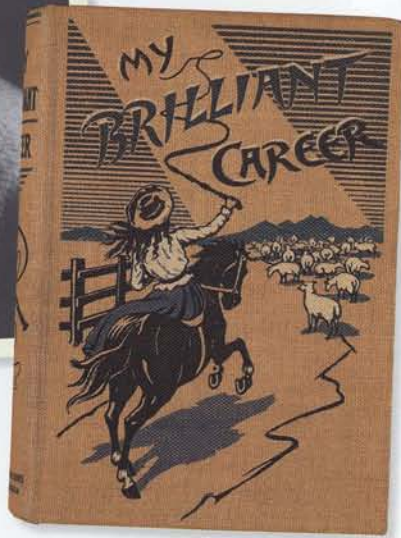




# Miles Franklin

## A BRILLIANT CAREER?



Mitchell Library. No Australian writer had ever done such a thing—or, at least, I have been unable to find any who did. And it was an extraordinary archive. In its completeness, extent and range, it was unrivalled at the time and probably still is among writers' archives. The correspondence alone was in excess of 7000 letters, and Franklin kept carbon copies of the letters she sent as well as retaining the letters she received.

Both these surprises bespeak an eye for posterity.

She need not have worried. In *My Brilliant Career*, her first book, published in 1901, she produced an Australian classic. It is still in print over a century later and was made into a film in 1979, the centenary of her birth.

above:  
Miles Franklin, also Brent of  
*Bin Bin* [1925]  
b&tw photograph;  
21.9 x 16.5 cm  
Photograph by the Australian  
News and Information Bureau  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an24715117

Paul Brunton reveals contradictions between the private and public life of renowned Australian author Miles Franklin

above right:  
Cover reproduced from  
*My Brilliant Career* by Miles  
Franklin; with a preface by  
Henry Lawson, (Edingburgh:  
William Blackwood and  
Sons, 1901)

When Miles Franklin died on 19 September 1954, a few weeks short of her 75th birthday, she left two surprises. Both were unprecedented and demonstrated that in death, as in life, she was well ahead of her time.

The first surprise was the establishment of the Miles Franklin Literary Award. No other Australian, and only wealthy men outside Australia, had done anything like this. It was a final gift from a woman of modest means to advance the cause of Australian literature—a cause for which she had fought valiantly.

The second surprise would hardly be noticed today. But in 1954 it was also unprecedented. Franklin bequeathed her entire personal and literary archive to the



right:  
Miles Franklin, 2 April 1898.  
Aged 18 years, taken at the  
time she wrote *My Brilliant  
Career*  
State Library of NSW, A673004

*My Brilliant Career*, published when Franklin was 21, and the Miles Franklin Award, formalised at the end of her life, have been the extent of most Australians' knowledge of this remarkable and complex woman. Between these two landmarks, though, was an extraordinary life of outward success and private frustration lived by a feisty woman who never gave up.

*Miles Franklin: A Brilliant Career?*, a travelling exhibition of the State Library of New South Wales, showcases this life for the first time. Franklin's extensive archive, the permanent preservation of which she so carefully planned, is the principal source for the exhibition.

The note of interrogation in the title refers to the fact that increasingly, despite all the evidence, Franklin came to see her life as a failure. The question mark also alludes to the fact that she had intended her first book to be titled 'My Brilliant? Career' and was angered when the publisher ignored this.

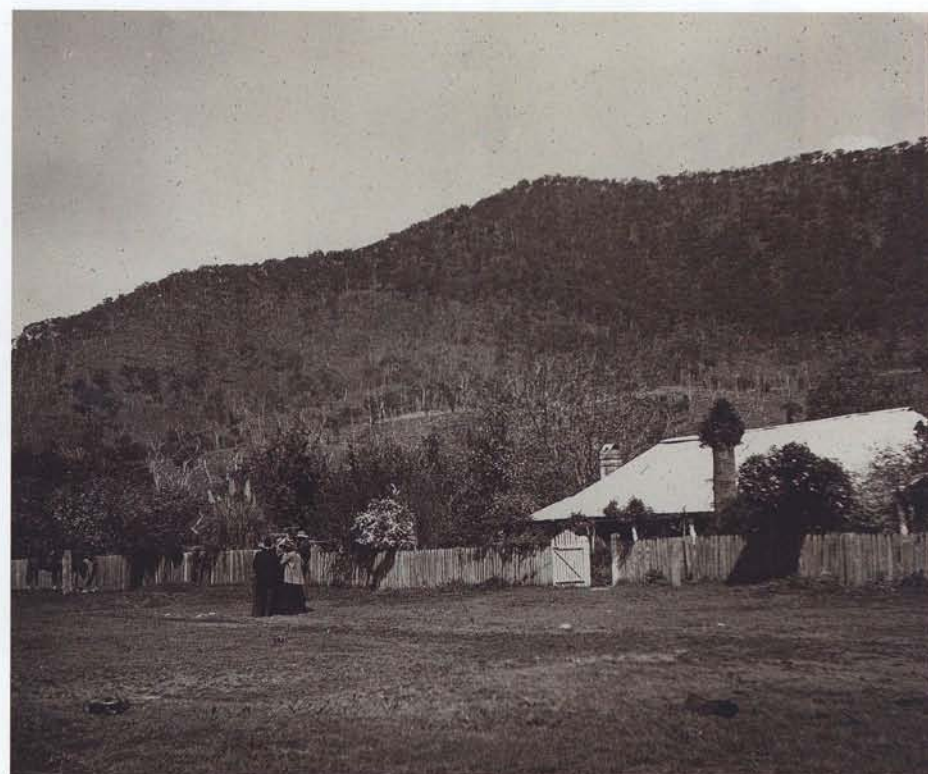
Stella Maria Sarah Miles Franklin was born on 14 October 1879 at Old Talbingo Homestead, near Tumut, the home of her maternal grandmother, Sarah Lampe. 'Miles' commemorated Edward Miles, an illiterate ancestor who had arrived in Australia as a convict in 1788.

Franklin's parents, Susannah (born 1850) and John (born 1848) lived at Brindabella station. The years spent at Talbingo and Brindabella would always be for Miles Franklin the golden years. Nothing ever surpassed them in her view and she never really came to terms with the world outside these two beautiful, isolated and enchanted places.

In 1889, the family moved from Brindabella to a property, Stillwater, 20 kilometres south-west of Goulburn. It was here that *My Brilliant Career* was written. The book was a popular and critical success and was rapidly reprinted. Franklin was inundated with letters urging her to continue writing and a brilliant literary future was predicted.

But her success did not lead to further publication. A sequel to the novel was rejected. Other manuscripts were spurned. America promised hope and perhaps some literary glory. With her mother's support, she sailed on 7 April 1906, aged 26, across the Pacific to another country and another culture.

From 1908 to 1915, Franklin worked for the National Women's Trade Union League



in Chicago. Work with the League was pioneering, exciting and exhausting. She was the League's press officer for the legendary 22-week Garment Workers' strike over 1910–1911 which resulted in the loss of millions of dollars by both sides and the death of five people. Her publicity skills achieved favourable press coverage for the workers. Simultaneously, she became assistant editor of the League's journal, *Life and Labor*, the

top:  
Miles Franklin's birthplace, Talbingo Homestead, Tumut  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-vn3408614

bottom:  
Charles Blyth  
*Brindabella Homestead, N.S.W.* 1898  
oil on academy board painting;  
23.2 x 31.0 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an2291553



above:  
Delegates to the fifth Biennial Convention of the National Women's Trade Union League of America, New York, 7 June 1915. Miles Franklin, second from left  
State Library of NSW, A673010

first issue of which appeared in January 1911. She was also at this time involved with the organisational work for the League's third biennial convention which took place in Boston in July 1911 and at which she was elected national secretary.

She was, in the midst of all this activity, still writing, though in secret. None of her colleagues knew of her other life as an author. Short stories, plays, novels, were offered to publishers who either promptly or tardily rejected them. She could publish nothing in America. It was beginning to look

as if *My Brilliant Career* was a brilliant flash in the pan.

In November 1915 Franklin arrived in London—partly impelled by a sense of patriotism in war time. From July 1917 to February 1918, she served as a cook in a tent hospital near Lake Ostrovo, Macedonia.

Back in London, from 1919 to 1926 she worked as Secretary with the National Housing and Town Planning Association and organised a women's international housing convention in 1924. Away from work, she was continuing to write but, as in America, publishing success eluded her.

In the early 1920s, Franklin conceived an idea for a series of novels based on her family's pioneering history in the Monaro region. She would publish this series under the pseudonym Brent of Bin Bin (Bin Bin was the name of a run adjoining Brindabella that her father had leased).

Franklin saw the creation of this pseudonym as a publicity device. The mystery of Brent's identity would compound, she thought, until on publication of the final novel her authorship would be revealed to an astonished world. In this she was defeated because, although the six novels were completed by 1933, she was not able to organise publication of them all in her lifetime. Although the Brent books achieved some success, they brought no glory to the name 'Miles Franklin' because she never revealed that she was the author. With outrageous effrontery, though, she regularly publicly boosted Brent's works as if she had nothing to do with them.

Miles Franklin returned to Australia in November 1932, living in the family home at Carlton, Sydney. She plunged into cultural life with gusto and, such was the force of her personality, it was as if she had never been away. The years of her homecoming were years of regular publication.

*All that Swagger* won the S.H. Prior Memorial Prize in 1936, received good reviews and Franklin received hundreds of fan letters. It was broadcast on the radio and reprinted regularly. It was *My Brilliant*



right:  
'All That Swagger' by Miles Franklin. Reproduced from *The Bulletin*, 16 September 1936  
State Library of NSW, A128532

*Career* revisited and more successful financially.

Franklin was again a celebrity. She spoke regularly on the radio and she would publish a succession of books almost until the day she died (and four would be published posthumously). She was a prominent member of Australia's literary community. She was in demand as a speaker. She added cachet to an opening night, a literary meeting, or a party. She was out every night of the week. Vital, witty, energetic, outspoken, and original was the general consensus. 'Life-enhancer' had not yet entered the language but that is what everyone meant.

But it was all too late. Those years of literary failure in America and England had scarred her. She had not failed at work. She had not failed socially. But none of that counted. It was literary success she craved, and when, finally back in Australia, it was given to her, she would not believe it. She believed she had wasted her life.

*Miles Franklin: A Brilliant Career?* traces Franklin's life through her private letters, diaries, manuscripts, books and photographs and those of her contemporaries. Words were Franklin's lifeblood. The exhibition presents Miles Franklin in her own words, letting her speak as wittily, as forthrightly, and as pertinently as she did when she was alive. The use of audio gives a sense of what it was like to be in her presence.

You will find a vulnerable and at the same time indomitable woman, lonely yet sociable, outspoken and also sensitive. She

is an astute critic, and a woman with a huge capacity for friendship.

Franklin's diaries are displayed for the first time—and she is revealed as one of the great diarists of Australia. In these she meditates. She reminisces. She discusses politics, religion, sex—all the forbidden subjects—frankly, intelligently and memorably. She vividly describes places visited and events attended. She criticises books and plays and films with insight and humour. And best of all, she takes to pieces her contemporaries on three continents and both hemispheres before our very eyes, and then re-assembles them, with precision and devastating wit.

In a letter to fellow writer and friend, Katharine Susannah Prichard, written in the last year of her life, Franklin wrote: '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'.

Franklin suffered the punishment but never lost the wonder.

PAUL BRUNTON is Senior Curator, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales and editor of *The Diaries of Miles Franklin* (2004). He is also curator of the travelling exhibition *Miles Franklin: A Brilliant Career?* which will feature at the National Library from 23 April to 17 July 2005

below left:  
Geraldine Rede (1874?–1943)  
*The White Feather* [c.1900]  
pencil and crayon drawing;  
23.5 x 30.0 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an6054397

below:  
Book covers from works by Miles Franklin (Brent of Bin Bin):  
*Prelude to Waking*, *Up the Country*  
and *Bring the Monkey*  
Manuscript Collection, MS 5681

