

Resurrecting Ned Kelly

LYN INNES

In a review of Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang*, the poet Peter Porter commented that the three most potent icons in Australian popular history were Ned Kelly, Phar Lap, and Donald Bradman.¹ Of these Ned Kelly has the longest history, and has undergone numerous revivals and reconfigurations. One might also argue that he was the least successful of the three; he was a man who saw himself as a victim of empire, class, race, and the judicial system. At least that is how Kelly presents himself in *The Jerilderie Letter*, and many of those who have written about him affirm that this view was justified. So the question is why and in what ways Ned Kelly has become so potent; why cannot Australians let him die? And what does he mean to Australians, or indeed the rest of the world, today? This essay will glance briefly at some early representations of Kelly, before discussing in more detail Peter Carey's revival of Kelly, and considering the significance of that revival in the present.

Kelly and his gang became legends in their lifetimes, and promoted themselves in this light. Joe Byrne, one of the gang members, is named as the author of "The Ballad of Kelly's Gang", sung to the tune of "McNamara's Band":

Oh, Paddy dear, and did you hear the news that's going
'round?
On the head of bold Ned Kelly they have placed two thousand
pound,
And on Steve Hart, Joe Byrne and Dan two thousand more
they'd give;
But if the price was doubled, boys the Kelly Gang would live.
'Tis hard to think such plucky hearts in crime should be
employed,
'Tis by police persecution they have all been much annoyed.
Revenge is sweet and in the bush they can defy the law:
Such bailing-up and plundering you never saw before.²

Numerous ballads along these same lines were composed and sung during the gang's brief reign, celebrating Kelly and his men as heroes, and after the siege at Glenrowan, lamenting their tragic deaths. These popular ballads contrast with the voice of the establishment, represented by the *Melbourne Punch*, for example, which denounces the four members of the gang as "cowardly liars" and commends the "annihilation of a national evil".³ Somewhere in between these polar opposites were the numerous exhibitions and melodramas of the period featuring the Kelly gang. One of these actually featured Ned's younger sister and brother, Kate and Jim, appearing on stage at the Melbourne Apollo on the eve of his execution. He has been the subject of innumerable biographies, and gets a mention in most histories of Australia. The first feature length film ever produced was *The Kelly Gang* in 1906. And since then there have been at least five other feature films, including two in the 1920s. The 1970s Mick Jagger version epitomises yet another attempt to commodify and popularise Ned Kelly. There was a musical produced in 1978 called *Ned Kelly—the Electric Rock Show*, produced by and starring Reg Livermore.⁴ Since 2001, researching the "afterlife" of Ned Kelly, I have found numerous items in Sydney newspapers concerning plans for new films about Kelly, auditions for a musical, the sale of "Neddy Teddies" dressed in a cuddly version of his distinctive armour, and revived rumours of his younger brother Dan's escape from the siege of Glenrowan and various identities in a second life in America, NSW, or Queensland.

But Kelly lives on not only in the Anglo-Celtic Australian imagination and commodity culture. Ian Jones reports that among the Yarralin Aboriginal people of Northwestern Australia Ned Kelly has been absorbed into legends of group survival as an ally against white oppression. One legend tells how Kelly and his angel friends arrived in a boat, made a river, and caused the salt water that covered the land to be expelled. Another legend gives him Christ-like status, as he teaches the aboriginal people how to make a damper and boil a billy, and is able to feed the whole mob with just one damper and billy of tea. Yet another story recounts how he kills four policemen at

Wyndham station, and is taken back to England by Captain Cook. There his throat is cut and he is buried, but he rises into the sky amidst the noise of thunder, causing Darwin to shake and the white men to tremble.⁵

That image of Kelly rising into the sky causing the powerful white men to tremble recalls Sidney Nolan's potent image of Kelly in armour towering above the mountain ranges. Kelly has haunted not just popular and media culture but also "high" culture, and for many of us Nolan's series of paintings is what first comes to mind when we hear the name of Ned Kelly. What haunts us there is the enigma of the man, the unknown body that hides behind that strangely archaic and yet strangely modern suit of armour. He is Don Quixote and Frankenstein's monster, human and robot all at once.

The desire to breathe life and language into that shell also haunts Australian literature. The paradox of his supposed final words before his execution, "Such is life", becomes the title of Furphy's seminal modernist Australian novel, featuring the kinds of selectors, nomads, and squatters that Kelly and his gang grew up with. Kelly's life and fate have inspired numerous novels throughout the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries.⁶ Douglas Stewart's verse play gave him an ambivalently tragic status and voice in the 1940s. And in the past decade, both Robert Drewe and Peter Carey have written highly sophisticated novels seeking to penetrate the armour of myth, legend and iconography that has encased him.⁷

Peter Carey has said in the numerous interviews which followed the publication of *True History of the Kelly Gang* and the various prizes awarded it (including both the Commonwealth Writers and Booker Prizes, as well as Australian ones), that his inspiration for this novel was sparked by seeing the Sidney Nolan paintings in the 1960s, his reading of *The Jerilderie Letter*, and his admiration for James Joyce. His epitaph for the novel comes from William Faulkner: "The past is not dead. It is not even past."⁸

Cary's brilliant ventriloquising of Kelly's voice, the vivid local detail, the insertion of actual newspaper accounts from the period, the appeal to a whole series of long-established Australian male heroic images embedded in such figures as "The Man from Snowy River", "The Sick Stockrider", Ben Hall, and the Henry Lawson stories, have convinced many critics that the novel is indeed to be read as a "true history", as faction rather than fiction, as the quintessentially Australian novel. A number of them endorse the book jacket blurb which declares the novel "the song of Australia". Ned Kelly is represented by Carey as an exceptional and daring horseman, who careers down mountain slopes and fords rivers; he knows the local terrain like the back of his hand; he is a "native" in the same ways as Les Murray declares himself and his rural community native-born on and of this land, he nurtures it and grows to know the virtues of every tree and plant and every kind of soil. Like Lawson's rural characters he battles against the odds of drought and poverty, and the formidable Australian terrain; like them he dreams of a peaceful life and making a living on a modest selection; like them also he owes his main allegiance to his mates, while also seeking to provide for and protect his womenfolk. In the British edition of the novel, Carey's insistence on the "truth" of this history is reinforced by the cover and preliminary material with its grainy photograph of a poor rural family beside a rough bark hut, maps of the country where the Kelly gang lived and roamed, supposed transcriptions of documents from the State Library of Victoria, detailed bibliographic descriptions of the documents which are claimed to have been written by Kelly.⁹

But the wary reader will realise that the very detail with which the various packages of documents are presented must raise questions about their provenance. Moreover, although there is a resemblance between the style and voice of *The Jerilderie Letter* and that of the novel, there is also quite a distance between them. The following extract from *The Jerilderie Letter* gives a fair sample of the language, style, and politics voiced by Ned Kelly and dictated to Joe Byrne:

But as for hand-cuffing Kennedy to a tree or cutting his ear off or brutally treating any of them is a falsehood, if Kennedy's ear was cut off and they shoot me it would not be wilful murder if they packed our remains in, shattered into a mass of animated gore to Mansfield, they would have got great praise and credit as well as promotion but I am reconed a horrid brute because I had not been cowardly enough to lie down for them under such trying circumstances and insults to my people certainly their wives and children are to be pitied but they must remember those men came into the bush with the intention of scattering pieces of me and my brother all over the bush and yet they know and acknowledge I have been wronged and my mother and english landlords which is better known as Officers of Justice or Victorian Police ... a policeman who for a lazy loafing cowardly bilit left the ash corner deserted the shamrock, the emblem of true wit and beauty to serve under a flag and nation that has destroyed massacred and murdered their forefathers by the greatest of torture as rolling them down hill on their own soil, or had fled to America or other countries to bloom again another day, were doomed to Port McQuarie, Toweringabbie Norfolk Island and Emu plains. And in those places of tyranny and condemnation many a blooming Irishman rather than subdue to the Saxon yoke, Were flogged to death and bravely died in servile chains but true to the shamrock and a credit to Paddy's land ¹⁰

As Russel Ward has pointed out these final lines closely echo a poem by the popular convict bard, Frank the Poet (Francis McNamara), written almost fifty years earlier:

He said: I have been a prisoner at Port Macquarie,
at Norfolk Island and Emu Plains;
At Castle Hill and cursed Towngabbie—at all those
places I've worked in chains;

Kelly's rhetoric also recalls similar ballads about Jack Donahue, the Irish bushranger, and "The Wild Colonial Boy."
¹¹

Ward's argument has to do with the significance of the Australian popular ballad as both a reflection of the "true" Australian ethos, and a shaper of the Australian mind. It is

interesting to see here how this early 1830s ballad has provided both content and rhetoric for Kelly's dictated autobiography and defence. But it is also interesting that Carey's representation edits out many of these early formulations from the Australian ballad tradition and replaces them with references and allusions which are distinctively part of the Irish political and mythical tradition. Carey also revises the style, punctuation and voice of *The Jerilderie Letter* in significant ways. Compare this passage from Carey's novel:

Bricky Williamson done no more than carry the children to safety but on the basis of Fitzpatrick's lies he were charged with Aiding and Abetting Attempted Murder. This same charge were laid against our mother and as I had left her undefended the police took her and the baby as easy as picking mushrooms in a cow paddock. The pair of them were took to Beechworth Prison. And there Sir Redmond Barry waited for her like a great fat leech hiding in the bracken its only purpose to suck the living blood it were the same man who wished to hang the rebels at Eureka the same man who sentenced our Uncle James to death for burning down the house. When we heard he were to be the Judge we sent word through Mr Zinke we would surrender if Barry released the mother and babe but the great man thought us less than dog manure beneath his boots. Word came back he planned to teach a lesson to us so-called LOUTS.

In response I pledged to do the same to him.¹²

Carey takes from Kelly's outpouring the vivid local imagery, the passionate flow of invective and self-righteousness. Contrary to the remarks of many critics, he does not take the punctuation, for Kelly's discourse as transcribed by Joe Byrne is much closer in form, if not in tone and spirit, to Molly Bloom's in Joyce's *Ulysses* than Carey's. What Carey does is remove most of the commas, add a distinctively Australian syntax and idiom, and insert many full stops, resulting in a sharper and often more coherent account, while retaining the illusion of a style that is more oral than literary. American critics have persuasively compared Carey's narrator to Twain's

Huck Finn, although Huck Finn is both more innocent and more knowing than Kelly.

Carey invokes the imagined speaking voice of Kelly, as well as the transcribed letter, to foreground his bitter sense of injustice, and above all his urgent determination to be heard. The existence of *The Jerilderie Letter* itself, and the fact of its suppression, once seized by the police and then when laboriously rewritten, suppressed by the printer, as well as contemporary accounts of the long “lectures” Kelly inflicted on his hostages, all give justification for Carey’s emphasis on Kelly’s outrage at the treatment of his family and himself, but above all his desire to correct the newspaper and judicial “misrepresentations” and lies—a conspiracy, as he saw it, to silence the poor and the colonized, especially the Irish. Thus the brief opening section in which an outside observer describes the armoured Kelly as a kind of Frankenstein’s monster emerging from the mists, a “creature [which] was nothing human”, a beast, is followed by Kelly’s own statement that the purpose of his “True History” is to overthrow “the lies and silences” on which he was raised, to write for his distant daughter a history which “will contain no single lie”, and allow her to “finally comprehend the injustice we poor Irish suffered in this present age” (7).

Taking Carey’s Kelly at his word, Andreas Gaile has seen *True History of the Kelly Gang* as a true exemplar of postcolonial resistance writing—here the subaltern voice is celebrated and can finally be heard.¹³ “In the present case,” Gaile declares, “it is Ned Kelly who by appropriating the power of discourse, writes “his own damned history” and inserts his narrative into the grand narrative of history.”¹⁴ But while accepting this as one reading of the novel, and admitting that much of its power comes from our sense that the subaltern voice *is* being heard, I would suggest that Carey’s work is rather more complex and ambivalent than Gaile’s description allows. There are a number of ways in which the reader is encouraged to question the reliability of this version of events and Kelly’s ability to tell “the truth”. In other words, there is a

gap between the authenticity of the voice and the authenticity of the events and perspectives it speaks—a gap which in some ways makes the voice seem all the more authentic.

The bibliographic detail, the editorial comments, the claim that the bundles of documents were stolen, suppressed and edited by Thomas Curnow, the school teacher who betrayed Kelly's presence at Glenrowan, and who promised Kelly that he would "improve" the "rough" history, are all factors which might make us wonder about the "authenticity" of the history put before us, and which certainly draw attention to the gap between Kelly and Curnow, between the illiterate or semi-illiterate and ourselves as literate readers, fully able to appreciate the inventiveness of Peter Carey. But more important in terms of our willingness to give full credence to Ned Kelly's account is Carey's insistence on the Oedipal character of Ned's relationship with his mother. This is indeed a post-Freudian novel, and Carey takes elements of *The Jerilderie Letter*, such as its closing declaration ("I am a widows son outlawed and my orders must be obeyed"¹⁵), to create Kelly as obsessed with replacing his dead father in his mother's affections and esteem. In Carey's depiction of him his displacement by new lovers and his inability to protect her from the police together drive him to near-madness, and to risk and lose not only his own life but those of his gang. Carey also invents for him a wife, Mary Hearn, who is so like his mother that at one point he mistakes Mary for Ellen Kelly, and who also has had a child by his mother's lover, George King.¹⁶

The understandably obsessive concern to protect his mother and clan from "the authorities" is linked to his identification with the motherland, with Ireland's history of exploitation and colonisation. Carey builds on the affiliation seen in the well-worn rhetoric of victimisation and defiance found in numerous passages in *The Jerilderie Letter* such as the one quoted above, to create a whole complex Irish cultural continuity in his mother's stories about Cuchulain and Deirdre, the ballads and songs about Ireland, Ned Kelly's own identification with Cuchulain in his armour, and the recourse to the symbols of

agrarian subversion in the wearing of women's dresses invented for Ned's father and fellow gang members.

But perhaps Mary Hearn's response to such identifications and her departure for the United States give a clue to Carey's response to such obsessive identification with the past as a history of injustice and victimisation. Like Joyce's *Ulysses*, this novel might be read as not only a post-Freudian novel, but also a post-nationalist and post-postcolonial one — perhaps even post- “The Troubles” in Northern Ireland. Like Leopold and Molly Bloom, Mary Hearn rejects the nostalgic immersion in the myths of the motherland, the aggressive rhetoric of the “Citizen” with its obsessive invocation of the wrongs and martyrs of the past, and above all the cycle of violence which victims inflict upon one another. She firmly condemns the actions of the gang members who identify with the “Sons of Sieve” or the “Mollies” who took revenge on their landlords by symbolically but terribly mutilating their livestock, and tells them that they must “ease the lives of the poor, not bring terror.” (278) When she urges Ned to choose life by leaving the country with her, rather than death by staying in Australia with his mother, he chooses to remain with his mother. Mary Hearn seeks economic and psychological fulfilment for herself and her child in the United States, away from the obsessive cycle of victimisation and revenge in Australia. It may be that her choice shadows that of her creator, who like James Joyce needed to distance himself from his country's most deeply ingrained myths and obsessions in order to write about them.

And yet one might argue that Carey nevertheless remains too close to his protagonist's obsessions. It is in part the intensity and conviction of Kelly's self-representation that marks the power of Carey's novel, but it also allows us to be deflected from a less narrow and monocular vision of the context in which Kelly operated. Even within the limits of Kelly's version of his own history, there are some surprising omissions. When one steps back and considers the culture of first generation Irish immigrants, one might expect frequent reference to the Catholic religion, its language and beliefs, that

formed a cohesive bond between Irish Catholics, and a clear marker and barrier between the protestant rulers and landlords and their impoverished tenants. Yet the language and attitudes of Irish Catholics are absent from Carey's novel. This may be explained in part by Carey's (and perhaps Kelly's) emphasis on the political and economic oppression of the class that Kelly belonged to, rather than cultural antagonism, an emphasis which is also strengthened by the frequent reminder that the representatives of the law (the police and judiciary) were also of Irish descent.

In a novel which is so concerned with dispossession, perhaps more significant is the omission of any reference to the presence and eviction of the first Australians, the Aboriginal peoples. The areas Kelly and his family inhabited contained many Aborigines during the mid-nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century, and many of them were also employed in the timber business in which Kelly worked. Thus we are left to wonder whether Kelly's lack of awareness of those other dispossessed people should be seen as his blindness — or Peter Carey's. Perhaps it is relevant here to recall Ann Curthoys' reservations about the tendency in Australian culture to offer competing histories of victimisation, each of which obscures or deflects from our vision other victims.¹⁷ Carey's novel gains much of its mesmerising force through its convincing mimicry of Kelly's intense but blinkered concern for his family and followers, his own narcissistic conviction of his role as indomitable victim. Had Carey referred even in passing to those other dispossessed peoples, he might have created a stronger awareness both of Kelly's egotism and of the wider significance of his story in the political struggle which affected many Australians of diverse backgrounds. One might speculate also that the multiple revivals of Kelly at the beginning of the twenty-first century reflect an anxiety in the face of an increasingly diverse Australian culture, and perhaps a desire to hark back to an older and less complex narrative of national self-fashioning.

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- ¹ Peter Porter, “Made Noble in the Fire”, *Times Literary Supplement* (No. 5101), 5 January 2001, 19-20.
- ² Cited by Charles Osborne, *Ned Kelly* (London: Anthony Blond, 1970), p. 194.
- ³ Osborne, p. 163.
- ⁴ Shirley Despoja, Arts Editor for the *Adelaide Advertiser*, wrote of the opening night at the Adelaide Festival of Arts in 1978, “A hideous monument to bad taste and theatrical excess” (cited by David Hawkins in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 June 2002).
- ⁵ Ian Jones, *Ned Kelly: A Short Life* (Port Melbourne, Vic.: Lothian Books, 1995), pp. 339-40. For further discussion of these legends and their significance, see Deborah Rose, “Ned Kelly Died for Our Sins”, *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 2 (1989), pp. 51-8.
- ⁶ These include Nat Gould, *Stuck Up* (1894) and Ambrose Pratt, *Dan Kelly* (1911). Rolf Boldrewood’s *Robbery Under Arms* (serialized in the *Sydney Mail* in 1882-3; published in book form 1888) may have been influenced by Kelly’s exploits but draws substantially on other bushrangers like Ben Hall.
- ⁷ Robert Drewe, *Our Sunshine* (Sydney: Picador, 1991).
- ⁸ This frequent quotation (a slight misquotation) comes from William Faulkner’s dramatic novel, *Requiem for a Nun* (Random House, 1951). In Act 1, Scene iii, Gavin Stevens says, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”
- ⁹ This photograph is not featured in the first (University of Queensland Press) Australian edition, or subsequent paperback editions in Australia. For a comparison see Elizabeth Webby. “Books and Covers: Reflections on some Recent Australian Novels”, *Sydney Studies in English*, 29 (2003) pp. ... -
- ¹⁰ Ned Kelly, *The Jerilderie Letter*, ed. Alex McDermott (Melbourne: Text Publishing Company, 2001), pp. 60-8.
- ¹¹ Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend* (Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 55.
- ¹² Peter Carey, *True History of the Kelly Gang* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001), p. 230. All further references will be to this edition and will be included in the text.

- ¹³ Andreas Gaile, "Re-mythologizing an Australian Legend: Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang*", *Antipodes* 15/1 (2001), 37-9.
- ¹⁴ Gaile, p. 38.
- ¹⁵ *The Jerilderie Letter*, p. 83.
- ¹⁶ In fact, Kelly is reported by one of his captives at Jerilderie to have referred to his marriage: "when outlawed I was only three weeks married." Ian Jones dismisses this claim as "a fantastic detail" which discredits this report (*Ned Kelly: A Short Life*, p. 113).
- ¹⁷ Ann Curthoys, "Mythologies", in Richard Nile, ed. *The Australian Legend and its Discontents* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2000).

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