

Jill Roe, *Stella Miles Franklin: A Biography*. New York, Sydney and London: 4th Estate, 2008, 720pp.

ISBN: 9780732275785

AU \$59.99

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Jill Roe has produced the definitive work on the life and times of Stella Miles Franklin in this long awaited biography that is prolific in its detail. There is no introduction that attempts to summarise this complex personality. Roe begins with the birth of Franklin in the prologue, and ends with her after life—the memory of Franklin as it continues to exist in the nation’s consciousness. At the very least, Roe has produced an invaluable reference tool for Australian historians and feminist critics; a ‘sourcebook’ similar to that which Franklin claimed to write about Joseph Furphy in her 1945 biography *Joseph Furphy: The Legend of a Man and his Book*. But in producing a work of this size, so impressively framed by social and historical contexts, Roe has also cemented Franklin’s importance to Australian literary studies and placed her at the centre of national and feminist debates, in both Australia and overseas, as they span across several generations.

The first four chapters explore Franklin’s early years, before her emigration, and promote the image of a talented, extroverted and ambitious young woman who ‘even as a very small child ... was already something of a prodigy and accustomed to being the centre of attention’ (11). This depiction of the youthful Franklin is further elaborated in Roe’s adult Franklin, a woman driven by her literary aspirations to the end, and beyond, in her desire for both a living and posthumous existence as a writer. It is perhaps fitting, therefore, that Franklin’s early years have commonly been understood through her writing. Her childhood world, so defined by its Australian setting, was the one period of her life she ensured would be known to the public, through her early fiction and her autobiography, *My Childhood at Brindabella* (1962). The protagonist Sybylla from *My Brilliant Career* has often been perceived as synonymous with the adolescent Franklin, and only more recent scholarship has explored the limitations in reading her first novel simplistically, under the label of autobiography. Far from reducing her work in this way, Roe succeeds in making Franklin’s literary beginnings a window into early nineteenth-century Australia as she experienced it.

By giving voice to what she coined as Franklin’s ‘significant silence’ in a *Meanjin* article in 1980, Roe makes a substantial contribution not only to a complete picture of Franklin’s life story, but also to currently limited perceptions of her nationalism, most notably how she reconciled the ‘indelibly Australian’ writer with the cosmopolitan expatriate. It wasn’t until Drusilla Modjeska’s *Exiles at Home* (1981) that much became known of Franklin’s twenty-six years spent overseas. Roe extends Modjeska’s appropriately titled ‘A Chapter of Her Own’ with six lengthy chapters that have achieved the mammoth task of piecing together Franklin’s life during her time in Chicago and London, including her six months spent working as a nurse in Macedonia during the First World War. She is portrayed as a proliferative writer during these years rather than a failed novelist who

struggled to live up to the literary reputation created with the publication of her first novel. Although confronted with many rejections of her pseudonymous writing, by both publishers and critics alike, she continued to produce fiction into her fifties. It was not until later in life, as Roe writes, that Franklin had difficulty in maintaining the flow of literary output, although she continued to be a commentator and dedicated diary writer until her death.

It was also during this overseas period that Franklin's ambition to be a playwright was born, although with very little success resulting. In offering brief descriptions and interpretations of the plays Franklin wrote, Roe brings to light many untapped literary resources that await scholarly perusal by feminist critics, for there are several manuscripts with intriguing titles such as *Virgins Out of Date* amongst Franklin's private papers. Outside these fictional contexts, Roe illuminates Franklin's journalistic talents and the career she made for herself writing for newspapers and magazines. The role Franklin played for working women during her Chicago years, primarily through her work with the journal *Life and Labor*, is also given necessary attention in this biography. Roe writes of the social conscience and values born during these years as they influenced, and complicated, Franklin's life and literature on her return to Australia in January 1933. In the age of the New Woman and with growing links between nationalism and conservative politics, Franklin's ideas seemed outmoded and contributed to feelings of displacement.

Her return home was, according to Roe, a difficult one, but it was a change that would also bring about the best years of her life, and certainly a renewal of her literary successes. She formed productive literary partnerships with women writers Kate Baker and Dymphna Cusack, and wrote what is arguably her best work in the 1930s, *All That Swagger* (1936), for which she won the Prior Memorial Prize and a revival in popularity. Roe places Franklin at the heart of this dynamic and politically fraught period, thereby demonstrating her national importance beyond that of her place within the pioneering, colonial Australia so commonly represented in her fiction. She was actively involved with the Fellowship of Australian Writers until she felt that the Communist influence directed it from matters of national and literary import. The lecture series she gave in 1950 in Western Australia on the history and future of Australian literature also demonstrates how highly she was regarded as a commentator on contemporary national issues.

It is, however, in the private life of this writer so commonly accused of mystery and secrecy by her friends and colleagues, that readers understandably seek elaboration. Roe wrote in 2004 in *Australian Feminist Studies*: 'Although the contours of her [Franklin's] life are by now well enough established, the dynamics of her interior life and its expression in personality, and that more sombre concept, character, are still being clarified' (44). It was also 2004 that saw the publication of Paul Brunton's selection of Franklin's diary manuscripts, but until Roe's biography there had been a distinct lack of scholarly engagement with the diaries or other private papers from Franklin's archive. Roe's biography goes a long way in providing clarification of this unknown personality. Through the use of Franklin's pocket diaries in particular (for Franklin kept many

diaries), Roe provides a contrast to the extrovert, exposing that Franklin had deep insecurities concerning her writing, a nervous disposition that affected her health and caused insomnia, and recurring bouts of depression that were often linked to feelings of loss (indeed, she outlived almost every member of her family). On her return to Australia, the tension between her cosmopolitanism and national identity contributed to her sense of being an 'exile at home', and only occasional relief was found in the company of other intellectuals, such as American writer Charles Hartley Grattan who had a short residency in Australia. Feelings of displacement were also brought on by a growing tension during these years between her feminism and nationalism, at least in part signified by her involvement with the political movement Australia-First, a movement Roe describes as 'tangential' to women (410). There are also occasional comments by Roe that intimate the 'interior' complexity in Franklin's relationship to Australia as encouraged by her expatriation; while she complained to others that 'Australia had become a backwater', Roe tells us 'the wonder is that scarcely a whiff of those thoughts reached her diary' (263).

It is perhaps disappointing that these complexities in Franklin's character are not placed in the foreground of this biography and that limited interpretation is made. But it was clearly not Roe's intention to engage in an analysis of what she describes as Franklin's 'unresolved' inner conflicts with this publication (568). Instead, Roe has performed the important task of producing the definitive work that is, by no means, the final word. This biography raises as many questions as it answers, paving the way for future studies into an identity that is, as colleague P. R. Stephensen said, 'as paradoxical as a platypus' (568). There are many paradoxes made evident on a close reading of this biography. One of the most intriguing to emerge concerns that of the secretive Franklin who avoided the limelight and the Franklin who actively sought out fame. Roe situates Franklin's secrecy pragmatically within her ambition, most notably her use of the pseudonym Brent of Bin Bin to arouse the public's curiosity and thereby make more sales. But Roe also indirectly suggests that this pseudonymous persona served a much more psychologically intriguing purpose for Franklin: the alter-ego of an insecure writer. This alter-ego persona is evident in the grand claims Franklin makes to Brent's talents, which she never seemed confident enough to make about her own—claims, for example, that he 'was responsible for discovery [of Robert Gray]' (324) and that he was comparable to John Galsworthy (308). Indeed, Roe cannot help but refer to them as independent personas, commenting on Franklin's 'high regard for Brent' (414). If Brent was a convenient mask for the fame she ambiguously desired and the success she only partly felt she deserved, the lengths she went to in order to ensure posthumous fame illustrates a similar contradiction. References are made at various points throughout this biography to Franklin's carefully preserved archive. Roe writes of her 'clearing and pruning' (429) of her personal papers, and at one point mentions that she 'worked on her diaries' (463) as though they were another literary manuscript in production. These comments complicate representations of Franklin as secretive by indicating her intention for posthumous revelations and showing the extent to which she asserted control over her self-image. This is clearly the biography Franklin expected to be written one day.

There are also poignant moments in this biography in which Roe offers those scholarly insights made possible by thirty years of research both to open up unexplored areas of Franklin's history and to address misconceptions. She establishes a relationship between the 'transcendental powers' of the bush for Franklin and her religion, a topic of which very little has been written (24). Her reflections on *My Childhood At Brindabella* set the tone for future chapters, in which Franklin finds 'an idyllic childhood ... left her ill prepared for life beyond its confines' and that 'conflict and creativity go together' (25). The topic that Roe clearly felt needed the most clarification concerns Franklin's relationship to sex, and in particular the claim by writer Ray Mathew in an earlier biographical account (in 1963) of Franklin that she suffered from sexual confusion. Roe frames Franklin's choice of restraint and abstinence in historical and feminist contexts, arguing that she was trapped in a 'no win' situation and did 'the best she could do in a world where male sexuality and power were still overwhelming' (538). At the very end of this biography, Roe represents the ambiguities and difficulties in Franklin's personal life as the price she pays as one who, in her 'wish for independence and employment must break into male citadels, which is never an easy or simple thing to do; and the effort has consequences for the individual who tries' (568).

Such an ending is particularly appropriate for this biography because it is an invitation to feminist scholars to continue the examination that Roe began many years ago, notably with her publications of Franklin's letters and topical writings, and through these her ongoing assertion of Franklin's importance as an Australian woman writer. Awaiting further exploration is the tension between Franklin's public and private lives, as one 'whose cheerful persona disguised many anxieties' (119), and whose vast archive of personal papers, carefully preserved, holds so much material of historical and literary import that even Roe's seven hundred page biography, with almost eighty pages of endnotes, could not fully do it justice.

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