



# NED KELLY RIDES AGAIN ... AND AGAIN AND AGAIN

BY BRIAN MCFARLANE

A friend of mine tells of the family legend that her great-grandmother, a settler with many children of her own, delivered Ned Kelly.

**M**Y three-year-old grandson points to a small garden statue of Ned Kelly, about 1½ metres high, in a town to the south-east of Melbourne, and knows who it is intended to be. A stall at the Mornington market on a Wednesday in November 2005 was substantially stocked with artefacts relating to the Kelly saga, including a life-size recreation of the armour and a

smaller version of this with a clock set in the torso. At the Olympic Games in Sydney in 2000, one of the most striking features of the opening ceremony was a parade of figures wearing the instantly recognizable Kelly armour. Such is the persistence and pervasiveness of the Kelly legend over the last 150 years.

As with most legends, it is almost impossible to separate out the factual from the fanciful, or to get an unprejudiced, historically reliable account.

One recalls



LEFT FROM TOP: A PAINTING FROM SIDNEY NOLAN'S NED KELLY SERIES (1946); YAHOO SERIOUS AS NED KELLY IN RECKLESS KELLY (1993). ABOVE: NED KELLY (PHOTO: CAROLYN JOHNS). RIGHT FROM TOP: THE KELLY GANG (1906); THE KELLY GANG (1906); THE KELLY GANG (1920)

the great director John Ford's line from *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962): 'When the legend becomes fact, print the legend', presumably because that is what most people will want to hear. In the Kelly country in north-eastern Victoria, one finds a huge (i.e., six-metres high) statue celebrating Ned's pre-eminence in Glenrowan where he was finally caught, its size perhaps signifying that he is the township's only claim to distinction. There is a different sort of monument in Mansfield. In the latter's main street is a memorial: 'To the Memory of the THREE BRAVE MEN who lost their lives while endeavouring to capture a band of armed criminals in the Wombat Ranges, Near Mansfield, 26<sup>th</sup> October 1878. This Monument is erected by subscription, from the inhabitants of Victoria and New South Wales. AD 1880.' Here, and on several gravestones in Mansfield dating back to that time, the Kelly gang is simply referred to as 'armed criminals'. A new book, Alex Castles' *Ned Kelly's Last Days: Setting the Record Straight on the Death of an Outlaw* (Allen & Unwin, 2005), queries the validity of the legal processes that led to his hanging.<sup>1</sup>



What then are we – and, for the purpose of this essay, are *films* – to make of these conflicting responses? I shall be mainly concerned here with the two most recent Kelly films, those made in 1970 and 2003, with a glance at Yahoo Serious's spoof *Reckless Kelly* (1993), but to do so it seems necessary to place them briefly in several wider contexts. 'Icon' and its adjective 'iconic' are two of the most overworked and misused words today, but if we take an iconic figure to be one having widely exemplary status, then clearly Ned Kelly is 'iconic' in the Australian context. Who else is so famously Australian? Perhaps only Don Bradman and Nellie Melba: well, Bradman has a song written about him, Melba has a dessert named for her, and Ned Kelly has given rise to a simile ('As game as ...'). Who else so potently conjures up the essence of Australianness, as it is stereotypically conceived, involving such qualities as doggedness, populist appeal, and lack of deference for such Establishment as the nation may boast? A film which takes on Kelly will have to come to some sort of terms with such national mythology.

In the case of Ned Kelly, there is a formidable intertextuality which involves novels, plays, operas and ballet and paintings, even a large tapestry,<sup>2</sup> as well as filmed interpretations of the Kelly gang's exploits. Films can be usefully appraised in a cross-medial context of this kind, but it may well be claimed that film has not yet really made its definitive



LEFT: MICK JAGGER PLAYED THE AUSSIE OUTLAW IN TONY RICHARDSON'S *NED KELLY* (1970)  
 ABOVE: *NED KELLY* (PHOTO: JOHN TSIAVIS) RIGHT FROM TOP: PHILIP BARANTINI, ORLANDO BLOOM, HEATH LEDGER IN *NED KELLY* (PHOTO: CAROLYN JOHNS); ORLANDO BLOOM IN *NED KELLY*; *NED*; ABE FORSYTHE IN *NED*



mark in its representation of Kelly and his gang and what they stand for in the national history/mythology. Two of the more recent literary versions are Robert Drewe's *Our Sunshine* (1991) and Peter Carey's *The True Story of the Kelly Gang* (2000). Both novels are stylistically bold, both are told in the first person, and both are strongly pro-Kelly. According to the film's credits, Drewe's book provided the basis for the most recent film *Ned Kelly* (Gregor Jordan, 2003), which approaches its narrative in essentially more conventional fashion than Drewe's 'snapshots' account of Kelly's outlawry, starting at the Glenrowan pub and then lighting on influential 'moments' leading up to this. Carey's book assumes Kelly's semi-literate, unpunctuated but eloquent voice in a series of 'letters', presented as 'parcels' of documents held at the State Library of Victoria (now home of the Kelly armour), and supposedly written to Kelly's daughter. This Booker Prize-winner is intensely sympathetic to Kelly ('I'm sure you know I have spilled human blood when there was no other choice at that time I was no more guilty than a soldier in a war').<sup>3</sup> Since the novel is in the first person, there is no 'objective' viewpoint in which to place Kelly's own. Drewe locates Kelly's outlaw career in his poor Irish selector's background, and in obliquely adumbrated psychological roots relating to the 'soggy father'<sup>4</sup> he more or less despised and the mother who had his life-long devotion – and his anger for her marrying George King, who in Carey's book had also fathered a child by Ned's own light-of-love, Mary Ahearn.

There have been several plays based on the exploits of the Kelly gang, with titles such as *The Kellys*, *Outlaw Kelly* and *The*



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*Kelly Gang*; the latter, the first known, was performed in 1889. The best-known is Douglas Stewart's play, *Ned Kelly*, first performed in 1942 and published in 1943, reaching a wider audience when it was republished in Penguin Books' *Three Australian Plays* in 1963. It is a not wholly successful attempt to blend the realist and the poetic, which may account for its not being much performed in recent years. Somewhat talky and static, it probably had its most notable staging by the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust in Sydney in 1956, with Leo McKern, in pre-Rumpole days and girth, as Ned. The Penguin editor wrote: 'Here all the birds in the bush of the "Australianist" legend come home to roost – the underdog and his fight against society; the ambiguous rebel seen as lawless hero; the collision between the capitalist enterprise of the cities, and its conformist compulsions with the private enterprise of the bush; the epic themes of endurance and of wandering in vast, hostile landscapes.'<sup>15</sup> The film versions, as we shall see, take up – and perhaps in some instances idealize – such issues.

So, though there are novels, plays, operas and ballet scores on the subject of the 'Kelly Outbreak' as it has come to be known, the most nearly definitive images to date are not to be found in these or in the several film and television versions but in Sidney Nolan's great series of paintings,<sup>6</sup> first exhibited in the late 1940s. 'The simplicity yet overwhelming power of Nolan's black helmet – sometimes with the sky beyond visible through the eye-slit, at other times bloodshot eyes – has made it the quintessential Kelly image.'<sup>17</sup> One of such paintings (it preceded the series proper) is held at Melbourne's Heide Gallery in Heidelberg, Victoria; it is called: 'Ned Kelly "Nobody knows anything about my case but myself", 1945', the series itself having its permanent home in the National Gallery, Canberra.<sup>8</sup> The black square of the helmet has itself passed into the nation's iconography, creating its own legend as it reinforces the already existing one. As Chris Wallace-Crabbe has written: '... the artist found a human subject who lifted him to greater heights: the nineteenth-century larrikin-bushranger, Ned Kelly, energetically errant son of a transported convict, hanged for murder but para-

doxically revered, not only in Victoria but throughout the continent.'<sup>19</sup> And a little later: 'The Nolan legend is itself a rich one. He can be interpreted as the proletarian young man in rebellion against a bourgeois world.'<sup>10</sup> And most recently, the *Age* reported the sale, at a Christie's auction in Melbourne, of Nolan's *Ned Kelly Triptych* for \$133,595, two legends converging expensively.<sup>11</sup>

The fact that there is now an exhaustive *Encyclopedia* devoted entirely to Ned Kelly and those whose paths he crossed, and with a vast bibliography, suggests the kind of hold he has exerted on the national imagination. There is also a substantial permanent display of Kellyana in the State Library of Victoria's exhibition, 'The Changing Face of Victoria'. The most significant items here are 'the Jerilderie Letter', dictated by Kelly and written by his associate Joe Byrne, an attempt to offer their version of the events that ultimately led to Ned's capture and trial, and the supreme icon: the armour itself, or all of it that the Library has been able to buy.<sup>12</sup> That the Kelly exploits should occupy so prominent a place in this exhibition is yet another pointer to their centrality in Australian mythology.

What, then, has film made of all these rich pickings? The short answer is probably: not enough. Certainly, there is as yet no film image that displaces in the mind Nolan's images of the black-visored figure against the harsh ochre landscapes. In considering here the most recent feature films deriving from the Kelly story, the last context in which they should be placed is the long history of its cinematic representation.

As most people must now know, the *The Story of the Kelly Gang*, made by J. and N. Tait, which opened on Boxing Day 1906 in Melbourne, is regarded as the first secular feature-length film<sup>13</sup> made in Australia. Pike and Cooper describe it as 'The longest narrative film then seen in Australia, and quite possibly in the world',<sup>14</sup> adding that 'For five weeks it ran to packed houses at the Athenaeum Hall ... and then moved to other theatres'.<sup>15</sup> The film no longer exists except in fragments, and damaged ones at that: William Routt writes that 'About nine minutes survive out of the film,

which may have initially run to forty or more minutes (and subsequently seems to have been increased to at least an hour.'<sup>16</sup> The remaining nine minutes can be viewed on video,<sup>17</sup> and it is historically very revealing of the state of film art in that pioneering era: the narrative is conveyed largely by means of a static camera. The action happens in long shot within the frame as captured by a fixed camera, and there is no suggestion of editing to highlight, for instance, a face or gesture, or to comment on connections between shots. Sets are rudimentary, and much of the meaning is necessarily related in the inter-titles. But it needs to be remembered that this film derives from the very earliest period of feature filmmaking, and, within the constraints of what was film practice at the time, it is vigorous and fresh-looking. No doubt the success of this film, re-released with extra footage in 1910, encouraged the spate of films on related themes during the next five years, until the banning of the bushranger genre by the New South Wales Police Department in 1912, as an official response to the romanticizing of the outlaws.

There were at least three further early Kelly films,<sup>18</sup> all produced and written by Harry Southwell, who, Welsh-born, worked in American films before moving to Australia in 1919.<sup>19</sup> Southwell's first two<sup>20</sup> starred Godfrey Cass, whose father 'was a gaol governor, first at Beechworth, then at Melbourne Gaol, where he officiated at the hanging of Ned Kelly in 1880'.<sup>21</sup> Cass had played Ned Kelly on stage, as well as in *The Kelly Gang* (1920) and *When the Kellys Were Out* (1923). The former, 'substantially complete' according to Pike and Cooper's system of asterisks though there seems to be only a little over two minutes in the video collection, is described by them as 'almost naively ambitious' and 'the film carried a laborious warning against the temptations of outlawry' presumably to 'mollify the censors'.<sup>22</sup> In the surviving footage, Ellen Kelly's image is that of saintly maternal figure which seems to be at some odds with most versions of this tough mother of ten, selector and sly-grog purveyor.

*When the Kellys Were Out*, incomplete, with 'major gaps', was criticized for

its historical inaccuracy. However, it is arguable that none of the Kelly films has been overly concerned with this, more often playing for sympathy for the anti-hero, the underdog, in opposition to a cruel judiciary and its supporting police force. In this 1923 film, Southwell in fact goes to some lengths to portray Sergeant Kennedy as a family man, and the intertitles refer to his 'plucky fight against overwhelming odds' at the Stringybark 'massacre' of October 1878. The film lingers over his death, cuts to an 'insert' shot of his little child, and returns to the prone Kennedy who says to Kelly: 'If I ask you to fix up my wounds, it's for the sake of my wife and kiddy.' Whether this springs from Southwell's genuine feeling for Kennedy or is just his way of getting round the censorship problem that would have ensued from idealizing the Kennedy gang is problematic. Historian Weston Bate, writing of 'the Kelly saga', claims that 'the police ... engendered local distrust and contempt similar to that experienced on the goldfields',<sup>23</sup> while Wallace-Crabbe, though not in justification of their actions, says: 'The police were nothing more than the other side of a proletarian coin.'<sup>24</sup> Southwell's last version of the Kelly saga, the talkie *When the Kellys Rode* (1934), was made on location in the Blue Mountains and in Sydney's Cinesound Studios, and was banned in New South Wales for over a decade. One critic found it 'unedifying, unconvincing, and often laughable ...'<sup>25</sup>

There were plenty of other films about anti-establishment protagonists, and indeed this has been a continuing motif in Australian cinema until the present day,<sup>26</sup> but nearly two decades passed before the next one to focus specifically on Kelly. This was *The Glenrowan Affair* (1951). Shot on locations around the Victorian town of Benalla and in studios in Sydney, the director, Rupert Kathner, appeared as treacherous Aaron Sherritt under the too-cute pseudonym of Hunt Angels. The film was severely reviewed and had only limited screenings. Whether the public was simply tired of the Kelly gang's (mis)deeds or whether the long sleepy decades of the 50s and 60s in which so few Australian features were made are responsible, there was no further film focusing on this icon of Australian rebelliousness until Tony Richard-

son's British-funded *Ned Kelly*, starring Mick Jagger, in 1970.

In an interview in 1992, British director Karel Reisz told me:

*What happened was that Albert and I formed a company [in the early 1960s]. Albert at that time had an Australian girlfriend, Zoë Caldwell, who said, 'Why don't you fellows make a film about Ned Kelly?' We asked David Storey [I suspect Reisz may have meant David Mercer here] to write a script and we went to Australia to look for locations. It took us about fourteen months to prepare it. David Storey's script was very good, but very dark. When we delivered it to Columbia, who had commissioned it, I remember Mike Frankovitch [vice-president of Columbia's production arm from 1963] said, 'I've commissioned a western and you're giving me Macbeth. I'm not making this. Goodbye.'<sup>27</sup>*

Albert Finney had starred as Reisz's rebellious hero in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), and must have seemed very probable casting for Ned Kelly – if an English actor was to be considered – but the proposed production was abandoned. When the idea of a Kelly film was refloat, the director was Reisz's 'New Wave' colleague Tony Richardson, stage and screen director of *Look Back in Anger* (stage 1956, film 1959, with its protagonist the seminal rebellious youth figure, Jimmy Porter), and Mick Jagger was chosen as Ned. This caused a good deal of controversy in Australia, but, given that the film was going to need a 'name' to have any chance of international success, it was perhaps shrewd to cast one of the period's iconoclasts to portray a comparably rebellious figure of nearly a hundred years earlier. In his own way, Jagger was as much a focus for anti-establishment fervour as Kelly came to be in his.

Jettisoning (Storey's or) David Mercer's screenplay in favour of one jointly authored by director Richardson and Australian Kelly authority and television producer Ian Jones, the British company Woodfall, which had been set up by Richardson and playwright John Osborne, began shooting in New South Wales in July 1969, and was premièred at Glen-

rowan a year later. No one much liked the film then or later but it is in some ways more adventurous than the 2003 film which was more popularly received. It opens in the Old Melbourne Gaol, in colour so desaturated as to be almost sepia monochrome, with a title, THE END, and with Ned washing his hands and combing his hair, then making his way to the scaffold, attended by a priest, a photographer, and his mother (Clarissa Kaye) warning him: 'Mind you die like a Kelly.' This opening sequence is followed by a title, THE BEGINNING, as the narrative episodes begin to dramatize how Ned has been brought to the scaffold.

The film is unusually sparse in dialogue and its action is often linked on the soundtrack with ballads which either promote the exposition or intensify the shifts in mood, from, say, the tranquillity of 'The Pleasures of a Sunday Afternoon' to the plangent romanticism of 'She Moved Through the Fair' (sung by Glen Tomasetti), which accompanies the movement from the indoor knees-up to Kelly's alfresco meeting with Caitlin, to the melancholy strains of Jagger's version of 'The Wild Colonial Boy'. These balladic interpolations also offer some criticism of the Kellys in the song about Lonigan's widow ('They say that Ned Kelly ain't never done wrong ... /Tell that to Lonigan's widow') as well as the jocularly of 'Blame it on the Kellys' (sung over a montage in which they rob a dinner party, an English riding-party, a bank and a funeral procession). Then, as the film is nearing its end, the gloomy prognosis of 'In the Shadow of the Gallows' is heard, in a dialogue-free sequence in which the setting changes from a forest to the snow-covered high country. One reviewer who did not care for this narrative strategy dismissed it as 'an ambling, folkloric approach to [the] hero's grim outlaw existence',<sup>28</sup> but this seems to miss Richardson's point: this Ned is being presented as a ballad hero, not as a piece of detailed characterization.

In its use of these ballads and of the landscape, superbly lit and composed in Gerry Fisher's glowing cinematography, Richardson's *Ned Kelly* often reminds one of the aural and visual pleasures of Robert Altman's nearly contemporaneous revisionist western, *McCabe and*

*Mrs Miller* (1971). Fisher's is perhaps the one indisputable triumph of the film. Again and again the eye is ravished by images of the demanding but austere beautiful countryside. While the opening ballad sings of how 'They turned him out of Beechworth Gaol in 1871', the camera tracks the flora and fauna in their innocence of the drama of (in)justice; and later, the long shot of Ned sitting among ghost gums, reading, then seeing (and stealing) a ghostly bull, briefly suggests an outback Bayeux. When he returns home after his time at Beechworth, there is an echo of John Ford's majestic *The Searchers* (1956), as the long-missed one is greeted by sisters who run to meet him and the mother who peers through the hut's curtains. Near the end, the film makes its own contribution to the store of Kelly legend with a great shot of Kelly, in full armour, emerging out of the mist walking along the railway line to confront the police.

I've concentrated my attention here on the aural and the imagistic impact of the film rather than giving a connected account of its narrative. This is partly a matter of emphasizing the film's strengths, and partly because the events it canvasses are the well-known ones we expect: for example, Ned's early career as a bare-knuckle fighter; the treachery of Constable Fitzpatrick who arrests Ellen Kelly for 'attempted murder' when she intervenes as he lays hands on her daughter Kate; the 'massacre' of Stringybark Creek; the planning of the train derailment at Glenrowan and how it is thwarted. It is more important to consider not just what happens next but the kind of film and hero Richardson and his collaborators are presenting. If it is short on the conventional excitements of the western genre, with which it has of course points in common, it is interesting for the ideological shading its British filmmakers bring to it. As one of the key figures of the 'angry young man' school of British stage and screen, Richardson not surprisingly stresses the element of Irish Catholic semi-poverty striving to get a foothold in English Protestant comparative affluence.

Which brings us to an assessment of Mick Jagger's presence in the film – as one rebel hero representing another. One

contemporary British reviewer considered that 'Jagger never seems quite big enough to dominate the film and carry it with him ... even at his best in the heroic moments near the end of the film, he seems a slightly wooden performer.'<sup>29</sup> All right, Jagger is no great shakes as an actor, but he has a sort of charisma which transcends a wonky Irish accent and an often-stilted delivery. Fisher frames him in ways that make the most of his presence; he is, for instance, often photographed from low angles, especially towards the end when the myth-enshrinement is at its most intense, and his own rendering (repeated near the end) of 'The Wild Colonial Boy', in the communication medium he is most at home in, creates an authentic flicker of hero-victim recognition. Tony Richardson, fresh from his angry young man's re-telling of *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1968), may not have made a 'successful' film of his folktale version of Kelly, but it is more daring and more provocative than the conventional, better-received 2003 take on the tale – and those are surely two qualities one has a right to expect of a Kelly film.

Gregor Jordan's *Ned Kelly* is an Australian/French/UK/US co-production, based on Robert Drewe's novel, *Our Sunshine*, but not in general opting for its impressionistic narrational mode with its highly individual rendering of Ned's own first-person voice. While embracing the major incidents of the Kelly story, and clearly on the side of the rebellious Irish selector asserting the rights of the underdog in the face of a corrupt police force, an English landowner class and an oppressive judiciary, the result, as one reviewer has said, 'is neither as rousing nor as moving as might have been expected'.<sup>30</sup> Despite looking well and despite a more than competent cast (Geoffrey Rush is effortlessly commanding as Superintendent Hare, Ned's final antagonist), the film is no more than routinely entertaining without being memorable.

This film works almost too hard at soliciting our sympathy for Ned: immediately after the sequence that accompanies the credits, in which Ned is seen racing off a stolen horse, he is seen saying grace in his parents' shack, establishing early, that is, a background of Catholic piety

and the idea of the loving family man. He is then shown offering to 'break' the horse belonging to English landowner Cook (Nicholas Bell) rather than have Cook shoot it – Cook shoots it anyway, and our sympathies with Ned are further strengthened. When Ned needs Cook's wife Julia (Naomi Watts) to provide him with an alibi – he was busy making love to her at the time Sergeant Fitzpatrick claims Ned shot at him – she refuses: 'That's impossible. I'd be disgraced.' This becomes another example of Ned's Irish innocence betrayed by English duplicity. He is, at every turn, depicted as a justified rebel, which may or may not be the case, but it makes less for holding drama than a didactic apologia. Heath Ledger, undoubtedly a better actor than Jagger, is imposing enough but somehow less memorable than Jagger, and it may be that the film insists too much on his nobility of purpose. Almost at the film's start we see his boyhood rescue of a friend who nearly drowns, and it ends with the image of the young Ned having the green and gold sash he'd been awarded tied round him as 'proof that I've saved life as well'.

Jordan opens on a montage of guns and horsemen and, in Oliver Stapleton's cinematography, achieves some stylish vistas with horsemen on mountain skylines and a muted authenticity in interiors. The forest scenes evoke such Australian painters as Frederick McCubbin (take a look at his affecting painting, 'The Lost Child' and the famous triptych, *The Pioneers*)<sup>31</sup> while austere alpine vistas recall Fred Williams's bleak landscapes, without creating images as striking as those that dominate the earlier film. However, cinematographer Stapleton and production designer Steven Jones Evans have potently evoked the iconography of the western on many occasions: while a dance is going on inside, a lone rider emerges in the street outside; or later when Ned and Joe enter town as romantic heroes ('The country belongs to us and we'll go wherever we like'); or as riders approach a homestead in a way that again recalls *The Searchers* or *Shane* (1952) and countless other westerns. But I don't mean to imply that the film's 'look' is merely derivative. There is also a freshness in its response to the wild life of the Kelly country – to

birds and snakes, and to rock surfaces and twisted trees – and the image of the armoured Ned emerging from the gloom at Glenrowan to meet his captors draws superbly on Robert Drewe's description:

*He moves off into the smoky dark, rolling with the armour weight, boots crunching frosty gravel. The frost is clamping down the mist and gunsmoke clouds close to the ground. Bullets snaking low, hissing through the dewy grass ... Coming and going, lumbering and invisible, deflecting and absorbing bullets – he may as well be made of smoke – he sees all this.* (pp.166-7)

For the most part, Jordan's film has not sought to reproduce Drewe's tone, though the novel itself in some ways (including its impressionist sketching of episodes and the mix of first and third person) seems intensely cinematic. At this crucial moment, though, the film-makers seemed to have been consciously inspired by the writer.

These two movies – from 1970 and 2003 – are the main film representations of the Kelly saga. One ought, though, to note that there have been two parodic re-tellings in the cinema in recent years. Yahoo Serious's *Reckless Kelly* (1993) has a certain amount of sophomoric fun with the legend, updating it to include issues of environment and corporate greed. The Glenrowan Hotel is the home of the Kelly family and it is built on Reckless Island in a national park. Ned's project is to rob banks so as to buy the land and prevent a large bank from taking it over and selling it to the Japanese. His Robin Hood-style antics lead to his becoming a Hollywood star in a film called 'The Christian Cowboy', and it is perhaps apt that Ned fetches up in the home of the great legend-creator of the twentieth century. Oh, enough about its mad plot. It has just about enough energy to see it through, enough jokes at the expense of whatever comes to mind (such as the absurd appearances of emus and kangaroos dodging about the Hotel in a sly parody of the way they were once used in international films set in Australia). Following the success of Serious's previous scattergun comedy, *Young Einstein* (1988), this later film had at least some exposure, whereas Abe Forsythe's

*Ned* (2003) seems scarcely to have been seen. Perhaps its timing was off: it was released in the same year as Jordan's film. An online reviewer opened her review with: 'Irreverent, risky and highly inventive, there's plenty of Ned-foolery in this crazy spoof on the Ned Kelly story.'<sup>32</sup> The point of noting these burlesques is chiefly to draw attention again to the tenacity of Kelly lore: a legend needs to be thoroughly established before it can be mocked and survive the mocking.

At the time of writing, I do not think *Ned* is available on either video or DVD. Nor, as far as I can discover, are any of the television versions: *Ned Kelly*, the 1960 telemovie for the ABC, starring Ken Goodlet, who went on to play Superintendent Nicholson in Tony Richardson's 1970 film; the teleplay, *The Trial of Ned Kelly* (1977), starring John Waters as Ned (the text of the Roger Simpson screenplay was published);<sup>33</sup> or the mini-series, *The Last Outlaw* (1980), made for Pegasus Productions and Channel 7. The latter is the only one of the three that has been available for this study, and it is one of the least interesting versions of its protagonist's life and hard times. Running to four episodes of 100 minutes each, it seems interminable and the writers, Ian Jones and Bronwyn Binns, have filled out the time between the action episodes with innumerable static domestic scenes and sentimental asides. The series bears this caption: 'All characters, events, names, dates and places in this series are drawn directly from fact', but that is no guarantee of dramatic viability. Even more than most of the representations considered above, this one sanitizes the Kelly gang. From the outset, they are depicted as high-spirited lads, with Ned as a fresh-faced respectful boy, a good son who promises his widowed mother, 'Some day I'll build us a decent place', then as a hard worker trying his hand at felling trees. Later, when his gang has killed the three policemen at Stringybark, we are asked to accept his claim that 'It was a fair fight, nothing I looked for', and worst of all is a long speech he makes in the Jerilderie pub in which the screenplay doggedly tries to mythologize him as he intones sentiments such as 'Where one poor man is abused and oppressed, a dozen will arise to help him.'

It is not that such sentiments are intrinsically wrong, or even that Ned Kelly wasn't in earnest about them; in this series, however, they are undermined by inferior acting, some crudely predictable editing, a musical score which is utterly derivative (of westerns, Marlboro ads, even, in facetious moments, of sitcoms), and by a relentless determination to air-brush everything about the Kellys (even the interiors of the rough family home look like something from *The Little House on the Prairie*.) There is a potentially interesting comparison between (treacherous) Constable Fitzpatrick's words to Ned: 'As I see it, us Irish have got to stick together' and the Californian George King, who recalls how the US republic declared war 102 years ago; both, that is, have grounds for seeing Britain as the oppressor, but the simplistic screenplay resists developing such a political issue in anything other than the broadest, most conventional oppositions.

Perhaps the best way into a study of Ned Kelly on film is by way of a commendable recent documentary, *Besieged: The Ned Kelly Story* (2003), directed and produced by Gregory Miller and Barrie Dowdall. This attempts an even-handed, roughly chronological account (apart from starting at the Old Melbourne Gaol with an image of Ned Kelly's chained feet clanking along a metal corridor). Kelly tends to resist balanced judgments and to excite eager partisanship, but these documentarists, drawing considerably on Ian Jones's research and on-screen testimony, have admirably sought to present conflicting opinions.<sup>34</sup> An early voice-over wonders: 'Who was Ned Kelly? Was he a hero or a murderer? A terrorist or a revolutionary?' Study of the representations adduced in this essay may suggest that there is no clear-cut answer to these questions.

The interest in the Kelly phenomenon continues unabated. In December 2004, the Old Melbourne Gaol was the site for the launch of the Ned Kelly Touring Route.<sup>35</sup> As recently as 16 July 2005, Alex Castles' new book was reviewed in the *Age* with the heading: 'Such is injustice', echoing Ned's famous last words.<sup>36</sup> Two weeks later, the *Age* had the front-page headline, 'Kelly expert takes a stand against "poisonous" new



book', with Ian Jones taking the late Castles to task.<sup>37</sup> And on 3 July 2005, there was an article in the *Melbourne Age* which announced that 'The Federal Government has added the Glenrowan site of Ned Kelly's last stand ... to the National Heritage Register'.<sup>38</sup> This was to coincide with the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 'siege and bloody battle' at Glenrowan. For a man once thought by some to be a common thief and murderer, and by others a heroic defender of the poor and oppressed, Kelly might feel rather wry about the scene of his 'last stand' now being classified as protected ground. In ways not always easy to explain, Kelly clearly matters in the history of Australian iconoclasm, even, perhaps, by some who might have quaked at his approach. In 1958, cultural commentator A.A. Phillips wrote: 'Despite our uneasy shame about him, Ned Kelly still lives.'<sup>39</sup> That is undoubtedly still true today.

Brian McFarlane is the editor, compiler and chief author of *The Encyclopedia of British Film*, the second edition of which was published in September 2005, and his edited collection *The Cinema of Britain and Ireland* was published in May 2005. •

## Resources

(Publication details given in endnotes are not repeated here.)

1. The 1970 and 2003 film versions of *Ned Kelly*: both are available on video and DVD. The DVD of the later film has some useful 'extras' which discuss the place of Ned Kelly in popular culture.
2. The video of *Reckless Kelly* (1993).
3. The documentary *Besieged* (2003), available at Film Projects Pty Ltd, PO Box 580, Potts Point, NSW 2011.
4. The video compilation, *Bail Up!*, from the National Film and Sound Archive. This contains the existing fragments from the early Kelly films.
5. Justin Corfield's *The Ned Kelly Encyclopedia*, which has an immense bibliography.
6. The novels, *Our Sunshine* by Robert Drewe, and *The True History of the Kelly Gang* by Peter Carey;
7. Harold Stewart's play *Ned Kelly*, in *Three Australian Plays*.
8. Arthur Phillips, *The Australian Tradition*.

9. The State Library of Victoria's exhibition: 'The Changing Face of Victoria';
10. Two books about Sidney Nolan: Kenneth Clark *et al*, *Ned Kelly* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1961); Elwyn Lynn/Sidney Nolan, *Sidney Nolan – Australia*.
11. Mansfield Historical Society's *Tragedy at Stringybark Creek*, 2000, and other brochures from the North East Victoria Information Centres.

## Endnotes

- 1 Alex C. Castles, *Ned Kelly's Last Days: Setting the Record Straight on the Death of an Outlaw*, Allen & Unwin, Melbourne, 2005.
- 2 Based on a Sidney Nolan painting, and hung in the Benalla Art Gallery, Victoria.
- 3 Peter Carey, *The True Story of the Kelly Gang*, Faber and Faber, London, 2000, p.25.
- 4 Robert Drewe, *Our Sunshine*, Macmillan, Sydney, 1991, p.17.
- 5 H.G. Kippax, 'Introduction', *Three Australian Plays*, Harmondsworth *et al*, Penguin Books, 1963, p.17.
- 6 See Elwyn Lynn and Sidney Nolan, *Sidney Nolan – Australia*, Bay Books, Sydney & London, 1979, pp.58-71.
- 7 Justin Corfield, *The Ned Kelly Encyclopedia*, Lothian Books, Melbourne, 2003, p.366.
- 8 All but one of Nolan's Ned Kelly series were painted in the dining-room at Heide.
- 9 Chris Wallace-Crabbe, 'Nolan, Kelly and Co.', in *Read It Again*, Salt, Cambridge, 2005, pp.84-5.
- 10 *ibid*, p.87.
- 11 'Nolan's Kelly legend sells for more than \$130,000', *The Age*, 23 August 2005.
- 12 Wallace-Crabbe, *op. cit.*, p.93, reports that 'one of Ned's shoulder pieces was bought at auction in July 2001 by the State Library of Victoria for \$170,000'.
- 13 The Salvation Army's production, *Soldiers of the Cross*, predated it by six years.
- 14 Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper, *Australian Film: 1900-1977*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1998 (rev. ed), p.5.
- 15 *ibid*, pp.6-7.
- 16 William D. Routt, 'The Story of the Kelly Gang', in Brian McFarlane *et al*, *The Oxford Companion to Australian Film*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1999, p.473.
- 17 Video, *Bail Up! The Bushranger on Australia's Silent Screen (1906-1928)*, National Film and Sound Archive, 1996.
- 18 On the foregoing video, there is a ten-minute fragment, possibly filmed near Perth with amateur actors, and possibly pre-dating the Tait film.

- 19 Ina Bertrand, 'Southwell, Harry' in *Oxford Companion*, *op. cit.*, p.465.
- 20 Fragments of these two films are also preserved on the Video, *Bail Up!* There are 2 minutes 7 seconds from the earlier, and 17 minutes 19 seconds from the later of the two films.
- 21 Ina Bertrand, 'Cass, Godfrey' in *Oxford Companion*, *op. cit.*, p. 58.
- 22 Pike and Cooper, p.96.
- 23 Weston Bate, 'From Eureka to Ned Kelly: A Police Force Out of Step with Society', in *Victorian Historical Journal*, Vol. 75, No. 1, p.88.
- 24 Wallace-Crabbe, *op. cit.*, p.90.
- 25 *The Argus*, 15 October 1934.
- 26 Think of *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (Fred Schepisi, 1978), *Breaker Morant* (Bruce Beresford, 1980), *Crocodile Dundee* (Peter Faiman, 1986), in their different ways all at odds with establishment values.
- 27 Author's interview with Karel Reisz in London 1964. See Brian McFarlane (ed.), *An Autobiography of British Cinema*, Methuen/British Film Institute, London, 1997, p.478.
- 28 Jan Dawson, 'Ned Kelly', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, August 1970, p.159.
- 29 Margaret Tarratt, 'Ned Kelly', *Films and Film*, August 1970, p.41.
- 30 Geoffrey MacNab, 'Ned Kelly', *Sight & Sound* November 2003, p.56.
- 31 This triptych was bought by the National Gallery of Victoria in 1906.
- 32 See Louise Keller at: <http://www.urbancinefile.com.au/>
- 33 Roger Simpson, *The Trial of Ned Kelly*, with an introduction by Ian Jones. Heinemann Educational Australia (Australian Theatre Workshop), Richmond, Victoria, 1977.
- 34 *Besieged: The Ned Kelly Story*, Film Projects Potts Point, New South Wales, 2003.
- 35 Jonathan Green, 'On tour with the Kelly gang', *The Age*, 8 December, 2004.
- 36 Christopher Bantick, 'Such is injustice: Why Ned should have got off', *The Age*, 16 July 2005.
- 37 Larry Schwartz, 'Kelly expert takes a stand against "poisonous" new book', *The Age*, 1 August 2005.
- 38 Kenneth Nguyen, 'Ned Kelly's last stand takes an official place in history', *The Age*, 3 July 2005.
- 39 A.A. Phillips, 'The Australian Romanticism and Stewart's Ned Kelly', *The Australian Tradition*. Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1958, p.105.