

## Names galore, and the need for disguise

Brent of Bin Bin and the scrutiny of family

When we set out to deceive others, we hope also to deceive ourselves, but the two deceptions may have different aims, pointing us, and the others, in different directions. With this somewhat cryptic statement I start my consideration of the six novels of Brent of Bin Bin, an alias used by Miles Franklin for many years.

Brent was by no means Miles' only pseudonym. Many years ago, browsing through a catalogue of her papers about to be sold by Berkelouw, booksellers of NSW, I came across no less than fourteen names she'd given herself. These included Blake of Bin Bin, Punica Granatum, Plumb Bob, a number of others and, best of all, Mr and Mrs Ogniblat L'Artsau. (This last, read back to front, gives us Talbingo Austral, a tribute to her grandmother and the favorite place of her early years.) Talbingo, Australia; I drove through it one day, before I'd read any Miles Franklin books, and was enthralled. It was the most beautiful place I'd seen. When my reading of Australian literature connected these impressions with Miles, I understood at least a little of what the place had meant to her. Why had she made up so many names for herself? It's normally said that she was hurt by her family's reaction to the use of her real name on the cover of *My Brilliant Career*. This may be so; families are strange when one of their members achieves the sort of fame that family members classify as notoriety. Miles, it is said, was hurt, and wanted to remain hidden. Interestingly, she used her

real name for *All That Swagger*, and a fictitious name for her Brent of Bin Bin novels, several of which are set in much the same locale. Ray Mathew<sup>1</sup> says, 'Disguise is often the clearest expression of self', and I think he is right in the case of the Bin Bin novels, where Miles shows her hand freely while going through the motions of being someone else. More of this later, as and when it's appropriate.

There are six of these novels<sup>2</sup>, published in the following order, or out-of-order, as we may feel:

- *Up the Country*, Blackwood, Edinburgh, 1928
- *Ten Creeks Run*, Blackwood, Edinburgh, 1930
- *Back to Bool Bool*, Blackwood Edinburgh, 1931
- *Prelude to Waking*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1950
- *Cockatoos*, Angus & Robertson, 1954
- *Gentlemen at Gyang Gyang*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1956

What is the best order for reading them? Does it, or does it not, depend on the period of each book's setting? Or is there a theme being developed, by which we can decide the order? These questions aren't easy to answer. *Back to Bool Bool* is almost certainly intended to be the last of the series, if it is a series; one has only to read its last lines, ending with 'FULL STOP', to know that Miles – Brent – means what she's saying. But where to begin? *Up the Country*, which starts with a great flood in 1852, takes us furthest into the past, and is therefore a contender to be read first, but *Prelude to Waking*, set in England between the two world wars, with scattered references to

Australia, has more of an introductory feeling, so that, if pressed, I might favour it as the start of the series.

If it is a series. Did Miles, when she invented a name for herself, something she did often enough, think that the Brent of Bin Bin books would form a coherent whole, linked by something more than the pseudonym? It's not easy to say. There are times, in the six books, when a reader may feel that Miles has a plan, a scheme, and other places where no such idea is apparent: Miles is simply yarning, or 'possuming', as she says of her methods in *Up the Country*. I have little sympathy with Miles telling us that she's possuming. She seems to think that the origins of the term – the way of life of up-country people such as her grandfather Danny Delacey (*All That Swagger*) – is justification in itself, when readers, who also read the books of other writers, are unlikely to be so forgiving, or so patient. The test of a technique is not whether it can be given an up-country name but whether it works in the minds of readers, and Miles' technique in the Brent books is frequently faulty.

So what was she doing? In *All That Swagger*, her other and possibly stronger attempt at a unifying statement, she concentrated on a lineal description of the lives of a family – *her* family – starting with them leaving Ireland, settling in the south-east mountains of their new country, and creating a tradition as they helped, along with thousands of others, to create a new country. *All That Swagger* ends with an attempt to show the same family participating in a newly-grasped vision of radiant art-deco, progressive, modern Australia, with a new child on the way, aeroplanes in the air and the present as open to creativity and vision as the past. In describing

what is, for me, her greatest achievement, I am ascribing to her a unity of purpose which I don't think she fully possessed, though I feel sure that she aspired to it. She certainly, in my view, needed it, and it's this question of unity of vision which underlies and also undercuts the Bin Bin books. How well did she know what she was doing? Miles was talkative enough, but not particularly gifted at self-analysis, so let's concentrate on what she did, meaning the Bin Bin books she gave us.

*Up the Country* is where she starts and where her imagination needs to take us. She was always a woman of the tradition she invokes in this book, and she was happier describing the country as she saw it in her childhood and heard about from her elders than she was, in later years, describing what she saw around her. The passage of time adds a certain sanctity, in Miles' mind, to the most pedestrian and sometimes the meanest, even ugliest, events. Miles was always, I think, somewhat guarded because unprotected in her daily dealings, and was able to mount a consideration of greater moral complexity when dealing with things which had occurred in the historical zone behind her. Geographically, this covered the mountains ranging from south of Cooma to west of Canberra, and out to the drier, flatter areas near Goulburn, all in New South Wales; in terms of time, it covered something like the first three generations of white settlers. Despite occasional references here and there to the earlier existence of aborigines, Miles never really brings them into her thinking, for the good reason that she conceived of Danny Delacey and his like as taking part in a discovery which was almost a second creation. The pioneers had to be first; modern acceptance of the aborigines as having had the land open and understood for

thousands of years was intractable to Miles because it altered the meaning she gave to those first settler lives, heavy with hardship but triumphal in giving European man a new beginning. The Brent of Bin Bin novels are about that opening up of the new land, but also about the old world when, in its turn, it's visited by people from the new world who are adventurous enough to go seeking. Saying this suggests that the Bin Bin novels have a mighty theme, but it's one they don't entirely live up to: Miles' foibles and limitations pop up at almost every point, and yet we mustn't be too critical because her sheer despair, her inability to find anything satisfying enough to be a suitable development of the hopes, ideals and aspirations of the young people, mostly female, who crowd her pages, forces her to turn to the rivers of her land, endlessly flowing, as the visible expression of time, which wipes us all out, sweeps everything away, and is, as it were, the eternal enemy of the positive statements and achievements we might like to make. At once I think of Larry Healey, who had a sometimes shameful, sometimes tumultuous role in *Ten Creeks Run*, but is a different man in *Cockatoos*, where he is to be found on the first and last pages of the book, trudging behind a plough, unredeemed by any hope of achieving wealth, or anything very much, but simply persisting. The things he did in *Ten Creeks Run* seem, as we close the later book, to have been no more than pitiful attempts to escape the trap enclosing him. Here are the last lines of *Cockatoos*:

She left the kitchen by the back door and took the track to the cultivation paddock. Her father met her half-way, the winkers over his arm, while out of habit he looked sideways up to the clear cold sky and wished to God it would rain.

The child put her hand in his. He clasped the warm, soft little fingers in his hard, cold, work-roughened palm as if they were a lifeline. They went towards the house, the ordeal with Dot impending.

"Kindness! Kindness! God help us all to be kind to one another whether we deserve it or not," murmured the sensitive, weary man, but the little girl was gleefully imitating the mopokes that were calling in the scrub beyond the sheepyards, and did not hear him.

At the start of the same book there is a double-page spread of the 'Foundation Families of the Brent of Bin Bin Clans'; there are eleven of these families, each associated with a property name in bold caps, while the family names are smaller. There are scores of names in these family trees, they are the major names of the Bin Bin series, they cover, as already stated, a three-generation span of interconnected families, and yet the strongest statement that Miles can make, at the end of the fourth of her Bin Bin books, is the despairing 'murmur' of Larry Healey quoted above. "Kindness! Kindness! God help us all to be kind to each other whether we deserve it or not."

If that's the best that mankind can come up with, what can nature offer? Miles has two answers. Nature is endlessly rich, various and beautiful – a reinvigorating force – and it's relentless, a force coming from, and expressing, a very bleak, un-Christian eternity. This second idea appears from time throughout the six books and it gets its fullest statement at the end of *Back to Bool Bool*:

All around were deep shadows and enamoured silence where lately laughter and song had echoed, and in the

silence, enlarging it, the Mungee sang its immortal, its mercilessly beautiful lullaby to the boulders and trees, to the shrubs and ferns, to the rust-red road around the sidelings of the rugged hills, to the young lovers' moon and the stars. Oh, a sweet wild song that filled the fragrant night like a sigh from paradise: an untamed triumphant song as the Mungee rushed onward to the Murrumbidgee, to the Murray and the Great Bight, to trade its magic tale for that of the winds that roam for five thousand miles with nought to say them nay, freighted with mermaids' laughter or Leviathans' loves, odysseys of incredible feats of fortitude of men and dogs on the ice in the vast emptiness of the South – all the sagas of Antarctica's adventures, weird or heroic - from beyond Kerguelen, from beyond the Horn, from beyond the Bay of Wales, from beyond the Ice Pack Circle, from beyond the high dead mountains that guard the Pole, straight from eternity.

Immediately after this passage, having made her prose as orchestral as she knows how, Miles gives us 'FULL STOP': her Bin Bin books are done. But nature isn't always stated so extremely; there are times when it's more soothing: here's SP-over-J getting over a foul mood:

The aching immutable stillness had its influence. One might beat with rage against that for an eternity with no effect but to demonstrate human impotence, human insignificance. Nothing came from his outbreak but the refreshing perfume of broken tea-tree, heath, or bracken. The rocks crashed without injury to anyone or anything but a pinprick or two to the stately scrub.

The exercise relieved rage. The quiet restored reason. ... Stanton turned towards home feeling a little sick from foolishness. After all, what had he to go upon? Nothing. ... He was thankful he had said nothing. No one but his horse suspected what a fool he had been, and he was dumb. Far down the gully from whence the music of a creek ascended could be seen leafy bowers of tree-ferns, sassafras, and tea-tree, and spear-pointed trees of matchless grace indicating young timber. Above rose Mount Corroboree, black and forbidding, silent and still for ever, a dignified sentinel above the tree-tops – mile on mile, ridge on ridge of greens melting into hazy blues with distance.

He rode homeward steadily where to the west the white clouds were massing in mountains fringed with molten gold, of magnificent beauty, and presaging a thunderstorm.

These are the mountains, of course; in *Cockatoos*, we are mostly in the drier, flatter Goulburn district, nature isn't so lush, nor rain so reliable, the early settlers are only cockatoos (small selector-farmers) and they're forever struggling, they don't have the dignity of those who went further into the Monaro, and their children, or some of them, want to find a way out. Milly, of course (in *Up the Country*) marries the much older Bert Poole, but the young women who embody Miles' hopes in the later books are dreaming of escape, or have made it ...

... only to find a new form of trap. Sex. Men. Miles, like most of us, was a victim of her time. She was alive, indeed marvellously responsive, to the virtues of early settlement, but equally desperate for a way out. From time to time she shows us that the men of her places and period were aware of their limitations too, but they have

the land to work, and patriarchal roles to fill, whereas women can only bear children and manage households, tasks which some of them perform with grace and others with bitterness in their hearts. It must be possible to get out! Miles dedicated *Cockatoos* to Sybylla Melvin, the central figure of her own *My Brilliant Career*, an unusual thing to do. This is presumably because Ignez Milford, one of the book's escape-seekers, achieves the publication of her first attempt at a book called *NITA: The Story of a Real Girl*. I've already referred to Miles' deficiencies as a manager of her books; she is a deceptive and less than honest narrator. *NITA* provides a good example. Late in *Cockatoos*, six copies of Ignez's story arrive in the post as, we are led to believe, a complete surprise. Rubbish. There must have been a contract, but it hasn't been mentioned. No correspondence between author and publisher? No, because it suited the narrator to have the book arrive unannounced. Miles is in fact only intermittently the 'manager' of her stories. Much of the time she's snatching at things to offer the reader. A graver defect is her way of treating her books as factual accounts of real people – when it suits her – and slipping or sliding towards story-telling when that seems appropriate. Thus, from time to time she will 'verify' her accuracy by telling readers that what she has been talking about is still remembered today by the descendants of the people in her book, the quirks of actuality being brought in to support her fiction. I've already referred to the two-page spread of family trees at the beginning of the fourth Bin Bin book. I find this presentation exasperating, first, because it arrives three books later than it should, and, further, because its usefulness is greatly decreased by Miles' writing; names fly in

all directions, property names, family names, names of children, horses, features of the landscape ... the author assuming that the reader will *know* who or what's being referred to. It's a habit among people who live in a restricted locale to assume that anyone or anything can confidently be referred to in the certainty that locals – those already in the know – will conjure up not only the faces and associations of the people being referred to, but that they will feel about them in much the same way as everyone else. That is, that there is an already-existing map or name-sheet in people's minds as to who is wise (Bert Poole, obviously), who's a stick-in-the-mud, who progressive and so on. It's not uncommon for closed groups, even entire districts, to understand in this formulaic way, but alas, such a way of understanding is also the opposite of the way in which a mature novelist should be working, especially one who is handling a vast spread of characters. There is a contradiction between Miles' frequently expressed yearning for freedom and artistic advancement for her young people, and her management of characters inside the framework of the place that's enclosing – trapping – them. A wiser, subtler, writer than Miles Franklin would be aware of this dichotomy and manage it better.

Occasionally – let me backtrack a little, even contradict myself – Miles proves me wrong. I instance the very last chapter of *Ten Creeks Run*. Miles has spent twenty one chapters showing us the tightly restricted way of life of her region, with its stifled romances, formulaic marriages, and overpoweringly Scottish notions of anti-sexual respectability threaded through everything that happens between men and women, and she has brought us to the point of

making us, like the young women of the six books, despair of ever finding a way out, when she ... I think I have to say she amazes us. Chapter XXII begins with the announcement that Great-grandma Mazere has died. This last chapter puts her to rest, and it does more: it solves – temporarily – Miles’ problem as a novelist. Miles, as we know, never married, never had children. She was an outsider, an exception, to the very way of life she’s famous for chronicling, in which marriage, the bearing of children, the narrative of families, the continuity of generations, are the stuff of life. Sexuality is continuity however much difficulty Miles had in accepting it. She knows it, and she expresses how it works – for everyone but herself and those young women and the occasional poetically inclined male of similar mind – for those of the region which was her actual and her literary home. Sexuality is continuity, sexuality is life. In an earlier essay I pointed out how obvious this was to the black people of *Coonardoo*. It never occurred to those black people to deny the obvious but the Scottish and other settlers of southern New South Wales accepted the obvious either by denial or by stern control. Things had to be managed at every turn. There’s chaperonage everywhere. Nobody gets in a gig or a carriage, nobody sits at table, without concern for who will be close to whom. People seek secrecy, and there’s someone listening, watching from out of sight, somewhere. For every letter that’s delivered there’s half a dozen people speculating about the contents. In *Ten Creeks Run* Miles shows this endless speculation – spying, really – as the basis of public opinion in her district. There’s hardly anything else. She gives us pages of this gossiping as her way of showing us the context for the personal

lives of her characters. Indeed, it’s a characteristic of her books, and I’m not sure whether this is a weakness, a strength or simply a truth of her Bin Bin books, that the distinction between ‘characters’ and background people is hardly drawn at all. Everyone’s connected, everyone’s a part of public opinion, and the distinction between private thought and public opinion is so ill-drawn, so hazy, that it’s hard to see how anyone could manage their lives according to what we, today, are inclined to call inner truths. It’s such a hard world to live in, and the hardest role of all, at least in Miles’ view, is that of the young woman who doesn’t want her life simplified by an early marriage followed by children and the management of a household. In this sense Miles’ problem is everyone’s problem, but it’s also the problem of every chapter of her books. She is herself a restless, dissatisfied person in the books, every one.

Then she amazes us with Chapter XXII of *Ten Creeks Run*. How does she do it? With a death. Death is part of life, says the cliché; Miles turns it into summation. The arrival of a death, especially a belated one, makes us aware, fully appreciative, of a life. Great-grandma Mazere’s husband had died twenty five years earlier, ‘and every Christmas since, a bumper gathering had been rallied on the slogan “It might be Grandma’s last.” It was a family, nay a town, joke.’ This death of old Mrs Mazere has the effect of casting itself back over the events of earlier chapters and changing the way we feel about them; death sharpens the way we see life, heightens it, makes us at least partially accept things we’d previously found distasteful. The death of old Mrs Mazere, and Miles’ handling of it, her use of it as a novelist, changes the way we read her books,

most especially the way that the early death of Emily Mazere, who drowned, young and beautiful, on the eve of her wedding, is threaded through the six books as perhaps the most significant thing that is to happen in the lot of them – series or no series.

Emily is not so much the principal character of the books – no one person is that – as their guiding beacon. It may seem to us that she misses out on life, or perhaps evades it, by dying young; Miles, I'm sure, no matter how much she over-used Emily to urge a way of seeing on the unwilling reader, wants us to read the books in a way that accepts the death as one of the ways – perhaps, for a beautiful young woman, it may even be the best – of living. The life cut short may be seen as one where life's miserable or pedestrian features never overwhelm the beauty. The whole series is about being young, and hoping, striving, even desperately, to preserve the qualities which make youth golden and turn them, if possible, into something whereby they are consummated – a word I use un-sexually – by artistic expression. This, I think, explains the odd way in which Miles refuses to let Ignez be proud of the publication of Nita; she's more concerned to develop herself as a singer. At once our minds jump forward to *Back to Bool Bool*, the book that makes the group a series if it is one. How does it end? Mollye Brennan, Madame Austru, returns to the district of her birth, world-famous, an idol for her home people as she is in the world's opera houses, and she sings! A few pages later, the river that claimed Emily Mazere all those hundreds of pages ago claims Nat Horan, a young man whose understanding, Miles feels she has shown us, will connect him in our reading with the earlier Emily: both have died

young. Yet this second death, three generations later, is coupled, as Emily's death was not, with a concert which Miles offers as the musical balance to what's happened in the Fish Hole. Life has been fulfilled, death has reasserted itself, Miles bangs in those last two words, FULL STOP, where, for one or two of the earlier books, she could only offer INTERVAL.

This is the double assertion she wanted to make. Miles is an assertive writer, anxious not to allow the reader any mistake about what she intends. This demands, of course, that she herself be crystal clear about her purposes, and she isn't. Nonetheless, I think the way to read her works is to look for signposts. Miles is not inclined to let us draw our own conclusions. She is, as I've said a number of times, very directive. Shortly after the middle of *Cockatoos*, Ignez Milford (connected by marriage to the Mazerers) gets – escapes – to Sydney; her Uncle Raymond meets her at the station, but their way is blocked by an accident which results in 'a female form' lying on the tram tracks. Ignez is agitated, but Uncle Raymond (one of the Pooles) says, 'Keep cool, my dear. It's no one of any consequence.' It is, as we discover over the next seventy pages or so, a prostitute; Uncle Raymond refers to her as a 'fallen woman' who 'was intoxicated or she wouldn't have been out so early'. There is then a short but fierce exchange between Raymond Poole and Ignez Milford, the writer who's also a singer and a good pianist too, in which the man shows that he accepts the dichotomy of respectable and fallen women, and that the latter variety are, regrettably of course, *necessary*. Ignez, seething, and shaken, falls silent. This incident shadows the rest of the book. Ignez is a young

woman reaching out for the next stages of her life, searching for outlets for the creative, expressive side of herself, and the death of the prostitute (we're told several chapters later that she died) is a warning about the terms on which life is predicated. What does Uncle Raymond say about this?

"It's useless to kick against human nature. You must understand that men are not like women in this matter, and it can never be different. I for one wouldn't wish it to be – it's deuced pleasantly arranged as it is."

Miles has made her point powerfully, but a little too strongly for her own good. Writers, in my view, shouldn't be hectoring their readers, and this incident, and the way it's used, make us aware that Miles lacks the assurance to feel certain of how we will react to what she gives us. It's not that she doesn't have the right to use the incident, or any that suits her purposes, but that the drunken woman, now dead, confirms Miles in her conviction – her authorial stance – that Ignez, and by extension, any sensitive woman, can only get away from the horrible side of life – where men may be found heavily over-represented – through art. Art is thus turned, in my view, from life's expression, perhaps its glory, to another of those many forms of escape, such as gambling. This is one of those self-created problems which abound in Miles' work.

So what are we to think of the Bin Bin books? This depends on how we see them, and there are four ways that I can think of. We may treat them as historical documents, portraying the squatter and selector groups; if we see them this way, their value is obvious and we don't have to bother ourselves too deeply about their aesthetics

or what they lack in craftsmanship. Or, we may see them as an account of Miles' own struggles to get herself out of something which she both loved yet found restrictive; this is the reading most attractive to me. We may, in our displeasure, see them as little more than the shallow novelettes she herself disparaged (see Chapter V of *Ten Creeks Run*). Or we may take them on the terms they offer us and examine them as studies of women wanting, first, to get away, and then to achieve what they've most desired. If we see them thus, the most flattering of the four ways I've suggested, they disappoint us terribly because they offer so little. It seems that those who appeared to escape barely escaped at all. Ray Mathew, whom I've already referred to, sees Miles as a woman locked in the nineteenth century she rebels against. 'It is those mental conventions, that period's thinking which hampers all attempts to deal with later periods in her fiction. For Miles Franklin nothing – from a literary point of view – happened in her life after the publication of *My Brilliant Career* in 1901.'<sup>1</sup>

Let us take a look at the women who appear to escape. Emily Mazere is first, and she does it by drowning, so we can hardly expect others to follow. Ignez escapes, and Freda, and there is also Bernice Gaylord, in *Gentlemen of Gyang Gyang*, who has been the lover (as far as one can tell about such things in a Miles Franklin story) of a man called Vorotnikoff. Everything we're told about this man, up to and including his name, is directive of our reaction; Bernice returns to Australia, and she paints. Anyone who has ever known, and loved, the high country of the Monaro would agree that there is much for an artist to do there, but Bernice's subject

matter, as described by Brent of Bin Bin, can only make one wince. So appreciative are the men of Sylvester Labosseer's station that Bernice, whose first painting was of a group of men working at their commonplace functions, or hobbies, that the artist declares that she will next paint someone's dog! She's painted in France, she's been to the great galleries of Europe, and she chooses a dog, a dog, a dog! Miles has no idea about painting, and precious little of music either. Dame Nellie Melba, who gains a mention or two in the Bin Bin books, is reputed to have advised a fellow singer preparing to visit Australia, 'Sing'em muck', and I have to say that when Miles is talking about the arts she barely knows muck from anything else. She may scorn the providers (and readers?) of novelettes, but her own thinking, her taste, are hardly any higher, for much of the time. And if we turn to her understanding of her own art – writing – we have only to examine some of the tricks of events being made to happen or not happen in *Gentlemen at Gyang Gyang* to decide that she's frequently as bad as those she affected to scorn. I find myself reaching back to those rivers flowing endlessly as time, those cold blasts from the pole, reminding us of the limits to our lives, in order to get back some respect for this writer.

Let us remain a little longer with Ignez and Freda. The later pages of *Cockatoos* sustain the hope that they will find something suitable for their talents in another land, but *Gentlemen of Gyang Gyang* gives us only the *return* of Bernice Gaylord, disappointing to this reader. *Back to Bool Bool* is the test case. It begins at sea, following two ships as they head for Australia. The better class boat is bringing Madame Austras, who is both one of the Brennans of

Bool Bool and a look-alike for Nellie Melba. The crowd on the lesser ship includes Dick Mazere, who has by now a tiny reputation as a poet, and a Miss Timson who turns out to be Freda Healey. Dick has known her only by this adopted name and she has known him as Mr Meyers because the handwritten label on his deckchair has confused people. It's a matter of no importance but it's somehow indicative of Brent the writer that he, as much as Miles Franklin, his creator, likes to deceive us via names.

After the ships, it's Sydney, and then, after a certain amount of travel in the district where they all come from, it's back to Bool Bool. It's Brent's intention that we should see this as art arriving, appropriately but at last, in Bool Bool. The district is having a 'back to'. In what we might term an act of reverse-globalisation, those who've been away are returning to the little place they've come from. Madame Austras, Mollye Brennan, brings a huge excitement with her, but the others acknowledge, one way or another, that they belong to the place where they began. This is both true, and utter rubbish; it's all a matter of the terms and in a Miles Franklin book, it's the author who dictates, or tries to dictate, the terms. Freda, Dick, Bernice, Ignez and even Mollye Brennan are shown to us on Bool Bool's terms, or at least those of Sydney, not of London, Vienna, Paris and the rest. The viewpoint isn't adjusted so we can see Bool Bool from afar. So what lay behind the restlessness of the earlier books? What happened inside the souls of those who'd wanted to get away, once they reached the distant places they'd longed to see? What were their experiences and how did they change them, these runaways from Goulburn, the Monaro, Jindabyne, Cooma and

Dalgety? If a person had been formulated, shaped, in mountainous, outback places, how did they stand up when they reached the outside world? These are questions that the Bin Bin books appear to raise, and the reader can't help but expect some answers, and not of the Vorotnikoff-cliché variety, either.

Answers there are few. Miles doesn't give them. Instead we are treated to Blanche following the 'artists', breaking in on them, accusing them, forever wrenching the discussion, the reader's consideration, back to the wretched, localised terms we know so well from the earlier books. Blanche is such a font of misery that I find myself blaming the other characters for not walking out of the book. How can they tolerate being with her? Miles, if she only knew it, has an important point to make. When Governor Phillip raised the flag over the first white settlement in Australia, the settlement was English. It remained so for many years, but as the years rolled on, children were born to the colonists, the settlement(s) took on characteristics that belonged to the places where they were, not where they'd come from. This formation of an Australian identity was most noticeable among the under-educated and under-privileged. Wealthier people, those with aspirations to show their achievement, had to make themselves resemble, in some way and to some degree, their equivalents in the British Isles. It may be said that for a certain period of Australia's history – choose your own dates – our society lacked a top. The upper reaches of social life were either imitative or simply non-existent, unless you 'returned' to England. Many wealthy Australian families felt they had to take some part in the life of London, even perhaps the court

of the royal family, if their lives were to be fulfilled. (I'm thinking of the Whites, particularly of Patrick's mother – but there were whole classes of such people in the wealthier cities of Australia, even up to World War 2.) The people of Miles Franklin's books, and I include those of Bin Bin, are in an interesting position in regard to this gradual displacement from English society and the development of a self-sufficient Australia which no longer felt that something important was missing from its life. The battling selectors of Goulburn and the squatters of the Monaro, often battling just as hard, were too remote from capital cities to enjoy such social life as was offering there, so they had to make their own. Sometimes they did and sometimes they couldn't. Certain of Australia's writers concentrated on the poorer classes' struggle to make a life, but Miles (incorporating Brent) didn't have the knockabout humour of a Steele Rudd or the wide sympathy of a Henry Lawson. She had pride in her origins and a powerful commitment to show the classes she came from as she understood them, but some necessary element of detachment was missing from her artistic make-up. To put it as simply as I can, I don't think Miles ever found peace with herself, so she couldn't develop the calm, all-encompassing voice that her subject matter demands. Reading *Back to Bool Bool*, I feel that the author is as frustrated as I am by the endless, self-justificatory whining of Blanche, but Miles (Brent) has found no way to silence such people. She is still, to some degree, at their mercy and under their control. To me it is no accident that Blanche walks through the last of the Bin Bin books unchanged, unsoftened, while those who

have been overseas and lived according to other modes, revert, on their return, to the ways they once sought to abandon.

To read the six books is to be forced to the conclusion that those who escaped found nothing very much while they were away, desperate though they might have been to go. Freda, who, we are given to understand, has the intellect to do almost anything, is pursued by Major-General Sir Oswald Mazere-Poole (married, with a wife back in England, where he spends a good deal of his time). The Major-General takes Freda on a trip through the Monaro, and they take adjoining rooms at a hotel, the Major thinking that Freda will allow him entry through the connecting door, but this is not what happens, despite Freda's anticipations of a few pages earlier.

He put his hands on her shoulders and stooped to kiss her, found she was trembling, and saw terror and appeal in eyes accustomed to dance with fire of intelligence and humorous mischief. "Good God, Freda!" he whispered. "Weren't you expecting me? You don't mean to say –"

"Oh yes, of course I was expecting you, at first, and then I wasn't, and I didn't want ... and I hoped you didn't mean ... and – I at least ... oh!" she had her small fists in her mouth and her eyes wide like a child dreading a draught.

Having got her book and her characters into this position, Miles gets herself and her readers out of it by making the Major General, who is, after all, a Mazere and a Poole, extraordinarily good-humoured. While we are still wincing at what's been done to us by the novelist, Sir Oswald becomes jovial, reassuring, sympathetic. In some inexplicable way the sexual failure makes Freda even more appealing to him. Is this supposed to correspond

to some psychological reality? I doubt it; I'm more inclined to think that Brent of Bin Bin is so caught up in the pleasure of bringing the escapers home to Bool Bool, the country of the author's childhood and growing up, that nothing will be allowed to stand in the way of her enjoyment. The second half of *Back to Bool Bool* is some of the happiest and most confident writing that Miles Franklin ever gave us, silly as it may be at times. This occurs despite the sexual frustrations to which we have become almost inured by now – Madame Austrá can't have the Dick she loves, Sir Oswald can't have Freda, Dick can't have Freda, Blanche can't have anybody (she doesn't deserve it, we whisper gleefully), and Laleen – this is where Miles/Brent is most resolved – can't have Mollye's accompanist, the composer and conductor Nat Horan. The river that claimed Emily, long ago, is to have him. Miles/Brent writes the death with assurance, understatement, she is so certain of what she's doing. Emily's death is repeated and the lore of the swimming hole is added to. Intensified. Miles has achieved her aim in becoming Brent; she's asserted death and its ally, frustration, as equals to the continuity of life through sexuality, birth, and more conceptions. Those who step aside, like Miles, and those who are wrenched aside, like Emily and now Nat, are the contradiction – because moving around life's cycles in the opposite direction – of those who follow the cycle in the way that's regarded as normal. So perhaps the answer to my question of a few pages back is that the Bin Bin books are a series when Miles/Brent finally realises what she's about, and they aren't when she's groping for her way – possuming was the word she found for this.

The Bin Bin books are infuriating, not least when the author, without so much as a glance over the shoulder, or any sort of apology for having misled us in the past, can say something like ‘... the untravelled Australians in their friendly deference were infinitely preferable to those who had been abroad and were smattered with Europeanism.’ Did all those restless young souls, desperate to escape their limitations, achieve no more, in the end, than become ‘smattered with Europeanism’? The words I’ve just quoted come very late in the sixth book (third to be published). Miles knows what she’s saying because, at last, she knows where she is in her sequence. A couple of pages earlier she refers to the words of Larry Healey, Freda’s father, that I’ve already quoted from *Cockatoos*. Freda is thinking:

I suppose the river sang like that to the dancers long ago,  
such a little while since really, and yet they are all gone. We  
shall be gone too before we can accomplish anything. There  
is time for nothing, only to be kind – scarcely time for that ...

The negativity of this, and of the great concluding burst that Miles/Brent gives us before that final FULL STOP, make the Bin Bin series, in my view, the counter to, the other side of, Miles’ determined optimism in *All That Swagger*, where family pride in achievement and the ongoing nature of life are strong. That was a book by Miles under the name she shared with her family. The Bin Bin books are hers in a more private, personal way, the subject matter is similar enough, but the writer’s viewpoint is darker by far. Miles and Brent, if I may hold them separate for a moment longer, were novelettish writers at their all too frequent worst, lacked

technical accomplishment and the artistic detachment that allows writers to create structures that by their shape and form are *ready* to contain what’s later to be expressed within them, but Miles and Brent were determined, and dogged too, in setting out to achieve their aims. Miles, like the people she wrote about, couldn’t reach the things she wanted to do overseas – she couldn’t even make herself particularly happy there – so she had to come home and put up with herself inside the limits she felt as an unfortunate but unshakeable part of herself. Hence the restlessness, the impatience that’s so readily discernible in her writing; but, as so often, if you want the qualities of the writer you have to accept the drawbacks because they’re connected. Miles Franklin, and her opposing self, Brent of Bin Bin, are an excellent example of this.

1. *Australian Writers and their Work: Miles Franklin*, by Ray Mathew, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1963
2. Editions referred to in the writing of this essay were as follows:
  - *Up the Country*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1984 edition, ‘edited more severely than Miles Franklin herself would ever have allowed’ (Publisher’s Note)
  - *Ten Creeks Run*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, first Australian edition, 1952
  - *Back to Bool Bool*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, second edition, 1956
  - *Prelude to Waking*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1950
  - *Cockatoos*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1954
  - *Gentlemen at Gyang Gyang*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1956