Miles Franklin

Miles Franklin is a central figure in Australia’s literary landscape.

Stella Maria Sarah Miles Franklin was born on 14 October 1879 at Old Talbingo Homestead, near Tumut, New South Wales, the home of her maternal grandmother, Sarah Lampe. One of the greatest Australian writers of the twentieth century, ‘Miles’ commemorated Edward Miles, an illiterate ancestor who had arrived in Sydney as a convict in 1788.
Jill Roe, one of Franklin's biographers, describes Franklin's mother Susannah (born 1850) as ‘a well-regulated and rather humourless person’ and her father John (born 1848) as a ‘native-born bushman [with] a touch of poetry in his make-up’. The family lived at Brindabella station in a valley on the western edge of present-day Canberra, 110 kilometres along treacherous mountain tracks from Talbingo. Stella — as she was always known to those closest to her — was their first child but soon joined by a sister. Eventually the family grew to seven children.

Stella was educated by a private tutor, Charles Blyth, who thought highly of her abilities and found in the young Franklin the conventional reward of teachers: ‘the responsive student’. It was a happy childhood in an idyllic setting, though Stella was aware of how her mother's life was circumscribed by domesticity.

"I have never seen a like combination of courage, industry and organizing ability – (wasted)."

Miles Franklin writing about her mother in her diary, 13 June 1939.

Franklin returned to Talbingo several times during her childhood. There, surrounded by her grandmother and a number of aunts and uncles, she was treated as a ‘pet and a prodigy’. Throughout her long life Talbingo remained synonymous with unconditional love and security.

In May 1889 the Franklin family moved to a property that Susannah Franklin named Stillwater. It was near Bangalore, a railway stop about thirty minutes from Goulburn. This move would prove to be an economic failure. Stella went to the newly opened Thornford Public School and was encouraged in her writing by her teacher, Mary Gillespie, who would become a long-term supporter of Franklin. Tom Hebblewhite, editor of the local newspaper, the Goulburn Evening Penny Post, was another early supporter of the young Franklin.

Franklin's first known literary effort, a verse entitled 'Man's a Fool', was written when she was eight. At the age of sixteen, Franklin's first known publication, an account of her school picnic, appeared in Hebblewhite's newspaper (though some articles which appeared earlier may have been written by her). In 1896, Franklin wrote several short pieces including two that she signed 'S.M.S. Miles Franklin', the first time she used the name 'Miles Franklin' that would become such a significant thread of Australia's literary fabric.

My Brilliant(?) Career

"Nothing great has been attempted, merely a few pictures of Australian life … There will be no mistakes in geography, scenery or climate as I write from fact not fancy. The heroine, who tells the story, is a study from life and illustrates the misery of being born out of one’s sphere."

Letter from ‘S.M.S. Miles Franklin’ to publishers Angus & Robertson, 30 March 1899

Franklin gave an early version of what would become her best-known novel to Hebblewhite, who offered a constructive and enthusiastic assessment. On 20 September 1898, just a few weeks short of her 19th birthday, Franklin began afresh, completing her manuscript by March 1899. A number of rejections followed and, in desperation, in November 1899 she approached Henry Lawson [5], whom she only knew from his poetry.

Lawson was very impressed with the manuscript and he arranged publication in Britain. My Brilliant Career by Miles
Franklin (her preferred name for publication) appeared in April 1901 and reached Australia in September. Franklin was upset that the question mark in her title — My Brilliant(?) Career — had been omitted, that her language had been toned down and that Lawson who wrote an introduction to the novel, had revealed that the author was a woman. When the book reached Australia, Franklin ensured that Hebblewhite received a copy (and, when the book was lost years later, she replaced it for him ‘with remembrance from his pupil Miles Franklin’).

"It is the very first Australian novel to be published ... Her book is a warm embodiment of Australian life, as tonic as bush air, as aromatic as bush trees, and as clear and honest as bush sunlight."

A. G. Stephens, Bulletin, 28 September 1901
My Brilliant Career was well reviewed in Australia and Britain and was rapidly reprinted. By the end of 1901 it had sold 1012 copies. It would sell another 1105 copies in 1902. Franklin was inundated with letters urging her to continue writing. A golden literary future was predicted, but Franklin would earn very little from her brilliant book as colonial editions of books published in Britain attracted a much-reduced royalty.

Miles Franklin, now a celebrity, was regarded as a ‘comet of wonder’. She had an entrée into society where she met movers and shakers in the world of feminism and social action such as Rose Scott in Sydney and Vida Goldstein in Melbourne. A. B. (Banjo) Paterson, whose Man from Snowy River had been published in 1895, offered her a literary collaboration and there are suggestions of a romance.

Constantly collecting material to fulfil her literary ambitions, Franklin worked briefly as a governess and as a nurse probationer before going into domestic service in Sydney and Melbourne during 1903 and 1904. She met Joseph Furphy, whose classic book Such is Life had been published in 1895, offered her a literary collaboration and there are suggestions of a romance.

Franklin’s fame and the success of My Brilliant Career did not immediately lead to further publications. After a sequel to the novel was rejected and a variety of other manuscripts were spurned, Franklin attempted to enter journalism. While she would publish many newspaper articles, she was unable to make a living from this type of work.
writing. In 1903 she had little money and was living with her parents at Penrith where they had moved to a small holding. It was a further descent from Stillwater, which itself had been a descent from the beloved Brindabella.

America promised more and, with her mother’s support, she sailed on 7 April 1906, aged 26, across the Pacific to another country and another culture. Lovelorn Edwin Bridle, a cousin who proposed marriage in 1905, pursued her by post but suffered the same fate as many other suitors. His efforts would result in an acceptance of friendship but not marriage.

**Leaving Australia**

“I love my work very much as it brings me in to close friendship with everyone in the world who is making thought and history.”

**Letter from Miles Franklin to her aunt, Annie Franklin, 21 November 1913**

In late 1906 Franklin arrived in Chicago. From 1908 to 1915, she worked for the National Women’s Trade Union League. Conspicuous wealth co-existed with exploited immigrants and intractable social problems in the windy city. It was pioneering and exciting work with a group of talented women who remained correspondents and lifelong friends, often referred to as her ‘congenials’.

Franklin was the League’s successful press officer for the legendary 22-week Garment Workers’ strike of 1910–11. She helped organise the League’s third biennial conference in Boston in 1911 at which she was elected national secretary. She held various editorial positions on the League’s journal, *Life and Labor*, where she worked with fellow Australian, Alice Henry and she travelled around America on League business with the President, Margaret Dreier Robins.

The Chicago years, when Franklin was in her late 20s and 30s, were years of hectic social activity. There were singing lessons, piano lessons, French lessons, lunches, dinners, dancing, the theatre, concerts, the opera, learning to drive a car. There were, too, several eligible young men.

Yet in private, Franklin was unsettled and her diaries tell of a ‘creeping melancholy’, her ‘unsatisfactory life’, ‘the futility of my existence’, ‘my failure in accomplishment’. She suffered regular bouts of ill health and entered a sanatorium for a period in 1912. Her anxiety would often exhaust her.

Unbeknown to her colleagues and friends, Franklin was assiduously writing novels, short stories and plays. All were either promptly or tardily rejected by American publishers.

In 1909, *Some Everyday Folk and Dawn* was published in Britain. This had been written before she left Australia. It is a romance that centres around the first election in New South Wales at which women could vote (August 1904). By the time the book was published, all women in Australia had the right to vote at both State and Federal elections. Franklin’s American colleagues were still fighting for this. The novel was not a success and Franklin would not publish again under her own name for more than twenty years.

In 1915, *Net of Circumstance*, written in Chicago, was published in Britain under one of her many pseudonyms, Mr and Mrs Ogniblat L’Artsau (Austral Talbingo reversed). The novel deals with the dilemma for women of maintaining independence within the confines of marriage and motherhood. The protagonist, while deciding whether to marry, suffers a series of illnesses reminiscent of Franklin’s own illnesses in her Chicago years. Again, Franklin was unable to replicate the success of *My Brilliant Career*.

“The call of the blood is very strong and London lures me.”

**Letter from Miles Franklin to Eva O’Sullivan, 23 September 1915**

In November 1915 Franklin arrived in London — ‘the heart of her empire as she put it’ — impelled at least partly by concern for her people at war. Though very much against conflict, as revealed in her private and public writings, she remained fiercely patriotic throughout her life. Franklin stayed in England, except for visits to Ireland in 1919 and 1926 as well as a visit to Australia in 1923-24, until 1932.

Over the years she spent in England she worked as a cook and was also able to earn some money from...
journalism. From 1919 to 1926, she was secretary at the National Housing and Town Planning Association and organised a women’s international housing convention in 1924.

Franklin enjoyed the cultural offerings of London and continued to write, especially for the theatre. But her work continued to be rejected and she had little money.

In March 1917 Franklin volunteered for war work with the Scottish Women’s Hospitals for Foreign Service. She served as a cook in a 200-bed tent hospital attached to the Serbian army near Lake Ostrovo, Macedonia, Greece, from July 1917 to February 1918, under the leadership of fellow Australian Dr Agnes Bennett.

Miles Franklin believed that war was futile and a particularly male form of lunacy. She thought that nothing had been learnt from 1914–18 and the Second World War, succeeded quickly by the Korean War, confirmed this belief. Some of Franklin’s most powerful works are those that expose most clearly her anti-war sentiments. In April 1952, she wrote to writer Jean Devanny:

“I still am an independent in politics and am against war — all wars. I should be against even a war to emancipate women, because war never can be won. To contemplate war is to be defeated.”

In the early 1920s, Franklin conceived an idea for a series of novels based on her family’s pioneering history in the Monaro region of New South Wales. After an absence of almost eighteen years, she returned to Australia briefly over the summer of 1923–24. She continued to work on the concept when back in England and would eventually publish the series under her most fiercely protected pseudonym Brent of Bin Bin (Bin Bin was the name of a run adjoining Brindabella that her father had leased).

There are six Brent novels. The first, *Up the Country*, appeared in 1928 and was quickly reprinted a number of times. *Ten Creeks Run* followed in 1930, *Back to Bool Bool* in 1931, *Prelude to Waking* in 1950 with *Cockatoos* released in 1954 around the time of Franklin’s death (she saw an advance copy in July) and *Gentleman at Gyang Gyang* in 1956.

Franklin believed that using a pen-name would generate a continuing mystery as each of the novels was published. It was a good marketing ploy and, in this (as in many ways), Franklin was well ahead of her times. She was even able to keep Brent’s identity hidden from her publishers.

She praised Brent’s works publicly and privately as if she had nothing to do with them: in lectures, on the radio, in articles, in letters, even in her own private diaries. She wrote to others in the guise of Brent while simultaneously writing to them as Miles Franklin. She even chaired a meeting of the Fellowship of Australian Writers in 1941 which discussed the very subject of Brent’s identity!
About this item:
Miles Franklin photographs & postcards of home & travel in Australia & abroad, c. 1879-1954

Talbingo Homestead where Miles Franklin was born

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Miles Franklin as a nurse

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**Business card of Miles Franklin, c.1910-1914**

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Miles Franklin's waratah cup and saucer

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Miles Franklin's waratah cup and saucer

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Photographs of Miles Franklin, c. 1879-1954

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Miss Miles Franklin, Feb 194[?] ("type":"image","clickUrl":"https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au"[3]")

Call # PX*D 250 (v.1) [31]
Digital ID: IE3250403
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About this item:
Photographs of Miles Franklin, c. 1879-1954

FL3250537 [33]

Photographs of Miles Franklin, c. 1879-1954
Call # PX*D 250 (v.1) [34]
Women delegates to the 1912 Chicago convention of Theodore Roosevelt's Progressive Party,
FL3190445 [27]

Miles Franklin's waratah cup and saucer,

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Jounama Creek, 1903,

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[3]FL1041937 [38]
Returning home

"People seem to be rejoicing like frogs after rain at something really Australian at last that is not gloomy and ugly while at the same time not glozing hardships."

Letter from Miles Franklin to Molly Menken, 12 January 1937

Aged 53, Miles Franklin returned to Australia in November 1932. She would live for the rest of her life at 26 Grey Street in the Sydney suburb of Carlton. This had been her parents' home since 1914. Her father, John, had died in 1931 and Franklin cared for her mother, Susannah, until she died, aged 87, in 1938.

In July 1936 Franklin won the S. H. Prior Memorial Prize of £100 for *All That Swagger* a novel that brought her critical and commercial success. The novel was published in late 1936, serialised in the *Bulletin* and regularly reprinted in Franklin's lifetime. It received good reviews and the author received hundreds of fan letters (one of which said that Franklin was as exciting as Don Bradman). It was *My Brilliant Career* revisited and more successful financially.

In January and February 1942 — as the Japanese advanced, Singapore fell, and Darwin was bombed — Franklin's epic of Australian pioneering life was read over ABC Radio.

On her return to Australia in 1932, Franklin had plunged into the local literary scene, standing up for literature with a 'bias, offensively Australian' as her friend Joseph Furphy had put it thirty years before. She passionately believed that great literature was firmly rooted in the culture of the writer. In all of her writings, at meetings and on the radio, she flayed those who urged Australians not to write about Australia because of the risk of appearing parochial.

In 1931, Franklin wrote of her necklace of friends to her former American colleague and fellow-Australian, Alice Henry. It was a lengthy necklace spanning Australia, the United States, Britain and Continental Europe. Thousands of letters received and sent attest to correspondence with individual friends, or her 'congenials', often extended over decades, with the value she placed on friendship and loyalty reflected in many of her published works and her unpublished manuscripts.

All her life she was a much sought-after companion for her wit and vibrant personality. She enjoyed entertaining friends at Carlton, a busy household that, at its peak, received seventy visitors over just two months. Special guests would have a ceremonial cup of tea from the 'waratah cup' — a great honour despite some nerves about dropping the cup — and sign the 'waratah book'.

Even in the last year of Franklin's life, when she was tired and frail, writer Katharine Susannah Prichard wrote, following a visit to Carlton:

"Such a treat just to hear you talk. I do love the wit & play of your so original mind. Nobody makes me laugh so much ... so delightfully Miles, gay, intrepid & unique! ... thank you again for so much stimulus – and the happiness of being with you."

My Humpy
"I have a lemon tree heavy with ripe fruit at the back door: the guavas are just done and the loquats are coming on. I am sitting by a fire made of sunflower stalks and the wood pruned from a plum tree, and all is so quiet and peaceful."

Letter from Miles Franklin to May & Phyl Meggitt, Cheshire, 6 July 1940

Franklin referred to her home in Sydney’s Carlton as ‘my humpy’. She was, on occasion, encouraged to move but if she was not content with suburban life, she never admitted it. As she let Hartley Grattan know: ‘I have plenty of food, a good roof and bed’.

Here she continued to write in her private diaries. In them she candidly — often hilariously — comments on the manners and morals of her contemporaries.

They also record her feelings of desolation and increasing frustration over her perceived lack of achievement and recognition. This is despite her considerable publishing success, an active social life and her capacity for generous friendship.

"I used to feel ten years ago that I was in a very long tunnel with the light faintly glimmering ahead. Then I lost the light but kept on hoping it would be seen again around a turn. Now I feel that the tunnel has fallen in and is my living tomb. It doesn’t matter that I was too ungifted to come to anything but it is weary & uncomfortable to myself."

Miles Franklin, Diary, February 1938

"Feeling terribly discouraged & as if I had better give it all up & die! I’ve struggled so long for nothing — long enough to prove over & over again that I have no talent for writing. Could have made a success & helped my family had I set to something else. There’s not a soul alive to whom I’m of any consequence, none to care a pin how soon I die. Failure & desolation indeed."

Miles Franklin, Diary, January 1950

Jounama Creek

"When we were young we were weary sometimes of our elders croaking about the necessity to love our fellows, etc, but in our turn we come to know that it is the only thing that lasts — if memory lasts, too, of course — and the only thing that mitigates the inexplicable punishment, the endless wonder of being alive."

Letter from Miles Franklin to Katharine Susannah Prichard, 5 November 1953

At the age of 70, Franklin delivered a successful series of lectures on the Australian novel in Perth. Her notes on Australian writing, published as Laughter, Not for a Cage (1956), still resonates today.

Miles Franklin died on 19 September 1954 and her ashes were scattered, as was her wish, in Jounama Creek, Talbingo, close to where she had been born almost 75 years before. An icon of Australia returned to the bush that she had loved all her life.

A secret, only revealed after her death, was her establishment of the Miles Franklin Literary Award for the year’s best novel or play which presents ‘Australian life in any of its phases’. It was a generous act of personal philanthropy for Australian literature, unequalled in its time. The first award was made in 1957 to Patrick White for Voss.

The scale and scope of Franklin’s influence upon her family and friends, upon her fellow writers and upon the generations of Australians who have read her work, is extraordinary. Though her life was littered with disappointments, hers was a very brilliant career.

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This story draws on the exhibition, ‘Miles Franklin: A Brilliant Career?’ [40] (Paul Brunton, Curator), presented at the State Library of New South Wales from 1 March to 20 June 2004.

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Links