



REVISITING THE PAST: A STUDY OF PETER CAREY’S NED KELLY AS A NATIONAL ICON

¹VIKRAM SINGH

¹Assistant Professor, Department of English
C.R.M. Jat College, Hisar

Abstract:

The myths associated with outlaws or ‘social bandits’ are important elements of national identity in many developed countries. The myths surrounding ‘social bandits’ and rural outlaws such as Robin Hood, Jesse James and Ned Kelly are important expressions of cultural identity in urban and industrialized nations. One such myth which remained alive in the collective memory of the people is the myth of Ned Kelly. Even after his death, the outlaw Ned Kelly lives on in Australian culture through various media, ensuring his position as a symbol of Australian identity. The present paper focuses on the myth of Ned Kelly, a mytho-historical character of Peter Carey’s novel True History of the Kelly Gang and presents how he has challenged the hegemonic power structure of the time and has proved himself as a national icon. Revisiting the past is an attempt to restore dignity to the historically marginalized and misrepresented groups. The paper analyses how a writer revisits the past and presents the marginalized masses who are subject to tyranny, from a dignified and elevated point of view. This paper also aims to study how Peter Carey, an Australian writer rewrites through fiction the history of marginalized aboriginal and provides him the deserved statues.

Keywords: Australia, bushrangers, national identity, revisiting past, Ned Kelly, outlaw, culture.

Introduction

“The past is not dead. It is not even past.”

William Faulkner’s words form the epigraph to Peter Carey’s *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000). The quote comes from *Requiem for a Nun* (1951) and is uttered by Gavin Stevens to his wife while discussing her wayward personal history. It refers to the way that past actions survive long into the future through consequence, remembrance and guilt. This kind of survival of the past was evident in the Australian consciousness at the time of *True History of the Kelly Gang*’s publication, as Australia’s colonial history was being called into question. During this period, an array of Kelly narratives appeared in popular culture in the form of novels, exhibitions, films, and children’s books.

Australia has a unique history of its own; some parts of it are prominent and distinct, while others lay ignored and indistinct. However, one piece of the history of Australia is not so distinctive, and that is the prominence of bushrangers as outlaws. The most famous of these Australian bandits is a bushranger named Ned Kelly. One of the most popular figures in Australian history, Ned Kelly, is at the center of

Carey's novel *True History of the Kelly Gang*. The life of Ned Kelly is intertwined with the history of the continent itself as well as prejudices carried across the oceans from England. Although it is difficult to separate fact from fiction in the story of Ned Kelly's life, it is clear that he lived a life full of struggle. He was an Irish Australian, loyal to his family whose history was "steeped in the mythology of the Irish rebellions against the British" (Marsh 61). This was part of the cause of the tension between the wealthy British settlers and the poorer Irish in Australia in Kelly's time. As a consequence, Ned Kelly himself had strong anti-English feelings and an extremely strong aversion to the police who in that era was under the English authorities. The police of those times were said to engender "local distrust and contempt similar to that experienced on the gold fields" (McFarlane 29). He lived at a time when the Irish-Australians experienced some rough and discriminatory justice from police and wealthy land-owners (or squatters). These squatters had assumed property rights and despite legislation to allow indigenous people to settle on the Crown land occupied by the settlers, the squatters still managed to maintain their monopoly on land and drove the natives off their lands. It was the combination of these oppressive forces that Ned Kelly tried to rebel against.

Born in 1855 to Irish immigrant parents, Kelly was a notorious gentleman bandit who became a prominent figure in the Australian legend and folklore. Although Kelly and his gang murdered three policemen, they have since been immortalized as men who would not bow down to the British imperialistic government that controlled Australia in the nineteenth century. Using both conjecture and legitimate facts, Carey depicts Kelly as a poor and illiterate man who commits crimes only to settle injustices for the downtrodden- a mythical Robin Hood figure for Australia. Of course, Kelly Gang is a real historical phenomenon, although even calling this small band of literal and figurative brothers a 'gang' begins to suggest constricting categories of judgment and evaluation. In fact, the gang was made up of four young men- Kelly, his brother Dan, Joe Byrne, and Steve Hart- whose fabled exploits begin with the shooting of the trooper Fitzpatrick in 1878 (an incident in which at least two of the four were not even involved), and continues through the Stringybark Creek killings of three policemen in October of that year and the hold ups of banks in December 1878 and February 1879. This last robbery was also the occasion for the composition of the famous "Jerilderie Letter", which formed the Jamesian germ of the novel and in which Ned Kelly attempts a sort of vindication of what some saw as the gang's murderous rampage. The end for the gang came in June 1880, in the ferocious firefight at Glenrowan with which Carey opens his novel, and the end came for Ned, who barely survived the shootout, by hanging on 11th November of that year. Purportedly, his last words on the gallows were "Such is life" (32).

The story has fascinated Australians from the beginning, not least because of the Kelly Outrage, as it was sometimes called, and the Kelly execution which finished it effectively, represented the end of the bushranging era in Australia. This is the time which itself had spawned or revived a number of cultural masterplots; the story of oppressed Irish convicts, emancipists, and currency lads cheated, harassed, robbed, and generally abused by the Anglo power structure; the related story of small selectors hounded by the prosperous squattocracy; the story of the bravery and superb bushmanship conveyed in the colloquial simile 'as game as Ned Kelly'; the story of unswerving mateship maintained in the face of overwhelming odds; and the story of the charming larrikin whose misdeeds are more mischief than malice. That Kelly himself has become a cultural icon is demonstrated by the fact that, according to Andreas Gaile, more than 1,200 books have been written on Kelly and his part in the bushranging phenomenon, not to mention innumerable popular ballads, poems, and stories, as well as the Sidney Nolan series of paintings and a spate of dramatic treatments in plays, films, and television programs. Clearly, Kelly figures as valuable currency in perpetuating and disseminating cultural masterplots.

Gaile demonstrates how Carey exposes the lies and deceptions that make up the traditional representations of Australian history and supplants them with a new national story one that because of its fictional status is not bound to the rigidities of traditional historical discourse. At a time of momentous cultural change, when Australia is being transformed from a New Britannia in another world to a nation not merely in, but actually of the Asia-Pacific region, Carey's fiction calls for the construction of a

postcolonial national identity that acknowledges the wrongs of the past and gives Australians a sense of cultural orientation between their British past and their multicultural present.

Historical figures feed into representations of the national character, such as the independent, frontier spirit embodied by the early settlers and pioneers of the USA and Australia. Outlaws comprise important elements of national identity in many advanced industrialized countries and form an important part of the 'collective memory'. The myths surrounding outlaws share common themes cross nationally, such as "friend of the poor, oppressed, forced into outlawry, brave, generous, courteous, does not indulge in unjustified violence, trickster, betrayed, lives on after death" (Seal, 11). The overwhelmingly positive qualities associated with the myths surrounding heroic outlaws are not always based in historical fact, but 'exist in most of the world's folklores, celebrated particularly in song and narrative' (Seal, 2).

Ned Kelly and Australian Identity

The present paper is a study of the most important Australian outlaw- Ned Kelly who has lived in the collective consciousness of the Australian people for more than hundred years. It seeks to demonstrate the symbolic importance of a 19th Century outlaw for contemporary Australians, suggesting that some colonial myths remain salient for citizens of a multicultural society. The paper also probes if Kelly is a national symbol for the majority of Australians, invoking strong positive or negative feelings. It will also attempt to establish why this long dead outlaw is still relevant in the 21st Century by operationalising recurring outlaw themes from the literature. Drawing mainly upon folklore and fictional literature, Hobsbawm (1960) developed the notion of 'social bandits' to describe a particular type of heroic rural outlaw. For Hobsbawm, social bandits were more than criminals; they were seen as champions of the people, particularly by poor and oppressed peasants. The relationship between bandits and peasants was also reciprocal, as bandits relied upon the support of local people in order to evade capture (Hobsbawm 2000). Social bandits for Hobsbawm were the heroes of peasant based social movements, protests and rebellions, although as West (137) points out, it is not 'just the manner of the Robin Hood archetype that transforms criminals and outlaws into social bandits. It is the way they are interpreted to defy rules and capture through daring and cunning'. Hobsbawm's four criteria in relation to social bandits can be summarized as:

the bandit does not leave his community...he reflects the moral values and ideology of the community...his predatory activities are consistent with this ideology-his victims are those defined as enemies by the community...he is supported in word and deed by the community (O'Malley, 273).

Eric Hobsbawm maintained that 'the myth cannot be entirely divorced from the reality of banditry', a point that is particularly important for students of national identity, for it is the myths surrounding historical figures that come to be integrated into representations of the national character, rather than the facts, analogous to Thomas' famous dictum, 'If men define the situation as real, it is real in its consequences' (Thomas 572). Social bandit folklore still resonates in contemporary societies. We contend that the universal characteristics associated with outlaw heroes- rebellious but brave, fighters against injustice and oppression, chivalrous in their treatment of women and the poor, and embodying a sense of fair play- comprise the characteristics generally associated with Ned Kelly in Australia. Ned Kelly embodies what Eric Hobsbawm calls the 'social bandit', one of the 'bandit-heroes' who reflect a longing for 'freedom, heroism and the dream of justice' amongst the poor and embody their yearning for 'the fellowship of free and equal men, the invulnerability to authority, and the championship of the weak, oppressed and cheated'(13). He is an altruistic criminal and at the same time raises questions about "who" imposes the label of 'criminal' on "whom." Ned's account is his alternative history, a reply to the authorized versions of the history of the British Empire and of the ruling class of the penal colony of Australia.

The early 2000s saw a furor of debate about the degree of strategic omission or fabrication in narratives of Australian colonial history in relation to the treatment of Aboriginal Australians. Fiction had encroached upon the territory of history with far-reaching consequences, as the founding myth of

Australia as a largely peaceful settler colony was being thrown into question. Negotiating history and fiction becomes especially difficult when dealing with such a heavily mythologized and culturally loaded figure as Ned Kelly, who exists simultaneously on a number of planes. Firstly, Kelly exists as the historical persona, a man who lived in colonial Victoria, and whose actions are on the historical record. Secondly, he exists as an indigenous mythological figure. Kelly, as a mythological figure can be discerned through local ballads or legends, and whether seen as a hero or a villain, he remains a national icon. Separate from, but drawing on both of these forms, is the fictionalized Kelly in *True History of Kelly Gang*. Carey makes use of both the historical Kelly through the “Jerilderie Letter”, and heroic aspects of the mythologized Kelly, as well as fictionalizing elements of Kelly’s narrative and character.

The reason why Ned Kelly remains an iconic figure is that he straddles a number of cultural dimensions. Kelly’s stance against the colonial police taps historical elements of Australian identity where the English authorities were seen as colonial overlords. Anti-English aspects of the Kelly myth in part account for the opposition of rightwing conservatives and pro-monarchists who downplay his symbolic importance. At the same time Kelly’s conflict with the colonial police and English ‘oppressors’ (as many Irish viewed them) relate to the egalitarian and social justice strands of Australian identity (Theplanous 1995). Tensions between the English and Irish in their countries of origin were transplanted to the new colonies, with Irish-Australians on the receiving end of some rough justice from the colonial police and wealthy landowners, known as ‘squatters’ (Jones 1995). Outlaws such as Kelly ‘were celebrated because they were seen, rightly or wrongly, to embody the spirit of defiance and protest, a symbolic striking back of the poor and dispossessed against those perceived as their oppressors’ (Seal 197).

Kelly had a direct impact upon the lives or the imagination of a substantial number of people. This is reflected in the fact that before he was hung in 1880, 32,000 signatures were collected petitioning the Governor for a stay of his execution (Molony 196). The best example of Kelly’s standing among contemporary Australians was the spectacular opening ceremony of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, where a group of armoured Kelly figures paraded waving mock firearms spouting streams of sparks. Significantly, the figures did not resemble the bearded outlaw; they were stylized representations of the outlaw based upon the artist Sidney Nolan’s ‘Kelly series’ of paintings (Nolan 1985). For most Australians they would have been instantly recognizable as Ned Kelly, because as Seal has put it:

Whenever there is a need to signify ‘nation’...we reach for those tried and true icons of the bush, the digger and Ned Kelly. (Seal, 158)

The paper shows that Kelly still has symbolic resonance for a majority of Australians long after his death. In part he is remembered as one of the few colonial figures who exhibited the anti-authoritarian, and rebellious qualities that are claimed to be part of the Australian national character. As Fitzsimmons (1990) put it, “Other nations glorify authority and openly embrace the officialdom culture. We eschew such notions. (Here’s to you, Ned Kelly)”. This, in turn, draws attention to the role of the Kelly myth in the narrative of Australian nationalism:

The myth of the anti-authoritarian Kelly Gang, as it enters popular consciousness, begins to enable and authorize the simplistic nationalism that Kelly’s fight against the established order in Australia was meant to challenge (Bliss 297).

No doubt, Ned Kelly has been considered as a central to the idea of Australian national identity. Although, for some, Kelly remains simply a horse-thief and murderer, for others he represents the archetypal Australian hero, embodying characteristics felt to be uniquely Australian; such as mateship, anti-authoritarianism and support of the underdog. Many versions of the Kelly narrative focus on these characteristics, which show Kelly defying the authority of the Victorian police force; supporting the rural poor, and dying bravely. Graham Seal has described Kelly as “one of the few nationally and internationally identifiable symbols of Australia” (126). Perhaps another reason for this attention is that Carey introduces several fictional elements that reimagine Kelly’s national and gender or sexual identity. These departures from the traditional Kelly serve to unsettle elements that are central to Kelly’s heroism, such as his heterosexuality, masculinity, altruism and support of the underdog. The most obvious reason

for such attention is the novel's illusionary presentation as an historical document. Carey's rendition of the Kelly story in *True History of the Kelly Gang* is so realistic that Andreas Gaile describes the text as a "near-perfect illusion of reality that almost manages to dupe the reader" (215). Paul Eggert goes further to argue that this illusion of reality is so convincing that some readers may "believe that Carey's work is a real autobiography, printed from a manuscript actually written by Ned Kelly" (123). Iain McCalman writes that it was suggested in a Canberra Press Club conference that Carey's fictional narrative may even come to replace the historical version of events (153). Such a conflation of Carey's novel with historical narratives can be seen with historian Alex McDermott's comparison of *True History of the Kelly Gang* with several non-fiction historical Kelly works, such as Ian Jones' *Ned Kelly: A Short Life* (1995) and Andrew McQuilton's *The Kelly Outbreak* (1979). (McDermott 102)

Conclusion

The writer, Peter Carey has deployed rewriting of history and myth to aid in affirming a dignified, just and more equal stature for the repressed and marginalized sections of the Australian society, the Aboriginals. Through revisiting the past, a writer challenges the hegemonic and repressive state apparatus. Hence, he acts as a revolutionary activist who ruptures the dominant ideological structures of the state in order to unravel the truth long buried in the tombs of the ancient past. Thus, in *True History of the Kelly Gang*, Carey has revisited the Kelly myth by reevaluating him as a national icon, and both historicizing and demythologizing his myth. For Carey, the Kelly story is in part an answer to the question posed by the notion of the 'convict seed': 'Can you have a decent society when you begin with these people?' Ned proves that he is 'not caught up in this deterministic notion at all' and by doing so shows 'he is one among us in a way', redeemed and absolved from the malicious convict stains. *True History of the Kelly Gang*'s interrogations of myth and cultural memory allow for a re-imagination of Kelly that, as Huggan has suggested, effectively removes the colonial nostalgia traditionally associated with Kelly. This occurs through the possibility of projecting Carey's destabilizing of cultural memory within the text onto our cultural memory of Ned Kelly. In the novel, Kelly's status as a principled and courageous rebel is, as Carey realizes, one reason why 'Australians still respond to him so passionately'; he was not brutalized or diminished by his circumstances. He embodies the proof that their dismal history need not be read pessimistically.

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