

DONAT GALLAGHER

A GREAT AUSTRALIAN

Colin Roderick, *Miles Franklin: Her Brilliant Career*. Adelaide: Rigby, 1982. \$19.99. 199 pp.

Nowadays Miles Franklin is best known as the author of her first novel, written when she was only twenty years old and titled with conscious irony *My Brilliant Career*. *My Career Goes Bung* was written two years later. Both titles are prophetic, both misleading. Stella Maria Sarah Miles Franklin was never to become a "success," if success is measured by sales and critical acclaim, by offices held or honours received. Large numbers of her rejected manuscripts have never been printed. Of all her many books only *My Brilliant Career* and *All That Swagger* sold at all well or received recognition in her lifetime. Until the revival of feminism and the renaissance of the Australian film industry brought *My Brilliant Career* back into well-deserved prominence, *All That Swagger* was her only work still read, and then mainly by students of Australian literature. Apart from a few private testimonials, Stella's devoted work for feminist and trade union causes went unhonoured. Her only significant memorial, the annual Miles Franklin Award for an Australian novel or play, was created by herself.

But from another point of view Stella's life was inspiring. The issues to which she principally devoted her energies apart from her own writing were Feminism, Trades Unionism, Australianism and Australian Literature. It is open to anyone to withhold sympathy from any of these causes, or to quarrel with Stella's understanding of them. But it is impossible to follow her life through Professor Colin Roderick's new biography, *Miles Franklin: Her Brilliant Career*, without being moved by the self-sacrifice, energy, persistence and courageous humour which marked her devotion. She did not merely campaign against the degradations of domestic service: she worked as a domestic so that she could campaign with authority. Her life is her monument. Miles Franklin was a woman in whom high spirit and footloose adventurousness mingled with love of home and devotion to family, in whom a formidable fighting spirit

was balanced by loyalty and adaptability and capacity for friendship. Professor Roderick is by no means an uncritical admirer of his many-sided subject, but the strength of his biography is that the abundance of fact allows the reader to draw conclusions separate from those of the author.

Only Professor Roderick could have written *Miles Franklin: Her Brilliant Career*, with its peculiar virtues and idiosyncrasies. His work is an – almost – unqualified success when he writes as historian, publisher, pioneer of the revived interest in Australian literature, and as confidant of Miles Franklin and her surviving relatives. Miles's early life in the Snowy Mountains area and in Sydney, her years of drudging for feminist and radical causes in Chicago, the fiasco of the hospital unit in Serbia, and the literary world in which she moved in Australia from the 1930's until her death, are drawn amply and solidly. Miles's literary career, marked by a bewildering array of manuscripts in a bewildering variety of stages, and confused by Miles's protection of her identity behind no less than eighteen pseudonyms – all this is treated with the knowledge and insight of the first discoverer of Brent of Bin Bin's identity, and of the trustee with whom Miles lodged her declaration that the Brent of Bin Bin novels had been written by her hand alone.

In one matter the historian in Professor Roderick eclipses the biographer. His account of Miles's forbears, stretching back as it does through pioneering and convict days into eighteenth-century England, Ireland and Germany, occupies fifty-odd of the book's two hundred pages. Has Professor Roderick been seduced into displaying his highly successful research, particularly into Miles's German connections, at the expense of his book? In fairness one must recall that Brent of Bin Bin's Bushcum-Galsworthy family saga draws heavily on family history, which Miles carefully collected; and that much of Miles's writing is close to fictionalized autobiography. Colin Roderick's detailed treatment of ancestral character and lore will be of interest to serious students. Again, many of us will be a little sceptical about Professor Roderick's faith in heredity as a guide to the qualities of the living. In this book I can accept the heavy emphasis on Miles's bourgeois German ancestry only by regarding it as a dramatic way of making a point that badly needed emphasising: that Miles Franklin was not merely a swashbuckling idealist; as well she had a strong stiffening of bourgeois recti-

tude, frugality, and capacity for humdrum toil, which accounts for some of the best features of her career.

When Professor Roderick abandons his roles of historian and chronicler of events which he knew at first-hand in order to write as critic-psychologist, he becomes, as he must have known he would become, controversial. In the first place, for good or ill, it is no longer widely accepted that the critic's "stock-in-trade" includes "the probing of the unconscious." In fact it is normal for critical hackles to rise at attempts to interpret novels in terms of what they reveal of the author's unconscious fears and desires. But Professor Roderick's biography abounds with judgements such as, "This novel is clearly a projection of Miles's own inner life"; or with speculation to the effect that, for example, a married-but-virgin character in a novel represents Miles's "hopes . . . to solve the problems of her own revulsion from the normal operation of the sexual instinct." It is doubly dubious, of course, to allow such guesses silently to assume the status of fact.

Miles Franklin was, admittedly, a tempting target for psychological exploration, if only because of the extraordinary deviousness by which she preserved her anonymity. A pseudonym like "Mr and Mrs Ogniblat l'Artsau" must be either a wonderful joke or the result of neurosis, or, as I suspect, both. Professor Roderick's analyses are always interesting, and often convincing when based on a wide range of evidence. My hesitation about accepting them at their face value, *in toto*, is based on a feeling — and no more than a feeling — that anyone so capable of self-parody, so witty and shrewd and downright as Miles Franklin, could not have poured out quite so much unself-conscious wish-fulfilment, so many guileless symbols of frustration.

As for Miles Franklin's feminist and democratic beliefs, Professor Roderick pretends to no patience with them. He relays them colourfully, often with the force of Miles's own pungent words. But he nowhere treats them seriously. His attitude is summarized in the final dismissal, "Her career as a feminist was a mere crackling of thorns under a pot." This is a logical conclusion to his everywhere having undermined Miles's crusading by treating it as a "safety-valve" for her anger at a society arranged by men, or as an indirect expression of deep fears of childbirth, or of resentment at her appearance. I am

afraid Professor Roderick has put it all in the way best calculated to provoke feminists; though he could claim — with a certain casuistical justice — that he nowhere attacks Miles's opinions.

A balanced view would have to take account of the fact that Miles's contribution to theoretical feminism was, as far as can be judged, slight. A recent study of her work, written from a radical feminist point of view, a chapter in Drusilla Modjeska's *Exiles at Home: Australian Women Writers 1925-1945*, can find virtually nothing specific to say about her opinions during the Chicago years, but contents itself with generalities about feminist politics. And, while sympathetic to Miles's position, Ms Modjeska is forced into expressions such as "curious, contradictory, idiosyncratic," "rather silly," and "riddled with contradictions."

Incidentally, the contribution made by Professor Roderick to knowledge of Miles Franklin can be gauged by comparing the wealth of information contained in his treatment of the Chicago years with the poverty of Ms Modjeska's treatment of the same period: remembering that Ms Modjeska published her — excellent — work in 1981, making use of the most up-to-date research available to her, while the Chicago phase of Miles's life was the one with which Roderick had the least professional or personal contact.

To the end of her life Miles Franklin preserved her belief in Australia, in Australian nationalism, in a national literature, in democracy as she understood it, and in feminism as she understood it. She remained faithful to her beliefs long after the political ideologies of the 1930s and the foreign migration and commercial developments of the 1940s and 1950s had rendered her views unfashionable: "There must be no compromise. If I stand alone, I still think I'm right." Professor Roderick shares his subject's stubborn integrity. Nothing would induce him to dissemble his disrespectful view of Miles's feminism, not commercial prudence, certainly not the tyrannous voice of fashion. On the other hand Colin Roderick has always respected Miles Franklin's devotion to the national literature; and his vision of Australia and Australian literature was, like hers, shaped by the writers of the 1890s. He has not changed. Indeed a sentence he wrote in 1954 soon after Miles's death finds a place, little modified, in the present book: "Animated by the same spirit of

human brotherhood as moved Henry Lawson and Joseph Furphy, she carried forward to this age that expansiveness to which we are bound to recur in the fulfilment of our national destiny.”

Miles Franklin: Her Brilliant Career is a beautifully illustrated book. By “illustrated” I do not mean that the publishers have included a number of interesting pictures, but that Professor Roderick has compiled a complete photographic record. It is slightly unusual to find such a wealth of illustration combined with a scholarly text. Indeed the text is so dense with fact that it is very much more enjoyable on second than on first reading. Moreover Professor Roderick places a strain on his readers by courteously assuming that we are as familiar as he is with the biblical and mythological arcana to which he likes to refer. I hope no one will be mistaken about the weight and importance of this book. Last year Drusilla Modjeska wrote of Miles Franklin: “A detailed critical biography is badly needed.” Miles Franklin did not have long to wait.