Channelling George? Coral Lansbury, the Australian Ethos, The Legend and Arcady

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School of History Seminar Series
Speaker: Melanie Nolan, National Centre of Biography, School of History

MacDonald Room, Menzies Library, ANU

Coral Lansbury was among the early critics of Russel Ward for his concentration upon bush virtues and male “mateship” in his classic The Australian Legend (1958). Lansbury has differed from most critics, however, in that not only did she point out omissions in The Legend but she also took Ward to task on his own literary terms for concentrating upon one kind of literature (bush ballads) to the exclusion of other literature. In her book, Arcady in Australia (1970), Lansbury suggested that the egalitarian, working-class, rural and largely benign view of Australian identity was born in the 1850s in England and translated into the literature. She argued that the Australian bush myth, then, was imposed on Australia from English literature “during the fifties by [Samuel] Sidney, [Charles] Dickens and [Edward Bulwer] Lytton. The sardonic mockery of Australian writers like Henry Lawson and Joseph Furphy was the reaction of experience in Australia itself to English literary imagination”. Just as others have considered Ward’s persona, background and life in order to show their connection with The Legend, (and Ward did this himself in his autobiography, A Radical Life), so an examination of Lansbury is revealing and helps to understand the making of Arcady. In particular attention needs to be drawn to her great-uncle, George Lansbury, a social reformer and suffragist, who led the British Labour Party from 1932 to 1935. In this paper I consider Coral Lansbury’s interpretation of the literary shaping of the Australian ethos, how she came to develop such views and why Lansbury has been effectively a “missing person” in Australia’s historiography.

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