Bushrangers in the Sydney Morning Herald: 
Ned Kelly and Australian Identity

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Abstract:
Ned Kelly is a key symbol of Australian identity although ‘bushrangers’ *per se* are of marginal importance. Our examination of *Sydney Morning Herald* articles (1987 to 2004) shows that Kelly appears in print more often than all other bushrangers combined, with the mythology surrounding Kelly sustained through this process.

Kelly is less likely than other bushrangers to appear in articles of an historical genre and is rarely the central focus of stories. On the contrary, Kelly is associated with films, art, literature and theatre productions, while Kelly the ‘outlaw’ is juxtaposed with ‘rapacious’ banks, inefficient government departments and ‘rogue’ politicians. Continual media exposure of Ned Kelly enshrines his place in Australian mythology 125 years after his death and contributes to his continuing relevance as a symbol of Australian identity.

Introduction

This is an extension of our previous research on Australian identity, part of an ongoing project that considers the influence of colonial figures on contemporary Australian identity (Tranter and Donoghue 2003; Tranter and Donoghue 2007). Through a content analysis of a large circulation newspaper - *The Sydney Morning Herald* (*SMH*) - we examine media coverage of bushrangers between 1987 and 2004.
Macdougall (2002: 115) claims the term ‘bushrangers’ was common in Australia as early as 1805, when it was used in the Sydney Gazette to describe ‘a group of suspected highway robbers, possibly escaped convicts, who often waylaid travellers in the bush.’ Bushrangers - often portrayed as heroic rebels - form part of the Australian mythscape, ‘the temporally and spatially extended discursive realm wherein the struggle for control of peoples memories and the formation of nationalist myths is debated, contested and subverted incessantly’ (Bell 2003: 66).

‘Social bandits’ (Hobsbawm 2000), such as the English Robin Hood, the American outlaw Jesse James and the bushranger Ned Kelly tend to share certain characteristics, such as bravery, daring, and acting as champions against injustice. Such bandits also require the support of their fellow ‘oppressed’ in order to evade capture (Hobsbawm 2000). Yet as West (2001: 1637) explains, “[I]t is not simply the just manner of the Robin Hood archetype that transforms criminals and outlaws into social bandits. It is the way they are interpreted to defy rules and capture through daring and cunning”. Seal (1996: 11) has summarised these qualities as ‘ten motifs’, comprising “friend of the poor, oppressed, forced into outlawry, brave, generous, courteous, does not indulge in unjustified violence, trickster, betrayed, lives on after death”. The heroic myths embodied in folk heroes such as Ned Kelly remains pertinent in many developed societies ‘despite globalisation, mass migration and cultural pluralism’ (Jones and Smith 2001: 45).

Bushrangers have been portrayed in the Australian print media for the past two hundred years in a variety of ways, from rebels and heroes in the mould of an Australian Dick Turpin, to robbers and psychopaths (Macdougall 2002). Ned Kelly, in particular, has been the subject of several films (most recently ‘Ned Kelly’ 2003), academic tomes (e.g. Jones 1995; Seal 2002) and popular novels (e.g. Carey 2001). Like Don Bradman, Ned Kelly has entered the mythology surrounding Australian identity with his image even projected to a global audience during the opening ceremony of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games.

Whenever there is a need to signify ‘nation’, as in Bicentennial, Olympic and Federation Centennial celebrations we reach for those tried and true icons of the bush, the digger and Ned Kelly (Seal 2002: 158).

As Seal’s point illustrates, Ned Kelly is one of only a few (if not the only) well known historical figures Australians recognise and celebrate, even though they have mixed feelings as to his status as hero or villain. Interest in bushrangers taps a notion of
national identity that is socially constructed (Calhoun 1994) – the bushranger as mythical folk hero. Constructionists critique the essentialist notion that ‘identity is given naturally…is produced purely by acts of individual will’ and that ‘individual persons can have singular, integral, altogether harmonious and unproblematic identities’ (Calhoun 1994: 13). They also take issue with ‘accounts of collective identities as based on some “essence” or set of core features shared by all members of the collectivity and no others’ (Calhoun 1994: 13).

As Anderson (1991: 6) has famously pointed out, nations are ‘imagined, because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’. Most of the readers of the SMH know the name Ned Kelly, although as Smith (1996: 583) warns: ‘it is notoriously difficult to disentangle the elements of genuine shared memory from those of exaggeration, idealization and heroisation which we associate with myth and legend, since there is usually more than a kernel of truth in the latter’.

This study differs from previous empirical research on Australian identity (e.g. Pakulski and Tranter 2000; Jones 1997; Phillips 1996) in that many earlier studies based their findings upon attitudinal survey questions. By contrast, this is an extension of our research on some of the characters who roamed the fringes of the former British colonies in the nineteenth century. By examining articles on bushrangers, we attempt to explore a form of constructed identity that is nevertheless grounded in historical figures.

Why have certain bushrangers remained popular? Why is Ned Kelly such a well known figure, when many Australians have trouble naming their first Prime Minister? We examine coverage of bushrangers in the print media (i.e. their frequency of coverage and their relevance and importance to articles). Is there evidence that the pattern of coverage has changed over time? For example, we anticipated that the bicentenary of (white) Australian Settlement in 1988 would be accompanied by more frequent references to colonial figures such as bushrangers, as would the centenary of Federation in 2001. More importantly in this context, how are bushrangers portrayed in SMH articles, and does the manner in which they are portrayed contribute to the formation of the Australian mythscape?
Data and Method

Articles were drawn from the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) database from 1987 to 2004. At this point we have limited our study to this brief period, first, because we were able to access an electronic database containing records from 1987 onwards and to key word search for all instances of bushrangers. Second, in light of our limited resources we could only examine only one newspaper. The SMH was seen as the most appropriate source for our study. Established in 1831, it has the longest history of publication of any Australian newspaper (National Library of Australia website), while New South Wales is the oldest and most populated state with rich history of bushranging (Macdougall 2002). While Ned Kelly hailed from Glenrowan in Victoria, he crossed the border into NSW, while other well known bushrangers, such as Ben Hall, Frank Gardiner, Captain Thunderbolt and Captain Moonlight were based primarily in NSW.

Keywords included ‘bushranger’, Ned Kelly, Joe Byrne, Steve Hart, Dan Kelly, Ben Hall, Frank Gardiner, the Captains Thunderbolt, Moonlight and Starlight, Dan Morgan and several others. The resulting articles were carefully scrutinised in order to determine the frequency of each bushranger reference, and a qualitative measure was developed to assess the centrality of bushrangers to each story.

Analyses

Ned Kelly was by far the most frequently mentioned bushranger, appearing in 59.8% of the articles. There was then a substantial drop in percentage terms to the next mentioned bushranger Captain Thunderbolt on 9.2%, with the other relatively popular bushrangers including Ben Hall (8.0%) and Captain Moonlite on 3.7%. Surprisingly, the other three Kelly gang members were only rarely mentioned during this period. On the basis of these data, Ned Kelly is by far the most frequently mentioned bushranger in the print media.

**Table 1: Bushrangers in SMH articles (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Kelly Gang</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ned Kelly</td>
<td>59.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Byrne</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve Hart</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan Kelly</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Other Bushrangers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Captain Thunderbolt</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben Hall</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Captain Moonlite</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘Bushrangers’ (generic term) | 14.4

Source: Sydney Morning Herald 1987-2004

Kelly references peaked just before the 1996 election, then slumped again after 1996, spiked sharply in 2001 and then once again declined (See Figure 1). The 2001 increase in Kelly stories is predictable in terms of the renewed interest in historical figures during the celebrations of the Centenary of Federation, but the mid 1990s are more puzzling. Analyses of the articles from this period reveal no clear patterns. The shift may reflect a combination of factors such as the support for the arts and civic culture and increased interest in republicanism under Keating’s Labor Government – as Ned Kelly has been portrayed as an early republican (Jones 1995). The Australian Labor Party has, according to Warhurst (1993: 106), ‘been influenced by a strong residue of anti-British feeling stemming from the predominance of Catholics of Irish-Australian decent’. Regardless, the pattern declined under Howard’s Coalition government after 1996, only rising again as the centenary of federation approached.

Figure 1
Comparing the percentages of Kelly articles compared with other named bushrangers (combined) and the generic term (i.e. ‘bushranger’ + ‘bushrangers’), Kelly appears in articles more often over time particularly after 2000 (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

Table 2 shows that bushrangers are rarely of central importance to the articles in which they appear. It also suggests that Kelly (9.6%) is less likely than Hall, Thunderbolt and Moonlite combined (19.5%) to be the ‘central’ focus of the articles in which he appears.

**Table 2: Centrality of the Bushranger to the Newspaper Article (per cent)**
Far from being the focus of most articles, bushrangers are used to attract, stimulate or maintain the interest of the reader. It is apparent from Figure 2 that Ned Kelly is not only the most popular of the bushrangers, but that in recent years has become even more popular relative to other bushrangers. To an extent the Kelly myth has been kept alive through a series of films and popular books such as Carey’s ‘True History of the Kelly Gang’ (2001), while in earlier years, frequent references were made to Sidney Nolan’s Ned Kelly series of paintings. However, even when we remove articles that refer to books, paintings and films from the analysis (not shown here), coverage is overwhelmingly dominated by articles mentioning Kelly.

Ned Kelly has become the equivalent of a brand. For Klein (2001: 5) the brand is the ‘core meaning of the modern corporation’ and advertising is ‘one vehicle used to convey that meaning to the world’. Kelly, and to a lesser extent other bushrangers such as Ben Hall, have, in Klein’s words been ‘aggressively mined’ by the media as ‘a source of borrowed meaning and identity’ (Klein 2001: 73). Kelly is often used as a ‘hook’ in newspaper headlines, such as ‘A Ballad to the Ned Kelly Borderlands’ (Williams 1992) and ‘Taking the Kelly Gang to Town’ (Cochrane 1993: 24). In most cases Kelly and other bushrangers are ‘peripheral’ to, or only tangentially relevant to the subject of the newspaper articles, and while several journalists authored multiple bushranger stories, the bushranger they tended to mobilise was Ned Kelly.¹

Journalistic responses to the paper Tranter and Donoghue (2001) presented to the 2001 TASA conference at the University of Sydney serves as an example of the way in which the Kelly name is often used. An article by Michelle Horin (2001: 3) appeared in the SMH following a media release of conference paper abstracts by the conference
organisers. The journalist picked up on conclusion to Tranter and Donoghue’s (2001) conference paper.

While middle Australia (re)discovers its convict roots, the educated elite may have shifted their gaze and status claims to the convicts’ heroes - the bushrangers. A renewed interest in the Ned Kelly story among Australian academic...artistic...and literary communities...suggests that for cosmopolitan elites a bushranger on the bookshelf is better than a convict in the closet.

The conference paper was about *convicts* not bushrangers, yet the resulting newspaper article was entitled: ‘Arise Sir Ned, Convict Chic is Dead’ (Horin 2001: 3), a clear attempt to cash in on the Kelly name.

In Table 3 we contrast Ned Kelly articles with those containing other relatively popular bushrangers. Our centrality measure is split into two ‘dummy’ independent variables, so that we can compare articles where bushrangers were of ‘central’ or ‘moderate’ importance against those where they were of ‘peripheral’ importance. We included a dummy variable to control for the articles that mentioned bushrangers but were actually focussed upon particular artists, novelists or films.

The regression model ‘explains’ a far greater amount of variance for articles contrasting Kelly with other named ‘bushrangers’ than Kelly compared with Captain Thunderbolt or Ben Hall. Compared to ‘bushrangers’, Ned Kelly was mentioned less frequently in 1988 articles than in other years (OR 0.42), and in 2000 articles Kelly was far less likely to appear than Captain Thunderbolt (OR 0.29) compared to other years. Ned Kelly did not differ significantly from the other bushrangers in terms of his centrality to articles. However, articles of an historical genre were 4 to 5 times less likely to contain Ned Kelly (OR 0.19 to 0.36), while those related to the arts, books, plays and films were much more likely to include Kelly than other bushrangers (OR 4.65 to 5.90).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Ned Kelly vs 'bushrangers'</th>
<th>Ned Kelly vs Ben Hall</th>
<th>Ned Kelly vs Thunderbolt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>1.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>0.42*</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>1.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.29*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>1.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All other years (referent)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 3: Predictors of Bushranger Articles in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (1987-2004)*
## Bushranger importance to article

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0.84</th>
<th>0.68</th>
<th>2.57</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>1.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peripheral (referent)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Type of Article

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0.19**</th>
<th>0.36**</th>
<th>0.22***</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Historical</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art/Books/Plays</td>
<td>4.65**</td>
<td>5.90*</td>
<td>5.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (referent)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nagelkerke R² .29 .14 .20
N (270) (230) (239)

* p < 0.1  ** p < 0.05  *** p < 0.01


### Discussion

In the matter of bushranging, it is not in the least ‘the facts’ but the mythology to which they gave rise which should interest the historian and all the rest of us (Ward 1980 in Seal 2002: viii).

When Kelly was omitted from the Bicentennial Authority list of 200 men and women who had ‘made positive contributions to making Australia what it is today’, critics suggested ‘one of the failings of the list is that it disregards the radical, anti-authoritarian, rebellious element in Australia’s history’ (anonymous, *SMH* 1988: 38). Bushrangers *per se* do not comprise an important element of Australian national identity (Tranter and Donoghue 2007). However, Ned Kelly still matters 125 years after his death, as he is one of the few enduring characters to exhibit the brave, larrikin, anti-authoritarian qualities many Australians claim as part of their national identity. As Fitzsimmons (1990: 58) put it, “[O]ther nations glorify authority and openly embrace the officialdom culture. We eschew such notions. (Here’s to you, Ned Kelly)”.

Jones (1995: 338) claims that for ‘almost fifty years after his death the literature was overwhelmingly anti Kelly, but in folk songs and often wildly inaccurate oral traditions a Robin-Hood-like figure survived’. Kelly was characterised as ‘a man who stood against the police persecutors of his family and was driven to outlawry when he defended his sister against the advances of a drunken constable’ (Jones 1995: 338). Since Kenneally’s (1929) sympathetic interpretation of the Kelly story the literature has
been mainly pro-Kelly, as novelists from Robert Drewe (*Our Sunshine*) to Peter Carey (*True History of the Kelly Gang*) reworked traditional material in imaginative ways.

Yet representations of Kelly in the *Sydney Morning Herald* differ markedly to those of other bushrangers. By analysing article genres – ‘historical’, ‘arts’, ‘film’, ‘theatre’, ‘books’, ‘letters’ a generic ‘news’ category and so on – we found other (relatively) well known bushrangers such as Ben Hall and Captain Thunderbolt were most likely to be depicted in historical articles, often in relation to bushranging in certain geographical locations. By contrast, Ned Kelly tended to be associated with the arts – articles on exhibitions, films, novels or theatre performances. Kelly was also the subject of many letters, and appeared in a greater proportion of articles about books, and ‘news’ articles to a much greater extent than other bushrangers.

The ways in which bushrangers are represented by the media have implications for the formation of the Australian mythscape, and go some way to explaining Ned Kelly’s continuing presence as an ‘Australian icon’. Kelly not only appears in print far more often than all other bushrangers combined, if the *SHM* is a reliable source, but to a far greater extent than other bushrangers, the mythology surrounding Kelly is re-constructed through his media depiction. The myth lives on and is perpetuated through its retelling in film and literature. While word of mouth transmission of the exploits of this Australian social bandit has diminished among the literate, media dominated citizens of contemporary Australia, the creators and re-creators of culture – particularly artists, film-makers and authors now carry the torch.

Ned Kelly’s life and myth have inspired paintings, novels, films and songs. One cannot understand the Australian spirit without coming to terms, like it or not, with his life and legend (anonymous, *SMH* 1988: 38).

Of course popular national characters such as Kelly also have great commercial potential that has not passed unrecognised. Articles on Ned Kelly not only contribute to the Kelly myth, presumably they also help to sell newspapers. As Jones (1995: 339) points out in the first edition of his book, *Ned Kelly: A short life*:

Ned Kelly has become a commodity to be packaged and promoted. A till to clink, a drum to thump or a banner to be waved. The Kelly helmet has become a piggy bank…

Bushranger articles in the *SMH* both tap into, and also propagate the mythology of the folk hero. They mine an iconic form of 19th Century (Irish) ‘Australian-ness’ that is an important aspect of the national character. Ned Kelly is ‘remembered’ as more than just a bushranger, although perhaps ‘mythologised’ or ‘constructed’ are more appropriate...
terms to employ. Kelly is one of the few, arguably the only folk hero in the short history of ‘white’ Australia who is known by a substantial proportion of contemporary Australians. Or rather, versions of his legend are known, with most Australians likely to be somewhat sketchy on the details surrounding his life and death. The legend of Ned Kelly then, is an important part of the Australian mythscape.

Aesthetes and journalists tap into the wellspring of myth surrounding Ned Kelly for their own creative (and commercial) ends, and in the process sustain the myth of Ned Kelly the bushranger in Australian folklore. As long as this continues, Kelly’s helmet, or at least Nolan’s impression of Kelly’s helmet, will continue to be recognised as a symbol of Australian identity.

References


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1 For example, Garry Maddox was the author of 8 bushranger articles, all on Ned Kelly. Peter Cochrane authored 5 out of 6 on Kelly and Steve Meacham 4 from 6 on Kelly. An exception was Malcolm Brown; 6 out of his 7 articles were on bushrangers other than Kelly, including 3 on Captain Thunderbolt.