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Age, Melbourne

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# Literary gem discovered

Kim Goldsmith, above, holds the diary, inset. Right: Miles Franklin, photographed as part of a promotion for *My Brilliant Career*.

## Julie Power

Four days before her death at 74 from heart failure, renowned Australian author Miles Franklin wrote her last entry in the diaries she had kept most of her life.

“Went to Eastwood by ambulance to be X-rayed. Ordeal too much for me. Day of distress and twitching. Returned to bed,” she wrote in faint pencil on Thursday 16 September 1954 from her home in Carlton in Sydney’s south.

The entry is contained in a red diary about the size of a pack of cards that recorded the last year of Stella Maria Miles Franklin’s life.

As well as domestic detail of Franklin’s final months, it contains the only inkling of the secret legacy that would become the Miles Franklin Prize and allow writers – from the first winner Patrick White to Josephine Wilson last year – to give up their day jobs to write about “*Australian life* in any of its phases”.

Everyone believed the diary of her final year was lost until her distant relative Margaret Francis spotted it in an old suitcase. Seeing the diary with Franklin’s tiny spidery writing was “a moment of absolute exhilaration”, said Ms Francis, who lives in Wagga Wagga.

She glimpsed the diary 30 years ago, and had kept a promise to keep its existence a secret, hoping that someone had put it somewhere safe.

After finding it three years ago, Ms Francis – who has dedicated much of her life to writing three volumes detailing the extended Franklin family’s rise from illiterate convicts and settlers to the educated squatocracy – would get up at five in the morning to read and transcribe the entries.

“Sometimes that was difficult, you would feel so sad. But what I had to keep thinking . . . was that it was about her afterlife. This diary shows [her] urge to write sustained Miles,



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not only through her brilliant career but through her entire life," she said.

On Thursday, Franklin's distant relative, Kim Goldsmith, will give the diary to the State Library of NSW. It adds a 47th volume to the 46 diaries to the author and feminist's record of Australian literary and domestic life from 1909.

The collection is unrivalled in the intensity and depth of their record of Australian society in the middle of the 20th century, said the State Library's Mitchell librarian Richard Neville. "She was a force of nature herself, and her diaries are the literary equivalent," he said.

The last entries track Franklin's physical decline. They detail the ongoing tension in her life between domestic life and caring for others, her writing, a need for recognition and the urge to create a legacy for the future that would allow authors a room of their own to work.

"One wearies of always putting up stream without acceptance, let alone rewards of a material nature," she writes on January 4, 1954, after struggling with her anti-war play, *The Dead Must Not Return*.

As she gets sicker and the weather colder, Franklin says her lungs feel like they have "iron bands" around them. Life in crude, unheated Australian houses was purgatory, she writes: "Only comfortable place in winter in Australian houses is in bed."

Between streams of visiting well-wishers and loving family, she struggled to clean sheets, mop floors, preserve figs, and buy and prepare food daily, in the era before modern whitegoods.

"Interruptions all day, so was unable to open proofs. I struggled through - lay down in misery of exhaustion until A & Delys came at 5 & cooked dinner," she wrote on April 16. "My heart thumping dreadfully."

She received telephone calls and visits from Australian writers - Frank Hardy, Inky Stephenson and Catherine Elliott-Mackay - and pushed on with completing the proofs of her book *Cockatoo* which

"finished me completely".

Mr Neville said the touching diary - more personal than previous years' - suggests Franklin knew she was dying, yet was still working, wanting to produce things.

"Is this the end or shall I struggle on?" Franklin wrote in June that year.

Despite her illness, Franklin was looking for a legacy, said Mr Franklin, who sits on the board that chooses the winner of the Miles Franklin Literary Award.

"There are tantalising glimpses when she goes off to Permanent Trustees [which managed her will, and set up the literary prize carrying her name] yet at no point does she talk about the prize," he said.

Franklin was known to be frugal, and Ms Goldsmith said she once wrote about eating crusts to save money. Her royalties were paid to the trustees to establish the prize with a bequest of £8922, the equivalent of about \$300,000 today. It was an enormous sum considering the weekly wage was £20 pounds when she died. None of her friends or family had known of her intention to establish the prize, which is now worth \$60,000.

Mr Neville said the prize was about providing space and opportunity for authors to write without the interruptions of day to day existence.

