

Miles Franklin

Australian novelist, author of “My Brilliant Career”



Miles Franklin (Stella Maria Sarah Franklin) writer, was born on 14 October 1879 at Talbingo, New South Wales, eldest child of native-born parents John Maurice Franklin, of Brindabella Station, and his wife Margaret Susannah Helena, née Lampe. Margaret was the great-granddaughter of Edward Miles (or Moyle) who had arrived with the First Fleet in the *Scarborough* with a seven years sentence for theft.

Her best known novel, *My Brilliant Career*, tells the story of an irrepressible teenage feminist growing to womanhood in rural New South Wales. This heroine, Sybylla Melvyn, is one of the most endearing characters in Australian literature and obviously

has much in common with Franklin herself, who wrote the novel while she was still a teenager. It was published in 1901 with the support of fellow writer Henry Lawson.



**The Franklin Family, 1894; Miles is at the far left
Photo: Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales**

Franklin's 1963 novel *Childhood at Brindabella* (1963) was to illuminate Franklin's first decade amongst pioneering families of the Monaro region. She was first educated at home and after 1889 at Thornford Public School when her family moved to Stillwater, an unrewarding small holding near Goulburn. About 1902 the family took up farming at Cranebrook, near Penrith, and later at Chesterfield. Farming proved to be a financial disaster and the family abandoned the property and went to the modest south-west Sydney suburb of Carlton.:

Franklin was deeply affected by her father's despair at the reversal of the family fortunes and by the hardships this imposed on her mother. It imbued her with a determination to take control of her own life. She obtained a post as governess on a property near Yass in 1897 and, encouraged by Thomas Hebblewhite of the *Goulburn Evening Penny Post*, set out to "follow the example of Charlotte Bronte" and write rather than follow the conventional female career paths of teaching or nursing.

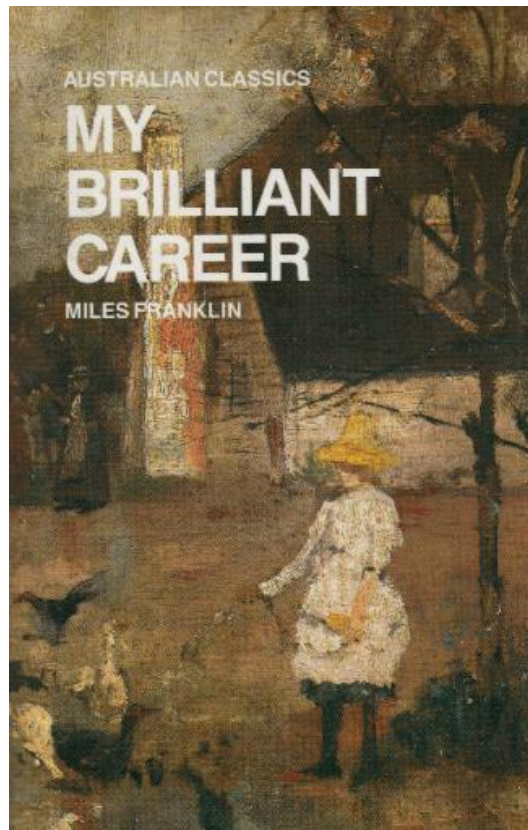


Brindabella Station, sometimes referred to as the Brindabella Homestead, is located within the Brindabella Ranges, NSW. It was the childhood home of Miles Franklin

My Brilliant Career, a novel clearly based on her own life, was completed in 1901. Miles Franklin had begun writing it when she was sixteen. It was the first of her novels and the most striking and clear-cut of them all, with something wild and Bronte-ish in its picture of a young girl hungering for life and love on the harsh outback plains of New South Wales.

Banned by the author herself from re-publication for ten years after her death in 1954, this vivid little Australian classic was originally published in Edinburgh in 1901. Franklin's objections to re-publication were not based on doubt about the merit of the book, but on the distress she felt when a work of fiction was taken to be direct autobiography. Much of it, we may say today, is clearly based on fact; but obviously the facts have been changed, enlarged, dramatized, and enhanced with imagination to make a work of art.

Henry Lawson and A.G. Stephens (legendary founder and editor of the *Bulletin* magazine) combined to greet it with enthusiasm when it first appeared. It retains its relevance today, for underneath its extravagances and its melodrama, which have their own charm of period, Miles Franklin's spirit flashes indomitably; and its picture of the rebelliousness of youth is as recognisable today as it was in 1901.



Book jacket (pub. Angus & Robertson)

Jacket illustration: "Tea Time" by Charles Condor 1888

The heroine of the novel, Sybylla, a headstrong girl growing up in late 19th century Australia, has the opportunity of marriage to a wealthy young man (Harry), but rejects it in order to maintain her independence. Instead she is forced to take a job as governess and housekeeper to the family of an illiterate neighbour to whom her father owes money. After returning home, she again rejects another proposal by Harry so she can write her novel, *My Brilliant Career*.

For purposes of publication Franklin assumed what is sometimes jokingly called a *moustache de plume* (the name 'Miles') in an attempt to hide the fact that she was a female author. However, the fact that she was indeed female was revealed and Australian publishers rejected her work on the grounds that it was "too rebellious". With the aid of Henry Lawson it was published by William Blackwood & Sons, Edinburgh and London, in 1901, to instant acclaim. Franklin then set about gaining "life experiences" and worked for several years as a domestic servant, using yet another name, Sarah Frankling...

The fiercely independent Franklin was involved in the early Australian feminist movement through her friendship with Rose Scott and Vida Goldstein. Her feminism and her rejection of traditional women's roles continued to make her books controversial in Australia. *My Career Goes Bung*, though written in 1902, was not published until 1946 because it had been considered “audacious”. (Initially the novel had been titled *My Brilliant (?) Career*. The question mark was later dropped, much to the author’s annoyance.)



Feminist Rose Scott (left) and poet Henry Lawson

Henry Lawson saw her as his "protégé", had high praise for *My Brilliant Career*, and agreed to write a foreword to it. However, on a personal level, Lawson did not appreciate her friendship with the feminist Rose Scott as Rose was also a friend of his wife, who was threatening to divorce him for his drunkenness. He believed that Rose, his wife and the other women in this feminist circle were spreading tales about his faults as a husband. In the light of history one is inclined to think that the tales were probably true!

Without actually rejecting a marriage proposal from a relative, Edwin Bridle, in 1906 Franklin boldly set sail on *Ventura* for the United States of America, intending to work as a “Mary Ann” (servant) and to continue writing and publishing. She certainly arrived to high drama – the devastation of the San Francisco earthquake. Moving on to New York, she was introduced by fellow feminist expatriates to Margaret Dreier Robins, president of the fledgling National Women's Trade Union League of

America, who offered her a post as personal secretary. She remained in the USA and involved with the League until war broke out in 1914.



**NWTUL march in New York. Miles is second from left
(Photo: Mitchell Library: State Library of NSW)**

Finally abandoning any idea of marriage, which she spoke of as “rabbit” work” Franklin sailed for England on 30th October 1915, with the vague idea of becoming involved in “war work”. On arrival in Britain she worked briefly at a crèche in Deptford, and “kept the wolf from the door” as a cook at the Minerva Café, at the same time ineffectually negotiating under male *noms-de-plume* with publishers or dabbling in journalism.



**In uniform as a nurse
(Photo: Mitchell Library: State Library of NSW)**

In June 1917 she joined the American Unit of the Scottish Women's Hospitals for Foreign Service as a voluntary worker and was stationed at Ostrovo, Macedonia. It was a stimulating but debilitating experience. Her health had never been robust and she was forced to return to England. In February 1918 where she remained for another eight years, working at various clerical jobs to earn her living while she continued accumulating manuscripts. It was during this time that she wrote *Prelude to Waking*, completed in 1925 but not published until 1950, this time under yet another *nom-de-plume*, "Brent of Bin-Bin".

In 1927 family pressure and her own declining health brought Franklin back to Sydney where she hired a Hurstville hotel-room for typing. Between 1928 and 1931, Blackwoods (U.K.) published three of a projected nine-volume pastoral saga by "Brent of Bin-Bin". The novels were well received and in this instance the little mystery of authorship was sustained until after her death.

Once again becoming dissatisfied with home and Australian literary life and in pursuit of publishers, Franklin left for London in 1930, returning late in 1932. During that time her father died and her finances dipped alarmingly. In 1933 she published a pot-boiler, *Bring the Monkey* and completed the six "Brent" novels, also the splendid, opinionated chronicle, *All that Swagger*, which won the S. H. Prior Memorial Prize in 1936, and confirmed her place in the literary world. The novel was, appropriately, published by the *Bulletin*.

From this time on Franklin devoted herself to intellectual work and most especially the advancement of Australian literature, for which she received a King George V Silver Jubilee medal in 1935. She embraced literary life with customary vigour, at least in so far as allowed by limited resources and a demanding mother who died in 1938 aged 88. Franklin joined the Fellowship of Australian Writers (1933) and the Sydney P.E.N. Club (1935). In 1937, she rejected an Order of the British Empire (OBE).

Franklin openly feared death, which came with a coronary occlusion on 19th September 1954 in hospital at Drummoyne.



True to her wishes, Miles' ashes were scattered on Jounama Creek at Talbingo where she was born.

(Photo: Mitchell Library: State Library of NSW)

It was only after Miles' death that perhaps her greatest contribution to Australian literature came to light. Her will left provision for the foundation of a literary prize, aimed at the 'advancement, improvement and betterment of Australian Literature.'

Miles was never wealthy; at times she struggled to make ends meet. The legacy must have meant years of scrimping and saving on her part. It is testament to her generosity that she noted in her will her hope that the prize would ease the financial burden of other authors. Her vision survives in the prestigious annual Miles Franklin award (first won by Patrick White for *Voss* in 1957),



Miles Franklin Award 2008 shortlist, (left to right) Rodney Hall, Steven Carroll, Alex Miller, Gail Jones and David Brooks. The winner was Steve Carroll for his novel about life in suburban Australia, *The Time We Have Taken*.

A film version of *My Brilliant Career* was produced in 1979 by Margaret Fink, directed by Gillian Armstrong, starring Judy Davis and Sam Neill. (This was a development Franklin had anticipated for Australian novels in the 1930s).



Judy Davis as Stella (Miles) Franklin in the film version of *My Brilliant Career*.

The film, which was an international success, remains remarkably true to the spirit of the novel. As the publisher, writer and critic Carmen Callil has noted, “Miles Franklin was decades ahead of her time, and *My Brilliant Career* was written for an audience not yet born. For in the character of Sybylla Melvyn, Miles Franklin created a character who mouths with incredible charm but deadly accuracy the fears, conflicts and torments of every girl, with an understanding usually associated with writers of the 1960s and 70s.”

All the qualities which Callil admires in the book have been retained by the film which, it might be added, also manages to exclude some of the original’s slightly less attractive qualities, such as its nationalism (which it shared with many of its literary contemporaries) and a certain tendency to let ebullience and exuberance overflow into gush and overly self-conscious romanticism. The dialogue, too, has been considerably

updated and “de-literacised,” but the *sentiments* expressed by Sybylla are very much those of the novel.

Miles Franklin also produced voluminous papers, willed to the Mitchell Library, Sydney.

Franklin also had a school named after her, the Miles Franklin Primary School, established in 1980 in Evatt in the ACT., not all that far from her beloved childhood home, *Brindabella*. A tradition that has lasted more than 27 years was set. Each year the school community celebrates Franklin’s birthday and a Kindergarten to Year 6 *Brilliant Writers* competition is conducted.



Miles Franklin Primary School, Evatt, ACT

In concluding, we’ll let Stella (Miles) Franklin speak for herself. Here is the opening paragraph of the work for which she is best known – her novel *My Brilliant Career*.

“MY DEAR FELLOW AUSTRALIANS

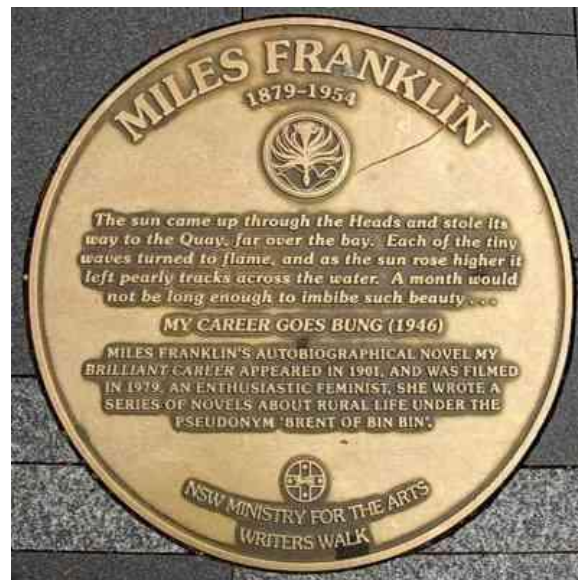
Just a few lines to tell you that this story is all about myself - for no other purpose do I write it.

I make no apologies for being egotistical. In this particular I attempt an improvement on other autobiographies. Other autobiographies weary one with excuses for their egotism. What matters it to you if I am egotistical? What matters it to you though it should matter that I am egotistical?

This is not a romance - I have too often faced the music of life to the tune of hardship to waste time in snivelling and gushing over fancies and dreams; neither is it a novel, but simply a yarn - a *real* yarn. Oh! as real, as really real - provided life itself is anything beyond a heatless little chimera - it is as real in its weariness and bitter heartache as the tall gum-trees, among which I first saw the light, are real in their stateliness and substantiality.”

(From the Angus and Robertson hardback edition, 1986.)

Stella Maria Sarah (Miles) Franklin had proved 'a real hard doer', as they used to say “up country.”



Plaque embedded in the Sydney Writers Walk, Circular Quay.

Works by Miles Franklin

Novels

- My Brilliant Career* 1901
- Some Everyday Folk and Dawn* 1909
- Old Blastus of Bandicoot* 1931
- Bring the Monkey* 1933
- All That Swagger* 1936
- Pioneers on Parade* 1939 - with Dymphna Cusack
- My Career Goes Bung* 1946
- On Dearborn Street* 1981 - edited by Roy Duncan

Under the pseudonym of "Brent of Bin Bin"

- Up the Country* 1928
- Ten Creeks Run* 1930

Back to Bool Bool 1931
Prelude to Waking 1950
Cockatoos 1955
Gentleman at Gyang Gyang 1956

Non-Fiction

Joseph Furphy: The Legend of a Man and His Book 1944
Laughter, Not for a Cage 1956
Childhood at Brindabella 1963

Collected Letters

As Good as a Yarn with You 1992 - edited by Carole Ferrier
My Congenials: Miles Franklin and Friends in Letters 1993 - edited by Jill Roe

Biographical Material

Miles Franklin 1967 - by Marjorie Barnard
Miles Franklin in America 1981 - by Verna Coleman
Miles Franklin: Her Brilliant Career 1982 - by Colin Roderick
Yarn Spinners. A Story in Letters: Dymphna Cusack, Florence James, Miles Franklin
2001, edited by Marilla North

Film Adaptations

My Brilliant Career - 1979, directed by Gillian Armstrong, and featuring Judy Davis and Sam Neill.

Sources

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miles_Franklin
www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A080591b.htm
www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/milesfranklin/
Stella Miles Franklin: a biography by Jill Rope pub. Harper Collins 2008
My Brilliant Career can be downloaded in its entirety for free via [Project Gutenberg](http://www.gutenberg.org)