A Comet of Wonder Fallen to Earth: The Diaries of Miles Franklin

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When Miles Franklin received her six complimentary author’s copies of My Brilliant Career in September 1901 at her family’s property, Stillwater, twenty kilometres south-west of Goulburn, she was a few weeks short of her twenty-second birthday. It must have been a moment of intense pride to hold the sturdily bound copy of her first novel, published by the distinguished Edinburgh firm of William Blackwood & Sons.

The book received many positive, though not uncritical, reviews both in Australia and Britain. In the Bulletin of 28 September, under the heading ‘A Bookful of Sunlight’, A.G. Stephens, the doyen of Australian critics, wrote:

It is the very first Australian novel to be published … the book is not a notable literary performance; but it is fresh, natural, sincere — and consequently charming … 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.

In the Bulletin’s next issue, there was further publicity and a photograph of the author. The more up-market Melbourne Book Lover of November 1901 said that it was ‘a very notable book. It is … destined in the future to be recognised as one of the distinctive signposts of Australian literature, for it is … the most thoroughly Australian novel that has as yet been given to the world.’ The Book Lover followed this up in December with a portrait and more praise. For the Sydney Morning Herald, it was ‘a creditable essay in prose fiction by a young Australian girl’, though the Herald did not approve of Sybylla Melvyn’s character.

In the last four months of 1901, the novel sold 1012 copies in Australia, and it would sell another 1105 copies the next year. Even today, these sales figures would not be risible for a first novel by an unknown writer.

Franklin wrote in November 1901: ‘I have been inundated with letters from all classes urging me to continue writing.’ Such success gave the author an entrée into society, where she met such movers and shakers in the world of feminism and social action as Rose Scott and Vida Goldstein. Even the governor-general, Lord Tennyson (son of the poet), wrote in his own hand to Franklin to say how much he had enjoyed the book. All in all, this was a heady moment for a young bush girl who had finished her formal education at sixteen. She wanted desperately to be a writer, she liked the limelight and she sought fame and fortune.

It didn’t last.

Although famous for a while, Franklin made no money. The consequence of publishing in Britain was that copies of her book sold in Australia attracted a much reduced royalty. In May 1904 she said her total earnings from the book had been £24 and a few shillings. And further success as a writer did not ensue. A sequel to My Brilliant Career was rejected by Angus & Robertson in 1902. Apart from journal articles, Franklin was able to publish nothing prior to her leaving for the US in April 1906.

The experience scarred her, particularly when it was compounded by her inability to have anything published in the US. In 1909 Blackwood did publish another novel, Some Everyday Folk and Dawn, which had been completed in 1905 before Franklin left Australia. Although the reviews were by no means dismissive, the book sank without trace and Franklin would not publish again under her own name for more than twenty years.

It was around this time that Franklin instructed Blackwood to stop the sale of My Brilliant Career. A story has arisen that so many people were offended by perceived self-portraits in the book that Franklin was forced to stop its publication and to flee the country, never allowing the book to be reprinted. This is an exaggeration. Her immediate family do not appear to have been unduly troubled: her beloved grandmother, for example, thought the book hugely entertaining, according to Franklin’s sister, Linda, who herself was looking forward to the next book from her sister’s pen. Her father does not seem to have been outraged at the portrait of Sybylla Melvyn’s father, who...
was shown as a hopeless drunk. Undoubtedly, some people thought they had been defamed, but, if we are to believe a letter written by Franklin to Rex Ingamells in September 1952, there were just as many complaints from people who felt they had been excluded and had missed out on their five minutes of fame:

I was so plagued when my first little effort appeared by the people from everywhere — strangers — who claimed the characters, and also by those of my own district who were enraged because they were in and those who said I had deliberately left them out. In my ignorance and inexperience I was baffled by this and it seared me so that I never recovered.

But Franklin took no action to stop the publication then. The book was reprinted five times up to 1904. In 1902 Franklin had complained to the publisher that not enough copies were available in Australia. When Franklin did leave the country, it was four years after publication and not because of the one work she had published, but rather because of the works she had not been able to publish in the interim.

*Some Everyday Folk and Dawn* was published in late 1909, and there is a letter from Blackwood dated March 1910 alluding to her recent instructions to stop publication of *My Brilliant Career*. Franklin was now thirty. It had taken her eight years to publish anything since *My Brilliant Career*, though she had tried and tried in Australia, Britain and the US. When she secured publication of the longed-for second book, it flopped. It was beginning to look as if *My Brilliant Career* was a brilliant flash in the pan.

To someone as acutely sensitive as Franklin, *My Brilliant Career* stood not as a remarkably successful first novel but rather as a constant reminder of her failure to progress as a writer. ‘There is every reason to hope that “My Brilliant Career” will prove to be the first fruits of a genius that will hereafter enrich Australian literature with much good work’, the *Book Lover* had said in 1901, and it was by no means an isolated view. It hadn’t happened. It seemed easier to remove the evidence.

The book would never be reprinted in Franklin’s lifetime, and she left instructions in her will, which was drawn up in 1948, that it was not to be reprinted until ten years after her death. She was not ashamed of the book. In fact, it shows great confidence in it to believe it would be wanted ten years after her death when it had not been in print for decades. Franklin could easily have forbidden republication in perpetuity, as other writers have done, but instead she simply put a distance, even in death, between herself and any reprint.

Franklin would continue to write, publishing fifteen books in her lifetime and becoming a respected literary figure in Australia in her last twenty years. But none of the books would be quite the success that *My Brilliant Career* was, at least in her own mind. In the period immediately following its publication, when Franklin was taken into Rose Scott’s glittering circle, she was regarded, she believed, as a ‘comet of wonder’ by many people. She rather liked that. By the time she wrote about this in her diary in April 1949, she added the phrase ‘God knows why’. The comet had plummeted to earth. Now she had the gnawing doubt that perhaps she really was not a great writer.

From 1906 to 1915 Franklin was in America, mainly in Chicago working for the National Women’s Trade Union League. It was exciting and important work with a group of talented women. ‘I love my work very much,’ she wrote to Annie Franklin in 1913, ‘as it brings me in to close friendship with everyone in the world who is making thought and history.’ She was, unbeknown to her fellow workers, writing assiduously — novels, short stories, plays.

Although her work for the League was fulfilling and her social life active and varied, there was an underlying malaise. Summing up 1913 in her diary, she wrote:

Looking back over the year I cannot recall one thing of usefulness or worth that I have accomplished for others, nor one of pleasure or satisfaction for myself. The futility of my existence, my weakness in effort, my failure in accomplishment fill me with a creeping melancholy that grows more impenetrable. I will fight against it, once more by hard work, and if in two years the results are no better than in the past I shall die of my own volition.

In November 1915 she arrived in London. That year, a novel based on her Chicago years was published in Britain. *The Net of Circumstance* was not published under her own name, but under a curious nom de plume, Mr and Mrs Ogniblat L’Artsau — Austral Talbingo reversed. Talbingo, near Tumut, New South Wales, was the place of Franklin’s birth on 14 October 1879,
and a place that remained dear in her memory all her life. The book made no impression on anyone and the only known copies in Australia are the two copies retained by Franklin herself. In London, Franklin worked as a cook, earned some money from journalism, had a brief period of war service in Macedonia and from 1919 to 1926 worked as secretary with the National Housing and Town Planning Council. All the time she was writing, especially for the theatre, and trying to have her manuscripts published — to no avail.

In the early 1920s she had an idea for a series of novels based on her family’s pioneering history in the Monaro. In December 1923 she returned to Australia for a few months, having then been away from her native land for almost eighteen years. This would be the series she would publish under the pseudonym Brent of Bin Bin. The first volume, *Up the Country*, appeared in 1928, followed by *Ten Creeks Run* in 1930, and *Back to Bool Bool* in 1931. These did bring some literary fame, though not much money. *Up the Country* and *Ten Creeks Run* were also reprinted in the early 1950s. But, of course, whatever benefit Franklin saw in using this pseudonym, and it seems clear from surviving correspondence that she saw it at least partly as a publicity stunt, it brought no fame and glory to the name of Miles Franklin.

But the pseudonym did put a distance between her and the reputed author. It also enabled her publicly, and shamelessly, to praise Brent’s works as if she had nothing to do with them. In doing this, she was convincing herself that she really was that the famous Brent of Bin Bin is actually Franklin say, ‘when it is revealed to me. ‘Won’t everyone be surprised,’ we can about this in her diary in April 1949, she added the phrase “God knows why”. The comet had plummeted to earth.’

Miles Franklin returned to Australia permanently in November 1932. She plunged into the local literary scene with gusto, and the years of her homecoming were years of regular publication. In 1936 *All That Swagger* won the S.H. Prior Memorial Prize. Franklin received good reviews and hundreds of fan letters. It was broadcast on the radio and reprinted regularly in Franklin’s lifetime, including an English edition in 1952. The 1945 Australian Pocket Edition of *Old Blastus of Bandicoot* sold 25,000 copies in its first year. Although *Bring the Monkey* (1933) was a failure, her satire on the sesquicentenary celebrations, *Pioneers on Parade* (1939), written in collaboration with Dympha Cusack, kept her name before the public, and that year she won a second Prior prize for her biography of Joseph Furphy, which was published in 1944. In 1946 the sequel to *My Brilliant Career*, *My Career Goes Bung*, was at last published. Two more Brent books would appear before Franklin died: *Prelude to Waking* (1950) and *Cockatoos* (1954).

In all, it is hardly a record of failure. But for Franklin it was not enough. She had felt a brilliant literary career ahead of her in 1901, several critics had said so, and it had not, in her opinion, come to pass. Her diary during these years of regular publication speaks, on the contrary, of failure. In February 1938 she writes:

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.

When asked by Ion Idriess in 1949 whether she is writing another book or resting on her laurels, she replies that she has no laurels to rest on. And in January 1950,
at the age of seventy, she writes:

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.

When Franklin died on 19 September 1954, just a few weeks short of her seventy-fifth birthday, she left two sensational surprises. One was the Miles Franklin Literary Award for the best Australian novel of the year or, failing that, the best play. The award was a generous gift from a woman of modest means to advance the cause of Australian literature, a cause for which she had fought valiantly. Nine years before her death, on 14 October 1945, she wrote to Prime Minister Chifley: ‘Without a literature of our own we are dumb. In the disturbed world of today, more than ever we need that interpretation of ourselves, both to the outside world and to ourselves, which is the special function of imaginative writers.’

No other Australian, and only wealthy men outside Australia, had endowed such a prize. In 1957 the first award went to Patrick White, for *Voss*. The Award was considered to be of such significance that it was presented by the then prime minister, R.G. Menzies, with the Leader of the Opposition, H.V. Evatt, in attendance. The ABC televised the ceremony. There is still a special frisson about the ‘Miles Franklin’ which is not shared by other literary awards, most of which are in any case given by governments or corporations, using other people’s money. Few Australians have used their own savings to sponsor literature on such a grand scale, though the National Biography Award, sponsored by Dr Geoffrey Cains, is a recent and valued exception.

The second surprise following Franklin’s death was the bequest of her personal archive to the Mitchell Library. 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, ever conscious of posterity, kept carbon copies of her own letters as well as the originals of letters she received. The archive included family papers dating back to 1841 and her entire library of printed books. It is one of the most comprehensive archives for the study of Australian literary and social history in the first half of the twentieth century.

It is of some note that, although Franklin kept all her drafts for all her works, published and unpublished, the latter of which can be counted in double if not triple figures, no manuscript of *My Brilliant Career* is in her archives. It is possible that Blackwood never returned it to Franklin. She did ask for its return. There is no complaint that this was not executed, though the surviving documentation is sparse. Some items within the archives marked by Franklin for destruction were burnt under orders from her trustees shortly after her death. This manuscript could have been amongst them, particularly as the trustees specifically instructed that the items for destruction were not to be examined. Franklin, indeed, may have destroyed the manuscript herself.

Although this archive has been exploited over and over again to produce dozens of books in the last decade alone, as well as numberless articles, Franklin herself has not been accorded a major scholarly biography. Marjorie Barnard’s initial foray of 1967 (combining biography with literary criticism), Verna Coleman’s valuable examination of Franklin’s American years, published in 1981, and Colin Roderick’s factually rich, but unsympathetic and in parts sneering, account of 1982 are all there is. Jill Roe’s long-awaited full-scale biography, due for publication in late 2004 by HarperCollins, will remedy the deficiency. The fiftieth anniversary of Franklin’s death, 2004 will also see a major exhibition on her life and work at the State Library of New South Wales prior to a national tour.

Franklin’s archive included various series of diaries: small pocket diaries which Franklin kept from 1909, when she was twenty-nine, until 1 January 1954; a series of more extensive diaries written from 1926 to 1954; and a series dealing mainly with literary matters and personalities written in the 1930s and 1940s, when Franklin was a powerful force on the Australian literary scene.

Franklin’s archive had been embargoed by her for the ten years following her death, but the diaries presented additional problems. They dealt very frankly with a number of people still living, and the Library maintained a restriction on access to most of them until the 1990s. In addition, the pocket diaries from 1926 to 1936 were either wholly or partly written in an obscure form of shorthand that took some years to decode and transcribe.

It was well known by her contemporaries that Franklin was keeping these diaries and that one day they would be made available. Marjorie Barnard wrote in her biography: ‘Affectionate to her friends, she could be malicious. Did she not threaten us all with her diary, to be published when she was safely dead?’ Leslie Rees recorded in his autobiography his impressions of Franklin at Fellowship of Australian Writers meetings in the 1930s and 1940s:

She seldom said anything at meetings. But she was a pillar of the Australian idea. When she did speak, it was to make it clear that Australian literature should be well and truly Australian —
in colour, settings, general character, everything. She was said to be writing down her candid impressions of every meeting and every person there, to be released to the world long after her death.

Her diaries at long last will be published in March 2004 by Allen & Unwin in association with the State Library of New South Wales. They will reveal her to be one of Australia’s great diarists. Jill Roe’s 1993 edition of Franklin’s letters revealed Franklin as a brilliant correspondent. It may well be that her letters and diaries, together with My Brilliant Career, will be the body of work on which her reputation will ultimately rest.

The diaries were, of course, meant for public access, as was the correspondence. Franklin carefully kept these throughout a long life of travelling, and made precise arrangements for their continued preservation in a research library.

This in itself was rare at this time, certainly in Australia. I am not aware of any other major literary collection of this era which was placed by its creator in a library or archives for preservation, with the noted exception of Franklin’s bête noire, Dame Mary Gilmore, a writer as interested in her posthumous reputation as Franklin was. Franklin valued libraries, herself being a regular reader at the Mitchell Library, and was instrumental in securing the deposit there of the papers of one of her heroes, Catherine Helen Spence, in 1937, long after Spence’s death. She had herself had experience in publishing literary papers in her work on another of her heroes, Joseph Furphy.

Franklin’s personality as revealed in the diaries is remarkably consistent over the more than forty years for which diaries exist, from the age of twenty-nine to within eight months of her death. The public Franklin is a convivial companion with a vibrant personality, witty, and with a great capacity for friendship. She was a life enhancer. The private Franklin is variously frustrated, depressed, dejected, with a sense of failure and worthlessness.

Her perceived lack of literary fame is not the only explanation for this underlying melancholy, but it is significant. And it was sensed by contemporaries. Shortly after Franklin’s death, Katharine Susannah Prichard wrote: ‘I’d have given anything for her to have had more appreciation and recognition in her lifetime. She has such wonderful qualities. Such grit and wit, and such a capacity for love, loyal and generous friendship.’

The ‘nobody loves me, I go nowhere’ routine regularly trotted out in the diaries should not be taken at face value when the evidence in the diaries themselves contradicts this. Everybody loved her, and she went everywhere. Nevertheless, the feelings of frustration, dejection, loneliness and lack of accomplishment were real and part of Franklin’s tragedy. Perhaps she had diagnosed herself when she wrote to Angus & Robertson in 1899 that the story of her heroine Sybylla Melvyn ‘illustrates the misery of being born out of one’s sphere’.

Franklin’s sparkling wit and keen powers of observation and description, of which her contemporaries were well aware, are abundantly revealed in the diaries. One extract must suffice here, that for 28 August 1942:

Yesterday went to Mark Foy’s to the 40th anniversary of the enactment of woman suffrage in New South Wales. Mrs Quirk, M.L.A., chief speaker. After 40 years we have only this specimen in parliament. They wasted time before beginning. We were bidden for 2.30 and it was nearly 4 before speaking began. Mrs Quirk M.L.A. tall and stout, real publican’s widow figure. Majestically attired in an expensive black beaded gown & cape with white facings, so well cut and she so expensively harnessed that her figure instead of gross became fashionable. Her coiffure and make-up, even to tinted nails, must have been the work of a professional. Tilted fashionable hat, ropes of imitation pearls, four glaring diamond rings, artificial posy. She had a thick sheaf of quarto sheets: on each was a sentence or two. She discoursed on each of these as texts for an incredible time and then laid it down so that her victims could ache with boredom because of the number still to be endured. She kept on for half an hour. People were sneaking out in ones, twos & fives. The M.L.A. seemed quite oblivious of this. As an illustration of the worthiness of women’s rule she instanced the 60 years reign of Victoria in which there was never any war or slavery!!!!!! Then she fulminated about Florence Nightingale and her struggle. Told how Florence had hung about the doors of the hospitals in the Crimean war (couldn’t the ass know that this was one war in Victoria’s reign?). At length
Florence got into the hospitals with her little lantern and rescued the men from the swarms of flies. Now flies & snow do not operate in concert. Flies disappear even in Sydney’s mild snowless winters, and in any case go to bed when little lanterns come out. Thus she lumbered along, her whole utterance on that scale of pomposity, spuriosity & ignorance. The chairman was frantic. She was whispering under the M.L.A.’s great bowsprit that the other speakers would have to be cut out as closing-time was approaching. M.L.A. seemed to be in a trance of auto-intoxication and unaware of emptying seats & bored & restive victims.

I leaned across & said to the chairman that I would be overjoyed to forego my talk of 10 minutes into which I had been pressed because of Lucy Cassidy. The chairman thanked me with joy: she had never heard of me. I had paid two shillings for a tea mostly of uninteresting scone & 1s8d train fare, an expenditure I could ill afford as well as the wasted day. In hopes of salvaging something I sunk off to do a few errands before half-past five. The M.L.A. had now gone on for 40 minutes and the notes in her hand weren’t half done. I had nearly reached the lift with the other escapees when Lucy & Mrs Lawson espied me. Despite her lameness Lucy started in pursuit. She is taller & stronger than I. She clutched my coat & I could not without unseemliness prevail against her on the slippery floor. She returned me to the obsequies remarking in full voice: “Miles Franklin that everyone wants to hear, sneaking off!” The victims were glad of the diversion. It did not break the trance of the M.L.A. Relief however was on the side of the beleagued. M.L.A. took a substantial fit of coughing. The waitresses had long since surreptitiously extracted all the cutlery & vessels. The manager of the floor was found. At long last, with everyone on the qui vive like Sister Anne, water arrived, but it did not rescue the M.L.A. from her cough. So with long drawn-out apologies for having to desist in the middle of her speech, she subsided just as she was advocating the spoils to the victors in politics. A few other battered war horses, rusty with faction & destitute of vision had to have their airing & then I had to tackle a bored audience aching to be home. I spoke for five minutes only. Not one went out nor looked bored — I made a survey. Then Bertha Lawson presented the M.L.A. with some of Henry’s books. God knows why except that Bertha having been unable to live with Henry as a wife is now having a distinguished career among the non-cognoscenti as his widdy. She took scarcely a minute in her speech: but up rose the M.L.A. again and made a seven-minute speech of horn-blowing acceptance. She said Henry Lawson was her favorite poem (sic). Her other favorite poem was Kipling’s “If” because every word of it could be applied to Jack Lang!!!!! She was the equal as an empty windbag of any male, ignorant, self-seeking member of Parliament.

The diaries bring Franklin to life in all her infinite variety. ‘I bewilder myself, I’m so complex,’ she wrote to Emma Pischel, a friend from Chicago days, in May 1947, ‘so how cd he who knows me not, be able to unravel me?’ The diaries help in the unravelling process.