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VOLUME 37

Mícheál Ó hAodha and John O'Callaghan (eds)

NARRATIVES OF THE OCCLUDED IRISH DIASPORA

SUBVERSIVE VOICES



Reimagining Ireland

Volume 37

Edited by Dr Eamon Maher
Institute of Technology, Tallaght



PETER LANG

Oxford • Bern • Berlin • Bruxelles • Frankfurt am Main • New York • Wien

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Australia's Occluded Voices: Ned Kelly's History Wars

'Such is Life'. These are the 'famous last words' spoken by the bushranger Ned Kelly. Or at least that's the way the story goes. It is difficult to say anything about the historical figure without encountering the massive legend. For it is not only the voice of Ned himself, but also a booming chorus of oral tradition, including bush ballads, that have sung Ned's praises. Hanged in Melbourne on 11 November 1880, Ned Kelly shares his anniversary with another kind of Remembrance Day relating to violent conflict. In Australia today, Australia's national museums and art galleries often give primacy to the once-occluded voices of rebels, including Aboriginal people who resisted colonisation. Activists, radical and revisionist historians have brought once-suppressed voices within earshot. In reflecting upon Ned Kelly's voice, this chapter considers its place as a 'native voice' in the multiple settler-coloniser spaces of Australia.

Although Irish-Australian bushranger Ned Kelly spoke out in the 1870s on behalf of the occluded voices of ex-convicts and small land selectors, he has arguably had more words to say – real and imagined – than most other figures of Australian history. His memory is kept alive in its popular representations, including oral histories, ballads, jokes, sayings, plays, novels, visual and multi-media and other texts.¹ With sayings like 'as game

1 John Meredith Folklore Collection, National Library of Australia contains some folk reminiscences and songs of the Kellys. For a brief biography of Ned Kelly, see the *Australian dictionary of biography*, <<http://adbonline.anu.edu.au/biogs/A050009b.htm>>, Kelly, Edward (Ned) (accessed 12 February 2011). See Ian Jones, *Ned Kelly: a short life* (Sydney, 2008); Graham Huggan, 'Cultural memory in postcolonial fiction: the uses and abuses of Ned Kelly' in *Australian Literary Studies*, 20 (2002), pp. 132–45.

as Ned Kelly' and 'that kid is a real Ned Kelly', he has permanently entered the Australian lexicon.

In this chapter, I will discuss how Ned Kelly's campaign to be heard unsettled, outlasted, and even displaced, more mainstream narratives. Living in the decades well before Australian federation, the idea of Australian nationalism was barely formulated. The Australian Natives Association, which started in Melbourne in 1871, only adopted the platform to lobby for federation of the Australian colonies in 1880, the same year as Ned's death. Unlike Ned's circle, the Australian Natives Association comprised of middle-class, Australian-born men.²

In 1855, Ned Kelly was born in country Victoria. His mother Ellen was the daughter of James Quinn of Co. Antrim, Ireland, who emigrated with his family as a bounty immigrant and his father 'Red' Kelly was from Co. Tipperary, having been transported to Australia as a convict for pig-stealing.³ At the age of twenty-five, Edward or Ned Kelly was hanged in Melbourne for murder. But Ned's voice could not be silenced and he remains one of Australia's most prominent national legends. Even today, Ned still pervades Australian popular culture—in history texts, journals, newspapers and magazines, blogs and in many different spoken, sung, danced, visual representations, television and films. He has been played by names as big as Mick Jagger and Heath Ledger. Towns like Jerilderie, Glenrowan and Benalla devote themselves to Ned Kelly tourism, while elsewhere, local bakers, bargain shops and other businesses trade upon the Kelly brand as a signifier of defiant national pride.

Associated with a romantic but contested notion of larrikin masculinity, Ned's legend embraces a white coloniser heritage encompassing Irish

² According to the 'Iron Outlaw' website, which contains many valuable analyses and documents, the midwife for Ned's birth, Mary Gorman, was part of a family that had set up one of the local ANA branches of the Australian Federation League (AFL) and crucial meetings leading to federation; the AFL was a distinctive organisation from the ANA. See also Jones, *Ned Kelly*, p. 14. <<http://www.ironicon.com.au/nativened.htm>>. There are many Ned scholars and archaeologists conducting and publishing their findings on the internet.

³ John Maloney, *Ned Kelly* (Ringwood, 1989), pp. 7–8.

land loss, political oppression and immigrant exile. Against even these traumatic pasts, however, the dispossession of Aboriginal Australians is in a different league. Given the impact of post-colonialism in the twenty-first century, it would therefore be logical to expect that the age of Ned had finally passed. Surely it is too whitebread and masculinist a tale to suit a contemporary Australian identity? This chapter explores how, amidst occluded voices of Australia's national history, the Kelly legend occupies a space that fills an affective tension around belonging. In order to demonstrate how two particular sets of suppressed histories of Australia enjoy national attention, I am about to take you for a brisk walk through a couple of Exhibition venues. But first, we need to consider some of the key developments in national historical debates.

Over the last few decades, Australian history has become an intensely political issue,⁴ often reaching the front pages of newspapers. Australia's earlier national narratives, including her public memorialisations, celebrated her history as Britain's youthful and innocent child. It was a European-derived history told and toned by white, predominantly male authors. Australia celebrates its national day on 26 January, a British founding day when the British convict fleets arrived at Botany Bay – a day now also dubbed 'invasion day'. There have been many challenges to the reification of this establishment past, most notably by Aboriginal people who organised a huge Survival Day celebration in the Bicentennial Year of 1988, with Aboriginal Australians gathering from all over Australia. When *The History of Australia* by the Irish Australian historian John Maloney was being launched by Prime Minister Bob Hawke, Aboriginal protestors grabbed a copy and hurled it into the waters of Sydney Harbour.⁵ With great clarity, this act signified the ongoing contest between 'white' and 'black' versions

⁴ Previously, for example during the Cold War, history was also politically contested, but the last few decades saw it reaching new heights. Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The history wars* (Carlton, 2003); Bain Attwood, *Telling the truth about Aboriginal history* (Crows Nest, 2005).

⁵ See Mark McKenna, 'Different perspectives on Black Armband History', Research Paper 5 1997–8, Parliament of Australia, Parliamentary Library, <<http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/rp/1997-98/98rp05.htm>> (accessed 27 January 2011); Ann

of Australian history. Eight years previously, Malony's biography of *Ned Kelly* was launched uneventfully. Nor did Bob Hawke's launch of Patrick O'Farrell's Bicentenary book *The Irish in Australia* stir up the waters.

In previous decades, histories of Australian identity narratives examined tensions between convicts versus free settlers, Catholic versus Protestants or Irish versus English. By the 1980s, they examined race and gender issues, with relations between the new and old settlers of Australia, the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, starting to see the spotlight.⁶

This came into clearer focus in 1992, when the High Court recognised native title in the Mabo Judgement, followed by the Wik Judgement, which recognised Aboriginal rights to pastoral leases.⁷ The Prime Minister of the time, Paul Keating, trumpeted his working class Irish Catholic background. Even his home suburb, Sydney's Bankstown, had once been known as Irishtown.⁸ In 1993 Keating joyfully visited the home of his Keating ancestors, Tynagh, Co. Galway and also Tipperary, ancestral home not only of Ned Kelly's father but also of Keating's political hero, Labor Prime Minister Ben Chifley.⁹ With Keating's irreverent jokes, his outspoken Republicanism and refusal to follow royal protocol – having famously laid hands on Queen Elizabeth – he exuded the proud 'larrikin' tradition linked with the Ned Kelly saga. Keating also addressed another issue of ancestry and national identity, being the first Prime Minister to deliver a major speech acknowledging the historical wrongs committed against Aborigines. Delivered in Redfern Park in 1992, it attracted a large Aboriginal audience and articulated a changing national historiography.

McGrath (ed.), *Contested ground: Aborigines under the British crown* (Sydney, 1994), Chapter 10.

6 Patrick O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia* (Sydney, 1987); Malony, *Ned Kelly*; John Malony, *The Penguin history of Australia* (Ringwood, 1988).

7 McGrath (ed.), *Contested ground*, Chapter one provides an overview of national history. The Mabo Judgement, other relevant legal decisions and some academic articles may be researched at <<http://www.austlii.edu.au>>.

8 John Edwards, *Keating: the inside story* (Ringwood, 1996), p. 27.

9 Edwards, *Keating*, pp. 21–6; see also Don Watson, *Recollections of a bleeding heart: A portrait of Paul Keating PM* (Milsons Point, 2008).

According to historian Mark McKenna, Keating's talented speech-writer Don Watson admired the prominent historian Manning Clark, author of a multi-volume set, *A history of Australia*.¹⁰ Clark had a particular vision of history as offering a moral framework and some of his later ruminations presented the British Empire as evil. During his time in England, Clark's exposure to Irish protest against the English prompted him to reflect upon Australia's place in the wider history of British imperialism.¹¹ However, Keating's speeches went further; they did not actually blame England, but owned the evils as Australian: 'We took the traditional lands ... We committed the murders ... We took the children from their mothers ... – It was our ignorance and our prejudice.'¹² Keating's introduction of the Native Title Act and his attention to the politics of redress made him unpopular with many voters. Some lamented that the 'Old Australia' and its story of a triumphant white historical identity had become redundant. Keating's 1996 election loss thus became associated with his acknowledgement of the facts of Australian Indigenous history.¹³

Distinguishing himself from Keating, the incoming Prime Minister John Howard's acceptance speech announced that Australians should not feel guilt, but rather should be 'relaxed and comfortable' about their past. In 1997, the *Bringing Them Home Report*, a commissioned enquiry into the history and impacts of Aboriginal child removal, was released. During Howard's time as Prime Minister (1996–2007), his refusal to say 'Sorry' for its devastating impacts created a lengthy standoff. With such

10 McKenna, 'Different perspectives'. See also Mark McKenna, *An eye for eternity: the life of Manning Clark* (Carlton, 2011); Brian Matthews, *Manning Clark: a life* (Crows Nest, 2008).

11 See also Rob Pascoe, *The manufacture of Australian history* (Melbourne, 1979), pp. 76–7.

12 Cited by McKenna, 'Different perspectives'; Redfern speech, note 39. See also Mark McKenna, *The captive republic: A history of republicanism in Australia 1788–1996* (Cambridge, 1996). For full text, see <http://www.antar.org.au/issues_and_campaigns/self-determination/paul_keating_redfern_speech>, accessed 26 May 2011.

13 Macintyre and Clark, *The history wars*; Attwood, *Telling the truth*.

top-level endorsement, the backlash against Aboriginal history turned into a storm. Dubbed 'The History Wars', an intensified national debate was waged between a nexus of politicians and historians. Accused of making Australians feel grief and shame about their past, histories that examined atrocities and/or racism were mocked as 'black armband'.¹⁴ Writer Keith Windschuttle, a media expert turned historian and a communist turned right-winger, contended that the darker side of Australian history had not just been overemphasised – it had been intentionally fabricated.¹⁵

Despite apparent black/white history binaries, the place of the Irish in colonisation remained ambiguous and sentimental undercurrents that the Irish were a distinctive, more humane kind of coloniser prevailed. Many Irish Australians – including 'the shamrock Aborigines' or Aboriginal descendants of Irishmen and women – preferred to imagine that the Irish were the 'good colonisers' and that the groups shared a common history of oppression by the English.¹⁶ What complicates such an equation, however, is that, like other non-Aboriginal settlers, the 'colonised' Irish Australians actively dispossessed Aboriginal people of their lands. With no permission, let alone authorised treaties from traditional landowners, they took up holdings as convicts, land selectors and squatters, whilst others took up jobs as the police who were sent out to 'pacify' Aboriginal people.¹⁷ Thanks to such work and 'free' land, many Irish immigrants thrived. By 2011, historical research proved that the plight of the downtrodden Irish

selector paled in comparison with that of the downtrodden Aboriginal people. However, a complex narrative tension arose, including elements of shared historical identities.

Aboriginal art

Having now completed some preliminaries, we are ready for the Exhibition tour. Our first venue is the Australian National Gallery (NGA) in Canberra, Australia's capital city. It is January 2011. If you step into the entrance of its new wing, you meander through a forest of 200 Tiwi burial poles. The tell of Indigenous creation or 'dreaming' stories of land, landscape and people. Originally commissioned to mark the Australian Bicentenary of British colonisation in 1988, they memorialise Indigenous histories: stories of death, cultural continuity and ancestral beings whose actions caused the stars to light the skies, the mountains and islands to be formed.

If you then step onto the NGA's big escalator, you will encounter a more expansive group of galleries of Indigenous Australian art, which announces itself with an installation of huge letters that spell out 'DISPERSAL': the oft-used euphemism in archival records for native police killings of Aboriginal people, especially on the Queensland frontier. This gallery exhibits a huge range of ceremonial and storytelling interpretations on bark and canvas.

We need to backtrack a little – or a lot. While it is now known that Indigenous Australians occupied Australia for at least 50,000 years, the archaeological evidence was not unearthed until the 1970s. Up to the late 1980s and 1990s, Aboriginal paintings were generally displayed as artefacts in ethnographic and natural history museums. Historians only started to seriously research Aboriginal history from the late 1970s and 1980s. Although recognition of Aboriginal paintings as art is long overdue, I contend that they should also be recognised as texts for history telling. Art can speak directly to the viewer; the creator does not have to

¹⁴ A prominent theme in these recent debates was whether Australians should feel guilty about the violence and cruelties of the past, especially towards Aboriginal inhabitants and non-white residents. See Macintyre and Clark, *The history wars*; Attwood, *Telling the truth*.

¹⁵ Keith Windschuttle, *The fabrication of Aboriginal history* (Sydney, 2002).

¹⁶ Ann McGrath, 'Shamrock Aborigines: The Irish, the Aboriginal Australians and their children' in *Aboriginal History*, 34 (2010). <<http://eprints.anu.edu.au/apps/bookworm/view/Aboriginal+History+Volume+34%2C+2010/2641/cho3.xhtml>> (accessed 27 January 2011). See also Bob Reece, 'The Irish and the Aborigines' in T. Foley and F. Bareman (eds), *Irish-Australian studies* (Sydney, 2000).

¹⁷ For example, see Patrick O'Farrell, *Letters from Irish Australia, 1825–1929* (Sydney, 1984).

be literate, and the viewer does not always need to seek translation. The paintings by more remotely located Aboriginal artists integrate ancestral, autobiographical, contact and landscape stories that constitute emplaced histories. They make powerful claims of ongoing landed sovereignty and assert occupation from time immemorial. While few visitors would be able to decode their detailed content, the location of these works in a national art gallery provides strong public acknowledgment of these long missing voices in official Australian history and cultural production.

The new Indigenous Gallery's 'urban' section displays numerous paintings that overtly critique mainstream 'white histories' in a more familiar European-style or a hybrid visual language. Robert Campbell Junior's *Aboriginal embassy* (1986) ponders his Australian history lessons, the foundational story of English/Anglo-Australian usurpers and Aboriginal assertions of sovereignty. In other works, he 'indigenises' navigator 'discoverer' Captain Cook by depicting him in a witty combination of the Indigenous X-ray and dot style painting of Arnhem Land and the central desert.¹⁸ Numerous Aboriginal artists, including Gordon Bennett and Daniel Boyd among others, have also succeeded in providing complex, subversive takes on Australia's mainstream histories, for example Daniel Boyd's melodramatic depiction of the apotheosis of Captain James Cook.¹⁹

The second Exhibition venue we visit is oval-shaped and more intimate. Walk back to the original Gallery entrance and immediately to the left, you'll find a new, semi-enclosed space that has been specially designed for the Ned Kelly Series of white Australian artist Sidney Nolan, painted in mid 1946–7. Like seemingly naïve pages in a children's storybook, twenty-five paintings, including a diptych, are arranged in sequential order. The visitor gains a sense of being surrounded – possibly even 'held up' by this historical tale of heroic resistance. However, it is also a tale of family – of mother Ellen Kelly, of sister Kate and of the gender-bending Steve Hart escaping sidesaddle in a skirt. Most notably, Nolan's portrayals of Ned's mask

¹⁸ National Gallery of Australia, <<http://nga.gov.au/federation/Detail.cfm?WorkID=64217&ZoomID=2>> (accessed 17 February 2011).

¹⁹ Maria Nugent, *Captain Cook was here* (Port Melbourne, 2009), p. 135.

have made it one of the most recognisable and indelible icons in Australian culture. With only a slot for eyes, Ned Kelly and his gang's helmets made them look like they were part machine – antecedents to robots that in turn harked back to medieval days and chivalrous values.

Nolan identified with Kelly. He, too, came from working class Irish stock and around the time of the Series' development, he was in trouble with the law for deserting the army. Ned's indefatigable courage and high-held principles inspired Nolan, who depicted him as noble knight. In contrast, the police stare stupidly, oblivious to their own actions: puppet-like innocents from a Punch and Judy show. Ned Kelly's use of an iron mask and armour made for a ubiquitous iconography. Entranced by Kelly stories told by his grandfather, who had been a member of the police force hunting him down, Nolan transformed the legend into a modernist iconography of nation.²⁰

The National Gallery's rearrangements and refurbishments reflect dramatic shifts in those competing voices that represent that slippery concept of nation. Curators have been influenced by political and scholarly developments and by changing public tastes. Although not directly juxtaposed, the Indigenous and Kelly galleries start to articulate connective threads only partly entwined. As anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose perceptively argued: 'As myth-dream Ned Kelly is both invader and outcast; his position encodes the longing to belong and the fear that white Australians will never belong – will always be castaways in the continent of Australia.'²¹ Rose infers another Nolan myth-series – that of the white woman castaway 'Mrs Fraser', supposedly held captive by Aboriginal men on what is now Fraser Island. As historian Peter Read expounded, the theme of 'belonging' has been an uncertain, anxious one for settler-colonisers in Australia. At the

²⁰ Sidney Nolan, Murray Bail, and Andrew Sayers, *Sidney Nolan's Ned Kelly: the Ned Kelly paintings in the National Gallery of Australia* (Canberra, 1992), <http://www.heide.com.au/downloads/Unmasked_Nolan_Education_kit.pdf> (accessed 15 February 2011).

²¹ Deborah Bird Rose, 'Ned Kelly died for our sins' in Max Charlesworth (ed.), *Essays on Aboriginal spirituality* (Victoria, 1998), p. 116; Peter Read, *Belonging: Australians, place and Aboriginal ownership* (Oakleigh 2000).

entrance to the Nolan gallery are paintings by Nolan's associate Arthur Boyd, who explored colonialism and made 'colour plays' by transmuting a 'white/black' bride: stories of intermarriage, sexual intrusions, death, guns, destruction and militaristic, authoritarian oppression.²²

At Federation in 1901, Australia remained part of the British Commonwealth. As it did not fight wars to become a Republic, following the Kelly gang's story offered vicarious opportunities to follow a drama of rebellion and independence over British authority figures. It also provided a reassuring exile story that could be shared by other white immigrant colonisers with shallow roots in the continent. With a wide network of admirers, sympathisers and informers, bushrangers carried out the closest thing that Australia got to a civil war. Of course, this excludes colonising wars of dispossession, which nonetheless intersect in ways that warrant further examination.

As well as Ned's legend mobilising a sense of independent nationhood, it also celebrated a revered kind of manliness. Due to their status as 'colonials', white Australian men suffered a sense of inferiority that was particularly reinforced when their leaders visited Britain. As Marilyn Lake has argued, Australian men yearned for recognition of an equal manhood.²³ Bushranger ballads offered the people's antidote. In Victoria, the most popular song of 1880 was the 'The Wild Colonial Boy', an Irish ballad that romanticises rebellion against authorities and creates sentimental pangs about Irish rebel, Jack Donahue, who was transported as a convict, being forcibly separated from his adoring mother and his distant land. It promotes an egalitarian moral code that defies judges, redistributes wealth from 'squires' and celebrates the uniqueness of the Australian bush. The hero of this stirring song changed to Jack Doolan in Australia, protesting

22 Kay Schaffer, *In the wake of first contact: the Eliza Fraser stories* (New York, 1995); Ian McNiven, Lynette Russell, and Kay Schaffer, *Constructions of colonialism: perspective on Eliza Fraser's shipwreck* (London, 1998); Ann McGrath, 'White brides: Images of marriage across colonising boundaries' in *Frontiers: A Women's Interdisciplinary Journal* (21), 2002.

23 Luke Trainor, *British imperialism and Australian nationalism* (Cambridge, 1994); M. Lake and H. Reynolds, *Drawing the global colour line* (Carlton, 2008).

the injustice of convictism and the law in general, including lines such as: 'He robbed the wealthy squires and their arms he did destroy/And a terror to Australia was this wild colonial boy'. With the main character and lyrics changed, and with many different versions of the lyrics, it is hard to sing it without thinking of Ned Kelly:

With a heart that knew no danger and a spirit knew no fear
He stuck up Beechworth mail coach and robbed Judge McAvoy
Who trembling gave his money to the wild colonial boy.
He bade the judge good morning and told him to beware ...
And never part a mother from her son and only joy,
For fear he might turn robber like the wild colonial boy.²⁴

From the 1960s, 'radical historians' revelled in researching rebel voices: bushrangers, trade unionists, working class heroes, and the ordinary ANZAC soldiers of the First World War. Their egalitarian impulses and anti-Imperial, anti-colonising sentiments made them worth celebrating. By the 1970s, the old Whiggish narratives of liberal democratic progress were being replaced by histories that gave primacy to the 'ordinary' people – the convicts, the unionists, the battlers and the land selectors. Many of these were Irish Australians, arriving as convicts and government-assisted immigrants, or as refugees due to political agitation, famine and land displacements. Marxist and other radical historians such as Brian Fitzpatrick, Ian Turner and later Humphrey McQueen, rarely sought to separate the Irish from other Australian rebels. Although the influence of local Catholic schools maintained a distinctive identity, Irish ghettos were not a permanent feature of Australian cities. Nor were there outbreaks like anti-Irish riots perpetrated in 1840s Philadelphia by the nativist Protestant American activists calling themselves 'Native American Movement'. Rather, in Australia, the Irish were a foundational group.

Australian history scholars made a strong case that in the early nineteenth century, the number of Irish convicts and later immigrants to

24 Gale Huntington and Lani Herrmann (eds), *Sam Henry's songs of the people* (Athens, Georgia, 1990), pp. 120–1.

Australia made them a formative cultural influence on mainstream (white male) Australian culture. Russel Ward's *The Australian Legend* (1958) was enormously influential in explaining cultural evolution. Ward argued that the Celts and the Australian bush had a disproportionate influence on creating Australian national speech, national values and character. Based upon his population estimates, Ward argued for an Irish impact three times that of the British Isles,²⁵ especially amongst the working classes. As historian Patrick O'Farrell expounded in the 1980s, the Irish were 'the dynamic force' in national character building: 'the Irish have been the dynamic factor in Australian history, that is, the galvanising force at the centre of the evolution of our national character'.²⁶ Keating, too, saw this impetus behind his beloved Labor Party. Because the Irish quickly assimilated, they were no longer thought of as entirely distinct, let alone as a 'race'. And unlike Aboriginal people, they were not subjected to official forms of discrimination. By the 1990s, the Irish were so integrated and intermarried into mainstream 'white history' that it was quite logical for the new post-colonial history to fuse them into the pale race of greedy colonisers.²⁷

Now we have moved on to an Exhibition at the National Museum of Australia (NMA). We are back in 2003. As its Senior Curator, I can share some behind-the-scenes views of its development stages. The Museum opened in 2001, Centenary of Federation and the height of the 'History Wars'. Accused of pro-Aboriginal, anti-white bias, the NMA soon became a key battleground. We developed a large-scale exhibition which was entitled *Outlawed! Rebels, Revolutionaries and Bushrangers*. On the surface, it

²⁵ Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend* (Melbourne, 1958), pp. 47–8.

²⁶ O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia*, p. 10.

²⁷ From the 1980s, historians such as Patrick O'Farrell, Bob Reece and Oliver MacDonagh repositioned the Irish Australians as an almost forgotten people. A new generation of scholars including Malcolm Campbell, Sean Brawley and Anne O'Brien continue this quest, pointing out how, at various times, the ethnic 'Irish' were sometimes feared as a radical threat. Following O'Farrell, scholars agreed that extensive intermarriage with Scots, Welsh and English had integrated the Irish into Australian society. Bob Reece, *Exiles from Erin: Convict lives in Ireland and Australia* (Basingstoke, 1991); Malcolm Campbell, *Ireland's new worlds: Immigrants, politics and society in the United States and Australia, 1815–1922* (Wisconsin, 2008); McGrath, 'Shamrock Aborigines'.

appeared a return to familiar historical ground – to the bushranger anti-heroes, those populist favourites of Australian history. Bushranger stories had long held intense nationalistic appeal: tales of bushranging were staples of Australia's oral history and folklore collections; romanticised stories of their campaigns against the ruling classes and the police were best-sellers. However, we adopted a *global* history approach where these nationalistic stories would be juxtaposed with famous outlaws from around the world: Robin Hood, Hone Heke, Jesse James, Pancho Villa, Song Jiang and Ishikawa Goemon.²⁸

No other Australian bushranger outstripped the fame of Ned Kelly. As aptly expressed at a recent Kelly anniversary: 'There are 20 million Australians and 6 million of them are related to Ned Kelly – or someone who helped save him, shoot him, arrest him.' Everyone wanted a bit of the Kelly story.²⁹ For this was personal – part of *our* story. It connected people to nation. Although Ned paraphernalia was to be the exhibition's key 'destination' or crowd-pulling aspect, they proved the hardest to obtain. We hoped to bring the four sets of Kelly gang armour and other Kelly relics together. However, despite negotiating patiently and hard, the State Library of Victoria, the Victorian Police Museum and Old Melbourne Gaol all refused to lend us their respective Kelly armour. Nor would the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the National Gallery of Australia loan us their Nolan Kelly series paintings. In fact, one individual seemed insulted that we had the gall to ask – virtually insinuating in reply that we had no right to loot 'national treasure'. Others intimated it was not right to wrench Ned from his Melbourne, his rightful home – and site of his hanging. Understandably, the Police Museum thought we would glorify a

²⁸ National Museum of Australia, *Outlawed! Rebels, Revolutionaries and Bushrangers* (Canberra: National Museum of Australia, 2003).

²⁹ This comment was made during an event marking the 130th anniversary of Ned Kelly's execution, around 11 November 1880, broadcast on television. Unfortunately I do not have the direct source or speaker's name. It sums up impressions I also gleaned whilst researching the Outlawed Exhibition for the National Museum of Australia.

police killer. Although all states saw Ned as their own, these three public repositories viewed Ned relics as 'theirs', to be held tightly.³⁰

Thankfully, we successfully borrowed one suit of Kelly gang armour, Joe Byrne's, held in the family of a local Canberra man. We bought other objects from private collections: including a lantern slideshow that toured the epic drama in pre-cinema days. *The Story of the Kelly Gang*, 1906, one of Australia's very earliest feature films, was held in the collection of the National Film and Sound Archive. We missed out on buying Ned's shoulder piece, which went for \$200,000. An exciting NMA purchase, however, was 'the Hanlon letter', a transcription of Ned Kelly's major opus, the Jerilderie letter, which we bought at auction.

Although Ned Kelly's voice has been preserved in a number of archival settings – court-hearings, local newspaper accounts, commissions of enquiry and oral history reminiscences – the Jerilderie letter of November 1878 is the most compelling. As historian Alex McDermott wrote: 'Even now it's hard to defy the voice. With this letter, Kelly inserts himself into history, on his own terms, with his own voice.'³¹ This superlative example of a marginalised, dare-devil, slightly crazed epistle was suppressed for over fifty years. Kelly wanted it published in the *Jerilderie and Urana Gazette*, but instead it was handed over to the police. First published in 1930, the original letter did not come into public hands until December 2000, when it was anonymously donated to the State Library of Victoria.³² Lacking much punctuation, the Jerilderie letter immediately launches into colourful storytelling that blends passionate political ideas into a grisly, visceral language of murderous threats. Written and spoken words become 'indivisible'. McDermott describes the text as 'highly personal, dramatic, oratorical, and charged with competitive hostility ... [its] logic is associational rather

30 A new Exhibition at the National Museum of Australia, 17 March to 31 July 2011, has managed to get the four suits of armour together. On the topic of the Irish in Australia, and sponsored by the Embassy of Ireland in Australia, it is called *Not Just Ned: A True History of the Irish in Australia*.

31 Alex McDermott (ed.), *The Jerilderie letter* (Melbourne, 2001), p. xxviii.

32 McDermott, *The Jerilderie letter*, p. xxvii.

than linear, the style both flamboyant and rough, full of 'raw invective'.³³ The anger in Ned Kelly's prose and his moral outrage at injustice is both rousing and chilling. Novelist Peter Carey found Kelly's letter so captivating that he carried a copy of it around for years. Inspired by its lilting rhythms, Carey eventually wrote *The true history of the Kelly gang* (2000), winner of the Booker Prize.

The Jerilderie letter's colourful turn of phrase reveals an uneducated but highly intelligent mind. Although a promising student, Ned's schooling was abruptly terminated due to his family's situation after his father's death. He was described as a 'clever illiterate person', but neither the government nor the police wanted to allow him a published platform. Although matching the tenor of Kelly's reported speeches, Joe Byrne, a literate member of the Kelly gang, is thought to have transcribed it. The charismatic Ned already had many sympathisers and even his enemies later described him as a kind of 'superhuman'.³⁴ At age eleven, Ned saved a younger boy, Richard Shelton, from drowning in flooding Hughes creek. His bravery was so commendable that the boy's father, Esau Shelton, rewarded Ned with a gold trimmed, green silk sash that he cherished for life (it is now held at the Benalla museum, its status as a secular relic is enhanced by claims that it is stained with Ned Kelly's blood from a shoot-out). Before his escapades with the law, Ned had also gained fame for fighting twenty bare-knuckle rounds against the boxing champion Wild Wright. Both events were significant enough for official portrait photographs to be taken. Additionally, Ned was famed as a great shot with a rifle and an outstanding horseman. The Kelly gang covered vast tracts of land between Victoria and New South Wales – thousands of miles at speed. With stolen racing stock or 'blood horses', the police mares had no chance of catching up with them. Furthermore, the gang had expert, deep knowledge of the country – its hideouts, routes and food supplies. As small selectors, bush knowledge helped them to survive with additional food supplies and ways to outwit the large landholders of cattle. During his time as a boy at Avenel, Ned had

33 McDermott, *The Jerilderie letter*, pp. xxix, xxviii.

34 McDermott, *The Jerilderie letter*, p. vii.

direct access to Aboriginal camps of the Kulin nation, learning some of their skills. His neighbour Esau Shelton had studied Aboriginal manners and customs and it is likely that Ned and Richard Shelton learnt some tracking, knowledge of local game, weather and other skills from these traditional Kulin landowners.³⁵ When on the run, bushranger Harry Power, an early mentor for Ned, adapted bush skills gained from local Aboriginal people, including how to construct 'mia mia' shelters.³⁶

To Ned, the contents of the Jerilderie letter were of great consequence. Fearing that the police were misinforming the general public, he wanted his voice to be heard loud and clear. Fond of speeches, he was keen to justify his innocence – even to the detainees embroiled in the gang's hold-ups. Meanwhile, the wider public were enthralled, with newspapers providing blow-by-blow accounts of the Kelly gang's antics. The humiliating, unsuccessful police hunt was the other side of the story that captivated the public. Ned's oratory defended his outlawry; he made speeches against the banks and at Jerilderie tore up the mortgages of struggling farmers – a populist action potentially inciting a broader campaign of class rebellion. He asserted his dislike of needless violence and his concern for the poor, particularly struggling mothers and children. Ned's angry rebel masculinity was attenuated by his passion to protect his sister Kate and younger sisters from police harassment and insults, and his mother from the heavy-handed jail sentences of the courts. After his father's death, he took on the role of family protector and patriarch. He built a hut for his mother out of bush materials, which included a slab chimney. His family and clan loyalties and 'gentlemanly' behaviour were reported frequently. When his mother was jailed for cattle stealing, Ned was deeply upset, especially as she had a young baby and other children to care for. Once their father had died, she was left desperately impoverished. Although Ned's letter was not

completely finished, it concluded ominously: 'I am a widows son outlawed and I must be obeyed.'³⁷

Under the tradition of English common law, Ned Kelly did not have to be tried; declared an outlaw in 1878, he could be killed like vermin. Facing the prospect of being shot dead by police or being executed, his letter was a self-defence that argued his case; a product of much deliberation, it also represented a voice that could outlast his life. He handed it to Edwin Living, an accountant that he had taken hostage whilst robbing the Bank of New South Wales at Jerilderie. That same evening, Ned made a speech at the local pub, arguing that police had targeted him unfairly. But he hoped the letter would outlast his oratory; when he handed it over, he reportedly said: 'This is a little bit of my life; I will give it to you.'³⁸ Indeed, this exchange was 'live' – transferring his voice and the life-force that propelled it.

The Jerilderie letter contains many allusions to Ireland, grafting that longer colonising history of oppression onto what he saw as his impoverished family's plight in Australia. His parents and their grandparents tutored Ned in an imported anti-imperialism. Some authors doubt that Kelly's emphasis on Ireland's woes would have received much support from local Victorian farmers. McDermott claimed that the various ethnic groups of Welsh, Scottish, Irish and English were 'trying to put their northern-hemisphere politics behind them. The imperial imperative gave them notions of a shared identity, the idea of being British.'³⁹ However, an anti-authoritarian politics appealed to urban people, many of whom believed the police were corrupt and sympathised with the Kellys' plight. While some people in the Kelly gang's range intensely feared them, others held them in awe and respected their gentlemanly, polite behaviour. In the Jerilderie letter, Kelly describes his family's struggles against police persecution and their difficulties as small-scale farmers. He goes into tirades against England and its Queen, but worse, all that was dreadful about the English in Ireland

37 See Hanlon transcript, National Museum of Australia.

38 See original at <<http://www.nma.gov.au/interactives/jerilderie/home.html>> (accessed 17 December 2010); also <<http://nishi.slvvic.gov.au/latrobejournal/issue/latrobe-66/tr-g-t3.html>>.

39 McDermott, *The Jerilderie letter*, p. xxxmcd.

35 The Kelly gang later lived in and traversed the lands of the Yorta Yorta further to the north. Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation, <<http://www.yynac.com.au/maps.php>> (accessed 20 February 2011). See also Jones, *Ned Kelly*, p. 23.

36 Jones, *Ned Kelly*, p. 42.

as many as eleven, big & ugly enough to lift Mount Macedon out of a crab hole more like the species of a baboon or Guerilla than a man.⁴⁴ Here, Ned was making claims for a superior 'native' manhood, in close affinity with places in the Victorian landscape. Ian Jones comments that Macedon looked very much like Slievenamon, the Woman's Mountain of Tipperary.⁴⁵

Blending Irish experience into a diasporic history, Ned Kelly implicates authority figures working in both Ireland and Australia as English allies 'wearing the enemies coat'. Combining his family's transnational and multi-generational experience of English imperialism, he berates and accuses:

[T]o serve under a flag and nation that has destroyed massacred and murdered their forefathers by the greatest of torture as rolling them down hill in spiked barrels pulling their toe and finger nails and on the wheel. And every torture imaginable more was transported to Van Dieman's Land to pine their young lives away in starvation and misery ...

These Irish Australian convicts served in chains 'true to the shamrock and a credit to Paddy's land.' (my italics) He refers to the shamrock as 'the emblem of true wit and beauty'. As Irish patriot, Ned agitates for 'the colour they dare not wear for years'. And he makes a rallying call: 'rise old Erins isle once more, from the pressure and tyrannism of the English yoke. Which has kept it in poverty and starvation and caused them to wear the enemies coat'. Reaching beyond both Australia and Ireland, his rebel Irish diaspora becomes global. By now his mother had married a Californian, George King. Dreaming of a united front that could fight England and win, he asks: 'What would England do if America declared war and hoisted a green flag as it is all Irishman that has got command of her armies forts and batteries'.⁴⁶ An embryonic nationalism based upon a transnational Irish identity envisioned a world united thus by anti-English Imperialism.

Like the archetypal noble outlaw Robin Hood, Ned Kelly became a famed figure beyond his nation. In his lifetime, bushranger ballads spread

44 McDermott, *The Jerilderie letter*, pp. 65, 69.

45 Jones, *Ned Kelly*, p. 16.

46 McDermott, *The Jerilderie letter*, pp. 67–9, 71.

was personified in the local Victorian police. Thus Constable Fitzpatrick 'will be the cause of greater slaughter to the Union Jack than Saint Patrick was to the snakes and toads in Ireland.' Extending his attack, Fitzpatrick is never sober, 'sold his sister to a chinaman'⁴⁰ and had upper class pretensions. According to Kelly, he is too 'genteel ... more fit to be a starcher to a laundress than a policeman.' His 'deceit and cowardice is too plain to be seen in the puny cabbage hearted looking face.' Kelly bitterly recounts how the police destroyed the family's provisions and insulted and threatened to shoot his sisters. Had he been there, he states menacingly: 'I would have scattered their blood and brains like rain I would manure the Eleven Mile with their bloated carcasses and yet there is not one drop of murderous blood in my Veins'.⁴¹

Revealing an emergent sense of nativist identity, he says he 'could not suffer [police] ... blowing me to pieces in *my own native land*' (my italics).⁴² Although a proud Australian 'native', this passage also harks back to the violence experienced in the more distant 'native lands' of Ireland. In a seething blend of transnational Irish political, historical imagery and landscape imagery, Ned ranted about: 'a parcel of big ugly fat-necked wombat headed big bellied magpie legged narrowhipped spaw-footed sons of Irish Bailiffs or English landlords which is better known as Officers of Justice of Victorian Police'.⁴³ One of the gang's hideouts was the Wombat Ranges near Mansfield. To neighbouring farmers who themselves stole stock from wealthier property holders, his alarming humour struck a chord. After all, Irish-born policemen were 'a traitor to his country ancestors and religion as they were all catholics before the Saxons and Cranmore yoke held sway since they were persecuted and massacred thrown into martyrdom and tortured'. To take one 'half-starved larrakin to a watchhouse', he had 'seen

40 Like many other whites, Ned saw Chinese people as inferior or as unfair competition. In Victoria and New South Wales, riots occurred on the goldfields due to race conflict. Kelly had been charged with assaulting a Chinese man, although the charge was dismissed.

41 McDermott, *The Jerilderie letter*, pp. 38, 40, 42.

42 McDermott, *The Jerilderie letter*, p. 56.

43 McDermott, *The Jerilderie letter*, pp. 63–4.

like wildfire through the bush. One glorified a bushranger who would 'fight to the last in old Ireland's name'.⁴⁷ The Kellys and their circle sang a series of 'Kelly ballads' – romanticising their courageous escapades and deeds, and possibly even some ancestral Irish songs. And they loved to hear bushranger ballads like the 'Wild Colonial Boy'.⁴⁸

Historians have investigated why outlaw legends held strong appeal and national significance. Eric Hobsbawm's essay in *Primitive rebels* was followed by *Bandits* and of special relevance here is Graham Seal's *The outlaw legend: A cultural tradition in Britain, America and Australia*. Seal espouses ten common outlaw motifs. The noble robber type was a friend of the poor, oppressed, forced into outlawry, brave, generous, courteous, did not indulge in unjustified violence, a trickster who was betrayed, and 'lived on' after death. Seal notes differences between the individualistic English outlaws and the American and Australian outlaws, who had strong family ties.⁴⁹ Paradoxically, although their 'outlaw' status positioned them outside the mainstream during their lifetimes, several were taken up as state-endorsed 'national heroes' and as symbols of national identity.

While Hobsbawm and Seal's analysis omitted Indigenous outlaws even in settler-coloniser societies, we insisted upon their inclusion in the *Outlawed!* Exhibition. The relationship of Indigenous resistance heroes to the settler-coloniser nation already defined Indigenous people as outsiders and, in a sense, as outlaws all. In the Exhibition, works by Indigenous artists told stories of Aboriginal bushranger Mosquito and the Tasmanian warrior woman Walyer, whilst the story of New Zealand 'outlaw' Maori

47 Cited in Ward, *The Australian legend*, p. 46.

48 This was the most popular song in the Australian bush in 1880, the same year the Kelly gang was stamped out. Huntington and Herrmann, *Sam Henry's songs of the people*, pp. 120–1. See also J.S. Manifold, *The death of Ned Kelly and other ballads* (London, 1941). 'The Ballad of the Kelly gang' was a song apparently popular whilst the outlaws were at large. <<http://raymondfolk.wetpaint.com/page/The+Ballad+of+Ned+Kelly+Gang>>, <<http://warrenfahey.com/bushrangers-8.htm>>. Folk expert Warren Fahey lists twenty-one songs about the Kellys. NLA oral histories also cite a Kelly song.

49 Seal, *The outlaw legend*.

leader Hone Heke was represented by his own powerful, mana-imbued objects. Although we had wanted to include the famous Aboriginal outlaw Jundamurra, an Aboriginal 'Ned Kelly' who famously eluded police, his story was already on display in another part of the Museum. The Exhibition included the Governor brothers, and in particular Jimmy Governor, a clever, hard-working man of mixed Aboriginal and white descent who sought revenge after his white wife suffered racism, killing six females, including a young daughter. Jimmy, a bushranger under Australian law, was hanged the same month as Australia's Federation. The term 'bush-ranger' was ensconced in Australian law, suiting 'bush' terminology for countryside. Bushranging involved travel, roving, mobility and the ability to blend into and become part of the bush, untracked and hidden from others. Bushrangers of all descriptions held something in common with Aboriginal people living a traditional bush lifestyle, but especially so when hiding out from the colonising militia.

Indigenous Ned

The adage that nearly every Australian knows someone associated with the Ned Kelly legend also applies to Aboriginal people. The police attempting to hunt down the Kelly gang had to use Aboriginal mounted police and trackers. An 1870s cartoon depicting the hopeless police hunt included an Aboriginal woman. Whilst the police sleep soundly in their hammocks, she is the only member of the party who sees the Kelly gang taunting them. Kelly's superior skills, cunning and almost 'native' know-how were renowned. The Victorian police were so desperate to catch him that in 1878, then again in 1880, they deployed Aboriginal trackers to help in the pursuit. Perhaps drawn by the reward of £8,000 for Kelly's capture, six Queensland mounted troopers, including Wannamutta or Jack Noble and Werannabe or Gary Owens, from Fraser Island and Cape York respectively, tracked the gang to Glenrowan. Although money was set aside for their reward, those

two never received it. An 1879 photograph held at the Queensland Police Museum shows a contingent of five Aboriginal trackers in police uniforms with senior Queensland and Victorian Police.⁵⁰ Ned may have known the bush, but he also knew that talented Aboriginal trackers exceeded his own skills. They could read the evidence of each broken branch, each foot or boot imprint or horseshoe, and each smudged creek bank. Kelly was more afraid of Aboriginal trackers than any white policeman, consequently referring to them as 'little black devils'.⁵¹

The Ned Kelly legend became transnational not only between Ireland and Australia, but it expanded into Aboriginal legend. According to historian Minoru Hokari, Ned Kelly becomes the 'moral European' – a good man who worked with the Gurindji people and hailed from a place called 'island' – or 'Ireland' – a place far outside their world of inland plains.⁵² Amongst the Yarralin people of the Northern Territory, Ned Kelly was said to have 'died for our sins'. According to Rose, they 'have given birth to an indigenous Ned Kelly: he belongs to the continent because he helped make it'. He is not 'truly other, but truly us'.⁵³ Kelly was in Australia at 'the beginning of the world', and was instrumental in dividing earth and water. However, he then travelled to England – the place from which alien animals and intruders hailed – and was killed there. The Yarralin people may have heard stories, for example, of Yemmerawannie, an Aboriginal man who did travel to England with Bennelong, and died there in 1794;

⁵⁰ Photograph, Queensland Historical Atlas, <<http://www.qhatlas.com.au/photograph/queensland-native-police-sent-hunt-kelly-gang-1879>> (accessed 17 February 2011). Noble & McBride v State of Victoria & State of Queensland, Australian Indigenous Law reporter, <<http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/AILR/2000/2.html>> (accessed 20 February 2011). See also Jones, *Ned Kelly*, p. 407.

⁵¹ Kevin Baker, *Mutiny, terrorism, riots and murder: a history of sedition in Australia and New Zealand* (Bathurst, 2006), p. 58; 'Tracking down a just reward', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 March 2000.

⁵² Minoru Hokari, 'Cross culturalizing history: Journey to the Gurindji way of historical practice' (unpublished PhD Thesis, Australian National University, 2001); see Minoru Hokari, *Gurindji journey* (Coogee, 2011); Nugent, *Captain Cook was here*.
⁵³ Rose, 'Ned Kelly died for our sins', p. 117.

thus 'England killed him'. Yemmarawannie was buried at Kent, but Ned Kelly rose up to the sky.

An 'indigenous' Ned Kelly thus becomes a beacon for all; risen, he is made into a 'dreaming character' by the Yarralin and Wave Hill people. While Captain Cook travelled 'wrong way', Ned Kelly and other people from 'Island' travelled according to the correct routes of songlines and the law of the dreaming. Although Rose and Hokari encountered different Indigenous versions of the Kelly legend, with the Gurindji story suggesting Kelly could be European or at least from somewhere else, they both echo Anglo Australian and imported Christian beliefs. In the Wave Hill version, he feeds damper and brews tea in a billy, supplying the multitudes, despite only having one billy. Kelly emerges favourably in contrast to the Englishman Captain Cook, who is not from 'the dreaming', travelled the wrong way, and harnessed destructive forces.⁵⁴

Proof of the Kelly story is located in a specific place in country – a permanent repository that holds a story and connects it with journey trails or songlines. The Aboriginal Kelly saga encompasses a subversive anti-colonial morality tale for people of today. It negates assertions that the English 'got to Australia first' and that they 'discovered' the 'new' land. Rather, Kelly was Indigenous and it is he who took the initiative and went to England. While travelling there led to his earthly death, he rose to the skies to then reside, forever grounded, in the dreaming earth of Crawford's Knob, named for a white pioneer. Like other Indigenous dreaming stories, Ned Kelly is associated with both journey routes and a tangible place – in this case, Crawford's Knob in Karangpuru country is a Kelly 'dreaming' site. Kelly thus predates and postdates colonialism, creating a kind of transcendent colonialism hovering above the 'immoral' English world.

So how did the Yarralin and Gurindji people, many of whom speak English only as a second language, become connected with Ned Kelly? Their white co-workers in the cattle industry told Kelly stories and sang bushranger ballads – entertainments around the nightly campfire and shared on long driving trips. Folk expert Warren Fahey counted twenty-one

⁵⁴ Hokari, *Gurindji journey*; Rose, *Hidden histories*; Jones, *Ned Kelly*, p. 421.

Kelly ballads.⁵⁵ Additionally, the Yarralin and nearby Wave Hill people were involved in courageous strike actions or 'walk-offs' against the large English-owned company Vestey's, a notoriously exploitative outfit owned by the aristocrat Lord Vestey. Trade unionists and the Communist party actively supported Indigenous protests. Indigenous activists like Joe McGinness proudly boasted their Irish descent and its protest traditions; equally, other well-educated Aboriginal people like union leader Dexter Daniels could have told the Yarralin people about Ned Kelly. Aboriginal drovers, stockworkers and union activists were travelling between Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and the Northern Territory and to metropolitan centres to gain support for the Aboriginal station workers agitating for both equal wages and Land Rights.

Could Ned have been one of their many inspirations? An exciting story often retold, everyone had a fresh angle and a story of connection. Aboriginal people, who knew every animal, crevice and waterhole inside out, would have admired Ned's bush knowledge and observational skills. Ned and the Aboriginal men were kindred stockmen and horsemen travelling over vast areas of country. Perhaps they also knew that, without Aboriginal trackers, police would never have found Ned Kelly. Indigenous storylines spread over vast distances, and stories of the Kelly gang and the Queensland Aboriginal trackers also spread to the Northern Territory.

Transnational Ned

Ned Kelly operated as a transnational hero across multiple nations. Although he spoke in an Irish brogue, he was Australian-born and proud of it. Struggling against imperialism and class oppression, he crooned Australian ballads to Irish tunes. During his life and afterwards, white

Australians 'indigenised' Ned as the 'native son' they hoped to emulate. He modelled a superior form of colonial masculinity that might endow them with the possibility of a true and independent Australian manhood. Demonstrating superior talents, he was physically strong, courageous, an exceptional gunman and horseman. He truly 'belonged' in the bush rather than the city; he knew it inside out, and had really made it 'home'. Ned's sharp bush knowledge enabled him to elude authorities; he was cunning, clever and outwitted the police. He was a home-grown hero, the ultimate 'Wild Colonial Boy' who was no sycophant to the British and could not be tamed by the authorities. Ned eluded police for eighteen months; he survived when he should have died; he exercised leadership, both in fronting a successful gang and by promoting egalitarian ideals, including more equitable wealth distribution and justice for the underdog.

At a time of embryonic nationalism, the white legend of Ned enacted white nativism, asserting the possibility of white Indigeneity. A home-grown 'native' legend, he transcended ordinary humanity, ethnicity and colour, and thus stood for all Australians. In their quest for a truly 'native' hero, Australians found one who was white like themselves and through whom they could vicariously defy the symbols of the Old World class system and its oppressive authorities.

Like Russell Ward's *Australian legend*, Ned Kelly's legend mirrored a similar appropriation, or more properly, a white imagining, of Aboriginal culture. Ward argued that bush experiences shaped national character traits, making the typical Australian a 'rolling stone', a 'nomad tribe' who believed that 'Jack is as good as his master'. As the emblematic 'white Aborigine', Ned inhabited a version of colonial manhood that had proven its superiority. Ned thus filled a hole in the national imagination. The working classes had little affinity with the middle-class Australian Natives Association. While members occasionally dressed as Aborigines and set up gunyas as a nationalist 'natives' joke, they did not celebrate convictism.⁵⁶ At the time of his outlawry, the notion of having convict ancestry was a subject of shame – the 'convict taint'. However, Ned's convict connections only

⁵⁵ 'Australian Folklore Unit': <<http://warrenfahey.com/minstrelsy-2.htm>> (accessed 17 February 2011).

⁵⁶ This changed after the mid-twentieth century.

emboldened him, becoming the vehicle for an obsessive anti-authoritarian streak and an egalitarian desire to ridicule upper class pretensions. Ned the super-hero bestowed some respectability upon those who had brushed with the law. He was a poor man's hero, an everyman hero. Admiration of Ned was free and open to all.

At once attuned to the details of the Australian bush – a world of magpies, wombats, and men whose natures merged almost totemically with animals, Ned shared a travelling and observant seeing mode redolent of Aboriginal ways. When in the dock at Beechworth, Ned's portrait was being prepared by well-known artist Julian Ashton. Ned tried to screen his face with a possum rug, an intricate craft practiced by Victorian Aboriginal people.⁵⁷ As symbol, he embodied a notion of convergence and blending into the landscape. Ned's sentiments towards the land also evoke Aboriginal and Irish rituals, including those of connectedness through song. After being remanded to Beechworth, biographer Malony writes:

Once more he set forth on that journey with McIntyre, Steele and Bracken amongst his guards. He pointed out the place of his birth as they passed by Wallan, he sang several Kelly ballads in a soft tone, and, when they came in sight of the Strathbogies [mountains], the old longing to roam free as a brumby welled up, and he wondered aloud whether he would ever be there again.⁵⁸

Singing was a direct way of connecting to country – to its coloniser songlines and to that house on the little hill or knob where he was born. The strange protuberance in the landscape is shaped like an Aboriginal midden. Kelly and other bushranger songs were already circulating around the country and would travel to different parts of the world. The Jerilderie letter, too, and its powerful oratory, would travel far. As the Jerilderie letter shows, Ned saw the world through Irish and Australian eyes. Kelly's Irish nativism was transnational: born of English oppression of the Irish – in

⁵⁷ See Jones, *Ned Kelly*, illustration, opposite p. 342, fourth page of illustrations.

⁵⁸ Malony, *Ned Kelly*, p. 235. The site of Kelly's birth has been stated as Beveridge, and according to the 'iron outlaw' site can be more exactly identified. <<http://www.ironicon.com.au/nativened.htm>>.

Ireland, Australian convict prisons and in American labour camps. Ned's letter spoke with a piercing directness. It was a kind of 'address to nation' – that of the Irish diaspora – that he hoped would be heard as far away as Ireland and America.

Is Ned dead?

The ubiquity of Ned – in his National Gallery shrine, in the *Outlawed!* Exhibition, in so many popular forums – would lead us to conclude that the Kelly legend did not suffer collateral damage from the History Wars. As a bushman, he is like that other militarist legend, the ANZACs, but he is very unlike them, for he does not fight under the Union Jack, and he does not fight on foreign soil. As we have seen, he is associated with class war, civil war, Irish war and 'Indigenous' wars.

In the 1950s, historian Russell Ward had written in passing of the 'apotheosis' of the Australian bushman as a type. There is little contention that Ned became a secular saint to many white Australians.⁵⁹ Proof of his 'greatness' is spread in oral tradition, blogs and popular forums, which complement official archives. As most heroic outlaws are believed to 'live on' after death, outwitting their captors or simply transcending death, Ned's burial place has fittingly been a subject of contention, as has his skull and bones. Some believe it was not Ned but his brother who was hanged, and that Ned (or another gang member) went off to live in Queensland in anonymity. The alleged bones of Ned and/or his brother or another, have been exhumed in Melbourne and Queensland. Despite attracting passionate advocates, none of these theories about Ned's remains have been proven conclusively. Ned's final resting place is till clothed in mystery. As secular saint, Ned cannot die.

In the Yarralin version of the story, the ever-resilient 'clever' man rose above England, offering an alternative moral universe for both white and Aboriginal Australians to interpret and to test. In his letter, the historical Ned reached for a voice that might be heard as far away as America. We know that it reached remote northern as well as urban Aboriginal Australians. Ned raised his voice in public speeches and it became a national voice, and what is more, a symbol of nation and the transnational that mediated across the journey lines and songlines between Australia and Ireland and between Indigenous Australian nations.

Although the Ned Kelly legend was oppositional, it became a unifying legend of nation. Ned Kelly's radicalism became so embraced by white Australian culture that it became not 'ethnic' or Irish but mainstream – and Aboriginal as well as white. Even in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, its association with 'old school' white masculinist values did not tarnish Ned's reputation. Ned's legend did not become embroiled in the post 9/11 anti-terrorism backlash, or in the Australian History Wars. Despite its anti-state and militia values, it transcended conflicts between 'blacks' and 'whites'. Never 'black armband' history, it went beyond partisan party politics. Even feminist critics had to admire Ned's deference to the patriarchal power of his mother Ellen Kelly, his outrage at her sufferings as a widow, and his courage in protecting sister Kate from molestation.⁶⁰

In the national lexicon, Ned's resilient legend finds fresh associations. Journalist Bryce Lowry described WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange as a fugitive Australian rebel and a 'cyber-bushranger' – 'the Ned Kelly of the digital age'.⁶¹ Ned will not only ride again, his voice will rise again. His once occluded voice thus stands amongst the most prominent and loudest in Australian national discourses.

60 Marilyn Lake and Farley Kelly (eds), *Double time: women in Victoria 150 years* (Ringwood, 1985).

61 Bryce Lowry, 'Julian Assange is the Ned Kelly of the digital age', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 December 2010.

Exhibitionist

Leaving our first Exhibition venue, the National Gallery of Australia, I noticed that it is Ned's image that bids us farewell. At the main exit stand, the NGA's visitor feedback pamphlet parades the black-armoured Ned with large rifle, astride his horse, his visor illuminated by an angry yellow landscape (the policeman in the corner of the original painting has been chopped out.) The NGA's *Digital prints brochure* depicts Ned with his see-through, headless visor opening into a great, spacious vision of sky and cloud.⁶² Ned is solo, isolated – residing in and out of the world. Riding a pantomime horse, Ned himself becomes a charred old trunk – a similar shape to the legendary 'black stump' out the 'back o beyond' in the Australian bush. Like some ancient God, you cannot see Kelly's face, thus rendering him an everyman or someone greater. Nolan painted Ned as speechless. With his mouth obscured by the head-piece, and no way for his words to emerge, we witness the enigma of an all-seeing, unspeaking silence.

While Ned is dead and the armour empty, he lives on as a symbolic force in a much-loved, albeit bleak, landscape of nation. With its primitive rivets, his transmuted armour recycles rusty, discarded farm machinery, reminding us of the hopelessness of the small farmer's efforts in this country. Ned's black armoured silhouette suggests both the charred remains of the gang members in the Glenrowan hotel and the idea of Ned as Aboriginal – as black. Perhaps it was only if reborn as Indigenous man could any 'native Australian' achieve a deep 'belonging'. A man of few fears, Ned wisely feared the bush knowledge of Aboriginal expert trackers. Although some Aboriginal trackers probably shielded the gang – if not only for their own protection – two Queensland trackers did the deed for the reward money. Decades later, the Aboriginal people involved in the northern cattle country, including those famous for protesting coloniser land and labour exploitation, were so impressed by Ned's story that they made him their

62 Sidney Nolan, *Ned Kelly*, 1946. Paintings have the same name.

own. Perhaps they merged his Irish name with another heroic dreaming story.⁶³ Whatever the origins of the story, Ned became both Indigenous resistance hero and man of the dreaming.

Ned's own beliefs did not leave him. Thousands rallied on the streets of Melbourne demanding a reprieve. On the day he was to be hanged, at 5 a.m., he was on his knees praying. He probably said his prayers to the Virgin Mary, the sentimental focal point of Irish Catholicism and a devotion he shared with his mother, who lay in a jail cell nearby. Kelly slept some more, then at 8 a.m. rose again. His lonely cell vibrated with rousing tunes, as he sang ballads of the bush and of the 'old days' dating back to Ireland as well as Victoria.⁶⁴ When Elijah Upjohn, the executioner, approached him in readiness for the execution, Ned expressed a desire to face his death unshackled, protesting in a lilting brogue: 'There's no need for tying me'. While Ned had lost his right to be obeyed, he had not lost his right to be heard. Staring steadily at the large gilt crucifix, his head was then covered with the execution hood. In a voice not entirely audible, in a sentence that is more national legend than reliable fact, Ned proclaimed 'Such is life'.⁶⁵ A bell tolled the prisoner's death knell. The wind that had been blowing northward and whipping dust all morning dropped and veered southward, creating a cool change in the atmosphere.⁶⁶

63 See Max Charlesworth, D. Bell, H. Morphy and K. Maddock (eds), *Religion in Aboriginal Australia* (St Lucia, 1984).

64 Malony, *Ned Kelly*, p. 252. He refers to songs of the 'old days' – these Irish-derived ballads were about Ireland and Victorian themes were interwoven.

65 This account of Ned's death draws on John Malony's telling, *Ned Kelly*, p. 252. 'Such is life' has become a popular 'saying' in Australian usage. Alex Castles, *Ned Kelly's last days: Setting the record straight on the death of an outlaw* (Crows Nest, 2005). Another account written by journalists is that he said 'Ah, I suppose it has come to this.' (Castles, p. 218). One of the songs he sang was 'In the Sweet Bye and Bye' (Castles, p. 221). Other songs he was singing were criticised because they were 'secular songs'. Jones and Castles both point out that journalists from various Victorian newspapers reported differently on his last words. The *Telegraph* reported he said 'Ah well, I suppose ...' and did not finish. He had written three long letters in the days before his death pleading his innocence.

66 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 January 1980, cited in Jones, *Ned Kelly*, p. 397.