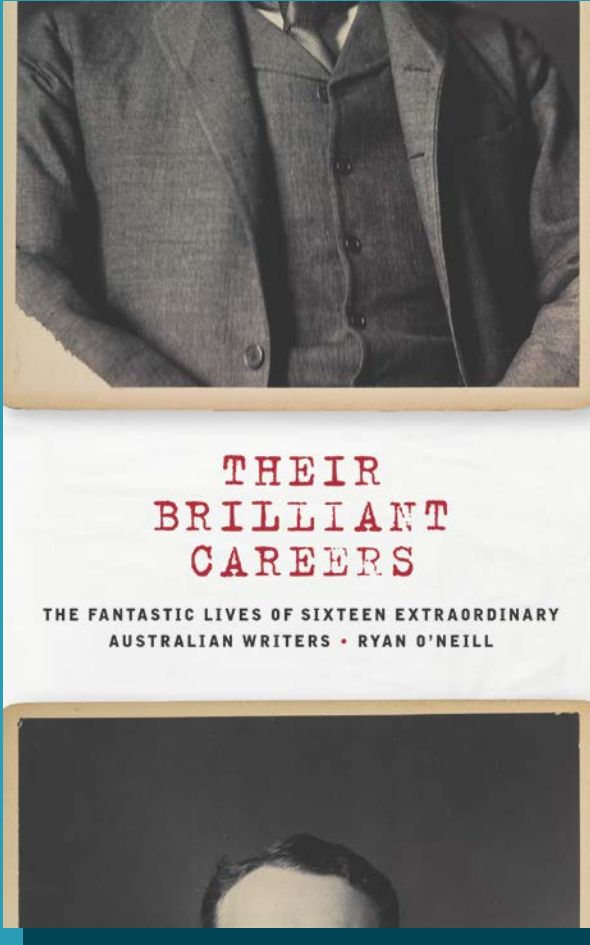


2017
LOGLIST

MILES FRANKLIN
LITERARY AWARD



PROUDLY MANAGED BY PERPETUAL



EXTRACT



Marcus Steele (1874-1924)

Marcus Steele, generally regarded as Australia's foremost novelist, short story writer and poet was born on 1st July 1879 in Newcastle, NSW. His father Peter, a carpenter, and mother, Elsie, were Scottish immigrants. Little is known of Steele's early life save that it was a difficult one, marked by poverty, and his parents' undemonstrative nature. At six years of age, Steele was sent to the local school, where he was to remain until he was thirteen, and then apprenticed to his father. The first of Steele's poems, a scrap of juvenilia called "Wood That I Knew," (now sadly lost) dates from this time, as does an anecdote that Steele was fond of repeating, and to which he ascribed all of his remarkable literary success later in life. One day, young Steele saw in the local newspaper that the submissions date for their short story competition has just closed. Steele went to see the editor to make sure his entry had been received. The editor could not find his entry, which was not surprising as Steele had never sent one. Steele made up a short story on the spot, and the editor, rather than read the other three hundred entries, awarded the young man first prize on the spot for the non-existent, "Wee Jimmy's Christmas."

With the proceeds of the competition, Steele spent the next four years travelling around rural NSW, gathering material for his first collection of poetry, *Bush, Beer and Ballads*. In 1893 Steele encountered Henry Lawson in a pub in Bourke, and spent the evening regaling him with his poetry. Lawson was entranced, and immediately wrote to J.F. Archibald, editor of *The Bulletin* extolling Steele's poetry. When Archibald asked to see Steele's work, the young man immediately wrote out his collection from memory, and dispatched it to the offices of the journal in Sydney. Sadly, the parcel was lost in transit, but based on Lawson's description, Archibald wrote a glowing review of Steele's work in the yellow pages of *The Bulletin*, praising him as an "Australian Wordsworth." Publication of *Bush, Beer and Ballads* was announced several times over the next two decades, with everything from wartime paper shortages to the Steele's notorious perfectionism blamed for the endless delays. This has not stopped *Bush, Beer and Ballads* from being voted the nation's favourite poetry collection in every poll held since 1972.



Having conquered the world of poetry, Steele turned his hands to writing prose. His first short story collection, *Charlie Cobb's Cobbers* was written from 1902 to 1907, with the title story added later in 1910. During this time, Steele survived on handouts from a number of wealthy patrons, including, it was rumoured, the Governor General and the Prime Minister, both of whom professed themselves admirers of Steele's work. Finally, in December 1910, the collection was completed, and submitted to Angus and Robinson. The editor, Arthur Findlay, accepted the book immediately, and invited Steele to his home for a celebratory dinner. According to legend, the two men drank long into the night, reading passages of *Charlie Cobb's Cobbers* to each other, and roaring with laughter. Unfortunately, when they awoke then next morning, they found that the house maid had used the only copy of Steele's manuscript to start the kitchen fire. With profuse apologies and guided by his famous sense of honour, Findlay paid Steele for his book, and wrote him a handsome letter of recommendation to his friend and fellow publisher, Richard Pallister, of Longmans, London. Steele sailed to London in 1913, already celebrated as one of Australia's finest writers. Henry Lawson, jealous of his success, refused to join a delegation of writers from *The Bulletin* who farewelled Steele at the docks.

Little is known of Steele during the First World War. It appears he began work on his first and only novel, *English Eucalyptus* in 1914, and finished the book in 1916 when, shortly afterwards, it was accepted by Longmans. Unfortunately, all six thousand copies of the book were destroyed in a conflagration caused by a zeppelin raid in March 1918. Steele's work had by then come to the attention of James Joyce, who had read an early version of *English Eucalyptus* (now lost) and described it as a "masterpiece." Joyce invited Steele to Paris, where Steele gave advice to the Irish writer on the composition of *Ulysses* then being published in instalments in *The Little Review*. Joyce later said that Steele had helped him reduce the size of the book by half, and many a critic has since observed it is a shame that Steele did not live to offer his advice to Joyce on *Finnegans Wake*.

Steele was to stay in Paris until his premature and tragic death in 1925. When warned against drinking the Parisian tap water, he replied that he had drunk far worse in Newcastle. He died of cholera six weeks later, and was buried in an unmarked grave, at his own request, in a small cemetery in the northern suburbs of Paris.