

*The real story of
"My Brilliant Career"*

*THE HIGH-SPIRITED MILES FRANKLIN,
A WOMAN AHEAD OF HER TIME*

In the winter of 1879 a young woman, seven months pregnant, rode south-west from her home in the rugged Brindabella Ranges, on the western edge of the limestone plain, over which today the city of Canberra sprawls. Then it was a windy, bare plain, former haunt of escaped convicts and bushrangers, with a few scattered farmhouses the sole signs of human occupation.

On a sturdy mountain pony, Susannah Franklin travelled 110km along high and difficult bridle tracks, often through snow-drifts, to Talbingo Station, some 24km south of Tumut (but only as the crow flies). She rode with difficulty, for not only was the terrain treacherous, but in the fashion of the day she was seated side-saddle and laced into an elegant riding habit. She jolted along with effort and discomfort as she travelled to her mother's home to await the birth of her first child.

The tough pioneer stock from which Susannah sprang carried her through. She had been born in these mountains in 1850 at icy Cooma, where her Prussian father Oltman Lampe had been overseer at Wambrook Station. In her teens she had been forced to carry a large part in the running of the family property at Talbingo when her father, after a fall from a horse, was stricken with paralysis and blinded. With her unconquerable mother and her younger brothers and sisters she had laboured as hard as any man.

Talbingo Station, with its gardens, orchards and dairies, became a byword in the district for comfort and hospitality. On November 26, 1878, Susannah Lampe married John Franklin and moved to Stella Maria Sarah Miles Franklin, aged 18.

Brindabella, even more lonely a place than Talbingo. Now, after the ordeal of her journey, she found pleasure in the order and decency of her old home and support in the birth of her child.

The baby was born on October 14, 1879, and was baptized on December 6, by the Reverend George Spencer, as Stella Maria Sarah Miles Franklin.

When Susannah had recovered sufficiently to make the trek back home, the little caravan of mother, baby and attendant uncle set off from Talbingo Station. Three month-old Stella nestled into a purple sateen pillow stuffed with feathers, and travelled securely on the horse of her mother's young brother, William Augustus Lampe, while Susannah cantered ahead in the hot summer sunlight, across the plains this time, avoiding the mountains, until they began the climb to the new house at Brindabella.

It was built in the typical pattern of one-storey bush homesteads of the day, out of hand-cut slabs of mountain ash and stringy bark, with a neat pitched roof of mountain ash shingles and a wide chimney piece at one side.

The isolation of these ranges was such that dry supplies of flour, sugar, rice, tea and other necessities could be brought in only once or twice a year by bullock team. The small homes had to be as self-supporting as possible, with vegetables, milk, eggs, bacon, meat and fruit produced on the property.

This particular pioneer house was, however, a wonder to other nesters for it contained those admired symbols of far-away middle-class civilization and respectability - a sewing machine and, wonder of wonders, a piano, dragged up the ridges on drays.

These unusual items were precious to Susannah. She had sweated and laboured with her mother at Talbingo to establish a comfortable home. Here she had to start again. Bit by bit, even though baby followed baby fairly quickly, she created around her roughly-hewn new house vegetable and flower gardens. She sewed, cleaned, cooked and, as far as she was able, brought the decencies of life and some of its beauties to her lonely dwelling. She strove to instil in her children the same severe standards of cleanliness and correct behaviour, unknown to many pioneering families, by which she herself had been raised.

As the years passed, elegant and talented Susannah found little romance or humour in life. She did her duty for her growing brood without tears, strongly disciplined and ferociously energetic. All the same, the armour of self-control did not entirely suppress marked artistic impulses. She painted in water-colour, read Shakespeare and Milton and sewed garments for her children.

The father, John Maurice Franklin, born at Yass in 1847, was a more obviously romantic figure. He was a superb horseman in a time when all rode well, and he was an expert bushman with a deep love and knowledge of the wide, wild countryside. Tall and handsome in the Celtic style, with blue eyes, black hair, and a classic profile, he was also

blessed, or cursed, with a generous, easy-going Irish charm. He encouraged the young Stella in her unorthodox little ambitions, agreeing that girls could be dragons, whereas commonsense Mother had said no, she could not be a dragon because "dragon is he."

At Brindabella, Stella could roam at will, through communities of pansies, lilies, roses and honeysuckle, through colonies of vegetables and settlements of pigs, cows, chickens, kittens, dogs and peacocks. But monarch of the territory was the horse. Everyone rode. Dressed in dark blue hand-me-down habit, the in-trepid little Stella was taken for her first canter without a bearing rein at the age of four. She became a superb and fearless rider.

On horseback she found exhilarating freedom from Victorian rigidities, excitement and challenge.

In spite of the pleasure of her home station, Stella Franklin as a tiny child often longed for the place of her birth, Talbingo. This predilection was bound up with her relationship to her sister Linda. At almost two Stella was robbed of her mother's lap and concentrated attention by a supplanting little creature, Linda Lampe Franklin, born on September 12, 1881. At this time Stella was sent to Talbingo where she sought the security of her grandmother's love, and determined to live forever in the old house where she had been born and had known no rival.

On Grandmother Lampe's formidable silken lap, playing with her impressive golden watch-chain, the sleepless toddler (for Stella was of a hyperactive nature) kept late hours with the adults, having her say in the grown-up conversation and earning a reputation as an entertaining little being. Grandma Lampe enjoyed the company of her quaint grandchild and to Stella she was a cherished idol.

As the 1880s proceeded, the arguments even in remote homesteads such as Talbingo began to change, for a new instrument was stirring the community. In Sydney, three months after Stella Franklin's birth, a weekly magazine, "The Bulletin," appeared for the first time.

Determinedly contentious, cheeky and abrasive, it attacked the heavy questions of the hour from one side or another: free trade, protectionism, republicanism, socialism, nationalism, federation and immigration. It also pummelled the lighter topics of the monarchy, the clergy, the judiciary, temperance, and the "new woman." It prided itself on bush readership, describing itself on December 15, 1888, as the "Bushman's Bible." The title stuck. "Slangy, pungent, irreverent, cynical, often sentimental, sardonically humorous, witty," it was written largely by the hardy men who lived in and knew the bush. Its tone seems to have appealed strongly to young Stella Franklin and to have influenced her attitudes.

The "new woman" with her breeches and her bicycles gave much joy to "The Bulletin," and the more serious ideas of John Stuart Mill on the position of women were drifting inland, puffed along by the efforts of Australian exponents of the cause - Louisa Lawson, Rose Scot, Lady Windeyer and her daughter Margaret.

There was another idea that took strong root in Stella Franklin: that, somehow, in some way, women were not as free as men. This was no mere intellectual notion but part of her experience, for seeing her beautiful, talented mother and other bush wives worn and soured in their marriages by the pressure of frequent childbearing, in circumstances of crushing drudgery, was a much more effective introduction to feminist ideas than any theoretical article.

Against the backgrounds of Talbingo and Brindabella, Stella's first nine years passed idyllically with an ecstatic visit to the zoo in Sydney the only venture afield. She learned her alphabet and some figures at her mother's knee and then it was time for formal education to begin at the little school at her Uncle Thomas's home, Brindabella Station. Daily she walked the 1.5km across the paddocks, "a very small girl, mostly sunbonnet, moving at a pace scarcely perceptible." In this isolated valley, far from any literary centre, the child had the good fortune to come under the care of a fine teacher, Charles Blyth.

Gentle, well-bred and literary, the elderly man was heartened by the intelligence and ability of Stella. Little Linda had supplanted her elder sister again, this time at Talbingo, but the pain of the loss of her grandma was soothed by the new world of the classroom. She loved her lessons, and showed ability early in

composition and literary appreciation. "You were the smartest and best little pupil I had or can hope to have in Brindabella . . . the only one of all my pupils here and elsewhere that I could write to expecting to be understood," was her teacher's assessment.

Taking her cue from her mother, Stella despised juvenile stories but responded enthusiastically at school to more difficult literature, revelling particularly in the poignancy, the heroism, the bitter bravery in loss and defeat of the Scots ballads. She also fell head over heels in love with the dictionary.

The free and glowing years of child-hood passed peacefully in a beautiful setting, in the security of a wide family. But in her 10th year the idyllic golden days ended. The family left Brindabella.

On April 30, 1889, John and Susannah Franklin moved down and north-east-wards to flatter and more settled country around the railway town of Goulburn, centre of a prosperous agricultural and pastoral district.

The first sight of her new home filled Stella with a sense of desolation. The scenery was drabber, the trees scraggier, no clear streams flowed, no fresh ferns cascaded. The house itself was a poorly built wooden structure of 10 rooms

with only the most rudimentary facilities. Worse still, the descent from the mountains to the tablelands was combined with a slide down the social scale, from the comfort, hard-won by Susannah, and the standing of a minor upcountry squatter, to the circumscribed hard labour of a farmer and his family on a small selection and the lowly status of a "cockatoo," scratching for a living. In this district even the horses were inferior and the liberation of the saddle, one of the great joys of Stella's life, was denied her for a time.

Susannah, ever a fighter, named the drab home at Thornford Stillwater after some clogged waterholes.

Distressed by the abrupt changes, Stella pleaded to visit the familiar old station at Talbingo again, and to her delight Grandma Lampe granted her wish.

By now she was almost 10 and when her proud rendition of a piano piece was disregarded by her relatives for the excitement of the first crawling of a new grandchild she was stunned, and must have realized that for her that endearing stage of childhood, when just to be new and young is to be a marvel, was over.

After Christmas 1889, she returned reluctantly to Stillwater, to the discipline of a real school, to an increasing perplexity about life and to a growing rebellion against the restrictions at that time placed on maturing girls. Even in her last days at Talbingo Grandma had reprimanded her for being "froward" (sic) or mutinous when Stella questioned any of these codes.

Her mother discouraged her views as impractical. In recalling this time Stella remarked:

"The artificial bonds called feminine were presented to my understanding. I must become genteel as befitting a young lady. A good deal was attributed to God's will, and did not turn my heart any more warmly to that gentleman."

In spite of wrenching changes, the persevering, industrious little girl settled well into life at tiny Thornford Public School, well-equipped with her quick mind and eager attitudes for the new tasks. Again she was most fortunate in finding an appreciative and devoted teacher, Mary Gillespie. Susannah was proud of the impression that her small daughter made on the inspectors in 1890.

The rebel, the feminist and the writer in the little girl were all burgeoning. Her scrapbooks of these years, while crammed with cut-outs of posies of flowers, butterflies, birds, aristocratic elegant ladies and beautiful, round cheeked toddlers, all washed with the gentle sentimental pastel glaze of Victorian taste, also include astringent counters culled from the journals of the day, such as: "What this country needs is a religion which will make a man feel that it is just as cold for his wife to get up and light the fire as for himself."

There is also a paragraph on the importance of loving words and deeds in the home. Unfortunately the move to Stillwater had not been a success. The background of life there was darkening. Susannah Franklin had laboured to create a pleasant home at Brindabella. But now after years of effort, with six children of whom the eldest was 12 when baby Laurel was born on July 20, 1892, her energies were depleted and, to her, Stillwater became a place of heartbreak and disappointment. A long, disastrous drought struck the dairying and pastoral industries (deepening the depression which had followed the bank crashes of 1893) and John Franklin, no business-man, failed in his auctioneering venture.

Stella's carefree early childhood had vanished with her father's decision to leave Brindabella. The freedom-loving little girl of the ranges had become a drudge on a cow cockie farm. There was milking before school and feeding the calves, then a long walk in summer heat or winter frost, a day's lessons, the walk home, milking again, washing the dishes, homework and piano practice. It was the life of many Australian bush children of the day but where most accepted their fate stoically, if grumblingly, Stella raged against the oppression of this harsh and dreary state. At 13 she sought escape from the sordidness surrounding her in scribbling romances of silken English high life, full of lords and ladies and grand mansions with butlers.

Stella also found release and joy in music. She played piano and sang in an unusual contralto. Music books surviving from that day include many of the sentimental airs which flowed through the little parlours or grander drawing rooms of Victorian Australia. Meanwhile, Charles Blyth encouraged her reading, "Vanity Fair" and Dickens, and praised her writing.

Her first published piece, a report on the Thornford Public School picnic, was printed in the "Goulburn Evening Penny Post" in 1896 when she was 16.

At 16, with her schooling over, it was time for the daughter of a poor farmer to look for work.

By February 1897 she was teaching her Franklin cousins privately at Yass. She found it very hard going and, in comforting her, Blyth urged her to keep a diary of thoughts, feelings and remarks, and to look upon her disappointments and worries as useful material for literary purposes in the manner of Charlotte Bronte. Tactlessly, he also remarked that Charlotte was small, plain and short-sighted. The adolescent concern with looks is a venerable chestnut. In Stella Franklin's case the matter was an anguished issue, distressingly complicated by her relationship with her sister Linda.

Stella thought herself plain and her sister beautiful. The girls were less than two years apart in age, close in their affection, but utterly different in looks and temperament. Adolescent Stella longed for Linda's traditional style of beauty,

for her classic profile, oval face, golden hair, slender figure and gentle, delicate manner.

In looks Stella's conviction of plainness was quite unbased. She was short, certainly, only 155cm, but her figure was trim and well proportioned. Her complexion, always well protected from the sun in spite of her outdoors life, was fine and fair, her teeth white and even. Her blue-grey eyes slanted slightly beneath well-marked brows and determined little chin supported a mobile mouth. Though Stella, gregarious even at 4, the character and intelligence evident in the face were not in the more insipid style of beauty then popular, she also had one noticeable conventional claim to contemporary loveliness. At 17 her mid brown hair, glinting with copper lights, flowed more than 100cm down her back.

Soft-hearted Linda idolized her sister. Stella's reciprocating love was strong, but interwoven with the jealousy she had experienced at being supplanted.

There was the awareness, too, that Linda was all she could not be, gentle and accepting, mixed with the suspicion that her mother did not love her as she did Linda.

She began to pour all the adolescent rage and pain she felt into a burlesque autobiography of a girl very like herself, Sybylla Melvyn, living on an impoverished dairy farm in a district called Possum Gully, the daughter of a strong, austere mother and an incompetent father who has come down in the world and finds comfort in drink. She entitled it "My Brilliant (?) Career."

Stella Miles Franklin began "My Brilliant Career" on September 20, 1898, when she was 18, and finished it on March 25, 1899.

Sybylla Melvyn, 16 years old, drudging daughter of a poor farmer, finds that her ambitious wishes for a career in the arts, and her impatient demands on life, clash with her late 19th century society's narrow notions of what is proper for a girl. Her adored Grannie, her beautiful and sad Aunt Helen, and her over-worked, respected mother urge her to conform. Her once-worshipped father, now a broken-down farmer-cockatoo, well known for his sprees around the commonest pubs in town, cannot help her; nor can wealthy squatter Harry Beecham who wishes to marry her.

Blackwood accepted it in January 1901, and by April it was printed.

Inevitably, because supposedly fictional, Sybylla's life so closely paralleled Stella's, the unsophisticated country people of her blood or acquaintance saw themselves caricatured in the book. The George Franklins of Oak Vale, who had given her a job teaching their children, thought themselves parodied and outrageously insulted in the M'Swat portrayal as ignorant and slatternly and could not forgive her. It was a family breach which could not be mended.

Her humourless mother was furious at the picture given of their lives. But, unworried by what people might say, adoring Linda was delighted and even Grandma accepted it not without a chuckle. Wrote Linda:

"Thank you for that lovely, lovely present. I am so proud to be the sister of an authoress ... Grannie nearly killed herself laughing at parts of it ... Grannie hides it when anyone comes in but tells them about it, not what's in it . . . She looks at the business side. Let 'em buy it she says . . . You are pretty hot on me in places, not to say anything of poor Father!"

Whatever his failings, John Franklin must have been a man of generous and loving nature not to react to some degree in the manner of his brother George. Yet there was no break.

As word of that Franklin girl's latest exploit spread, the whole district was abuzz. From an unusual child she had grown to a remarkable girl and now into an extraordinary young woman. Daring, high-spirited, lacking in girlish meekness, she had unusual ideas on marriage and religion, though she never had a reputation for "fastness." Station-reared in a male world, she was as free and friendly in her manner with men as with women, but fastidious in her own sexual behaviour to the point of primness. Her entertaining liveliness attracted a number of male admirers and the district speculated on the identity of Harry Beecham.

After the unhappiness and frustrations of her adolescent years, after her resolute struggle to succeed, in spite of the turmoil which she had roused within her family, at 21 Stella Miles Franklin held the juicy golden orange of the world in her hands. CU

From "Her Unknown (Brilliant) Career.' Verna Coleman, published by Angus and Robertson

As printed in The Australian Women's Weekly, Wednesday 18 November 1981