

# THE GLOBALISATION OF OUTLAWS AND BUSHRANGERS

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## ABSTRACT

Australian's knowledge of outlaws and bushrangers are examined in this research drawing upon national survey data from 2005. With the exception of Ned Kelly, the American outlaws Jesse James and Billy the Kid are better known in Australia than any local bushrangers. A large proportion of Australians named Kelly (80%), James (46%) and Billy the Kid (33%), but very few identified other bushrangers or outlaws.

Social background influences knowledge of outlaws. Middle-aged and older people born in Australia or the UK were most knowledgeable, while news consumption and secondary education were also important factors in the recognition of outlaws. Outlaws such as James, Kelly and Robin Hood are not just folk heroes in their home countries but also recognised globally. Mythologised through visual and print media they have transcended their outlaw image to become global icons representing values such as bravery, loyalty and support for the underdog, regardless of the veracity of these representations.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Known generically as 'outlaws', rural bandits were a product of the nineteenth century, when 'the typical frontiersman was a small individualist agricultural proprietor or farm labourer, not a cowboy or ranch hand' (Ward 1958, 10). The Australian variety, the 'bushrangers' emerged in Australia following 'white' settlement, and disappeared, at least as organized bands following the death of Ned Kelly in 1880 (Seal 1996).

Outlaws form part of the American and Australian mythscape, that 'temporally and spatially extended discursive realm wherein the struggle for control of peoples memories and the formation of nationalist myths is debated, contested and subverted incessantly' (Bell 2003: 66). While by no means loved by all, some American outlaws such as Jesse James and Billy the Kid are 'celebrated' in a similar way to Ned Kelly in Australia or Robin Hood in England.

In an analysis of the characteristics of outlaws as they are portrayed in mythology, Seal (1996) identifies "ten motifs" that tend to be shared by outlaws across a variety of cultures. These are "friend of the poor, oppressed, forced into outlawry, brave, generous, courteous, does not indulge in unjustified violence, trickster, betrayed, lives on after death" (Seal 1996: 11). In a similar vein, Cashman (2000: 205-209), identifies 'innocent beginnings...supernatural protection...chivalry...non-violence...guile, bravado...fair play...robbing the rich to give to the poor...self-sacrifice' and being betrayed by those he trusts as common themes in Irish outlaw mythology. Many such themes are relevant to the myth surrounding the Australian bushranger Ned Kelly

*a man wronged by the police and the government...brave, clever, an outstanding bushman who outsmarts the police at almost every turn, who offers no violence to the poor and weak and eventually 'dies game' (Davey and Seal 2003: 168-9)*

'Social bandits', such as Jesse James and Billy the Kid share characteristics such as bravery, the propensity for risk taking, and, at least for some, they are champions against injustice (Hobsbawm 2000). As West (2001: 137) explains, "[I]t is not simply the just manner of the Robin Hood archetype that transforms criminals and outlaws into social bandits. It is the way they are interpreted to defy rules and capture through daring and cunning". The support of their fellow 'oppressed' is also necessary in order to evade capture (Hobsbawm 2000).

Outlaw myths similar to those surrounding the English outlaw Robin Hood persist in many advanced industrial societies. This is particularly the case with Jesse James in America and Ned Kelly in Australia, who remain in the public eye as the subject of films, television series and literature. Jesse James symbolises the globalisation of American culture, as one of the few well known 19<sup>th</sup> century Americans that Australians recognise, even though they may have scant knowledge of his exploits.

Rebellious outlaws symbolise aspects of national identity (Tranter and Donoghue 2007). Cashman (2000: 193) claims that the representation of outlaws 'in Irish folklore and popular literature provides a valuable perspective on the intersections of culture and politics-and especially the development of national identity and nationalism'. Outlaw myths are not only of interest to scholars of folklore and history; they reflect the values of and nostalgia for a prior 'golden age' (Smith 1996) when such values allegedly held sway.

## **2 DISCUSSION**

### **2.1 RESEARCH AIMS, DATA AND METHOD**

In this research we attempt to assess the penetration of one aspect of American popular culture in Australia. We examine an element of the alleged Americanisation of Australian culture (see Bell and Bell 1998). We examine Australian's knowledge of outlaws by asking survey respondents to name four American outlaws and Australian bushrangers. Several questions were of interest to us. First, how well known are American outlaws in contemporary Australia? Which outlaws are the most widely known, and perhaps more importantly, are Australians as able to identify bushrangers, as they are American outlaws? Second, to what extent do place and other socio-demographic factors contribute to knowledge of outlaws? For example, how is knowledge of particular American outlaws related to characteristics such as gender, age, education and country of birth? Finally, how do Australians come to know about outlaws and bushrangers? What are the main sources of their information (e.g. formal education, newspapers)? We attempt to address these questions after briefly discussing our research strategy.

This research is based on survey questions we included in the 2005 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA), a nationally representative sample of Australians adults aged 18 and above (Wilson et al. 2006). The 2005 AuSSA is the second in a biennial series of surveys administered by a team of researchers based at the Australian National University. The response rate of 42% is comparable with the other major Australian attitudinal survey, the Australian Election Study (2004) (Bean et al. 2005). The AuSSA employs a split sample design. The sample in which our questions were included had 1914 cases.

We asked the following questions in the 2005 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes:

*Bushrangers roamed the countryside during the early period of European settlement in Australia. Please write the names of four bushrangers below.*

*Outlaws were also common in the United States of America in earlier times. Please write the name of four outlaws in the spaces below.*

Our research strategy allows us to answer some research questions more appropriately than others. A major advantage of the survey approach we use is that we can make inferential claims about Australian adults based upon our sample results, that is, we can generalise our findings to the Australian population. We also use multivariate techniques to assess the net associations or relationships between, for example, demographic factors and knowledge of outlaws and bushrangers.

However, our approach also has its limitations. While we are able to estimate how many Australians could correctly identify outlaws and bushrangers we have only partial data to account for variations in knowledge. The AuSSA has very useful demographic characteristics of respondents, but does not, for example, include questions on what people read (e.g. novels, history books), or how often. It does however, include questions on sources of political news (i.e. newspapers, television, radio or internet), information that we use as a proxy measure to approximate news sources in general.

### **2.1.1 ANALYSES**

Responses to the questions are summed to establish the 4 best known American outlaws and bushrangers in Table 1. Jesse James (46%) is by far the most frequently named outlaw. While it is perhaps not surprising that many Australians can identify James, the results do allow us to quantify their knowledge. There is a drop to the next best known outlaw – Billy the Kid (33%). Thereafter, a substantial drop in recognition occurs to Butch Cassidy (12%) and the Sundance Kid (6%) - famously represented in the 1969 film of the same name by Paul Newman and Robert Redford. The other James gang members including Jesse's older brother Frank also fared poorly in the survey. 'Wild Bill' (James Butler) Hickock was incorrectly identify by 5.0% of the sample as an outlaw, however, we did include Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday as outlaws in Table 1, as in reality they walked both sides of the law (Carnes 1996).

Surprisingly, particularly given the popularity of Ned Kelly (80%), many Australians are largely ignorant of other bushranger with the exception of Ben Hall (29%). Only eleven per cent named Ned Kelly's younger brother Dan, with the other gang members - Steve Hart and Joe Byrne - identified by only about three per cent of the sample. In fact after Ned Kelly, Jesse James and Billy the Kid were identified more far more readily than any Australian bushrangers.

Responses to scales measuring overall knowledge of outlaws and bushrangers indicate approximately forty per cent of Australians could not correctly name any American outlaws, compared to eighteen per cent who could not identify any bushrangers (Table 2). Twenty five per cent correctly identified one American outlaw, compared to twenty eight per cent who only named one bushranger. Knowledge of bushrangers was more evenly spread, while for outlaws it dropped away in a linear fashion. Only nine per cent of respondents could identify four American outlaws compared to twenty three per cent who correctly identified four bushrangers, suggesting that knowledge of outlaws is limited to a few high profile figures. However, only 11 people (0.6 per cent) correctly named all four Kelly gang members (i.e. Ned, Dan, Joe Byrne and Steve Hart).

It is important to point out that our question design diminishes the likelihood of several outlaws or bushrangers being identified by a large proportion of the sample, as we constrained respondents to identifying only 4 outlaws. The popularity of two outlaws – particularly Jesse James and Billy the Kid – limits the magnitude of subsequent responses. The same can be said of the bushranger sample due to the higher profile of two Australian bushrangers - Ned Kelly and Ben Hall. Some respondents also stretched the boundaries of what constitutes an 'outlaw'. Politicians such as George Bush and Ronald Reagan were named, as were actors associated with the 'western' film genre, including Clint Eastwood and John Wayne.

To illustrate the impact of social background on Australian's choice of the four best known outlaws, a series of regression models are presented in Table 3. Generational

based differences are apparent, with the oldest respondents able to name the most bushrangers, although recognition of outlaws is strongest among the baby boomer generation. Secondary schooling also influences knowledge, although while the effect was positive for bushrangers, tertiary education had a weak negative, although non-significant impact for outlaws. Interestingly, those who completed year 10 tend to do better on these questions than people with more (or less) secondary schooling.

Controlling for other factors, men were more knowledgeable than women on both outlaws and bushrangers, consistent with gender based knowledge of politics (Tranter 2007). Country of birth is also an important indicator. Being born in Australia, the United Kingdom or New Zealand (the latter for bushrangers only) increased knowledge, while Protestants were slightly more knowledgeable than other denominations on both scales. Finally, self assessed middle class location and consumption of news from newspapers or the internet also has a clear impact, but only on knowledge of bushrangers, while living in a capital city is associated with less knowledge of bush-based Australian outlaws.

### **3 CONCLUSIONS**

Is the popularity of American outlaws indicative of cultural imperialism - an aspect of the Americanisation of Australian culture (e.g. Bell and Bell 1998; Emmison 1997; White 1978)? Alternatively, do our findings suggest the globalization (Featherstone 1990) of the outlaw phenomenon? While our results do not allow us to conclusively answer this question, we believe they support the latter explanation.

American movies and television programs have undoubtedly made outlaws such as Jesse James and Billy the Kid close to household names in Australia and elsewhere. However, it is far from clear there is recognition of the 'true' stories behind the outlaw myths - not that most Australians know the 'truth' about their own bushrangers, even those as famous as Ned Kelly!

Why are American outlaws like Jesse James and Billy the Kid so well known, when few Australians can name any bushrangers, apart from Ned Kelly and Ben Hall? Seal (2002: 154) claims 'the noble robber or 'Robin Hood' figure who redresses the political and economic wrongs done to the poor by the rich and powerful, is a cultural constant throughout the world, appearing in many guises in many nationalities'. Many outlaws were rural bandits supported by large networks of relatives, friends and sympathisers (Jones 1995). Their lives, as Seal suggests in relation to Kelly, contained politically charged elements and class based inequalities. Seal's motifs help explain Kelly's enduring popularity in Australian myth and also that of other folk heroes such as Jesse James and Billy the Kid, both of whom who died in 'unfair' circumstances at the hands of former friends (James was shot in the back while he dusted a painting and the Kid was ambushed by the local sheriff and died from his wounds).

Three interlinked elements are of particular importance in the creation of outlaw myths. The first is the role of the print media in popularising outlaws. The second relates to rumours of their survival – claims that they lived on after death. The third is the role of popular culture, especially through film, television and folk music that perpetuates idealised images of outlaws as free, brave, just and chivalrous heroes.

Like Ned Kelly, Jesse James had letters published in newspapers, in his case, appeals to former Civil war colleagues and sympathisers. In fact James remains a hero for the American neo-Confederate movement. Billy the Kid became a symbol of the American west following a sensational account of his life and death, entitled 'The authentic Life of Billy, the Kid', written by his nemesis, Sheriff Pat Garrett.

Rumours that James, Billy the Kid, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid survived, faked their death and escaped justice are popular in America. Since their reported deaths

several people have claimed to be Jesse James or Billy the Kid, with negative DNA tests failing to dispel such rumours. While such claims are perhaps more frequently associated with American outlaws than bushrangers, similar myths emerged in relation to Dan Kelly and Captain Thunderbolt in Australia.

Outlaws have of course been the subject of a multitude of Hollywood films that command a wide audience, from *Jesse James Under the Black Flag* (1921), *True Story of Jesse James* (1957) to *The Long Riders* (1980), and more recently *American Outlaws* (2001) and *Jesse James: Legend, Outlaw, Terrorist* (2007). Billy the Kid has been portrayed in a variety of films from *Billy the Kid* (1930), *The Left-Handed Gun* (1958), *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973) - with a soundtrack by Bob Dylan - to *Purgatory* (1999). In addition to Bob Dylan, Bon Jovi, Billy Joel and Tom Petty have all sang about Billy the Kid, while Woody Guthrie, John Lee Hooker and Hank Williams paid homage to the outlaw Jesse James.

Many of those who were outside of the law are not just local folk heroes but global figures recognised in several countries. Rightly or wrongly, outlaws such as James and Kelly have transcended the outlaw image to symbolise globally accepted values, such as bravery and the pursuit of justice for the downtrodden. Like Robin Hood, they have attained global fame through Hollywood. This suggests that although American images and products dominate cultural globalization there is also a constant reworking of non-American historical figures for global consumption. The American film industry absorbs, modifies and homogenizes local and 'foreign' (in this case outlaw) myths in search of a global market.

However, globalization does not merely involve the passive acceptance of foreign culture by citizens of the receiving country (Pickering 2001: 51). By tapping themes that resonate globally, like the rebellious hero, 'foreign' cultural artifacts such as outlaw myths are readily accommodated. Nor is the cultural transmission of outlaws a one way street - it also flows from Australia to the rest of the world. Seal (1996: 16-17) argues that Kelly 'has transcended the status of local hero and even that of folk hero to become a truly national hero'. Through a series of films beginning with *The Story of the Kelly Gang* in 1906 to *Ned Kelly* in 2003, and Peter Carey's 2001 Booker prize winning historical novel, *True History of the Kelly Gang*, Ned Kelly is now a global outlaw who ranks alongside Robin Hood and Jesse James. Such is life.

Table 1: Best Known Outlaws and Bushrangers (%)

<b>OUTLAWS</b>	
Jesse James	46.4
Billy the Kid (William Bonney)	33.3
Butch Cassidy (Robert LeRoy Parker)	11.8
Sundance Kid (Harry Longbaugh)	6.3
Doc Holliday	4.5
Frank James	2.7
Wyatt Earp	2.5
Cole Younger	0.9
<b>BUSHRANGERS</b>	
Ned Kelly	80.4
Ben Hall	28.9
Captain Thunderbolt (Frederick Ward)	12.4
'Mad' Dan Morgan	12.0
Dan Kelly	11.0
Captain Moonlite (Andrew George Scott)	8.5
Frank Gardiner	5.5
Steve Hart	2.8
Captain Midnight (Thomas Smith)	2.5
Joe Byrne	2.5

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2005)

Table 2: Outlaws and Bushrangers Correctly Identified by Australians (%)

	<b>Outlaws</b>	<b>Bushrangers</b>
None	40.2	17.5
1	24.6	27.5
2	16.3	19.0
3	9.6	12.6
4	9.4	23.4
Total	(1914)	(1914)

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2005)

Table 3: Social Background on Knowledge of Bushrangers and Outlaws (Odds Ratios)

	Outlaws		Bushrangers	
	b	$\beta$	b	$\beta$
Intercept	0.10		0.41	
Men	0.30**	0.12	0.13*	0.05
Born Before WWII	0.34**	0.11	0.73**	0.23
Boomers (1946-59)	0.45**	0.16	0.65**	0.21
Gen X (1960-1970)	0.29**	0.10	0.39**	0.12
Gen Y (1970+)	0	-	0	-
Completed School Year 10	0.18*	0.07	0.33**	0.11
Completed Degree	-0.06	-0.02	0.30**	0.09
Australian Born	0.58**	0.19	0.95**	0.29
New Zealand Born	0.42	0.04	0.57*	0.05
UK Born	0.72**	0.15	0.66**	0.13
Born Elsewhere	0	-	0	-
Middle Class	0.11	0.04	0.21**	0.07
Protestant Denomination	0.14*	0.05	0.14**	0.05
Live in Capital City	0.01	0.004	-0.27**	-0.09
Newspapers or Internet main source of news and information	0.12	0.04	0.22**	0.06
R <sup>2</sup>	.07		.14	
n	(1656)		(1656)	

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2005)



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