



**Russel Ward**  
*Sketch by Louis Kahan*

## *Russel Braddock Ward (1914–1995)*

On 13 August 1995 Russel Ward died after a long period of illness. Author of *The Australian Legend* (1958), he was a seminal figure in Australian historical writing. He was one of the first to seek an Australian history that addressed questions of national identity, and the social history that provided its formative values. His work melded literary and historical studies as few had done before.

My own memories of Russel Ward in the years of the first publication of *The Australian Legend* are still strong. His kindness and patient support were vital to those of us who as young lecturers taught with him in history courses at the University of New England. His teaching skills, and joy in teaching were inspiring. He was also supportive of new ventures, as of my field work in Aboriginal archaeology. The support was not just intellectual. He was cook on our first excavation camp — the good food and evening camp fire stories of the men and songs of the bush made it memorable. They also opened up new aspects of the Australian past for me as a classical historian, and for my students whose Australian history had been set in a British imperial mould.

As a school boy in Charters Towers, Perth and Adelaide, he often visited outback stations, seeing an Australia so different from that of the metropolitan centres of learning. As a young man he travelled to the Centre, like many other artists and writers of his generation, suddenly discovering the Australian landscape, and the lives of Aboriginal people and the pastoral workers of the stations.

Russel came from a family that valued learning, education and high ideals of service. His father, a respected classical scholar and devout Christian, served as Headmaster of several leading schools, including Wesley College in Perth and Prince Alfred's College in Adelaide. Russel could not share his father's religious beliefs, but did share his conviction that 'faith is putting into your life the substance of what you believe'.

At school and university his life was dominated by study of literature and by the sports at which he excelled — rugby and rowing. At Adelaide University he read English, and some history — but little of it was concerned with Australia. Indeed, when he asked in which year he would study Australian literature he was told there was none. Australian history was also absent from the curriculum. By the time he graduated he was already aware that those assumptions were in themselves an historical

phenomenon to be investigated. He concluded that at the end of his four university years (1936) he felt:

no nearer to understanding my own country, and the world events that threatened it, than I had been on leaving school. This was partly because Australian history, literature, art, anthropology and so forth did not exist as undergraduate studies; but more because politics, or contemporary history had barely come into being either.

[Ward, R., *A Radical Life : The Autobiography of Russel Ward*, (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1988), p. 84].

Like so many of his generation he found that graduation did not lead, in orderly sequence, to the calm of an academic career. He taught, with enjoyment and flair, at Geelong Grammar and Sydney Grammar, before the war and its aftermath intervened.

While teaching after the war he continued to read in history, literature and politics and wrote a number of school text books. In the early 'fifties he commenced full-time doctoral research concerning the nature of Australian identity as seen in its literature and folk songs. He was among the first doctoral scholars at the newly established Australian National University. Research into folk songs soon led to research into the working conditions and ethos of the pastoral worker and its influence on national self-awareness. So an English thesis became a social history thesis, and the Australian legend was born.

Ward's writing always encompassed what might now be called 'cultural studies', anticipating much of what is now regarded as vital in Australian studies. However, even distinguished doctoral research did not bring easy or immediate entry to the academic world. Like many of his generation who saw, with dismay, the rise of Fascism in the 'thirties, or were concerned with social issues, Communism held great appeal. As a political activist and member of the Party for a brief time, Russel was subjected to surveillance, and the attention of what he called the 'thought police'.

A series of reverses, themselves mirroring the experiences of Gordon Childe at the end of the 1914-1918 war, a time also dominated by fear of Socialist threats to established order, delayed Russel's entry to academia. The 1950s were not years of tolerance for political activism or questioning of accepted values. The difficulties of these years took heavy toll of the peace of mind and health of all the Ward family, and particularly of his wife Margaret.

At New England Russel fostered a strong and individual school of Australian historians, and he held the Chair from 1967 to 1979. *The Australian Legend* was followed by a series of studies in Australian history and literature, fifteen in all. His services to education, history and literature were recognised by awards such as the Queen's Silver Jubilee Medal in 1977, an AM in 1987, and a DLitt in 1983. A long serving member of the Council at the University of New England, he was its Deputy-Chancellor for eight years.

Russel Ward's new vision of Australian identity and its formation that forged *The Australian Legend* also helped forge a new era of historical and cultural studies in Australia. His teaching stimulated young scholars to explore beyond the accepted bounds, to question accepted interpretations and to experiment. He was generous in his intellectual tolerance of new ventures, and a wonderful teacher whom many remember with affection for his lack of pretension and concern for social justice. There was also that flamboyant turn of phrase, and the flouting of convention by someone who, at the same time, never lost his command of the formal courtesies.

Russel Ward's academic research and writing linked popular literature and song with social history in new configurations. They, and his life, epitomise and reflect so much of the events and values of the central decades of this century. His influence on our historical vision is unquestioned. We may accept his own summation of his life (p. 242):

... If my life has achieved anything, it has helped many Australians, by showing themselves the nature of their national identity or self-image.

*Isabel McBryde*

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Louis Kahan*