world of the time. Norman Lindsay in particular was seething, enraged by the rapturous reception of such ‘maudlin rubbish’.

The underlying tenor of this biography is to show, as the title implies, that Dennis is not to be confused with his ‘sentimental bloke’. Dennis didn’t discourage the tendency of the public to do so, realising that it would be good for sales. He was an assiduous marketer, using his regular contributions to the *Bulletin* in the lead-up to publication to ‘advertise the book’ by using The Sentimental Bloke as a pseudonym. He asked Henry Lawson to write a preface, and then had to request the removal of a sentence which drew attention to a certain class-consciousness which they shared but which Dennis wanted to gloss over. While clearly an admirer of Dennis’s best work, Butterss seems a little uncomfortable with such a pragmatic approach to literature, and he also appears slightly dismayed by Dennis’s free-spending reaction to sudden success after years of living on the margins as a freelancer.

It is difficult, of course, to give an intimate portrait of someone who left no diaries or confessional writings. Testimony from his wife and his friends, and correspondence, is available and has been used extensively. But there is an odd absence at the centre of this book. The facts are there, but the evidence of what made him who he was is circumstantial. Both his marriage and his death are described rather perfunctorily. It comes as a surprise to the reader, having read the evidence that Lindsay despised his work so much, that Dennis would propose him as an illustrator for a projected book, ‘unaware of how deep Norman Lindsay’s animosity was’ (147). Did he ever become aware, I wonder, and how did he feel about it?

Nevertheless, Butterss’ biography is the result of painstaking research and a thorough knowledge of Dennis’s extensive writings, and the closing summary is a sensitive and well-judged plea for due recognition to ‘be given to the literary sensation whose humour and emotion were so important to Australians at home and at the front’ in World War I (222). I would add a plea for recognition of the enduring influence of his
minor masterpiece for children, which in its wry irreverence has nourished generations of Australians.