

Australian Dictionary of Biography

Lansbury, Coral Magnolia (1929–1991)

by **Melanie Nolan**

This article was published online in 2015

Coral Magnolia Lansbury (1929–1991), radio scriptwriter, academic, and novelist, was born at St Kilda, Melbourne, in 1929, second child of Australian-born Oscar Vincent Stephen Lansbury, and his English-born wife May, née Morle. Coral's parents were London stage actors who toured New Zealand and Australia in 1928 and 1929 with a production of *The Vagabond King* before joining the cast of *Show Boat*; auspiciously, they gave Coral the second name Magnolia for the precocious heroine of the musical. The family settled in Sydney after the cast disbanded there in December 1929. By 1933 Oscar had taken a job as a radio sound-effects officer with the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC). Coral once told an interviewer that she detested her mother and revered her father, who introduced her to Dickens and Thackeray to keep her quiet backstage.

Following her parents into the theatre, Lansbury became a child actor in J. C. Williamson Ltd productions; her first role, aged ten, was a fairy in a Christmas pantomime. She began regularly performing in radio serials. While she was still a teenager, one of her radio scripts was accepted. Educated at North Sydney Girls High School (1941-45), she attended the University of Sydney (1947-50), where she completed the requirements for a first-class BA Honours degree, majoring in English and history and winning the Maud Stiles and George Arnold Wood memorial history prizes. As an unmatriculated student, she was ineligible to graduate. She never respected the high and low cultural divide. On the one hand, her verse play *Krubi of the Illawarra*, about an Aboriginal girl seeking knowledge of the rites and symbols that her people believed belonged to men, won the 1948 Henry Lawson prize for poetry. From 1953 to 1963 she was a feature and drama writer with the ABC, winning a number of awards for her work. On the other hand, she found steady employment writing an 'enormous amount of soap opera material . . . which, while profitable, was of dubious literary worth' (Lane 2000, 75).

Lansbury was to marry three times. Her first marriage, on 20 February 1953 at the registrar general's office, Sydney, was to the sixty-four-year-old veteran actor and producer George Harold Edwards; it was his fourth. He contracted pneumonia and was hospitalised two days after the wedding; six months later he died. Lansbury's son, Malcolm Turnbull, was born in October 1954; she married his father, Bruce Bligh Turnbull, electrician and later a travelling salesman, on 29 December 1955 at Campbell Street Presbyterian Church, Balmain. Malcolm was sent as a boarder to Sydney Grammar School in 1963, and Bruce took care of him when Lansbury left the marriage soon after. She married John (Jock) Salmon after their respective divorces.

In 1963 Lansbury had been appointed a lecturer in history and Australian studies at the University of New South Wales; it was here that she met Salmon, a New Zealand-born specialist in French history and the university's foundation professor of history (1960-65). As television supplanted radio drama, she had decided she would not make the transition, although she later appeared on the panel show *Beauty and the Beast*. She revived research

on the growth of trade unionism in Australia, begun as a Master's thesis under the supervision of Bede Nairn in 1952. This remained unfinished. This was a natural topic, perhaps, for a relative of the politician and social reformer George Lansbury, who had lived briefly in Australia (1884-85) and later led the British Labour Party (1932-35).

During 1966 Lansbury joined Salmon at the University of Waikato, New Zealand, where he was professor of history and dean of humanities (1965-69). She was a lecturer in history and a senior lecturer in English and, at the same time, a graduate student at the University of Auckland (MA, 1967; PhD, 1969). Social contexts and the novel's symbolic role in cultural inventions were innovative themes that pervaded all her academic work. Her postgraduate research was published as *Arcady in Australia: The Evocation of Australia in Nineteenth-Century English Literature* (1970). She argued that Samuel Sidney, Charles Dickens, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, and Charles Reade transferred the myth of a happy English rural life to Australia with huge success, evoking however 'a new Australia that bore only passing resemblance to the country as it existed' (Lansbury 1970, 2). She traced the masculine origins of the bush mateship myth that figures such as Henry Lawson, 'Banjo' Paterson, and William Guthrie Spence had popularised. For the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* she wrote articles on Dickens, Hector Lamond (Spence's son-in-law), and her first husband; she and Nairn co-wrote an article on Spence.

When Salmon joined the faculty of Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania, United States of America, in 1969, Lansbury accompanied him. She was an associate professor of English at Rosemont College (1970-73) and a visiting professor of English and history in the graduate school of Victorian studies at Drew University (1974). Appointed associate professor of English at Rutgers University, New Jersey, in 1974, she was promoted to professor in 1976. She published works on Elizabeth Gaskell's life and novels and Anthony Trollope's language and structure. She was a socialist rather than a feminist critic, though she combined both in *The Old Brown Dog: Women, Workers, and Vivisection in Edwardian England* (1985). She and Salmon divorced in 1981. That year she was appointed distinguished professor of English and coadjutant professor of history at Rutgers. Three years later she became graduate dean and director of sponsored research.

Famously, in the mid-1980s Lansbury's distant cousin, the actress Angela Lansbury, challenged her to write something more interesting than dull academic tomes. She published four novels: *Ringarra: A Gothic Novel* (1985), *Sweet Alice* (1986), *Felicity* (1987), and *The Grotto* (1988); a fifth, *Opium*, was not completed. Three had Australian settings. Her colleagues dubbed her the 'Dean of Dazzle' (Rothwell 1988, Weekend 4): green-eyed, coppery-haired, and theatrical; and Jane Cadzow described her as 'tall, glamorous, very funny, [and] highly successful' (Cadzow 1986, 6). She was quick-witted and a 'fierce competitor on the squash courts' (Cipriano 1991).

Especially after the breakdown of her final marriage, Lansbury travelled regularly to Australia. Her son noted that she 'was a fairly outrageous character' who did not 'much care what people thought of her': 'she was often wrong but she was never in doubt' (Cipriano 1991). He nursed her in the weeks before her death from bowel cancer on 2 April 1991 in Philadelphia.

Select Bibliography

- Cadzow, Jane. 'Triumphs of Coral.' *Weekend Australian Magazine*, 13-14 December 1986, 6
- Cipriano, Ralph. 'Coral Lansbury, 61, A Proper Scholar Who Wrote Bawdy Books.' *Philadelphia*

Inquirer, 4 April 1991, http://articles.philly.com/1991-04-04/news/25779154_1_opium-squash-courts-radio-dramas

- Lane, Richard, ed., with additional research and writing by Lynne Murphy. *The Golden Age of Australian Radio Drama*. Vol. 2. [Canberra]: ScreenSound Australia, 2000
- Lansbury, Coral. *Arcady in Australia: The Evocation of Australia in Nineteenth-Century English Literature*. Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1970
- Lansbury, Coral. Curriculum vitae. Private collection. Copy held on ADB file
- Rothwell, Nicholas. 'The Dean of Dazzle.' *Weekend Australian*, 15-16 October 1988, Weekend 4

Additional Resources

- [Trove search](#)
- [is rapidly making a name for herself in radio plays](#), Narandera Argus and Riverina Advertiser (NSW), 2 September 1947, p 1
- [is to play the lead role in her play 'Krubi of the Illawarra'](#), Advertiser (Adelaide), 4 June 1949, p 3
- [photo](#), Sunday Herald (Sydney), 18 March 1951, p 1
- [has written eight radio plays](#), Sydney Morning Herald, 6 November 1952, p 7s
- [is to marry George Edwards](#), Sydney Morning Herald, 19 February 1953, p 6s
- [interview](#), Canberra Times, 18 July 1981, p 2
- [discusses her novel 'Ringarra'](#), Canberra Times, 15 January 1986, p 14
- [interview](#), Canberra Times, 23 October 1988, p 4

Related Entries in NCB Sites

[view family tree](#)

- [Lansbury, Coral Magnolia](#) 
- [Edwards, George \(husband\)](#) 
- [Turnbull, Bruce Bligh \(husband\)](#) 
- [Turnbull, Malcolm \(son\)](#) 
- [Lansbury, May \(mother\)](#) 
- [Lansbury, Oscar Vincent \(father\)](#) 
- [Turnbull, Mary Agnes \(mother-in-law\)](#) 
- [Turnbull, Frederick Bligh \(father-in-law\)](#) 
- [Stein, Mona Mary \(aunt\)](#) 
- [Lansbury, Bromley Arthur \(uncle\)](#) 

- **Stein, Ernest James** (uncle by marriage) 
- **Lansbury, Ellen Selina** (grandmother) 
- **Lansbury, Arthur Thomas** (grandfather) 
- **Murphy, Lionel Keith** (friend) 

Citation details

Melanie Nolan, 'Lansbury, Coral Magnolia (1929–1991)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/lansbury-coral-magnolia-17182/text30213>, published online 2015, accessed online 5 August 2015.

© Copyright Australian Dictionary of Biography, 2006-2015