

Ned Kelly the Bothersome Hero

Ned Kelly died November 11th, 1880, but to this day, he is an iconic figure within Australian culture and is regarded by many to be a hero. He was a horse thief and a murderer, but these aspects of his identity are not as important as the ones Australians attribute to him that made him a hero; he stood up for what he believed in, resisted those who persecuted him and his family, stood for the underdog against the authorities, stood for the poor and the widows against the rich and was an honorable, loyal, and just man. This is his popular image, but in truth, Ned Kelly was a petty thief who came from a family with a history of crime, and simply made the transition from horse thief to murderer. He is admired today because men are naturally rebellious, selfish and haters of authority who consider the rich and powerful to be evil and the poor and rebellious to be good, thus giving them an excuse to overlook bothersome character traits within their heroes, such as murder.

Those who wish to excuse Ned's behavior do so, as Ned himself did, by blaming the authorities, saying that the Kellys had become the objects of unnecessary police harassment and persecution.¹ Ned said in his letters that the police came and intimidated his family at their house, particularly his sisters.² He was therefore forced to seek revenge upon the authorities for the ill treatment of his family.³

There is certainly evidence that the authorities placed an enormous amount of pressure upon the Kellys. Commodore Fitzpatrick was accused by the Kellys of trying to

¹ John McQuilton. *The Kelly Outbreak, 1878-1880 – The Geographical Dimension of Social Banditry*. (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1979). Page 69.

² Alex McDermott. "Who Said the Kelly Letters?" *Australian Historical Studies*. (2002), Vol. 33 Issue 118. (La Trobe University Press, 2002). Page 261.

³ McQuilton, 3.

molest one of the Kelly daughters.⁴ Fitzpatrick also appeared at the Kelly home one night, probably while drunk, and tried to arrest Dan Kelly, Ned's brother, and lied to his superiors as to what went on that night.⁵ This didn't stop the authorities, however, from arresting Mrs. Kelly, Ned's mother, for aiding and abetting attempted murder, sentencing her to 3 years. Even other police at the time thought that this sentencing was excessive.

The authorities specifically singled out Ned and entrapped him, after having tried to do so before and failing. Ned found a horse wandering through a field, and so he took it. Senior Constable Hall, an officer who had a personal grudge against Ned, knew that the horse was missing and had actually found it long before Ned ever mounted it, but he did not retrieve it for the owner. When Ned took the horse, Hall brought Ned to the station under the pretext of signing forms relating to his good behavior bond, for Ned had been imprisoned previously and released early on good behavior. When Ned got there, Hall instead arrested him on phony charges of horse theft. Ned resisted the arrest and fought with Hall, who called for backup and then beat Ned furiously with his revolver. "...[T]he pistol whipping of a 16-year-old in the course of an arrest," says John McQuilton in his book *The Kelly Outbreak*, "is indicative of how over-zealous some of the rank and file had become in implementing their superiors' orders... The arrest shaped Ned Kelly's attitude to the police from that time on."⁶

Although the Kellys did indeed receive much attention from the authorities, it was not always unwarranted. Long before Ned was ever born, his family had earned a

⁴ Graham Seal. "Ned Kelly: The Genesis of a National Hero." *History Today*. (November 1980). Vol. 30 Issue 11. Page 11.

⁵ Seal, 11; McQuilton, 85-88.

⁶ McQuilton, 79-80.

reputation for stealing stock from others and as horse thieves.⁷ The Kellys were related to the Quinn clan, on Ned's mother's side, and the Quinns made up the region's major criminal element.⁸ Records of arrests and convictions of the Quinn clan go back as far as 1856, starting with James Quinn, Ned's grandfather, who alone was arrested once for stealing cattle, four times for stealing horses, once for threatening someone, twice for assault, four times for violent assault, once for assaulting a police officer, four times for bodily harm and once for being a Kelly sympathizer.⁹ When the police erected a station just outside of the Quinn and Kelly residence, they burned down the police station's stables.¹⁰ "By the 1870's," says McQuilton, "many of [the Quinn clan's] members were actively involved in regional borrowing and theft..."¹¹ The policy of bringing clan members to justice for 'any paltry crime' was vigorously implemented... By 1873, Ned and Jim Kelly, Gunn, Jimmy and Pat Quinn, Jack Lloyd and friends Wright and Williamson, a selector neighbor of the Kellys, were in jail."¹²

Though the authorities sometimes overreacted to crime done by the Kellys and Quinns and handled situations improperly, it is clear that Ned and his family were heavily involved in crime and other anti-social behavior, had little to no regard for the law and had no interest in interacting with the community in a legal way. Why, then, did the Kellys have so much popular support and so many sympathizers in their day, and why is Ned Kelly an iconic and celebrated Australian hero?

⁷ McQuilton, 2.

⁸ McQuilton, 69.

⁹ McQuilton, 196.

¹⁰ McQuilton, 72.

¹¹ McQuilton, 74.

¹² McQuilton, 82.

Ned Kelly was a bushranger—an outlaw—and the idea of the Australian bushranger has been romanticized. Bushrangers came from social groups which considered themselves to be disadvantaged by the government, police and the wealthy—thus the bushrangers were characterized by the poor or underprivileged social classes as almost Robin Hood-like characters, who robbed from the rich and undeserving and fought against the corrupt government that did not look out for the poor.¹³ “These communities,” says McQuilton, “...often saw the bushranger as a victim of an unjust social system driven to lawlessness, as a champion of the ‘underdog’ and as a reflection of themselves, if in an exaggerated form.”¹⁴ The criminal acts done by bushrangers were seen as retribution against brutal jailers, wealthy squatters and the corrupt administration, and there was widespread sympathy for them amongst the lower classes.¹⁵

Thus, the people rationalized many of Ned’s actions: When the Kelly gang raided a police camp at Stringybark Creek, they had perfectly good reasons, like obtaining food and ammunition, and they only responded with violence in self-defense when they were in fear for their lives. Ned Kelly shot Commodore Lonigan dead, but Lonigan asked for it, because he reached for his gun. In reality, goes the reasoning, Ned was a peaceful man, not a murderer, and only killed when he was forced to do so, epitomizing “...the romantic picture of a decent, honest man, forced to take up arms against those who oppressed him and his class...”.¹⁶ In his letters, Ned explained that he could not possibly

¹³ Seal, 10.

¹⁴ McQuilton, 2.

¹⁵ Seal, 10.

¹⁶ McDermott, 255.

be called a murderer, because it is not murder to destroy ones natural enemies, and the police were Ned's natural enemies.¹⁷

Ned took advantage of the sympathies he received from the convict and ex-convict populations, who were itinerant bush workers and small farmers.¹⁸ When he robbed banks, Ned would destroy deeds and mortgages, which endeared him to struggling selectors, who saw the bank as "poor man-crushers".¹⁹ Whenever he had an audience, such as on February 5th at Jerilderie when he robbed a bank and held hostages at the Royal Mail Hotel, he would grandstand, ranting against the authorities and laying out explanations for his deeds.²⁰ He presented himself as a champion of the widows and the poor, and he railed against the rich, urging them to give money to the poor and treat the poor kindly, and giving them ultimatums.²¹ He barked loudly against what he saw as discrimination on the part of the authorities, who were working with the rich people against free selectors and small farmers.²² "...[T]hose individuals who take up arms and defy the law," says Eric Hobsbawm in his book *Bandits*, "and who rely on some measure of public and localized support, are both the expression and embodiment of social protest."²³ It is not hard to see why he found as much support as he did.

Ned Kelly's Irish identity also played a part in his rebellion against Australian authority, which was seen as an extension of English intrusion, and his being embraced by the people.²⁴ He was aware of his Irish background and the list of grievances his class

¹⁷ McDermott, 259.

¹⁸ Seal, 10.

¹⁹ Seal, 10.

²⁰ Seal, 12.

²¹ Seal 10.

²² Seal, 12.

²³ E.J. Hobsbawm. *Bandits*. (Suffolk: Penguin Books, 1969). Page 23.

²⁴ Seal, 10.

had against the English.²⁵ “...[M]any an Irishman rather than subdue to the Saxon yoke were flogged to death and bravely died in servile chains...”²⁶ said Kelly in one of his letters, trying to justify his actions. Ned was, therefore, another Irish martyr and hero, but although this identity was important to him, his personal struggle against the authorities was more so. “The cruelties of Australia’s convict history,” says McQuilton, “the role and function of the local police and the power of the local squatter in a specific local sense were of greater importance in his letters than his sense of being specifically Irish.”²⁷

Many sympathized with Ned Kelly during his own time because they saw corruption all around them and were unsatisfied with their lives. “...[B]anditry,” says Hobsbawm, “is a rather primitive form of social protest, perhaps the most primitive we know.”²⁸ Other Australian bandits, such as Jack Donahue, ‘Thunderbolt’, ‘Mad Dog’ Morgan, Ben Hall and Francis Christie were immortalized in song and idealized as the classic heroes of the bush who rebelled against The Establishment in order to forge their own path through life. “...[T]he bandit becomes a legendary folkloric hero,” says McQuilton, “because he mirrors, in an extreme form, a value system held by those who support him.” It is for these reasons that the story of Ned Kelly was perpetuated by the media and popular mythology after his death—by means of plays, radio broadcasts, news reports, books, and even movies—with varying degrees of truthfulness.²⁹

²⁵ McQuilton, 188.

²⁶ Ned Kelly, *Jerilderie Letter*. Kelly Collection, P. R. O.

²⁷ McQuilton, 188.

²⁸ E.J. Hobsbawm. *Primitive Rebels: Studies in archaic forms of social movement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries* (Manchester 1963). Page 13.

²⁹ Seal, 15.

When men see wealth in the hands of another man, they become envious. Men are selfish, and they want what is best for themselves, even at the expense of someone else. In the mind of an envious man, a rich man certainly did some dastardly deed in order to become rich. The envious man sees no reason why that wealth shouldn't be his, and so he hates the rich man, desiring to take what the rich man has. The envious man *deserves* what the rich man has, and therefore finds nothing wrong with actively wishing for the rich man's destruction. This deep-rooted aspect of human nature can help explain why the story of Ned Kelly is still so popular today. The administration that existed during Ned Kelly's day helped bring order to the lives of Australians by protecting banks, providing legal recourse and enforcing laws. Bushrangers who rebelled against that administration were fulfilling the selfish human desire for wealth, glory and rebellion. Ned Kelly and his family made a living stealing goods and horses from other people. They were enriching their own lives at the expense of others. The Kellys and their sympathizers rationalized this behavior. Those who owned the goods didn't deserve them, in their minds, for they were rich, and being rich, they must be the cause for others being poor.

Being selfish, men love to be praised, admired and worshipped. Being a notorious bushranger gave Ned Kelly celebrity, which is something most men desire for themselves. A battle between an armor-clad bandit and the authorities is therefore seen as glorious, romantic, heroic and brave, instead of selfish, arrogant, and foolhardy. Ned Kelly's pride ultimately led to his downfall. He and his gang dressed themselves in awkward and unwieldy metal armor for a final showdown with the police instead of sticking with the guerilla-type tactics that they had used previously. Ned was a great

speaker, and even after his brother and his friends had all been killed and he had been captured, he wrote letters and sent them to administrators, relying on the power of his persuasion to save him from the gallows. It didn't.

“For historians,” says Alex McDermott in his article, “Who Said the Kelly Letters?”, “and for those seeking a deeper understanding of what it is that constitutes human consciousness, here is truly a hero.”³⁰ I agree that human consciousness can be better understood by examining the life and mindset of Ned Kelly, but I do not think that there was anything heroic about the man. If heroism can truly be found in the “rambling and incoherent”³¹ manifesto of a horse-thief-turned-murderer, then who is to say that heroism can not also be found in the writings of any self-centered coward who picks up a gun and starts shooting people on a college campus? I say no—heroism cannot be found, in neither instance. Society would do better to choose its heroes based on a person's humility, instead of his hubris.

³⁰ McDermott, 273.

³¹ Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 23.

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