

## Keeping it in the family; one way to interpret the past

A look at *All That Swagger* (1936) by way of seeing how Miles Franklin reconciled her need to be at one with her nation's past, and with her family too, while expressing something of what she felt was the spirit of her time.

*All That Swagger* is a family saga, but what sort of family? What sort of saga? Every family is a mixture of families, since outsiders marry in, and produce children who are half insiders, carrying on the established line, and half outsiders, with the potential to pull the patriarchal family they were born into back onto the rails of the family their mother came from. I, for instance, am an Eagle, but my mother was a Duncan, and the Duncans recite their story with as much pride as the Eagles, and if we stop to consider, the Duncans are as much a mixture of admixtures as the Eagles ... A family line, a family 'character' are constructs, usually created by the men or women whose imaginations are strongest. Humans need definition. We cannot think without a few precepts unchallenged in our minds to fall back on when we're most in doubt. Personal identity, and that includes 'family', is something that must be sustained. The idea of family, and the idea of our particular family, are necessary to us. The family members surrounding a young child are a collection of strengths and weaknesses that can be likened, I think, to rocks – some to be built on, some to be avoided.

So what is a family saga? Ideally, it is a collection of stories woven into a coherent and extended narrative, with gaps filled by

the narrator if he or she is aware of them, or left for the reader/listener to notice, if the narrator isn't troubled by what's been left out. Why do I ask these questions? Because *All That Swagger* looks like a lengthy example of the type, complex in detail though simple in outline, and I think I myself read it that way for many years, until I began to examine Miles Franklin's writing more closely, at which point I found that my earlier admiration had become much more troubled. In the previous essay I referred to the 'statuesque objectivity' of the later Henry Handel Richardson; it's a quality we won't find in *All That Swagger*, and I rather wonder what Miles would have thought of the trilogy created by the earlier, self-exiled writer. I say thought, because it would have been different from what she'd have said. In public, I'm sure that she would have praised the other woman's achievement, but what she felt when she studied the trilogy – if she ever did – is hard to imagine. She would certainly have sensed that HHR's methods could never be hers, not least because her underlying need to tell her family's story came from a different quarter of the mind from that of Richardson's need, and her methods, as we shall see, were cheese to Richardson's chalk.

Indeed I want to ask whether Miles' book is best thought of as a family saga, obvious as this might seem, or would it better be considered as a hymn to Australia, the whole book a song of encouragement to Australians to live according to the nobly egalitarian (if I may put those words together!) principles by

which Danny Delacy lived his life? I think that as I examine the book I shall be finding points at which Miles Franklin exhorts her readers to see their country in a certain way and I think, also, that this moral-exhortation view of the book is the only way of seeing it that holds its disparate methods together.

Let us turn now to the book. As usual, I begin at the beginning, and it's in Ireland. What does Miles Franklin think of Ireland? Does she know anything about it?

These sound like objective questions, which means that they will be of little use, Miles being the sort of writer she is. Does she know anything about Ireland? Yes and no. Miles is by no means a student of Irish history, but she is the inheritor, the recipient, of that endless stream of folklore, fantasy and rhetorical talk (talk, talk, talk!) which flows through the worldwide diaspora. She's part of Ireland in that strange way whereby people of Irish descent manage their affairs and their thinking in defiance of the various 'logics' which other peoples, other cultures, try to impose. Danny and his Johanna escape from Ireland in hopes of a more prosperous and less restricted life on the other side of the globe, but this means, of course, that they bring Ireland with them in their minds. Danny finds what he wants in his pioneering of two properties at the bottom of New South Wales, but Johanna never attains the 'elegancies' she's learned to desire before she leaves her home. She can't forget the loneliness, the isolation, she felt at Burrabanga, the second of her husband's properties, where, left on her own while Danny went off selling cattle, she saw their hut burn down. The fire inflicts terrible burns on her daughter,

Kathleen Moyna, and despite Johanna's efforts, the little girl dies, and something of Johanna with her. Love and excitement fall away from her marriage. Her husband, when eventually he returns to his family, has had a leg amputated after a fall from his horse, and he, in Johanna's eyes at least, is no more than a quirky, garrulous little man who is so attentive to his rambling thoughts, his axe and his pipe that he can never succeed at the main game – making money and creating a socially desirable homestead.

Comments reflecting Miles Franklin's feminism are sprinkled throughout the book, so that she makes the reader feel keenly for Johanna's inability to get her family's life onto the path that she desires, yet her sympathies are with Danny. There are more important things for him to do than to humour his wife. He must ...

What must Danny do?

Danny is the book's repository of virtue, and he must be true to his way of understanding life: his vision. Things like wealth, power, status, influence, are of little importance to him. If he can live by right principles, live generously, keeping always his vision in mind, then he is a happy man. What is that vision that means so much to him?

Danny's vision is something he sees almost every day. It's in the way he feels when he climbs out of the valley where Bewuck has been built and looks at the ranges encircling him, stretching to the horizons that surround him also. Here is Danny at the end of his life, taking his last long walk.

Near the crest of the cutting he sat on a gray log. He

remembered felling the tree, more than half a century gone; it remained as sound as a stone and was decorated with beaded lichen. He watched the Murrumbidgee tumbling from the Bunyip Hole into Delacy's Crossing, and heard the complaint of the casuarinas mingling with its sigh as it ran from out eternity into eternity, crying Hussssssssssh! to the sun or stars. There was mystery for you! Danny liked to ponder on mysteries, but the twin mysteries of time and space were overpowering.

Danny wanders on, with his staff and wooden leg, 'a figure firmly etched into the consciousness of the district.' He is known, and talked about, over a sizeable region, but there are few who can grasp the preoccupations of his mind.

Far away was the timeless, illimitable blue with the mountains prinked upon it and a presence palpitant with a thousand centuries of oblivion, behind which the sun was going down to Riverina to rise on old Ireland, now so near at hand. Poor Ireland! So scourged by conquerors and usurpers, that at best she could have afforded him room for a goat and the operations of a spade, but here was the glory of wide horizons, sublimely empty. He worshipped the pregnant peace of the piled ridges with their lore unlegended. Potential revelation hovering just beyond capture gave the locality its haunting magic.

"The moind! The moind!" he spoke aloud to himself, in the way of a poet lacking an audience.

A few days later, Danny is dead. The book has run three quarters of its length, and without Johanna and Danny, it would seem to have run out of energy, and certainly vision, but this

is not so. The last quarter of the book is packed with Miles' treatment of the transition from Danny, the pioneer, to those of his descendants who also seek his grail. They are, in order, Harry, Danny's third son, a man without worldly success, Harry's son Darcy, a youngster who, in the flat and often arid inland country, far from the mountains, repeats the pioneering adventures of the old man until he returns to marry Clare Margaret Delacy, his first cousin. Clare Margaret, I often think, is Miles Franklin's portrait of the self she would like to have been, and was, in some measure, perhaps. Clare Margaret and Darcy have a child, Brian; Darcy dies in the book's most moving scene, and Clare Margaret devotes herself to giving the boy his chance. He's sent away to school in Sydney, gets a scholarship to Oxford, he becomes an airman, he returns ...

The last pages of the book make it clear that Brian is the modernisation of Danny. His wife, for he has one, an American aviatrix called Lola, is pregnant, so there will soon be an heir, and Brian, so important for himself, and for his mother, Clare Margaret, has turned, or been turned, by a pregnancy and by the author's intent, into a link in the chain which joins the generations. Franklin uses Brian, in the last pages, as her way of looking into the future, giving him the task of carrying the vision which has been her theme, the finest thing sustaining human life, and linking the minds of her people, and the minds of her readers too, with those holy, wondrous mountains where she spent her earliest years.

So, to return to my questions at the beginning of this essay – what sort of family, what sort of saga? – I have now to say that *All That Swagger* is a book of considerable complexity which has as its backbone a very simple spine: Danny, Harry, Darcy/Clare, and finally Brian. It sounds simple, but there is still a good deal more to say.

The account I have just given is such a simple one that readers who know the book may wonder why so much has been left out – Hennessy the publican, and the various courtships that do and don't lead to the firmly tied knot of marriage. Miles handles these with gusto, though readers who are not accustomed to communities where everyone knows everyone else – thoroughly, and down to the last detail of their business – will find themselves thumbing the pages in an attempt to find the diagram, or should I call it the family forest, for which they feel a need. Though I've read the book numerous times I still get confused over who's married to whom, or whose child this one is! Franklin assumes that the reader can easily stay abreast of the flood of information and activity she pours onto her pages, and the truth is that some of us can't.

There is a reason for this. The book sits in an undefined area between fiction and actuality. Franklin has a disconcerting – and annoying, to me – way of revealing that some of the events in her tale are real. True. Actual. As an example, let us turn to the moment when Sissy Vance, a child of twelve, discovers that her mother is in bed with William Delacy. This is not because a sexual union has taken place but because William has mistaken the room

where he is to sleep. He was drunk. Sissy blurts out what she's seen before the women of the household can suppress her.

The young gathered out of sight to giggle. The elders upheld their dignity by laughing when the young were not by.

The pressure of merriment speedily united both camps in that hearty laughter memory of which persists to this day.  
(my italics)

And Miles continues in a way that would occur to no other writer:

There was much laughter in the unexpected continent where even the birds chortled in derision and were mimicked by their own kind.

The birds! They're everywhere, they're part of the country's fauna, but they're also a part of Miles Franklin's unique way of validating – no, *sanctifying* – anything she approves of. I said that the book can be seen as a hymn to Australia; the reader knows when Miles approves of somebody or something in her tale, because it will lead her to write like this:

(Danny) was invigorated in mind and body by the solitude amid the stately boles of the gums, resembling marble pillars. Sunbeams fell like searchlights through the roofs of sickle leaves onto the bracken and aromatic shrubs below. Magpies, black and white cockatoos, yang-yangs, tits, kookaburras, honey-eaters, wood-peckers, thrushes and countless other friends were with him all the day, as they had been over forty years earlier when Bewuck had been equally virgin ...

Virgin. Della Delacy, eldest daughter of Johanna and Danny, has felt the need to marry, instead of becoming the nun that her mother wants her to be, or the household frump Danny takes for granted. She manages to get Edward Angus to marry her, though he's much younger. Johanna turns grumpy, Danny offers to make them a garden, and the wedding takes place without any description except the lines I've quoted above. The marriage, you will notice, is not sanctified by the ceremony but by the setting, the mountains, and above all by the birds:

Mimicry by pet magpies and other birds was an amusing parody, that of the lyre-birds a spell-binding recital. On misty winter mornings when all was damp and dripping, and fragrant as imagination with the sharp, sweet tang of the dead leaves, when other creatures were still, then the lyre-bird's notes rang full and clear through the eucalypt aisles.

The Australia invoked by Miles is still there, though if we visit her forest today we're likely to see regrowth timber, not the primeval bush of Danny's time; it's more likely, though, that we'll fly over it in a plane, or rush through it in a four wheel drive, so much faster than the horses of Danny's day. Miles' vision, that continuation of Danny's vision, is a creation of his generation and she must have known, when she wrote her biggest and strongest book, that the things she was talking about were already in the past.

There are markers through the book to show the reader time's progression. One generation gives way to the next, as I've already pointed out, but there are historical markers too. The first words of Chapter 10 are 'Gold! Gold!' and if we jump forward to

Chapter 13, the cry is 'Horses! Horses!' This second cry is part of one of the historical analyses which Miles sprinkles here and there, pushing the fictional aspect of her creation aside while she lectures. Whether you enjoy these pronouncements or regard them as an abandonment of her work of story-telling (Henry Handel Richardson, where are you now?), will probably depend on whether or not you like what you read. For example:

(Danny's) practice of equality with all men foreran a continent-wide experiment, which, when he was in his grave, flowered in measures of political freedom and protection for the average man, and raised the personnel of the working class to the highest in any nation, an altitude which indicated what the average man could, and also what he could never become nor achieve without inspired leadership.

Absence of backward breeds abolished the flunkey class; the transformation of the peasant element was the contribution of the horse. No man can remain a peasant and go a-horse ...

Brian Delacy, when the story focuses on him, has been asked to stand down from Oxford, and has become a pilot. He and Lola – whom he marries because respectability is important with the Delacys, Miles explains – fly to Australia in what sounds like an early version of the helicopter. Quite a trip! The transition had begun when he was still a child.

"Horses will soon be two a penny," the breeders said.

A few years more and the motor car, which had excited such derision at the beginning of the century, became a commercial reality – the final challenge to the horse and all the swagger of his acolytes. Most people were still assured

that the motor car could never be anything but a toy for the wealthy. The cost would keep it above the ordinary man, who would have to depend on the horse.

Brian Delacy, despite what the reader will make of him, is intended to be a modern man, because he sees flight – flying machines – as transformative of human life. In describing him in this way I am stepping around some truly dreadful writing by Miles Franklin because I want to stay with her argument, which I think is representative of one strand of thought in the period when she wrote, and the earlier period in which she was formed. I want to concentrate for a moment on the way the book ends, because I think it will tell us a lot about why it was written in the first place.

The book ends with Lola, Brian's pregnant wife – though nobody knows, as yet – being taken to see the wonder of the old Delacy properties. She's not very interested but her absence from Sydney creates the opportunity for Adrienne, another cousin of the family, to have an affair with Brian. Tut tut! Lola returns unexpectedly, hiding herself under the bedspread until Adrienne comes in with Brian. Her perfumes, we have already been told, are on the dressing table. Lola listens to the lovers, then confronts them. Adrienne wants to fight for Brian, and Lola faints, but when a doctor is called the matter is as good as over. The doctor is both a female and a gynaecologist! Adrienne is whisked away for comforting, Lola goes into a deep sleep for twenty-four hours, and Brian isn't needed. He sees, more quickly than anyone except

a novelist's mouthpiece could ever see, that he has been moved from being a young man admired by attractive women to ...

... something greater than himself, greater than amour; it was the extension of himself, a link in an unbroken chain – immortality.

While Lola sleeps and others take care of the distressed Adrienne, Brian, having not much else to do, gets into a plane and flies from Sydney, south to the mountains where the book has been set.

Before him lay the destined land of Daniel Brian Robert M. Delacy, in its aura of palpitant silence, enchantment welling from its ageless mystery. From that pregnant oblivion, glittering free of humanity to the Pole, shimmering broadly to the equator, might come the revelation for which man was toiling upward from the abyss. There man had space to escape from the limitations of his outer shell into the boundless freedom of his inner consciousness. There the sun rose as the promise of God and set as His benediction.

He lands, he looks about, he reads a letter written for his eyes, years before, by his grandfather, Harry Delacy, another of those who has sought the grail.

Man only needs to give intelligence full play and fair play to own the potentialities beyond the frontiers of present human knowledge in the Never Never and the Never Yet of the mind ...

Australia is the most wonderful country in the world, but new ideas must be freed to save and develop it ...

Science must learn to take Australia on her own lines and let her remain different ...

A dream is the highest possession of man. I can see in a vision the pioneering that is to be done in the mind ...

After some lines in praise of old Danny and Harry's own son, Darcy, the father, now dead, of Brian, Harry resumes, but does not finish:

In the eras which are coming it is not the felons who can grasp at the expense of their fellows who are to succeed in the fullness of living but those who ...

Brian thinks about the letter and the members of his family it brings to mind, then returns to his plane. A couple of horses frisk up to inspect him. He has enough of his great-grandfather in him to recognise that they are of the Nullah-Mundoe line, a breed of horses proudly continued by the Delacys through the long years of swagger when the horse was a potent expression of man's mind. Now, with a new age dawning, Brian, the latest of the Delacy line to hold the ideal of vision at the front of his mind, restarts the plane's engine and takes to the air.

Airman Delacy pondered on the extension of his being back to his great-grandfather through living memory, and on to his own great-grandson – with luck. The pert foal frolicking up to sniff the machine illustrated the revolution in transport. He was part of the transition and had the good fortune to be in his prime at this stupendous parting of the ways.

Then an uncomfortable thought inserts itself in the writer's mind:

Critical days ahead with the machine as master, looming as the destroyer if manipulated to Satanic ends!

Miles has her answer ready.

But it was inconceivable that men would hurl themselves into the abyss when the way out was as clear and wide as the shimmering track of the departing sun.

As we now know, the European powers, and others elsewhere, were preparing for war as the book came out, and within a decade of its publication atomic bombs were dropped on Japan. The war which people had described as the 'war to end war' had been continued, and one has only to look at the world today to realise that warfare is a perennial activity. The idea that humanity can rise above its darker features to enjoy the sunlit uplands of progress – the idea sustaining everything Miles Franklin put into *All That Swagger*, and particularly its triumphantly, radiantly art-deco ending, has been swamped by the pessimism and cynicism with which humanity now views itself. Here's how the book ends:

The engine shuddered and hummed, moved, ran, ascended; roaring, it rent the upper air, drowning the rhythm of ghostly hoofbeats, swiftly was gone above the ranges, while on the silver screen of night appeared the spectral forms of bullock transport and receding Delacys moving against ancient unfamiliar apparitions on the palimpsest of Time.

I have long felt a painful ambivalence about these last pages. Johanna's view of Danny has always seemed as valid, to me, as Danny's vision of the future, and as for Brian's vision at the last – Miles' vision – it's been buried by the debris of countless wars, massacres, and the natural disasters also, which humankind cannot seem to avoid. There are simply too many people in

untenable places for the world to be safe, and too many spasms of uncontrolled violence for people to be able to build, consistently, a world that's fit to be desired. Mankind cannot be trusted. While it's true that progress occurs regularly, the slithering backwards seems to cover as much distance as the steps forward. How can we make the advances that Miles and her vision-gifted people foresee and desire? I can offer no real answer and I don't think All That Swagger does either. Yet it is a reassertion of the desire to advance, the desire to turn what is first perceived as vision today into the reality of tomorrow. Perhaps humanity can do no more.

I have already indicated fairly clearly, I think, that the character of Brian is a feeble embodiment of Franklin's ideals, and even Danny, the excitable Irish lad who starts the whole book moving, strikes me as a man whose virtues are not entirely possible. (Please regard that as an understatement.) He occupies large tracts of land without upsetting the local aborigines. He gives them a bullock now and then, and he looks after Doogoolook when his tribe would have abandoned him. Similarly, he takes in Wong Foo, the Chinese gold-hunter, and Maeve, another black girl. He's good to O'Neill, a former convict, and he forms a lasting friendship with Hennessy, the publican and fellow-Irishman whose life is as long as Danny's and runs in parallel to it. He chooses not to press charges against Fullwood, the squatter who has been stealing his cattle, and he is more accepting than most men when Johanna banishes him to a bed in the end room. He is so virtuous, this Danny Delacy of Franklin's presentation, that his character seems to me to be like a flag flying over, and claiming

total occupation of the moral high ground. He's more rigorous than he needs to be in matters of his sons' relations – such as they are! – with women. The man is almost as prudish as Miles herself! One feels that if Johanna could be persuaded to talk over a cup of tea then she might draw a picture of her husband very different from Miles' portrait of the virtuous pioneer. Miles, to her credit, brings out Johanna's dissatisfaction, but doesn't allow it to divert any of the strength she allocates to Danny's vision, and his line. It's as if she's set out to anticipate any critical argument her readers might make by incorporating it in the book as she writes it, only to proceed as if it weren't there. After numerous readings, I feel there is much to resent about this book, an unfairness in the author's claim for her ancestor of incorporating the best of Australian life. The cause of my displeasure resides, I think, in the elaborate devices which she uses to exalt the vision see-ers, the grail-ists, above the mortals who surround them. The lesser mortals are there, on all sides, and they're well presented, but they're never allowed to offer their ways of seeing things on equal terms with the chosen - and it is Miles who does the choosing. This disquiet, this considerable displeasure, does not stop me admiring what Miles has done with this book; she wrenches the settlement of Australia, the opening up and the development, onto her own terms. What she thinks of young Australian men going off to fight England's wars in South Africa, Turkey and France, for instance, is honest, simple, direct, refreshing, and in my view, right. It is also very Irish!

Australia has, at the time of my writing this essay, a considerable tradition formed out of the experiences of Australians of many types. Our soldiers stand high, perhaps highest of all, in the view of the past we've developed. Miles, I'm sure, would have none of this. If her book is an argument, a presentation, and it's one that many of us find hard to accept today, then this is only because one view of our past has been overpowered by others – another, perhaps. I have just criticised Miles for putting up an argument, a point of view, only to ignore it. This is exactly what has happened to the view taken by many Irish-Australians of their nation's participation in the war of 1914-1918, which people of Irish descent disfavoured because they saw it as an English war.

Clearly it was, but the participation of Australians in it has been incorporated in the development of an Australian consciousness, that unceasing work-in-progress. Miles Franklin's *All That Swagger* is a deliberate attempt to shape that developing consciousness, and she does it, as we have seen in considering the last pages of the novel, in an optimistic, forward-looking way which allocates heroic virtue to the qualities she deems finest in those of her family who pioneered in southern New South Wales. The book is a claim on behalf of herself and her family, and it's also set up as a beacon to show the way forward. How to do this? Stay true to what I've shown you about the past, Miles would have said. Look back, and you'll know the way to go on.

As I've indicated on a number of occasions, I find this moral superiority exasperating, but there is clarity in her passion, and the passion won't be denied. I find it strange to be arguing

against the book, resisting it, because I've long been in agreement with much of what Miles is proposing, but, be that as it may, *All That Swagger*, even if it's unfashionable today, is very hard to get out of one's mind.