The Silken Cord: Contemporaneous Australian 20th-Century Political Biography & Its Meaning

Wednesday 20 August 2014 4:15-5:30pm

School of History Seminar Series
Speaker: Christine Wallace, PhD candidate, School of History, ANU

McDonald Room, Menzies Library, ANU

In 'The Silken Cord' an ‘action theory’ of biography is proposed: biography as action rather than as a passive publication. This is explored through contemporaneous political biography in 20th-century Australia – specifically, biographies written in the lead up to, or during, the tenure of Australia’s prime ministers from Barton to Howard. Australia had 25 prime ministers in the first century of Federation, but only 16 contemporaneous biographies of them were written. Three-quarters of these were written in the post-war period, and half were written in the 20th century’s final two decades. Who wrote them? What were they doing?

Given that perceptions of politicians influence their electability, and that biography can influence perceptions, this is a highly prospective area for testing the idea of biography as action – in this case, as political intervention. Here the metaphor of biography as a silken cord composed of several strands – historical, philosophical, literary, psychological and political – can be seen to operate with specific application. The silken cord of biography slips on easily and can drag a politician’s reputation up or down; sometimes it is even designed to hang them. Of course, while the biographer makes the cord, someone else may be holding onto it or subsequently seize it for their own ends. This thesis takes biography from the crude ‘authorised/unauthorised’ binary to something more nuanced, illuminating and potentially empowering for readers.

Chris Wallace is a doctoral student in the National Centre of Biography, School of History, ANU, and this is her pre-submission seminar paper. She has extensive experience as a journalist in the Canberra Press Gallery and is the author of four books, including a biography of Australian feminist Germaine Greer. Previous studies include a BA (ANU) in History & Political Science, BEc (Syd) and MBA (UNSW). 'The Silken Cord' is the first part of a planned three country comparative study of contemporaneous political biography in Australia, Britain and the US.