"Only Scratch the Surface": Reading Franklin's Cockatoos

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Abstract
Miles Franklin's novel *My Brilliant Career* has attracted a great deal of critical attention, perhaps prompted in part by fascination with the way Franklin thematises reading itself. Much less attention has been given to a set of books which can be understood as sequels and interlocutors to Franklin's first and most famous novel. Among these are *My Career Goes Bung*, written soon after *My Brilliant Career* but not published until 1946; *Cockatoos*, probably begun around the same time, but not published until the year of Franklin's death, 1954; her most 'genuine' (?) autobiography, *Childhood at Brindabella*, likewise published in 1954; and *On Dearborn Street*, set in Chicago, which did not appear until 1981. In this essay I want to examine these later works in terms of the ways in which they thematise reading.

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... books heighten reality, even for those who live the life depicted.¹

Miles Franklin’s novel My Brilliant Career has attracted a great deal of critical attention, perhaps prompted in part by fascination with the way Franklin thematises reading itself. Much less attention has been given to a set of books which can be understood as sequels and interlocutors to Franklin’s first and most famous novel. Among these are My Career Goes Bung, written soon after My Brilliant Career but not published until 1946; Cockatoos, probably begun around the same time, but not published until the year of Franklin’s death, 1954; her most “genuine”(?) autobiography, Childhood at Brindabella, likewise published in 1954; and On Dearborn Street, set in Chicago, which did not appear until 1981.² In this essay I want to examine these later works in terms of the ways in which they thematise reading.

My Career Goes Bung signals its status as a sequel, although there are a number of important differences between it and My Brilliant Career: Sybylla Melvyn’s siblings, for example, magically vanish, while her parents are transformed. Cockatoos is similar in being begun soon after My Brilliant Career as a response to that novel and its reception. However, Cockatoos was published under the most successful and most long sustained of Franklin’s many pseudonyms, Brent of Bin Bin, and, as stated, not until the year of her death, 1954. (Franklin clearly and provocatively signalled the relationship by dedicating Cockatoos to Sybylla Melvyn.³) Childhood at Brindabella (also 1954) seeks to some extent to rewrite the early years, perhaps in some vague sense to “exonerate” various family members. On Dearborn Street seems to be connected to this group in part because it centralises a male character
who wrestles with questions of marriage, sexuality and “purity” in ways that are oddly reminiscent of Cockatoos and of the “career” novels. In these circumstances, one of the ways in which Franklin's oeuvre might be understood is as a set of relentless, almost obsessive, rewritings of My Brilliant Career and the problems of reading and realism with which that text engages.

My “terms of reference” for this examination are set by a remark Elizabeth Webby makes, more or less in passing, in her Introduction to the Angus & Robertson volume which collects My Brilliant Career and My Career Goes Bung. Speaking specifically of these two books (whilst noting possibilities for others), Webby suggests the “life/fiction opposition is too simple: the values people act upon in life may, in fact, be derived from novels they have read.” My contention here, driven by Webby’s observation, is that Franklin’s work is a rich source for such controversy because it does not merely prompt, it thematises these conflicts. But I also want to argue that it does so in unexpectedly rich ways: Cockatoos offers a distinctive if problematic representation of writing, reading and reality in colonial contexts.

For a feminist reader, in particular, it is enormously tempting to claim Franklin’s work “for real”, especially when one reads a passage like this from My Career Goes Bung: “Men strut and blow about themselves all the time without shame. In the matter of women’s brain power they organize conditions comparable to a foot race in which they have all the training and the proper shoes and little running pants”. Thus fetchingly attired, they outrun the women who “are taken out of the plough, so to speak, with harness and winker still on them, and are lucky if they are allowed to start at scratch. Then men bellow that they have won the race, that women never could, it would be against NATURE if they did” [362]. But this kind of literal reading—one which was made by the film of the novel, which entirely ignored the structural and technical experimentalism of the book—overlooks the ways in which doubt about reading and reality undercut the kind of political radicalism and self-confidence on display here.

In the light of such passages it is easy to overlook the uncertainties that co-reside with such passion. Unexpected though such a
comparison might seem we can, I think, connect Franklin to a writer like Virginia Woolf, who not only shared with Franklin an interest in institutions of criticism, but centralised the problem of how to act politically (as critic Mark Hussey puts it) whilst in a state of "radical doubt". Franklin captures just this dilemma in describing the protagonist of *Cockatoos*, Ignez: "The inevitable rethrusting of self back on self to formulate or choose its pathway alone was confronting her" [146]. One way to work through this problem is to use our imagination to rehearse the real, a rehearsal that can occur during reading, or be prompted by it: as Sybyl in *On Dearborn Street* remarks, "if I cannot get a thing right in my imagination ... it will not come right in reality" [178]. The implication of the remark is that the relationship between narrative and "real life" is not contradictory but constitutive, a claim that gives much greater cultural force to the collision between romance and realism so often said to be the primary concern of *My Brilliant Career* and *My Career Goes Bung*. For if Elizabeth Webby is right, then the problem of readership is not merely a rhetorical or textual one: it is a problem of the subjectivity of writer/reader/critic, an encounter with "heightened reality", as the epigraph from Franklin has it, as well as an encounter with stories we routinely forget, fragment, disperse in telling our own.

*Cockatoos* foregrounds these issues, whilst superficially being a realist novel of colonial life. Ignez is a "Sybylla" figure who longs to write a novel and escape her lot in the country. Her bluntness is classically and distinctively Franklin: meditating on men, as she drags some habitués from the pub, Ignez wonders "why men should be so touchy about being called bastards when they had no scruples about fathering them. One of these days she would write a book, and it would be about real doings" [15]. While this claim connects and separates recreation, procreation and artistic creation, the questions about writing are quickly brought into dialogue with reading. Just a few paragraphs later we are introduced to a "real book", "J. S. Mill on *The Subjection of Women*." Mill’s book has been bought by Arthur, a suitor who has gamely rescued Ignez from the pub but has been so deterred by Mill that he had to purchase "a story to counteract it". Scenting weakness, Ignez declares that "Stories are only pap that
never happens. You wait till I write a yarn. It’ll be real” [16]. Many polemics are compacted in this remark: Ignez claims an ostensibly masculinist form, “the yarn”, but the word itself has connotations of femininity; more prosaically, it is Arthur who has the money to buy the book that Ignez longs to read, whilst he himself “can hardly write a letter” [16].

Franklin claims in Cockatoo, as she does in the earlier novels, that the writer has a certain level of power if they purport to tell the truth of the reader’s life. Humiliated by a story that an “obscene galoot” has boasted of seeing the lace on her pants when she rode astride, Ignez responds, “what I think of him might some day be a classic”. “What’s a classic?” asks her listener; “Mine’s going to be irrefutable in its own backyard” replies Ignez [19]. She knows that her only possible revenge is to “fix” the galoot’s insult in print, for those of broader mind to deride. But her logic, like that of other Franklin protagonists, is disabled because elsewhere we see that what she “really” wants to “come true” is romance. She keeps a scrapbook with snippets “with portraits and paragraphs about the celebrities who had arrived in the heaven of London or who were on their way” [64]. Ignez’s dream is to join them, to make this set of stories about artistic and famous the “real” narrative of her own life. But Franklin satirises precisely this mood in My Career Goes Buang, where Sybylla remarks that “Life must begin for me too on meeting [Edmée, with big bluish eyes that she rolled most arrestingly, and ... chestnut curls on her forehead], so lovely and romantic—the very girl of my dreams” [353].

In the colonial context, this interplay of text, reading and the longing for truth is structured as a problem of being allowed to write, thence to have one’s work taken seriously without it necessarily been seen as, and deriving its authority from, being “true”. Ironically Ignez herself, like Sybylla Melvyn in My Brilliant Career, clutches at the colonial writers. In addition to her scrapbook of the stars of theatre and music, she and her writing companion Dick keep a collection of Australian ballads which bring “perfume to existence – poetry about people like themselves, and vital with bush revelation” [67]. When the third member of their writing group, young Freda, is stricken by a lack of inspiration, Dick gives her the poem he has clipped from the
Australasian} to copy. (These attitudes contrast starkly with the cynicism with which writers, writing, and society critics are represented in My Career Goes Bung.)

Dick is an important character, as both companion and reader. In Ignez’s absence he gorges on reading “slush – poetry and wild west yarns”, but on weekends spent with older relatives subsequently discovers “the best of Thackeray, Dickens, and Scott, as well as Byron, Shelley, Southey and many others. His hunger for books increased, a propensity he found it best to conceal. He had absorbed the idea that the fault lay in Australia” [213]. But he, too, is lured by romance: “Novelettes dealing with Indians and buffaloes and white girls reared as princesses of savage tribes, which he had got from the working men” [241]. Just before leaving Australia he is given books by a man who reminds him of his uncles, being “quiet and not like a towny.” The bush is where Australian literature is made: the gifts come not from the shop Dick has entered but a room upstairs, “the home paddock of prime specimens and tried stock”: “Oh, to be a bookseller and publisher and have a room like that, or, failing such a height, to have a book written by himself with a publisher’s name on it, and gum-trees and kookaburras lining the cover, as Ignez had” [246]. Dick’s story is of “proper” training in reading, overcoming his preference for the sensationalist fiction given to him by the authentic representatives of the Australian bush, the working men.

Franklin’s complicated dance with truth and fiction suggests that she is less interested in finding the “reality” of either than in exploring the paradoxes inherent in the fantasy of the real, and blind faith in romance. Surely it is she who warns readers of Cockatoos, in a sentence of omniscient narration that interrupts a dialogue about truth, fiction, and the source of characters, that “The chief concern even in sophisticated literary circles is to identify the author’s characters with his acquaintances” [73]. She is interested, I think, in understanding the ways in which specific narrative forms—and their authors—become popular, or authoritative, in their own time and (not least), in their own minds, and the ways in which these modes of authority can be wildly contradictory. These contradictions are created in part by the fact that any individual can play multiple roles, as writer, reader and
even character. In *Cockatoos*, Ignez discusses the conundrum of the search for truth by readers of fiction with Dick, who responds with enthusiasm: a fictional character himself, he asks to be in the book Ignez is writing, but failing that, sportingly promises to buy a dozen copies “to give it a start when it comes out” [73].

When Ignez holds her own, published book in her hand, it not only represents a dream fulfilled, it throws into chaos her ideas about the relationship between truth, reading, and fiction:

All the notions she had scribbled down half in fun, half in protest, to read to Dick and Nora Alfreda were here petrified in print. Real, and yet so unbelievable! She had imagined that a book would be transformed into conformity with other books and was dumbfounded because all the things she striven to make different remained so, strikingly. Writing that book had been a kind of shouting at the top of her lungs into an uninhibited silence. Seeing her shouts in cold print was like discovering that the silence had all the time been full of listeners [214].

This complex and evocative passage brilliantly demonstrates the twinned horror and pleasure of authorship, the fragility of the fantasy that books are somehow able to fix and thereby transcend the intimate and the general social relations through which they are produced. For readers can only be “partial” readers, an audience will read their own longings for reality and for romance when they touch this book, when they read, hear, this young woman “shouting at the top of her lungs” into a silence filled with readers.

The coming of a book to a colonial community that was about that community and by one of its members is represented as a wondrous event, an act of cultural authentication and displacement. Much is made of the conflicts prompted by a book’s appearance in *My Career Goes Bung*, and the same moment occurs in *Cockatoos* when Ignez unexpectedly receives copies of her book in the mail. Pete wonders whether the book will be for sale in the Goulburn bookstore, “Foxall’s”: “He had once entered it to buy a penny exercise and been dazed by the many books…. ‘If they have this one, my cripes, it would show it was a real book.” Pete the yokel nails the persistent Franklin concern—will it
sell?—but Mrs Healey immediately puts the more prosaic view: “The dinner’s getting cold and the cows are waiting to be milked”, before pointing to the broader significance: “The things you have always been jabbering about life and men, look queer in print. Sort of uncanny” [215]. Freud takes from Jentsch the remark that we find uncanny that which we think to be alive; the example Jentsch gives is of a wooden doll, but let us imagine, for a moment, that narrative, story, itself can serve this kind of function, shuttling from the familiar to the unknown, the living to the dead, creating moments of recognition that are more vertiginous than estrangement and difference."

The preciousness of the book as commodity is shown (paradoxically) by Pete, one of the least sophisticated characters in Cockatoos. Convinced that there will only be one copy of the book, he rushes to Goulburn and takes possession of the sample sent to Foxall’s (and subsequently does a nice trade in rental). The story proves “so natural as to be indecent among barely literate people who confounded real and realistic”—much like the high-society members who are earlier accused of exactly the same error. Arthur, who supplied the ream of paper which became the manuscript, touches the printed book “wonderingly”. Because he knows the author “in the flesh”, Ignez’s book is a stand-in for the voice he had “heard nothing of ... lately” [216]. Dick, Ignez’s fellow author, character and reader, is overcome by emotion when he holds her book in his hands [216]. The wonderment of her country readers and fellow author is contrasted with the disdainful praise given by the Sydney critics who “recognise” in the book “the real” of a place they know only through fiction. Her most urbane reader opines, “Of course it must be a sort of reflex action. A child of that age, without any contacts, could not really feel. Has never been out of the bush, the publishers guarantee” [216].

The complicated interplay between the desire for romance and realistic narrative is reflected in Franklin’s representation of an equally intricate and intense set of relationships between public and private, as well as between spoken and written voice, and speech and singing. Ignez, who has a powerful but “untrained” and therefore ultimately unusable contralto (in career terms), hears the public performance of a visiting luminary:
The singer was at home in a classical aria and when she had bowed and bowed had to return and sing “Three Fishers”. That did not satisfy her audience and she added “Douglas Gordon”, a song of dying of or for love, which savoured of lunacy to maturity, but had enchantment for lovers heady with illusion, and this audience was young and susceptible and aching for true love, deathless or deadly\textsuperscript{10} [103].

We learn that “The social columns gossiped about her and her picture was in all the papers and on sale on postcards.” “Madame Junee” (shades of Melba and Bronhill) is made familiar to her audience by a web of narrative and reading, photographic image and looking, as well as personal experience of her body and voice. Each “version” of her is supplemented and enriched by reiteration in different cultural forms, which each “reader” has their own fragments of, and gives their own meanings to.\textsuperscript{11}

The effect of hearing the contralto not as an anomaly but as a celebrated voice—recognising it as her own, but watching also the audience’s enthralment—is as electrifying to Ignez as it is unexpected. In a single sentence, the import of which is signalled by a paragraph break which separates Miss Shaw/Madame Junee from her audience, Franklin writes:

The girl Ignez was there and then deracinated.

Later, this transformation is elaborated through a meditation on the relationship between narrative, the past, the present and the self: “The wistful ache for things that would one day be for her long gone, already gave body to anticipation of things yet to come in an awareness of her own legend as lost, as unwritten as the myriads of others of no consequence that filled the silence with those overtones that haunted her and Dick” [110]. That this pre-emptive yet remembered loss of story is figured by Franklin as deracination gives resonance to other aspects of Cockatoos which begin to engage with the story of Australia—colonisation—which it seems that Franklin could not bring herself to tell. Yet there are fragments. On this momentous night, when Ignez first “recognises” her self, her voice, in the glamorous and talented woman
on stage with her resonant and entrancing music, the “entertainment” begins “with the local glee club” in blackface, telling jokes that “were puerile in the first place” but “convulsing to their audience” [103].

Ignex, Dick and Freda begin their writing in the bush, in a casuarina grove frequented by black cockatoos [66, 72]. It is here that Dick first confesses he writes poetry, and the place becomes the symbol as well as the scene of authorship. As in My Brilliant Career writing is problematic, but for reasons that seem to have become more complex. An almost mystical, intuited failure of narrative in Australia is somatised in Ignex, that is, made intrinsic to her body and speech:

At the beginning the landmarks lack importance; there are no milestones. Speculative dreamers claim that all that has existed of the past, and of the future likewise, remains sentient in time, which flows both from and towards us, and that occasionally the future and the past are similarly in the subconsciousness. Thus tonight ... Ignex was aware of the regrets and despairs, the losses and failures of age, which blended with the zestful illusions of youth and beauty, joy and desire, and added poignancy to emotions which swamped her physical being [110].

If it seems like a stretch to suggest that Franklin is wrestling, here, with a colonial violence she will not name, it is worth noting that Ignex is soon after represented as recalling that specific past and of being overwhelmed by it:

Suddenly Ignex shivered as though dismayed by the immensity of the night and the emptiness of the land, swept by the winds of oblivion that had been the winding sheet of all who had known the tree above them. Wet, hardy profane and perishing the teamsters and their animals had of yore camped there after struggling through the winter bogs. Earlier, the convicts, brutalised and in chains, had made the first road. But long, long before it had been the corroboree ground of the blacks in a continent whose history was too far past for research to reconstruct, their only record a few stone axes that escaped the roadmakers' knapping [112–13; emphasis added].
Suddenly, there are milestones aplenty, in a history not “too far past for research to reconstruct”. In any case, we have just been told that “all that has existed of the past ... flows both from and towards us.” Thus the claim that Aboriginal people have disappeared, beyond the writer’s view, is a ruse, a fantasy.  

It is the claim that the past is unusable, out of sight, that makes the claim to an autochthonous, that is, displacing, self so important. Again, Franklin’s formulation is somewhat mystical, although it also emphasises the connection between life and place, narrative and subjectivity: “Inner response to outside influences was drawing them both out and away, but they were impregnated as with life itself with this soil and air, they were under its spell, there, in the sunlight where no legend was, already riding in their own. They could not stay, but it was grief to go” [148]. It is hard to imagine a more perfectly formulated expression of colonial culture than this. And the trope of sunlight recalls A. G. Stephens’ famous review of My Brilliant Career, headed “A Bookful of Sunlight”. That review begins with a long paragraph meditating on race, suggesting but never saying that Franklin’s book, which he hailed as the first Australian novel, derived its authenticity from the fact that it perfectly enacted the imaginative erasure of Indigenous peoples. Indeed, this is the “sunlight” of which he speaks. Borrowing a formulation from Stephen Orgel, one could speculate that what Stephens purposed to describe “was, in fact, a reading revolution, a revolution not of technology but of dissemination and reception”, in this case of stories of colonisation.

The colonial theme becomes more overt towards the novel’s end, where the troubles of the writer sees them compared, explicitly, to Aborigines. Freda, Ignez’s protégé and double in the next generation, goes to Arthur for money so that she can go and see Ignez in America. Arthur is sympathetic, telling her, “That’s fine. We’re the last of the tribe” [238; emphasis added]. He continues to work the land, and a couple of pages later, “breaking a virgin land or two”, “he turned up a splendid Aboriginal axe” [270]. This he keeps to give to Freda, notwithstanding her claim that she will never return. Franklin herself was, I think, aware of a kind of obscenity in this paralleling of the fate of the white writer and Aboriginal cultures, an unease indicated in the fact of Ignez having
already fled the country (and Arthur's forgetting of her absence). On the last page of the novel, she has the narrator ask, in terms which explicitly focus on the wars of dispossession and their continuing effects, "Would this sense of vacuum ever be conquered, filled, or did the curse of the aborigines or more distant peoples driven out rest upon it, to hold it a while longer for oblivion" [274]. Notwithstanding Arthur's cultivation of the land, and Franklin/Brent of Bin Bin's mythologising of colonisation, even the farmers remain "cockies". It is left to Arthur, "who had long ago ceased to be Ignez's knight", to explain the significance of the word beyond its obvious thematising of black and white. He observes of those like Ignez, Dick, and now Freda, who flee, "The trouble is that they don't take root deep enough—only scratch the surface like cockatoos. Here's a fine large place for long deep roots" [265].

The paradoxical achievement of Franklin's novel, the writing of which might have spanned her life, is that it demonstrates precisely the impossibility of the story it purports to tell. If it is true that "any work inscribes within its forms and its themes a relationship with the manner in which, in a given moment and place, modes of exercising power, social configurations, or the structure of personality are organized", then Cockatoos and the other Franklin novels with which that book is in dialogue offer rich and complicated sources for readers, as they also offer presentations of the irresolvable collisions which structure story in the colonial environment.

When she travels to the Sydney she has longed to see, to meet the writers, critics and literati she reads and dreams of, Ignez is part of a terrible scene. A tram has hit a woman; Ignez sees a face which "lay upwards, unmarred, white and tranquil. The clothes were undisturbed, only the blood told its deadly tale. ... It lay in pools on the asphalt and a stray cur began to lap. A passing cab horse, whose driver did not slack his pace, splashed through it" [152]. Ignez tries to give assistance, "It's a woman, and only men near her." Her uncle forcibly restrains her. Under questioning he admits that he had spoken to the woman before entering the station, and claims that her death is of not much consequence because she was a "'fallen woman'". Later that night her aunt remarks that "It's said that only for them we pure
women could not walk abroad", but Ignez emphatically rejects that story. "I don't want those woman to be martyred to save me. If they are necessary we ought to take our share" [157].

That Franklin means the accident to be of particular significance to Ignez is emphasised when we are told that "the consequences of the Redfern accident were going deeper into her subconsciousness". The woman's death makes literal and indeed graphic the horrors of sexual inequality, as well as becoming the basis for more story-telling: her uncle's response to Ignez's questioning about his own sexual behaviour is "not so amused ... as he became afterwards when retailing a version of the situation" [153]. How might we read this layering of story, how might we respond to the information that Ignez's host in Sydney should use a suicide as the basis of an anecdote? Is it a parable about the dangers for the rural ingénue? Is it participating in or responding to urban sensation? Or, if Ignez is connected to the woman by being described as "white and trembling" in this scene, if this is a "deadly tale" told in blood, could it also be a doubled and displaced dramatisation of colonisation, transposed to the urban environment and made representative of the fate of women? Or is that too much reading?

REFERENCES


3 So successful was Franklin in complicating the notion of authorship that the Blackwood’s ledger which lists author payments includes at least one entry for *My Brilliant Career* under the name Melvyn, whilst another record of payment, to her agent J. B. Pinker, put the name Franklin in inverted commas. Blackwoods Publication Ledger 1895–1919, MS30864, Scottish National Library, Edinburgh; Letter to J. B. Pinker from William Blackwood, 20 March 1906, Blackwood Wm and sons, Folder 2, Box 11, J.B. Pinker Collection, Northwestern University, Evanston.


6 At the end of this paragraph it is noted that Igniez has the photograph of one singer beside her looking glass, “like an icon” – mirror and magic side by side.

7 To some extent, though, Dick and his authorship are mocked, his poems said to be “polished ... by the latest rules.”

8 Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny”, *Writings on Art and Literature*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997. Freud suggests that realism as a literary mode—that which presents the things we believe we recognise—is therefore necessary for more dramatic, more intense and more unsettling forms of the uncanny (p. 227).

9 A footnote in Freud’s essay asks, “And what do you get out of it? I mean out of the particular mental function which we call consciousness, and which is nothing but the confounded activity of a damned toll-collector—excise man—deputy-chief customs officer, who has set up his infamous bureau in our top storey and who exclaims, whenever any goods try to get out, ‘Hi! hi! exports are prohibited ... they must stay here ... here, in this country...’” (p. 209). This moment of the appearance of the book, an object which is figured as “uncanny”, makes this a storey/story of the book/tale/yarn as both a product of the unconscious and a tradeable commodity. It is bound to its place in the unconscious, but is a physical object. *It is not allowed to leave.*


11 The thematising of enchantment by music entwined with memory is a constant concern in the novel: see for example, pp. 137, 141.


13 Given the trees, it is possible that Franklin had in mind glossy black- cockatoos (*calyptorhynchus lathami*), which depend on this source of food. Such literalism needs to be supplemented by the note that Franklin, an admirer of Katherine Susannah Prichard’s *Coonardoo*, might have had in mind that cockatoos were used to symbolic effect in that book.


18 Under questioning he admits he has sex with prostitutes, raising the possibility that the woman knew him [153]. Ignez’s views on sexual experience, as in *On Dearborn Street*, revolve around the horrors of “contamination.” This theme is, soon after, brought back to the question of voice: Ignez thrills her listener with singing that “though so deep, [was] thrillingly feminine.” Her notes “have no taint of the baritone in them” [156].