

Paul Eggert: The Bushranger's Voice: Peter Carey's True History of the Kelly Gang (2000) and Ned Kelly's Jerilderie Letter (1879)

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When the Australian bushranger Ned Kelly was hanged in Melbourne on 11 November 1880 a baffling and frustrating reign of outlaw terror, as the authorities saw it, finally came to an end. Together with his gang, Kelly had stolen horses, robbed two banks and killed three policemen. As an Irish-Australian, Kelly saw this villainy as an inevitable response to injustices dealt out to his kind by the Anglican political and social ascendancy in the colonies. With this stand and because of his daring actions, he cultivated a certain popularity around the country and, temporarily, had at his disposal an armed following in north-eastern Victoria. A previously unheard-of amount of public money was expended on his capture, and even while the months of bumbling and incompetent pursuit of Kelly and his gang were in progress an existing play was hurriedly altered so as to deal with the gang's exploits and retitled for the Melbourne stage. Some of Kelly's own writings and speeches were reported at second hand or summarized in newspapers. Immediately after his trial and sentencing, thirty thousand people in Melbourne signed a petition begging the Governor for a reprieve—but to no avail. After Kelly's execution, bushranger plays were banned for fear of public unrest. This delayed the public myth-making till the appearance of Kelly Gang plays on the stage from 1897, but in the following decades bushranger films, whether or not about Ned Kelly, were regularly banned.¹

In the meantime the novelist “Rolf Boldrewood” (Thomas Alexander Browne), who was also a police magistrate and a gentleman, had written a bushranger novel serialized in the *Sydney Mail* during 1882–83. When it was finally issued in a cheap, one-volume format in 1889 in Macmillan's Colonial Library series it was hailed as a mixture of social history and romance. It went on to enjoy enduring popularity, becoming, in fact, an Empire classic and selling half-a-million copies before World War II. Supposedly by a bushranger in prison about to be hanged, *Robbery Under Arms* is written in the first person, in the idiomatic, spoken-voice vernacular of a working man. This narrative method amounted to a stylistic innovation, for it committed the otherwise conservative Boldrewood to an inward understanding of why healthy young colonial men, not of convict extraction and with opportunity aplenty, were nevertheless tempted to “turn out” as bushrangers. It was a first for Australian literature, and is roughly contemporary with Mark Twain's more famous voicing of Huckleberry Finn.²

There is an umbilical cord of outlaw folkloric tradition that joins *Robbery Under Arms* and Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000), but the most tantalising manifestation of that tradition, for Carey, was Ned Kelly's Jerilderie Letter.³ Carey read Boldrewood's novel during the period in which he was preparing for and writing his Booker Prize-winning novel; yet there is no detectable influence of a stylistic kind.⁴ Ned Kelly's 56-page Letter was first published from a contemporary police copy in 1930 and again in 1948: it is by far the more important source. Having been assumed lost, its original manuscript finally resurfaced, as described below, in 2000 and was published. The relationship between the Letter and the novel interrupts an easy postmodern take on Carey's work: this interruption is the subject of the present essay. *Robbery Under Arms* is more important here as the precursor and example rather than as stylistic influence, for Carey has

done again what Boldrewood so innovatively achieved in the 1880s: the invention, or really, the reinvention of the bushranger's voice.

In an interview following the publication of his novel, Carey commented that “true history is totally consistent with the voice of the narrator” (2001a, 11). This was a telling remark. The deliberate creation of voice is a more charged, cultural-political matter than it may appear at first. Some people believe that the postmodernist dependence on quotation from earlier styles and periods—when (it is nostalgically assumed) the creation of meaning was not so philosophically vulnerable—is fishy, a dodge. Conservatives have all along lamented this quotational habit as a sign that artists could not affirm their culture's right to engender truth, and they tend to link it to multicultural disintegration; radicals saw it as a liberation, a sign that “history” was over. But with postmodernism now getting long in the tooth, the quotational habit in architecture, painting and creative writing reveals itself as only part of an exploitable repertoire of techniques, no longer philosophically loaded.

Peter Carey is no theorist, but he is an innovative writer who takes risks. His novel is, I believe, on the cusp of the change I am pointing to; it is a brilliant act of imposture and is postmodern in that sense, but it creates the narrative space for much else besides. Carey's providing a statement of sources at the end of the novel implies a genuine act of historical reference. He knew that he was dealing with perhaps the best known Australian historical figure. The rest of this essay teases out the paradox of a novel's being simultaneously both postmodern-quotational and, in the old-fashioned sense, an act of imaginative engagement with a significant past.

Voice and the Writing of History

Here are the first paragraphs of *Robbery Under Arms*, what Russel Ward would describe in 1958 as the literary birth of the Australian bushman:⁵

My name's Dick Marston, Sydney-side native. I'm twenty-nine years old, six feet in my stocking-soles, and thirteen stone weight. Pretty strong and active with it, so they say. I don't want to blow—not here, any road—but it takes a good man to put me on my back, or stand up to me with the gloves, or the naked mauleys. I can ride anything—anything that ever was lapped in horsehide—swim like a musk-duck, and track like a Myall blackfellow. Most things that a man can do, I'm up to, and that's all about it. As I lift myself now, I can feel the muscle swell on my arm like a cricket ball, in spite of the—well, in spite of everything.

The morning sun comes shining through the window bars; and ever since he was up, have I been cursing the daylight, cursing myself, and them that brought me into the world. Did I curse mother? and the hour I was born into this miserable life.

Why should I curse the day? Why do I lie here, groaning; yes, crying like a child, and beating my head against the stone floor. I am not mad, though I am shut up in a cell. No. Better for me if I was. But it's all up now; there's no get away this time; and I, Dick Marston, as strong as a bullock, as active as a rock-wallaby, chock full of life and spirits and health, have been tried for bushranging—robbery under arms they called it. And though the blood runs through my veins like the water in the mountain creeks, and every bit of bone and sinew is as sound as the day I was born, I must die on the gallows this day month. (Boldrewood 2006, 9)

Like *Robbery Under Arms*, Carey's novel is a first-person narrative. It is purportedly written by Ned, in semi-literate prose, for the benefit of the daughter (whom, in real life, he did not have). Unsophisticated readers are liable to believe that Carey's novel is a real autobiography, printed from a manuscript actually written by Ned Kelly. The first edition bears many factitious markers of historical authenticity: imitation quarter-bound leather with the spine untitled as if it were an individually bound manuscript; sections individually guillotined rather than as a whole quire, creating something like a rough, deckled-edge finish; and speckled endpapers and textured paper-stock gesturing at the handmade.⁶ The novel itself is divided, not into chapters, but into what purports to be a series of numbered manuscript parcels. We enter the novel via

a number of authenticating voices, each picked out in its own signifying typography: first, the voice of the unnamed collector who is introducing the manuscript to us and assuring us it is in “Ned Kelly's distinctive hand” and that it owes its existence to the efforts of the schoolteacher Thomas Curnow who gathered up the parcels and took them to Melbourne after having betrayed the gang at their last stand at Glenrowan; second, the archivist's voice, which provides a physical description of each parcel and summarizes its contents as neutrally as possible; and lastly and most impressively the voice of Ned Kelly.

Sophisticated readers, recognising these self-consciously historicising production values and layering of voices, will be tempted to read the novel as an elaborate and knowing act of postmodern quotation, cleverly blending fiction and fact till, as Xavier Pons comments, they are indistinguishable. “There is no hint,” he says, “of the status of the book as a work of fiction” (2001, 63).⁷ This worried some reviewers (what was happening to *real* history in all of this?) and it puzzled others, drawing Carey's reply: “Anyone who says ‘true history’ is obviously writing a novel. ... No historian would ever say that” (2001a, 11). He is right, of course, or at least right for the 1990s. Professional history-writing has long been understood as inevitably inflected by point of view. But if deconstructed, history can be seen as another form of fiction, its claims to authoritative truth-telling about the past destabilized by the textual condition of all writing. From a radical post-colonialist view-point, it has been seen, indeed, as an instrument “for the control of subject peoples” (Ashcroft 1996, 194).⁸ Whatever one thinks of this line of argument, the new awareness of the inevitably discursive nature of textuality, historical or otherwise, had gradually filtered from literary theory into more general circulation by the mid-1990s; and, as it did so, it afforded a discomfiting liberation for creative writers. It must be part of the reason for the resort to the past in so many literary novels of the last decade or so.

We should not assume that this view of history was shared in earlier times. The telling of history was more straightforward. The title of Carey's novel picks up that of C. H. Chomley's *The True Story of the Kelly Gang of Bushrangers* (1907). He had already written *Tales of Old Times: Early Australian Incident and Adventure* and other works. Although, in his *True Story*, Chomley uses historical documents (newspaper accounts, evidence at Kelly's trial and the papers of the Royal Commission that followed the trial), he rarely stops long to discuss them. He knows his audience: he wants to tell the story, his narrative of what happened, in an uncomplicated way. He often expresses scepticism about the extant accounts of events and of motives, but his attitude is always one of confident understanding and conservative judgement. He is a proficient storyteller. For him, a true story of actual events and a popular history of them were the same thing. Scene setting, the quoting of words spoken by those involved, beginning the story *in medias res* with the policeman McIntyre's return to Mansfield after the shooting of the three policemen at Stringybark Creek, the reliance on tiny details for verisimilitude and wry comedy are among the narrative techniques he employs.

Here is a fair sample. After McIntyre's return a search party sets out:

It was then about half-past nine. Rain was falling in torrents and the night was pitchy dark. Mr. Monk at once consented to guide the party to Stringy Bark Creek, also inducing two of his men to join it; and at ten o'clock the searchers resumed their journey, riding in melancholy silence in single file through the forest, with no sound but the rain pattering on the leaves, an occasional mournful cry of a mopoke, or the crashing of a wallaby through the undergrowth. None but bushmen born and bred could have steered a course through such country on such a night. (Chomley 1907, 14)

Later in his *True Story*, Chomley criticizes the reporters, actually present at the Glenrowan siege in 1880 (when Kelly was captured), who hastened to telegraph their sensationalized copy, for which there was a keen appetite in Melbourne and elsewhere. Stressing the thrilling aspects of bushranger exploits, including the use of partly or wholly invented quotations serving as dialogue in what amounted to semi-dramatization, had been a characteristic of often highly detailed newspaper accounts of bushrangers from at latest the 1860s. The stylistic continuity between the reporting of facts, and fiction, was waiting for Boldrewood to exploit it.

Chomley was the nephew of the Assistant Prosecutor at Ned Kelly's trial in 1880, and his account is critical of the bushranger. Chomley's successor, J. J. Keneally, an early member of the Australian Labor Party, stressed on the other hand the culpability of the police who brought on Kelly's revolt. Keneally's

Complete Inner History of the Kelly Gang and their Pursuers (1929) was the first sympathetic account of the bushranger. Drawing upon it, J. M. S. Davies's "The Kellys Are Out: New Kelly Gang History" was serialized in November—December 1930 in the Melbourne *Herald*.⁹ Davies developed a more complete narrative dramatization. Whole slabs of dialogue are invented; and the Jerilderie Letter, published for the first time, fifty years after Kelly's death, is nested into the history of which it is a part, cut up into heavily regularized and bowdlerized chunks of quotation, its text adjusted at will to suit the narrative context that Davies was providing. Davies did not allow himself to be hampered by what a later generation of scholarly editors would see as the historical witness of the document's exact wording and presentation.

Carey knows that professional historians do not write like this any more. His *True History* is, in one sense, a self-conscious retrieval, a postmodern adaptation of this simpler attitude towards history-writing, of an earlier style of telling a "true story." More obviously, it is a radical, literary adaptation into the first person of—and an extended, imaginative meditation on—the Jerilderie Letter itself.

Ned Kelly and the Jerilderie Letter

Although he does not mention it in the novel's acknowledgements page, Carey has pointed to his primary inspiration in interviews. Ned Kelly's Jerilderie Letter was an answer to the colonial press, which had painted him as a notorious villain after his shooting dead the three pursuing policemen. This had followed an incident when a drunken Trooper Fitzpatrick went to the Kelly farmhouse to arrest Ned's brother Dan on a charge of horse-stealing, molested their sister Kate Kelly, was probably shot in the wrist by Ned, promised not to prosecute, but soon after laid a charge of attempted murder against Ned, his brother and mother. This was in April 1878; Ned ran for it. He had already served two jail sentences but had been attempting to stay out of trouble. His mother was now imprisoned on the attempted murder charge. This was the last straw, and so he turned to horse stealing on a large scale. His offer to give himself up in return for her release was ignored. From then on, he was on the run with his gang; the murder of the three policemen at Stringybark Creek followed; then came two daring and well-planned bank robberies at Euroa and Jerilderie; then the gang's last, defiant stand against the police at Glenrowan in the armour they had fashioned from the steel mouldboards of ploughs; then Ned's capture at Glenrowan, trial, and finally his hanging.

In the Jerilderie Letter, he wanted to defend his own actions and to expose the corruption of police such as Fitzpatrick in the small country towns: police who, he believed, worked in collaboration with the rich, large landholding class (the so-called squatters) to frustrate the legitimate aspirations of small landholding selectors. Recent drought had increased the pressures. In this situation, horse- and cattle-duffing (rustling) and other forms of small-scale illegal activity were fatally attractive. He was frustrated; he and his class were oppressed. He found ready support amongst them once he was outlawed, but he could not get his voice heard.

He and his gang rode into the town of Jerilderie in southern New South Wales in February 1879. Apart from holding up the whole town and robbing the bank with both flair and effectiveness, and probably with some gratitude from those whose mortgages the bank held but which he tore up, Kelly also wanted to see the printer of the local newspaper. This man had been editorializing about the town's insufficient number of policemen needed to protect it against the recent upsurge in bushranger activity. Kelly not only substantiated his fears but wanted him to publish a 56-page manuscript. He said he had some instructions to give the printer, who had slipped away.¹⁰ The bank accountant Mr Living offered to pass on the manuscript, and Kelly trusted him to do so. In fact, he passed it on to the Victorian police as soon as he could, riding out of town that day for Deniliquin where he could catch the train to Melbourne. On his way to Deniliquin he stayed overnight at the hotel of a Mr Hanlon who made a copy of the manuscript. In Melbourne, by 1880, the original manuscript had been copied again by a government clerk so it could be used as evidence in Kelly's trial. That copy, still at the Victorian Public Record Office,¹¹ became the basis for all publications of the Jerilderie Letter until 2000 when the original manuscript was handed over to the State Library of Victoria.¹² Within ten days it was published on the Library's website and attracted 10,000 hits within a week. The rapid transcription of the manuscript by library staff was achieved by scanning to computer the edition of the Letter published as an appendix to Max Brown's account of Ned Kelly in 1948, and then correcting the transcription against the manuscript. This transcription appeared in printed form in 2001 (McDermott 2001),

the same year that the Hanlon copy surfaced, went to auction and was purchased by the National Museum of Australia.¹³

The original manuscript is written in a very clear hand and shows some other signs of being a fair copy. The hand has very similar though not identical characteristics to an extant letter written and signed by Joe Byrne, one of the gang who had had the benefit of a few years of schooling and was considered something of a penman. Ned Kelly himself had had less, and the only extant letter signed by him has very different characteristics. The Jerilderie Letter has almost no paragraphing, and although its spelling is only occasionally awry, the writer has little notion of the conventions of capitalization or punctuation, whether rhetorical or syntactic. The narrative is roughly chronological but often goes off on tangents, and the writer has little notion of how much assistance readers will need to understand the associative connections it makes and the people it suddenly introduces.

It is a baffling document if read without editorial assistance and historical and biographical annotation. But the struggle of a voice to be heard, to which its mangled syntax and amateur presentation poignantly testify, is clear enough. We don't know what instructions Ned Kelly wanted to give the printer, what license to change, correct, or regularize its text he would have required or allowed; but in view of the effort that the composition of a 7,500-word piece of prose would have involved and in view of his own earlier and later efforts in this regard, we can be fairly sure that Kelly wanted people to be able to read his self-defence in his own words.

Kelly starts the narrative with an incident when he is still a boy. He is accused, perhaps unfairly, by a travelling salesman (or hawker), McCormack, of taking a carthorse and using it to help a friend of Ned's called Gould, another hawker who resented the arrival of the McCormacks in his territory but whose cart had become stuck in the mud during very wet weather: "the ground was that rotten it would bog a duck in places" (McDermott 2001, 1). They returned the horse, but later Mrs McCormack,

turned on me. ... I did not say much to the woman as my Mother was present but that same day me and my uncle was cutting calves Gould wrapped up a note and a pair of the calves testicles and gave them to me to give them to Mrs Mc Cormack. ... consequently Mc Cormack said he would summons me. ... He said I was a liar & he could welt me or any of my breed I was about 14 years of age but accepted the challenge And dismounting when Mrs Mc Cormack struck my horse in the flank with a bullock's shin it jumped forward And my fist came in collision with Mc Cormack's nose And caused him to loose [sic] his equilibrium and fall postrate. (McDermott 2001, 3–6)¹⁴

The net result of all this was that Ned found himself serving a six-month sentence in prison. He was only fifteen years old.

From then on he was a marked man from a dubious Irish family that the police would keep a close eye on. It is to what he regards as the vindictive behaviour of the police that Kelly draws attention again and again in the Jerilderie Letter. Soon after he served this first sentence there is a scene where a Constable Hall—who, unbeknown to Kelly, wants to arrest him—grabs him, finds himself in the dust, aims his revolver at the young Ned and pulls the trigger. The gun misfires:

I threw big cowardly Hall on his belly I straddled him and rooted both spurs into his thighs he roared like a big calf attacked by dogs and shifted several yards of the fence I got his hands at the back of his neck and trid to make him let the revolver go but he stuck to it like grim death to a dead volunteer he called for assistance to a man named Cohen and Barnett, Lewis, Thompson, Jewitt two blacksmiths who was looking on I dare not strike any of them as I was bound to keep the peace [as a condition of his recent release from prison] or I could have spread those curs like dung in a paddock. (McDermott 2001, 12–13)¹⁵

The prevailing tone of the Letter is one of indignation; some of its invective is memorable; yet it is relieved at moments by humour: Fitzpatrick, Kelly remarks dryly at one point, "is very subject to fainting," (McDermott 2001, 52) which is of course a jibe at his courage and therefore at his manhood. But despite being if anything over-endowed with a stereotypically Irish sentimental connection to his mother and

despite being a man who was slow to take revenge, it is clear that something clicked in Ned's soul when she was jailed after the Fitzpatrick incident: “the Police got great credit and praise in the papers for arresting the mother of 12 children one an infant on her breast” (36–37).

His objection to the police throughout is on the personal level: he despises them first and foremost as *men*. He dwells at length on the Fitzpatrick incident and then on the pathetic efforts of the highly paid police, who have been chasing him and his gang, prepared to shoot him dead without even knowing him. Our last few TV generations have perhaps become too hardened to the sight of violence and too used to the anonymity of big-city living to appreciate this objection. There is something old-fashioned, but at the same time honest and direct, even admirable, about it. Ned Kelly could not think structurally about the nature of social oppression or, except in a fairly crude way, strategically. He is at the very opposite end of the political scale to a Talleyrand: he is more in the tradition of boozers who savour their grudges in the pub but never get to the point of action—except that Kelly *was* soon to take the next decisive step.

In the Letter he warns that, in the absence of justice from the government, he may be “compelled to show some colonial stratagem” (McDermott 2001, 28). At the end of the Letter, having advised the rich squatters around Greta to sell out and donate a percentage of their money to the widow and orphan fund, he warns: “neglect this And abide by the consequences, which shall be worse than the rust in the wheat in Victoria or the druth of a dry season to the grasshoppers in New South Wales I do not wish to give the order full force without giving timely warning, but I am a widows son outlawed And my orders *must* be obeyed” (83).

By now he must have been pondering the idea of moving beyond bank robberies to a full-scale confrontation with the police; he may already have hit upon the idea of achieving a technological superiority over them by the use of the armour; and conceivably, although there is no documentary evidence to *prove* it, he may have been intending to take his next opportunity to declare a republic for north-eastern Victoria. There were only the two bank robberies, and then there was Glenrowan, which was his attempt to lure the police into a trap and gun them down. He had had the rails lifted at Glenrowan so that the special police train would be derailed. Thomas Curnow managed to warn the police of this, which led directly to the brutally successful siege by the police of the Glenrowan pub where the gang was holed up. Kelly had armed supporters close at hand ready to go into action, but he did not use them. The threat of an insurrection continued for some months after his hanging. No wonder the Letter was suppressed after Living brought it to Melbourne. It would not be published for fifty years.

Writing, Authorship, and the Postmodern

It has been assumed that Ned Kelly dictated the letter to Joe, and that therefore it is still essentially in his voice; but the situation cannot be so simple. On the occasion of the Gang's earlier bank robbery at Euroa, Byrne was seen by witnesses to be writing a long document in red ink while the gang waited at the Faithfull's Creek homestead that they had taken over prior to the robbery. This stint of writing would have produced one or both of the two copies of what is now known as the Euroa or Cameron Letter. It was sent to Donald Cameron, MLA, whose question in Parliament on 14 November 1878 criticizing the police conduct of the search for the Kelly gang must have given hope to Kelly that Cameron would see justice done, possibly by having the Letter published. The second copy went to a superintendent of police, John Sadleir. The Cameron copy was itself copied by a government clerk, and this copy is the only one now extant.¹⁶ This Letter is about 3,500 words long.

In the event, Cameron was advised by the police not to allow it to be published; but it was shown to reporters, and one newspaper, the Melbourne *Herald*, did paraphrase it at length on 18 December, and this report was republished by a Beechworth newspaper the next day. However, Kelly's criticisms of the police were omitted, and his bid to get the Jerilderie Letter published probably arose from his frustration, as Carey has his Ned say, that they were too cowardly to publish what he had to say in “MY ACTUAL WORDS” (2000, 350). Doubtless they would have seen its suppression as only prudent.

Comparison of the text of the Cameron Letter to that of the Jerilderie Letter reveals much common material and similar wordings. The likelihood is, therefore, that there was a rough copy—or at least, in

editorial parlance, foul papers—from which the Cameron Letter was either developed by Joe or copied out. The foul papers must have been retained by the gang but reworked, possibly orally, and then probably by Ned and Joe in collaboration, to produce the Jerilderie Letter.¹⁷ This letter can be said to embody Kelly's most developed intentions for the text of his self-defence. So we have declared intention, and we have abundant evidence of authorial agency, slightly complicated by Joe Byrne's serving as least as amanuensis and perhaps as collaborator. The voice nevertheless offers itself as Kelly's: it is his self-defence, no one else's; and it is abundantly clear that he wanted his own words published, at the point of a gun if necessary. This is authorship, close and personal. In a letter to the Governor of Victoria, dealing mainly with the events at Glenrowan, that he dictated six days before he was hanged in November 1880, Ned Kelly concluded: "I should have made a Statement of my whole Career but my time is So short on earth that I have to make the best of it to prepare myself for the other world."¹⁸

In a sceptical postmodern age, Ned Kelly's authorship of the Jerilderie Letter is as authentic, as unmediated an example, as we can hope to find. The rawness of the text, its unguardedness, potency, and urgency are undoubtedly what inspired Peter Carey. These qualities are a reflection, in part, of historical contingency, of human agency, of intention. It is not enough to homogenize the Jerilderie Letter as an example of discourse or textuality or to see it only as a narrative performance. While the textual condition is unavoidable, it does not of itself offer us the historical *address* that we need if we are to play fair with Kelly's self-defence or to give it the audience that he never got in his lifetime. *This*, then, is the anti-postmodern side of the case. It emerges from a consideration of the artefact itself, the agencies to which it attests, and the historical contexts in which they were exercised—although always bearing in mind the caution that such contexts can be ones that we as much create as discover.

On the other side, it must be acknowledged that, even ignoring Joe Byrne's role in it, the Jerilderie Letter is not self-expression pure and simple. It was meant to be an intervention in a print culture. Ned Kelly was a trusting man who granted print more power and more purity of purpose than it actually had. He knew he was the subject of descriptions and listings in the *Police Gazette*; and at one stage before being outlawed he had called in at the Wangaratta office of the *Ovens and Murray Advertiser* to complain about the contents of a paragraph dealing with him and his friends (McDermott 2001, 18; Jones 1995, 101). He became especially bitter about how he was characterized in the newspapers after the Stringybark Creek massacre of the three policemen. He evidently believed that people only had to be acquainted with the facts of an unjust situation to demand that redress be taken. And he took the opportunity of both the Euroa bank robbery and the one at Jerilderie to deliver long impromptu speeches to the people whom he had bailed up until the robberies were completed. On both occasions the gang were, rather like actors, dressed up in disguises for the occasion: it was almost an entertainment. He went over much the same material as in the Jerilderie Letter, according to the witnesses, in some of whom he inspired admiration despite their being forcibly detained by the gang.¹⁹

Ned Kelly lived at the interface between oral and literate cultures: he knew he had to cover both bases as well as he could; but at least in the oral culture he was not at a disadvantage. The court recording of his conversation at the age of only twenty-five with Chief Justice Redmond Barry after Barry had just sentenced him to death shows that Kelly could handle himself well and with dignity, despite the gravity of the situation.²⁰ He inspired loyalty amongst the members of his gang, his wider family clan, and amongst at least some of the poor settlers in north-eastern Victoria where he lived and roamed.

True History and the Jerilderie Letter

In his reinvention of the bushranger's voice Peter Carey weaves into his own prose phrases and sentences taken from the Jerilderie Letter, but so seamlessly that they are hard to detect. His ventriloquy is like an editorial performance: a heroic act of *divinatio* on a grand scale, rather like the work of a papyrologist having somehow to reconstruct the text of a papyrus for which only the last few letters of every line have survived. The Jerilderie Letter and the available biographical and historical scholarship could only get Carey so far. What he must have realized was what Boldrewood had realized before him: that if he could invent the voice, if he could *perform* it with utter inwardness, everything else would follow, since it would have to inhabit and therefore be conditioned and limited by the same linguistic environment. Idiom and presentation would be everything.

Here is Carey retelling the incident in the Letter about the borrowed horse and the McCormacks:

We'll summons you for that adjectival parcel.

I called back I could summons him for slander if I wished I said neither Gould nor me had stole their effing mare.

Then Mrs McCormick come rushing down the steps wielding a bullock's shinbone she must of picked up on the way. Mr McCormick followed behind her shouting out I were despised by everyone in the district he said I were a coward and were hiding behind my mother's skirts.

At this insult I dismounted. Mrs McCormick then struck my horse on the flank with her impertinent weapon and the horse jumped forward and as I were holding the rein it caused my fist to come into collision with McCormick's nose and he lost his equilibrium and fell prostrate. Tying up my horse to finish the battle I seen Cons Hall descend from the pub like a glistening old spider gliding down from the centre of its web. (Carey 2000, 182–83)

Carey provides narrative continuity where the Letter is only notational or jerky; and he does it with sympathy. In an interview he is reported to have said: “I once knew people who spoke more or less like Ned does in my novel. I could inhabit this voice like an old familiar shoe” (2001b). Carey fills out the human presence: he shows us at least a version of what it was like to be Ned, there, on the spot. Carey also carefully maintains (as Kelly does not, in the Letter) the inevitably blinkered vision of a first-person narration that does not jump ahead in time: Ned's emotional dependence on his mother is one of the main interpretations of his character that only gradually emerges in the novel, but Ned can see it at this stage only as an insult.

Carey had to imitate an unlettered man's writing of a nearly whole autobiography and, for his purposes, Joe Byrne could not easily be involved as amanuensis since the writing happens over a considerable period of time. Breaking book decorums, figures are not spelled out even when they begin sentences, and nor are abbreviations. “Very” is presented as “v.” There is a frequent failure to indicate that a new sentence has started, forcing the reader to back up and read the phrasing again. Commas are not used, nor semicolons or colons; nor are inverted commas employed to separate speech from the ordinary prose. Wrong number and tense for verbs (I were ...; They was ... etc.) and solecisms that reflect common speech, such as “would of” instead of “would have,” are common.

In the novel's afterword, Carey lavishly thanks his editor at Knopf, Gary Fisketjon, for “four exhilarating weeks in collaboration.” While I found it curious at first that an American editor could be so effective with clarifying Australian idioms the utter, if slightly irritating consistency with which the non-standard features are imposed must be part of the answer. And there are limits to the orthographic liberties: apostrophes in possessives are nearly always conventionally correct, unlike in the Letter itself. The use of small capitals for the names of newspapers and for emphasis in the novel, instead of italics or underlining, does not derive from the Letter, but it is reflecting a once-common handwriting habit and a ventriloquy that Carey seeks otherwise linguistically. A Kelly relative, for instance, is said to be “more like Evans who always took great solace from the nosebag” (2000, 59): meaning that nothing will dampen the man's appetite. It's as if he were a horse. This is Carey's invention, not Kelly's, and although sometimes the idioms in the novel sound to me suspiciously like schoolyard lingo of the 1950s and 1960s, it is quite possible that the oral culture that I remember from my boyhood in Sydney was transmitting some turns of working-class expression common in Kelly's time too.²¹

Carey's invention of Mary Hearn—the prostitute whom, in the novel, Ned marries and with whom he has the daughter to whom his manuscript is addressed—allowed Carey to explain several events in Kelly's life with economy and effectiveness. Mostly they are scenes that Kelly's principal biographer Ian Jones struggles with insufficient evidence to reconstruct: so they are a pleasing fiction. Carey makes much of Ned's favourite book being *Lorna Doone*; in this, he is developing some work of Jones. The source for this fact is ultimately Grace Kelly, Ned's sister, as reported by Charlie and Paddy Griffiths in an interview with Jones in 1963. *Lorna Doone* romanticizes highwaymen; Jones suggests that the hero's first glimpse of the Doones of Bagworthy with “iron plates on breast and head” (1995, 212) may have been the inspiration for

the gang's armour, and that the suits could have been modelled “on a set of ancient Chinese armour imported for the Beechworth carnival of 1874 and preserved in the town's Burke Museum.” Prudently, he cites another claim that the inspiration could have been “an illustrated edition of one of Sir Walter Scott's novels” (218–19). If so, that would probably be *Ivanhoe*, very widely read throughout the nineteenth century, available in cheap formats before 1880 and occasionally illustrated, including with knights in armour.²² It would not be surprising to discover that an unlettered man would grant too much to the truth-telling power of what he could read, especially something as stirring as *Ivanhoe*, and that he might think there was an essential continuity between its Robin Hood world of merry men and that of his own gang of bushrangers.²³ It would be in keeping with his hopes that both the Cameron Letter (probably) and the Jerilderie Letter certainly, if published, would sweep all before them.

Carey backs a different horse in his account of the source of the armour. It makes historical sense and fits the character he has created: he portrays Ned intently reading an old illustrated newspaper that has been used to line the walls of one of the remote huts the gang stays in when on the run. The article is about the American Civil War, in particular about the new ironclad ships that were built from 1859 and used in battle for the first time in 1862. The ironclad bridge of the *Monitor* is said to be Ned's inspiration for the armour. Although Carey does not mention it, the first novel about Kelly, published in 1881 in weekly parts in London and largely fanciful in its account of Kelly until it started to employ Australian press reports about the capture, was J. Skipp Borlase's *Ned Kelly: The Ironclad Australian Bushranger*. Carey's speculation is another pleasing fiction: that he goes to the bother of making it historically plausible is yet another indication that his novel has only one foot in the postmodern camp.

Of course there is no denying that the authenticity of Ned Kelly's Jerilderie Letter is a textual effect: it flows from—we recognize it through—an act of reading on our part: but to leave the matter there is to flatten it entirely. It is, for instance, categorically different from the statement made on Kelly's behalf by his solicitor (and parliamentarian) David Gaunson. The statement was published in the *Melbourne Age* on 9 August 1880. Although this is also in the first-person, it is obviously not in Kelly's words. Gaunson must have edited what Ned dictated. Gaunson uses the accepted register for public discourse because he wants to plead a case. Although something like the Kelly voice emerges towards the end of the statement, the complex syntax betrays an appeal to respectable modes of feeling that Gaunson felt constrained to employ:

I do not pretend that I have led a blameless life, or that one fault justifies another, but the public in judging a case like mine should remember that the darkest life may have a bright side, and that after the worst has been said against a man, he may, if he is heard, tell a story in his own rough way that will perhaps lead them to ... find as many excuses for him as he would plead for himself. ... (Jones 1995, 297)

This is a long way from the Jerilderie Letter. Carey knows the difference too: he has Ned recalling that, when the gang rode into Jerilderie, “My 58 pages ... was secured around my body by a sash so even if I were shot dead no one could be confused as to what my corpse would say if it could speak ... I could feel them words being tattooed onto my living skin” (2000, 354). In Carey's novel, Ned and his voice are one, and Joe Byrne has no part in it: that is the anti-textualist, anti-postmodern contention of this self-consciously postmodern novel. The knowingness of the fabrication differentiates Carey's novel from the historical novel of earlier times.²⁴ Yet treating the reinvention of the bushranger's voice in Carey's novel as a textual effect is to ignore the authorial performance, the act of historical imagination, and the possible Ned Kelly that Carey has created. And it is to ignore Carey's participation in an Australian expression of a very longstanding, international folkloric tradition that people have adapted and performed as a way of making sense, usually a partisan sense in the present, of their world. If the postmodern present is an elaborate quotation of the past, we should not be surprised, then, at the end of the postmodern 1990s, to find a novelist reinventing a historical voice that would recreate a world of the past, one whose connection to the present has continued to be a vital one, thereby slipping the chains of the wearily theoretical self-consciousness that poststructuralism and post-modernism brought with them.

To leave Carey caught up in a web of text that only refers to and is parasitic upon other texts is, in addition, to ignore the reader's participation in the textual transaction. It is rather like the situation of architects in the Victorian age. Many of them believed their work was a poor thing at best. Inspired by

the religious revival of the 1840s, they felt they were doomed to imitative repetition of a style that had reached its peak in the fourteenth century when religion was purer and closer to the source. A similar sense of belatedness (though without the accompanying mournfulness) has been the postmodern man's burden. Yet when we look at St Pancras Station in London, at Butterworth's Anglican cathedral in Melbourne or any number of other grand public buildings from the nineteenth century, we see superb examples of a style that we have learned to cherish as Victorian gothic. That quotational style released the architects' creativity: and so with Carey the ventriloquist I have been describing redeems the postmodern dispensation of textuality. His creation gives imagined voice to a man long dead and also affirms Carey's own agency as author: as artificer, as the brilliant, focussing shaper of a textuality that in fact surrounded Ned Kelly himself in life and in death and from which he emerges defiantly, menacingly but also sadly and poignantly in the Jerilderie Letter.²⁵

Notes

1 For details, see Fotheringham (2006), Introduction to Arnold Denham and Another's *The Kelly Gang*.

2 Twain's novel—also an extended first-person narration in a vernacular register—was published in 1884, but most of it was written earlier. The use of vernacular for lower-class characters was longstanding: e.g., Dickens's Sam Weller and Haliburton's Sam Slick. Boldrewood's innovation was his narrator's use of the vernacular for very extended narrative.

3 For outlaw tradition, see further Seal (1996). Boldrewood kept abreast of events in the unfolding Kelly gang saga. At 8–9 February in his diary for 1879, Boldrewood recorded the Jerilderie robbery: “These celebrated outlaws successfully besieged ... the Police station and Bank and town—The bank they robbed. Like as [not,] they rested on Sunday not leaving till Monday morning” (Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, MSS 1444/2). But Boldrewood's novel is set in the 1850s and uses bushranger material from the .1860s: it does not directly draw on the Kelly gang story.

4 Personal interview with Carey, March 2003 in New York—where Carey has lived since moving from Australia in the early 1990s. However, Carey *did* borrow the name ‘Warrugal’ from *Robbery Under Arms* for the perfidious Aborigine who attacks Ned Kelly's father early in Carey's novel.

5 “Here [in *Robbery Under Arms*], if anywhere in imaginative literature is the actual birthplace of the noble bushman” (Ward 1958, 24). The following quotation is taken from the novel's serialisation, *Sydney Mail*, 1 July 1882: to “blow” is to boast, “mauleys” are fists. The serialisation finished on 11 August 1883. The first book edition was in 3 volumes (London: Remington, 1888). An abridged one-volume form (London: Macmillan, 1889) is the ultimate source of all subsequent editions: see further, Eggert (2003).

6 Peter Carey, *True History of the Kelly Gang*: two typesettings in hardback: (1) St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2000 (citations are to this “first edition”); and (2) New York: Knopf, 2001 also issued as London: Faber, 2001. UQP was Carey's Australian publisher from 1974. Redesigned paperbacks subsequently appeared from each publisher, and there have been translations into German, Dutch and Danish.

7 In fact this claim is not quite true of the Knopf edition (and therefore of the Faber: see preceding note), which added an editorial subtitle: “A NOVEL.” Pons is commenting on the UQP first paperback printing. The physical description given in the text is of the UQP first hardback edition.

Other early essays on the novel have included Gaile (2001) and Kern-Stähler (2003). The AustLit database lists many reviews (www.austlit.edu.au). The State Library of Victoria has collected all printings of the novel, Carey's early versions of it and associated papers. I acknowledge Jock Murphy's assistance in affording me access to the Jerilderie Letter and the Carey papers.

8 Discussed in Gaile (2001, 38). The powerlessness of those to whom knowledge is denied is a recurrent theme in Carey's first-person fiction, for example in his early short story “The Fat Man in History.” Gaile applies Ashcroft's argument to *True History*: the idea of the counter-narrative giving voice to the subaltern and thus disrupting the authority of the colonialist narrative applies quite readily to the Jerilderie Letter. (Compare my account of Kelly's appeal to a print culture, below.) But the argument, if it is to be applied successfully to *True History*, needs to take account of the postmodernist complications I am urging in this essay, as well as their *both* being expressions of a common Zeitgeist.

9 Davies was a journalist. The most convenient source for further details about Chomley, Keneally, Davies, etc. is Corfield (2003). Davies's history also appeared in the Adelaide *Register* as “New History of the Kelly Gang.”

10 The Melbourne *Argus* reported Mrs Gill, the printer's wife, as saying that Kelly said to her: "All I want him for is to see him to explain it ['this letter, the history of my life'] to him": qtd. in Hall (1879, 138).

11 Kelly Collection, VPRO, Melbourne: this and other Kelly items at VPRO are also available in facsimile and in transcription at <http://nedonline.imagineering.net.au/main.htm>. Accessed 6 March 2007.

12 The Jerilderie Letter is MS 13361, available in facsimile and (non-scholarly) transcription at www.slv.vic.gov.au/collections/treasures/jerilderieletter. Accessed 6 March 2007. Ian Jones had published two pages in facsimile in 1992. At a ceremony at Jerilderie in February 2004 (the 125th anniversary), Jones revealed the previously undeclared identity of the anonymous donor of the Jerilderie Letter to the State Library of Victoria: his wife and research-collaborator Bronwyn Binns, who died in 2003. They were in possession of the Letter during the period in which Carey was writing his novel, but he was not shown it (confirmed by Jones on 18 March 2004). Carey had rung Jones about three years before the publication of *True History* to discuss Kelly and the Letter.

13 Sold 31 July 2001 by Christie's of Melbourne to the National Museum of Australia, Canberra: collection no. 2001.15.4. The only scholarly edition of the Letter is an experimental one in electronic format at www.unsw.adfa.edu.au/JITM. McDermott (2001) page numbers are cited here but the text is corrected from the electronic edition, ed. Paul Eggert, which maintains the pagination of the original.

14 This edition misreads the Letter's manuscript as "bullock's skin" (as had the government clerk's copy and thus Max Brown's transcription).

15 Davies bowdlerizes the last phrase to: "like grass in a paddock": *Herald*, 28 November 1930, p. 15.

16 Kelly Collection, VPRO, Melbourne.

17 The foul papers must also have been drawn upon by the sympathiser who sent a 16-page letter to the Melbourne *Herald*, which published substantial sections of it on 4 July 1879; and the Beechworth *Advertiser* reprinted the article on 12 July: see Jones (1995, 202 and 374). This is the standard biography. Much of the biographical and historical information in this essay comes from it.

18 Qtd. in Jones (1995, 314). Writing this letter himself was out of the question due to gunshot injuries Kelly had sustained at Glenrowan: his right hand had been crippled and his left arm withered from the injuries. This letter deals mainly with the events at Glenrowan. Meredith and Scott 2001 conveniently presents Kelly's nine known letters. Those prepared in jail prior to his hanging represent a continuation of a habit of composition—dictation—witnessed by the Cameron and Jerilderie Letters. The voice is less filtered than in the letter prepared by Gaunson (dealt with below), but is rendered in conventional if less elaborate syntax and with correct punctuation. (I have not compared the original manuscripts, each of which Kelly has signed with an X and is countersigned as attested.) Presumably these appeals for clemency would at least have been read back to him before signature and may represent fair copies, the culmination of a longer process. A reading of all the letters shows the freshness and lack of inhibition of the Jerilderie Letter.

19 The speech, as reported by Mr Tarleton the bank manager at Jerilderie, is retailed in Hall (1879, 139–40).

20 For a transcription of the courtroom conversation, including Barry's puzzlement about the attractions of the outlaw life and the "spell cast over the people of this particular district" by Kelly's gang, see Corfield (2003, 477–79). Kelly replied to Barry's pronouncement of his sentence ("... hanged by the neck until you be dead. ... May the Lord have mercy on your soul."): "I will go a little further than that, and say I will see you there, where I go." Barry, already ill, would die twelve days after Kelly was executed.

21 Cf. "he were stalking me like an old goanna looking for a way into a chook yard" (p. 194); "proddies" (Protestants, p. 29) is first recorded from an Australian source in *OED2* as 1954; "micks" (Catholics, p. 29) as 1902 in the *Australian National Dictionary*; "blotto" (drunk, p. 69) as 1917 in *OED2*; and "adjectival" (for *bloody*, p. 13) as 1910 in *OED2*.

22 Jones (1995) cites (p. 376) the professor of English, E. E. Morris, as referring in 1889 to Scott as the inspiration for the armour, and the *Herald* (Melbourne) as identifying the novel as *Ivanhoe* (2 July 1880). In a personal communication to me, Graham Tulloch, editor of *Ivanhoe* in the Edinburgh Edition, points out: "The Magnum first collected edition of Scott has one picture which is a little suggestive in that it shows Isaac and two Templars one of whom has a flat topped helmet which might conceivably be an influence. (Waverley Novels in 48 vols: Edinburgh: Robert Cadell, 1829–33, vol. 17, illustration on title page). The Magnum illustrations were used in editions up to the mid-nineteenth century. Cadell and later A. and C. Black were the copyright holders and only publishers until copyright ran out. Although the Magnum was more like mass publishing than anything before, it still cost 5 shillings a volume so it was not for the poor. There was also a cheap two-column shilling-an-issue edition. Later on, Black added extra illustrations to their editions. I have one of 1860 which does have a quite interesting picture of Richard's helmet, described as *Helmet of*

Richard I. from his Great Seal (Waverley Novels in 48 vols, Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1860, vol. 16, p. 291).”

23 The idea of a “merry” life has strong associations with the life of outlaws in *Ivanhoe*. When Joe Byrne wrote to Aaron Sherritt on 26 June 1879 he asked him to join the gang for “a short live and a jolly one” (VPRO 4969).

24 Max Brown stated in 1948 that he had the choice of writing a novel rather than a biography, except then he would have had to make up whole chapters for want of evidence.

25 This article is a revised version of a paper given at the Society for Textual Scholarship Conference, New York, in March 2003. I thank the article's referees for their suggestions.

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