

# Nathanael O'Reilly: The Influence of Peter Carey's True History of the Kelly Gang: Repositioning the Ned Kelly Narrative in Australian Popular Culture

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GROWING UP IN AUSTRALIA DURING THE NINETEEN-SEVENTIES, I became aware of the legendary bushranger<sup>1</sup> Ned Kelly at an early age; stories of his exploits were taught in primary school, and children often emulated Kelly and his gang in the school playground. The story of Ned Kelly is an integral part of the Australian childhood. Long before learning other national narratives, such as the stories of the explorers Burke and Wills, the cricket-player Sir Donald Bradman, or the slaughter at Gallipoli during the First World War, we learned about Ned Kelly. However, while the Kelly narrative held a prominent position in educational and social discourse, it did not occupy the dominant position in popular culture that it has attained in recent years. Ned Kelly is currently a dominant figure in the Australian national consciousness, largely due to the commercial and critical success of Peter Carey's novel *True History of the Kelly Gang*, which repositioned the Kelly narrative firmly at the center of Australian popular culture and created a commercial and cultural environment conducive to the production of further revisions of the narrative. Before arguing for the significance of *True History of the Kelly Gang* and its impact on Australian popular culture, however, it is necessary to provide a brief history of Ned Kelly and the mythology that has developed around him.

## The History of Ned Kelly

Kelly was born in Beveridge, Victoria, in December 1854 to Irish parents. His father, John "Red" Kelly, was transported to Van Dieman's Land in 1842 for stealing two pigs. Once released, "Red" Kelly crossed to Port Phillip, Victoria, in 1848 where he married Ellen Quinn, a free immigrant. When Ned was ten, his father was jailed for being unable to pay a fine and died soon after his release in 1866. The remaining Kellys took up a "selection" on Eleven Mile Creek, not far from Benalla and halfway between Greta and Glenrowan, an area later to become known (and marketed) as "Kelly Country" ("Inner History," "The Life").

Ned Kelly had his first of many encounters with the law in 1869 when he was arrested for an alleged assault and held for ten days until the charge was dismissed. A year later, he was arrested and held for seven weeks as a suspected accomplice of the bushranger Harry Power; but again the charge was dropped, and later that year, Kelly was convicted of "summary offences" and imprisoned for six months. In 1871, Kelly was sentenced to three years in Melbourne's Pentridge Gaol for receiving a "borrowed" mare; he was released in 1874, but relations between the police and the Kellys did not improve ("The Life"). Ned's mother was jailed for three years for allegedly helping him and his brother Dan assault a police constable; it is generally considered that Ned was in the neighboring colony of New South Wales at the time (West 130). Kelly subsequently "pronounced war on police and squatters around his home town of Glenrowan" (West 131).

In 1878, police offered rewards of #100 for the capture of Ned and Dan Kelly, who formed the Kelly Gang with Joe Byrne and Steve Hart. Police sought to capture the brothers, and on October 25 camped at Stringybark Creek. The gang surprised the police; Constable Lonigan drew his revolver and Ned killed him, while Constable McIntyre surrendered. Ned Kelly and Byrne shot Constables Kennedy and Scanlon after they returned and refused to surrender. McIntyre escaped and reported the killings as an ambush. In November 1878, the Victorian government offered #500 for each of the gang, dead or alive ("Inner History," "The Life").

However, the Kelly Gang was both bold and elusive, conducting armed robberies in December 1878 and February 1879, at Euroa and Jerilderie. The gang rounded up police in Jerilderie and stole over two thousand pounds from the Bank of New South Wales. During the siege, Kelly dictated the famous “Jerilderie Letter” to Joe Byrne. Kelly intended the letter to be published as a justification of his actions, explaining that he was not a cold-hearted killer, but rather a defender of the Victorian Irish who had suffered unjustly under British colonial rule. Kelly wanted Samuel Gill, editor of the *Jerilderie and Urana Gazette*, to publish his letter. However, Gill had fled town and the Bank's accountant, Edwin Living, offered to deliver the letter to Gill. After the Kelly Gang left, Living traveled to Melbourne, where he loaned the letter to the police who made a copy and returned the original to him. However, the police concealed the copy, which was not produced at Kelly's trial, and the original was not published (“Jerilderie Letter”).

After the Jerilderie robbery, the Kelly Gang eluded the police for another seventeen months, despite an #8,000 reward. On June 27, 1880, the Kelly Gang captured the Glenrowan railway station, also taking possession of a hotel and holding sixty people hostage. However, news of the shooting of Aaron Sherritt (an informant) had already been wired to Melbourne, and Kelly knew he would have to fight the police (“Inner History”). According to Brad West, “Ned had planned to derail a police train. His plans came undone when he was betrayed by a local school teacher who flagged down the train and informed the police of the bushranger's whereabouts” (131). A shootout ensued that lasted as much as ten hours, with Kelly famously wearing a suit of armor fashioned from ploughshares. The police captured Kelly, who received numerous bullet wounds; the other gang members died. Although the police did not expect Kelly to survive, he recovered and stood trial. Kelly was sentenced to death, and despite a petition of 32,000 signatures asking for a reprieve, he was hung in Melbourne Gaol on November 11, 1880 at the age of twenty-five as a crowd of five thousand stood outside (“Inner History”).<sup>2</sup>

## Constructing the Mythology of Ned Kelly

To non-Australians it may seem that Kelly was simply a criminal who deserved his punishment, and thus his status as a national hero is unwarranted. However, it is crucial to note that a long history of police persecution and harassment of the Irish existed in the Australian colonies. The police constantly charged the Kelly family with various crimes. During Ned's short life, thirteen members of his extended family acquired a record of seventy-one arrests and twenty-six jail sentences (Souter). Although the Kellys were guilty of some of the crimes, the fact remains that they perceived themselves as victims of police persecution, a view shared by many of their contemporaries and subsequent generations of Australians. Kelly's supporters considered him the embodiment of legitimate resistance to a corrupt police force. He positioned himself as a representative of the oppressed and saw his actions as redressing the balance and correcting injustices.

As a result, Ned Kelly became a folk hero long before his death, as the petition for reprieve attests, but his story had also begun to be appropriated, revised, and mythologized during his lifetime. The first play about the Kelly Gang, entitled *Catching the Kellys*, was performed in Melbourne in 1879 while the Kelly Gang were still at large; a second play ran for twenty-nine nights after Kelly's execution in 1880 (Barkham). Over the next century and a quarter, the Kelly narrative was presented through various forms of popular culture; folksongs, musicals, films, novels, children's books, comic strips, and paintings. Australia's first ever feature film, *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (1906), released just five years after the Federation of the six English colonies as an Australian nation, played a significant role in transforming the Kelly story from a colonial into a national narrative. At the time, a critic for *The Bulletin* wrote:

*There is a deal too much racket about the show—sometimes you can't see the picture for the noise of horses, trains, gunshot and wild cries; but all the same, it is the sort of bellowdrama that the lower orders crave for, and two-thirds of Australia will want to see it—the two-thirds that believe that Ned Kelly was a greater man than George Washington. (Qtd. in Williams)*

Despite obvious elitism and disdain for the film, the critic freely admits Kelly's immense popularity, and the fact that Kelly holds a high place in the estimation of many Australians.

Since then, a new film about Ned Kelly has been produced almost every decade, adding to the Kelly mythology. Some examples of Kelly films are: *When the Kellys Rode* (1934); *The Glenrowan Affair* (1951);

Tony Richardson's *Ned Kelly* (1970), improbably starring Mick Jagger; Yahoo Serious' *Reckless Kelly* (1993); and Gregor Jordan's *Ned Kelly* (2003), starring Heath Ledger, Geoffrey Rush, Orlando Bloom, and Naomi Watts ("Cinematic Kelly"). In addition to these cinematic revisions, the Ned Kelly narrative has been the subject of dozens of books, four magazines, two CDs, thousands of Google links, numerous paintings, exhibitions, and an opera.

## Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang*

However, despite numerous creations and recreations of the Kelly narrative in multiple mediums, none in recent decades had captivated a wide-ranging, popular audience until Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000). The popularity of the novel created a ready consumer market for the subsequent explosion of Kelly stories, exhibitions, and tourist campaigns in Australia. To explain the immense popularity of Carey's seventh novel, it is important to note that it was an Australian and international bestseller even before winning the Booker Prize for the second time in 2001. The award brought an even wider audience to the novel, thus bringing the figure of Kelly himself to a wider audience, within Australia and abroad. The success of Carey's novel, in terms of both sales and Carey's second Booker, led to his nomination for "Australian of the Year" in 2001. In the same year, Carey also won the Victorian and Queensland Premier's Literary Awards, the *Courier-Mail* and *The Age* Book of the Year awards, and the Commonwealth Writer's Prize ("Double Whammy").

*True History of the Kelly Gang* sold 250,000 copies in Australia alone by August 2002, a massive number in a nation where the average print run for a novel is between three and five thousand copies (Nile 90, 107). Clearly, the novel reached an audience far beyond the usual literary audience and became a popular culture phenomenon. In August 2002, the Brisbane City Council launched "One Book One Brisbane," a promotion involving its thirty-two council libraries, encouraging citizens to read Carey's novel. The promotion boosted sales by eight thousand, with the council purchasing one thousand copies for its libraries in anticipation of increased demand and requiring Carey's publisher to launch a new print run. Brisbane's *Courier-Mail* newspaper even provided coupons to help readers purchase a copy, and Carey traveled to Brisbane from his home in New York as part of a ten-week nationwide campaign of discussions in libraries, bookstores, and coffee shops (McGregor, Fickling). All of this activity surrounding *True History of the Kelly Gang* took place two years after the publication of the novel, highlighting its tremendous ongoing popularity.

The critical reception of *True History of the Kelly Gang* has been highly favorable. In addition to the literary awards won by the novel both within Australia and overseas, critics have described it as "a virtuoso exercise" (Cowley), "a near-perfect illusion of reality" (Gaile) and "a brilliant tour de force" (Clancy 53). Carey quickly won acclaim from his fellow writers; in 2003, the three thousand members of the Australian Society of Authors voted *True History of the Kelly Gang* number sixteen on their list of the top forty Australian books ever published, which included both fiction and non-fiction (Keenan). The comments of Carey's fellow novelist Patrick McGrath regarding the reception of the novel reveal his belief that Carey has added power and prominence to the Kelly narrative: "It was clear he had breathed life into this iconic national figure and had aroused powerful antagonisms" (Qtd. in Wroe). McGrath watched Carey read to a packed hall at the Brisbane Writers' Festival, "His role was almost bardic in that he had articulated one of the great myths of this people. Here was an Australian author speaking directly to a large section of the Australian people about who they were" (Qtd. in Wroe). Robert Ross notes that *True History of the Kelly Gang* continues Carey's "chronicle of Australia's quest for national identity." One could argue that all of Carey's novels are concerned with national identity, but *True History of the Kelly Gang* tackles the issue head-on by revising one of the nation's most powerful narratives.

Kelly has fascinated Peter Carey for over forty years. In his teens, Carey first read the "Jerilderie Letter:" "I found this amazing, breathless, Irish language and I was so excited by it I typed out all 8,000 words and carried it around with me for years" (Bemrose 2). Carey has stated that he would never have taken on the Kelly story if he had not left Australia to live in New York. While working on a novel set in the United States, he visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan to view a traveling exhibition of Sidney Nolan's famous series of Kelly paintings; "I tried to explain them to my friends, and in the process of telling the story to foreigners, I recognized what a wonderful story it was" (Qtd. in Wroe). Carey was thoroughly aware of the national importance of the Kelly narrative before deciding to write his own version,

stating “the minute you start messing with a national story you know you are doing something a little risky ... and this particular risk was one I had been thinking about for a long, long time” (O’Reilly 164). Once Carey decided to revise the Kelly narrative, he had to devise an effective narrative approach. He chose to write the novel as a series of letters written by Ned to a fictional daughter, basing Ned’s written voice on the “Jerilderie Letter;” the success and popularity of the novel is due in large part to this narrative technique. Telling the story from Ned’s perspective allows the audience to view the events of his life in a manner not previously possible, while spending a large portion of the novel dealing with Ned’s childhood and giving him the role of a father adds sympathetic dimensions to the character.

Carey’s narrative technique also serves to bring Kelly’s voice to the forefront; it is a powerful and unique voice that cannot be ignored. Eileen Battersby describes Carey’s Kelly as “a character intent on justifying his own life” (1). Likewise, Andreas Gaile argues that Kelly “is well aware of the powerful ‘forces brung against [him]’ and knows that the ‘true’ story of his life will very likely be distorted by those who control the means of communication” (2). The aforementioned “Jerilderie Letter,” the real Kelly’s version of events, was suppressed by the powerful forces of the police and the government. Kelly was all too aware of the power of language and public discourse, thus his determination to have his narrative published.

Carey himself has commented that early reactions to *True History of the Kelly Gang* did not focus on the large amount of fiction in the novel:

*They saw it as much as history as literature. But there have been some more sophisticated readings of it, and a good reaction in Australia matters a lot. I have to write for a place, and Australia is my place. Australians read the book in a different way. They are passionately engaged and in the end it is theirs to love or to hate. (Qtd. in Wroe)*

Carey is well aware that his attitude to Kelly is not universal. He believes that Australians’ attitudes to Kelly tend to divide along class lines: “I would think that the people who call him simply a horse thief and a murderer are in an absolute minority ... By and large, they’re the genteel types who care what the British think about them—the same people who won’t have *Waltzing Matilda* as their national song” (Qtd. in Bemrose 2). Given Carey’s obvious disregard for what the British think of him, his outspoken stance on the issue of creating an Australian republic, and Kelly’s hatred for the British, it is highly ironic that the British presented Carey with the Booker Prize for *True History of the Kelly Gang*, a novel which repositions Kelly at the forefront of the Australian pantheon of heroes and often portrays the British as inhuman brutes. Andreas Gaile characterizes the novel as a “severe indictment” of “the British colonial administration” (“Re-mythologizing” 37).

Carey includes the opposing viewpoint in his novel with the character of Thomas Curnow, the schoolteacher who warns the police that they are about to enter an ambush at Glenrowan. Curnow cannot understand why the masses hail the Kelly Gang as heroes rather than recognizing his own heroic actions in saving the police: “What is it about we Australians, eh? he demanded. What is wrong with us? Do we not have a Jefferson? A Disraeli? Might not we find someone better to admire than a horse-thief and a murderer? Must we always make such an embarrassing spectacle of ourselves?” (398). Of course, part of Carey’s point is that Australians *do not* have a Jefferson or a Disraeli, and admire qualities such as anti-authoritarianism that are not admired in many other countries.

The immense popularity of Carey’s novel must in some measure be due to the fact that it can speak for Australians who feel oppressed in one way or another. It is too simplistic to argue that the novel only speaks for Australians descended from Irish convicts or immigrants. It should not be surprising that indigenous communities have incorporated Kelly into their narratives and view him as a wholly moral character. Nor should it be surprising that Australians of Chinese, Greek, Italian, Lebanese or English ancestry view Kelly as a hero. One does not have to approve of all of Kelly’s actions nor have Irish ancestors in order to sympathize with him and feel that he was a victim of numerous injustices. There is a danger in blindly embracing Kelly, ignoring his crimes, and proclaiming him an outright national hero; however, embracing flawed heroes is a popular tradition in Western culture, from Oedipus to Hamlet to Ned Kelly.

## Opening the Door for Further Revisions of the Kelly Narrative

Not only has *True History of the Kelly Gang* quickly become a central text in the Australian literary canon, it has had a major impact on Australian popular culture, setting the stage for further revisions of the Kelly narrative. The most recent film version of the Kelly narrative is Gregor Jordan's *Ned Kelly* (2003). Jordan, like other artists before him, understood that presenting the Kelly legend is a unique challenge. As Garry Maddox of the *Sydney Morning Herald* notes, "The pressure is on when you make a film about Ned Kelly. You're tampering with one of the country's most sacred myths. If the result is lame or misrepresents the legend, the criticism will be damning" ("Heath as Ned"). Jordan told Maddox that he realized during the production of *Ned Kelly* how important Kelly is to many Australians:

*We had guys working on the film with Ned Kelly tattoos ... people would come up and say "I used to pretend I was Ned Kelly in the sandpit when I was a little kid." It starts to make you think "hang on, this isn't just another movie to a lot of people. This is actually the movie about a guy they really love." ("No Hanging Offence")*

The film's marketers were fully aware of Kelly's status within Australia, creating the pitch, "You can kill a man but not a legend" (Fitzgerald 56) and describing Kelly as an innocent man oppressed by the authorities. However, many critics, including Evan Williams, describe Jordan's *Ned Kelly* as disappointing and claim that it failed to become "the great Australian Ned Kelly film." However, the film had a large, eager audience primarily because of the success of Carey's novel which reawakened Australians' hunger for the Kelly narrative, and that hunger does not yet seem to have been satisfied. Irish director Neil Jordan purchased the film rights to Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* (Barkham) and Tourism Victoria launched a publicity campaign promoting "Kelly Country" to coincide with Jordan's *Ned Kelly* (Shrimpton).

Additionally, eleven new books about Kelly have been published in the past few years (Minus), the majority since the publication of *True History of the Kelly Gang*, and Kelly even featured prominently in the opening ceremony of the 2000 Sydney Olympics, an event Robert Ross described as "a strange spectacle indeed and probably a mystery to those unfamiliar with the Ned Kelly story: a dance troupe wearing costumes inspired by his armor and waving sparklers to represent gunfire." Although it is significant that the producers of the opening ceremony chose to feature Ned Kelly in an event which allowed Australia to present its most important stories to the world, Kelly's inclusion should not be read as a revision of the Kelly narrative; rather, it should be understood as the display of an icon. Carey's revision of the Kelly narrative is detailed, radical, and widely influential, none of which can be said about the inclusion of Kelly in the Olympics opening ceremony.

Another example of the Kelly narrative's recent prominence in Australian popular culture is the exhibition entitled "Kelly Culture: Reconstructing Ned Kelly," hosted by the State Library of Victoria, which ran from February 28th through to May 25th, 2003. The exhibition explored "Australia's fascination with Edward 'Ned' Kelly and his enduring presence within [Australia's] literature, visual arts, cinema, performing arts, music and popular culture" ("Kelly Culture"). The exhibition's curators note that since "the release of Peter Carey's novel, *True History of the Kelly Gang*, the opening ceremony of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, and now a new feature film, Ned Kelly looms as large as ever on our cultural horizon" ("Kelly Culture"). The exhibition contained manuscript material by Carey and a video interview with the author, both of which reveal the importance of the "Jerilderie Letter" as a source for his work, and, indeed, the importance of Carey's work to the current popularity of the Kelly narrative and the marketing thereof. The original copy of the Jerilderie Letter was donated to the State Library of Victoria recently. The letter is now available on the Library's web site; it received eighty thousand hits during the first five days after it was posted (Barkham). Melbourne-based Text Publishing recently released a paperback edition of the "Jerilderie Letter." The catalog blurb states that Kelly's letter "deeply influenced Peter Carey's bestselling novel *True History of the Kelly Gang*." Ironically, the publishers of Kelly's letter are feeding on the success of Carey's novel in order to sell copies of the original inspiration for the novel.

## Critical Concerns: Should Ned Kelly Be an Australian Hero?

Despite the enormous Kelly mythology that has developed over the past century and a quarter, critics debate whether or not the Kelly narrative should be central to Australian culture, question what Australians' love of the Kelly narrative says about Australians, and express concern over the uses to which the Kelly

narrative may be subjected. The Australian academic, poet, and novelist John Kinsella writes that the novel makes him “uncomfortable” because the “fictionalization of the life of Ned Kelly participates in the creation and continuation of so many national myths.” He describes Carey's reworking of the Kelly narrative as “hijacking and rendering saleable a mythology.” Kinsella seems concerned that books such as Carey's will perpetuate and encourage a type of Australian nationalism that excludes Australians that are not of Anglo-Celtic descent, particularly indigenous and Asian groups. Evidence exists, however, that groups other than the Anglo-Celtic have adopted and appropriated the Kelly narrative for their own purposes. In her article “Ned Kelly Died for Our Sins,” Deborah Bird Rose describes several Kelly narratives that “belong to Aboriginal people in the Victoria River District of the Northern Territory” (3). In one of these narratives, Kelly is the first white visitor to the aboriginal lands (4); in another, “God, Noah and Jesus are all located in the person of Ned Kelly” (7). Clearly, Kelly is not the sole spiritual property of Anglo-Celtic Australians, and revisions of the Kelly narrative are not confined to the mass media.

Frank Devine, writing for *The Australian*, expresses an extreme view when he dismisses Carey's novel as “part of an outbreak of ‘Nedophilia’,” describing Kelly as a “wretched horse thief and cop killer,” and claims that Kelly “would have become the Pol Pot of north-east Victoria” if he had lived (Qtd. in Barkham). The Australian academic David Carter points out that critics “are distinctly uncomfortable in thinking about literature or criticism as playing a positive role in ... forming a national identity or a national community” (4); his concerns are similar to those of Kinsella. Although Carter admits his discomfort with the idea of literature playing a role in forming national identity, he allows that it may not always be negative, and can be positive (4). Graham Huggan points out that the Kelly legend has become a commodity: “the sheer quantity of Kelly material currently available on the market testifies not just to the durability of the legend, but also to its continuing profitability” (2). Huggan also notes that both Robert Drewe and Peter Carey are aware of “capitalising on Kelly's legacy” (7). After all, not only have both written novels based on the Kelly legend, both have sold the film rights to those novels.

In addition to the misgivings that Australian critics such as Kinsella, Devine, and Carter hold regarding the Kelly legend, many foreign critics have trouble understanding the importance of the Kelly narrative within Australian culture. Bill Bryson, the American travel writer and humorist, recounts a day spent touring Kelly Country with his Victorian hosts in his best-selling book, *In a Sunburned Country*. Bryson's description of Kelly reveals his inability to understand the importance of Kelly to Australians. As Bryson puts it, “Serious historians often accord [Kelly] an importance that seems to the outsider curiously disproportionate” (164). With staggering cultural insensitivity, and much inaccuracy, Bryson dismisses Kelly as “a murderous thug who deserved to be hanged and was. He came from a family of rough Irish squatters, who made their living by stealing livestock and waylaying innocent passersby. ... there wasn't a shred of nobility in his character or deeds. He killed several people, often in cold blood, sometimes for no very good reason” (164). Not only is Bryson's assessment reductive and inaccurate, it perpetuates the stereotypical depiction of Australia in the international media. For many Americans with a passing interest in Australia, Bryson's version of Ned Kelly may unfortunately be the only version they encounter.

## Conclusion

Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* has quickly become one of the most important works in Australian literature due to the cultural and historical importance of the narrative it retells, the commercial success of the novel, the critical accolades the author has received, the new prominence it has brought to the Kelly narrative, and the intense debate it has inspired. Clearly, serious “high-brow” literature can reach a massive audience and attain a central position in popular culture. The tremendous success and influence of *True History of the Kelly Gang* proves that popular culture and literature are not mutually exclusive. Rather than being the preserve of affluent, educated readers, serious novels can influence a nation's culture as powerfully as television, film, and popular music. Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* has repositioned the Kelly narrative firmly at the center of Australian popular culture, creating an environment in which further revisions have been produced and will no doubt continue to be in the future.

## NOTES

1. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a bushranger as “a criminal living in the bush, and subsisting by robbery with violence.”
2. Many of the facts of Kelly's short life are disputed and intensely debated; I have attempted to provide the commonly accepted version of events.

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