



# NED KELLY AND THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

BY MICHAEL PIGGOTT



**I**N THAT PIVOTAL YEAR OF 1942, Clive Turnbull wrote: “Ned Kelly is the best known Australian, our only folk hero”,<sup>1</sup> a judgement time seemed to confirm. On the cover of its final issue for 1966, *The Bulletin* presented a montage comprising a photo of the now iconic helmet from the Kelly Gang armour, a posy of flowers, and a reproduction of a Donald Friend painting making explicit reference to Sidney Nolan’s Kelly series. Words spelt out what was being suggested visually: “NED KELLY RIDES AGAIN and again, again and again...”. Inside was an article by M. H. Ellis called “The legend of Ned Kelly”, its subtitle “a vicious arch-bully with dingo eyes” reminding us that commentators from the 1870s onwards have mixed opinion with scholarship, and included what today would be labelled “black armband” and “white blindfold” views of history.

The subsequent 34 years have seen the legend continue to flourish, fed by a media with a self-reinforcing belief that any story including the Ned Kelly name should be printed. There have been other factors too: “Kelly Country” tourism and more general commercial exploitation, artistic and literary imagination, the urge deep within us to souvenir and collect, and of course aspects of Australia’s identity. Innumerable feature articles, several novels, and a television mini-series marked the centenary of his death in 1980. And over the past decade, the internet has provided a whole new platform for enthusiasts to

communicate and theorise! Inevitably there are now a number of Kelly websites.<sup>2</sup>

For proof of the Kelly legend’s enduring power, however, nothing previously has quite matched this year. The use of Nolan’s Kelly imagery in the Sydney Olympics opening ceremony and the release of Peter Carey’s new novel<sup>3</sup> were the high points, but there have also been news stories about the armour, the skull, and discoveries of further relevant documentation. There have been re-enactments of the trial, a Channel Nine *60 Minutes* program and straw poll, and legal attempts to recover payments never handed to the Queensland aboriginal police troopers. Finally there was the launch in early September of *PictureAustralia*,<sup>4</sup> the National Library’s collaborative online gateway to photo and other image collections. The Library’s choice of logo, based on the Nolan-Kelly helmet, it described as “a quintessentially Australian icon”, underlined by the presence in the collections of the inaugural partners of a Ned Kelly artefact.

**Top, left:** The inspiration for Ned Kelly’s armour? — “Helmet of Richard I from his Great Seal” — in Walter Scott, *Waverley Novels Vol. XVI, Ivanhoe*, Adam and Charles Black, Edinburgh, 1860 (Rare Books Collection, University of Melbourne Library).

**Top, right:** Logo of *PictureAustralia*, a National Library website providing access to Australian pictorial images. The logo is based on Sidney Nolan’s famous series of Ned Kelly paintings. (*PictureAustralia*, <[www.pictureaustralia.org](http://www.pictureaustralia.org)>)

With such interest it is timely to review the varied associations the University has with the Kelly phenomenon. Some are now of mere incidental interest, such as the inclusion of the armour, pistol and death mask in a fundraising “Australiana Festival of Art Music Literature and History” held at Wilson Hall in May 1959. Probably the best known link is via Sir Redmond Barry (1813–1880), a Senior Puisne Judge of the Supreme Court of Victoria who had sent Kelly’s uncle and mother to prison before, in October 1880, sentencing him to death. Barry was also the University’s first Chancellor and, in the opinion of Peter Ryan, “the indubitable prime founder of the University of Melbourne”.<sup>5</sup> Barry’s approach to the trial and Ned Kelly’s various statements during and after it, including one that anticipated the judge’s demise so soon after his own, have contributed to his notoriety as well as the enduring power of the Kelly legend. As Paul de Serville put it, until recent reassessments, Kelly’s death overshadowed Barry’s life. Other University connections attended the execution and its immediate aftermath: the gaol surgeon, Dr Edward Barker, was also the lecturer in surgery; and more directly, the Medical School was involved in the various certifications required for the execution, including a death mask.

However it is through the work of commentators and the collections of the University that the strongest links can be made. As to the former, one of the earliest was Edward Morris, Professor of

English, French and German Languages and Literature at the University of Melbourne, who suggested in his *Cassell's Picturesque Australia* that the inspiration for the armour was an illustrated edition of a Walter Scott novel.<sup>6</sup> In more recent times, Associate Professor Miles Lewis, whose expertise includes vernacular timber buildings, has assisted with heritage aspects of Ned Kelly's father's house at Beveridge. Most scholarly contributions however have been historical, with alumni and ex-academics featuring significantly in the contemporary Kelly bibliography: Tom Prior, Weston Bate, Professor Vincent Buckley, Dr John McQuilton, Professor Louis Waller, and Professor Manning Clark.

As for the collections, the University's prize resource is undoubtedly the material gathered over a lifetime's collecting of Australiana by the late Ian McLaren, OBE FRHSV MLA, held in the Special Collections unit of the University Library. Crime was one of McLaren's strong collecting interests, and this extended to Ned Kelly and Kelly's mentor Harry Power, whom McLaren wrote up for the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. His Kelly collection documents through correspondence his pursuit of all manner of Kellyana including ephemera, movie scripts, publicity posters, stills and even a set of dinner place mats. But the core material comprises almost 300 books, pamphlets, fiction, comics and other printed items plus newspaper cuttings, books and photographs. It is one of the strongest public collections on the subject, with particular strengths in its multiple editions of writings by C. H. Chomley (1900+), Ambrose Pratt (1916+) and Francis Hare (1892+, three of our editions not being recorded by Ferguson). Of the scrapbooks, one is especially useful for a contemporary press perspective, being drawn from a number of Melbourne and regional newspapers covering 1878 to 1882. Among the collection's rare, unusual and unique items are the typescript and several later condensed and serialised



Superintendent Francis Hare, shot in the wrist by Ned Kelly at Glenrowan, 28 June, 1880. (Photo: McLaren Collection, University of Melbourne Library.)

adaptations of Frank Clune's *The Kelly Hunters*; a pamphlet using the saga for teaching Bible lessons, and one of only three copies known to exist of the anonymous pamphlet *The Life and Adventures of the Kelly Outlaws* published in Adelaide in 1881.<sup>7</sup>

The University Archives also includes relevant material, unexpectedly given its principal collecting themes of university, businesses, unions, professional and community groups. In particular there is a collection of 54 letters and documents received by and relating to Superintendent Francis Hare covering 1859 to 1887, one of Kelly's pursuers and briefly in charge of the first stage of Kelly's capture. Nicely complementing his published memoir, *The Last of the Bushrangers*,<sup>8</sup> the collection includes letters by some of the key figures of the

Kelly story including the Police Commissioner Frederick Standish, Superintendents Nicholson and Sadleir, Detective M. Ward and John Sherritt, as well as items by Hare. The collection has its own mysteries. One is its provenance: the letters were found in a steel box in St Mark's Church Fitzroy in 1978 lacking any indication of how they came to be there. (They were placed with the University Archives through the good offices of a member of the History Department, the late Dr John Foster, who was briefly associated with St Mark's.) The other puzzle is the relatively little use the collection has attracted, particularly from scholarly writers.

Archivists and librarians have also been drawn to the Kelly story, beyond their roles in managing collections and ensuring accessibility for research, and again there are strong university associations. In 1968 Margaret Jennings, later to be the University's first officially designated Records Manager, published *Ned Kelly: the legend and the man*, a schools kit of reproductions and accompanying text as part of the Hill of Content Archive series. More critical to developing a pictorially based Kelly literature was Harry Nunn, a University of Melbourne (Trinity College) graduate and Victoria's first Keeper of Public Records. While he was with the Archives Section of the State Library in the 1950s he began collating an artificial Kelly series of official documents for fear that if left in the files they would too readily tempt collectors, yet thereby facilitating his and later researchers' use. The result was *Plundering Sons: a pictorial history of Australian bushranging*.<sup>9</sup> Frank Strahan, the University's foundation archivist, has also been interested in the Kelly story via his deep love of north east Victoria and a family connection: his great great grandfather was Senior Constable Anthony Strahan, one of Kelly's pursuers. The results were a piece of the old Kelly home at Greta West for the archives, and an article for the *Overland* Kelly anniversary issue in July 1981,

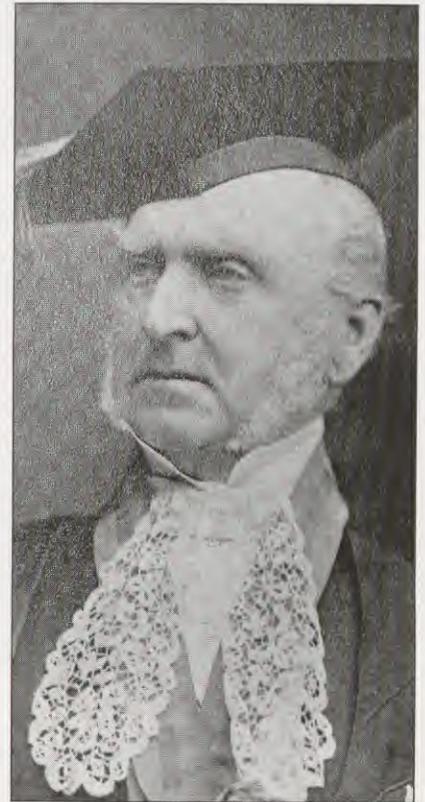
## NOTES

1. Clive Turnbull's introduction to *Ned Kelly: being his own story of his life and crimes*, Hawthorn Press, 1942, p. 1.
2. Eg <<http://www.ncs.net.au/nedkelly/html/glenrowan.htm>> and <<http://www.nedkellysworld.com.au/index.html>> (October 2000).
3. Peter Carey, *The True History of the Kelly Gang*, University of Queensland Press, 2000. In a smart marketing move, its release was matched by a further reprint of Ian Jones' 1995 authoritative account, *Ned Kelly: a short life*, Lothian Books, 2000.
4. See <<http://www.pictureaustralia.org/>> (October 2000).
5. See *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 3, Melbourne University Press, 1969, p. 109.
6. Volume 4, Cassell & Company Limited, London, 1889, p. 104. There were images in at least two Scott novels, *Ivanhoe* and *The Talisman*.
7. Based on Wayne Vargo's *Ned Kelly in the McLaren Collection: an annotated bibliography*, M.Lib thesis, University of Melbourne, 1995.
8. Francis Hare, *The Last of the Bushrangers: an account of the capture of the Kelly gang*, Hurst and Blackett, London, 1892.
9. Lansdowne, 1966, compiled with Tom Prior and Bill Wannan. It was subsequently to appear in new editions and titles, finally under Nunn's single authorship.
10. Jones, p. 382.
11. Ian Jones, *The Friendship that Destroyed Ned Kelly: Joe Byrne and Aaron Sherritt*. Lothian Books, 1992, p. viii.
12. For a US illustration, see Stanton Wheeler, ed., *On Record: files and dossiers in American life*, New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 1969.

accompanied by reproductions of some of Hare's letters.

For the current archivist, interest arises from the interplay of the legend's documentation and its historiography. One remarkable facet is how readily a life can be recounted with so little authentic personal material. After 120 years, but a single holograph letter is known to exist. The original of the so-called Cameron Letter, and the "Declaration of the Republic of North-Eastern, Victoria" are yet to be made available to the public or even an auction house. As for the Jerilderie Letter, though its content has been long known, its acquisition by the State Library was announced as this article was going to press. Fortunately for those who are unhappy relying just on oral tradition, crime — particularly murder — tends to beget its own official and newsprint traces. By the "Last Stand" at Glenrowan, there were eyewitnesses including newspaper reporters, artists, photographers, and dozens of police and hundreds of sightseers, resulting in "one of the most densely documented incidents in Australian history".<sup>10</sup> It so happens there was also a Kelly Reward Board to assess claims to the reward monies and a Police Royal Commission the year after the trial, which generated an indispensable resource of 18,000 questions and answers plus extensive supporting details. For all this, Australia's leading Kelly scholar Ian Jones has noted also how crucial were "those most perishable of historical sources — human memory and the landscape" where so many of the key players "lived and died".<sup>11</sup> We might also reflect on how elusive can be the simplest historical facts, some quite important to the legend. There were 22 official witnesses at the hanging, including a number of journalists, yet no agreement on Ned Kelly's famous last words.

Finally there is the glimpse we are provided of the crucial role record keeping plays in regulating the transactions of everyday affairs. Society does not, and simply could not, function



Sir Redmond Barry, the University of Melbourne's first chancellor (1853–1880) and the man who sentenced Ned Kelly to hang. (Photo: McLaren Collection, University of Melbourne Library.)

without them.<sup>12</sup> Those challenging oppression or involved in any way with the rule of law are especially aware of this. The security surveillance files of the East German *Stasi* organisation, used in contrasting ways both before and after reunification, springs immediately to mind as an obvious political illustration. As for the Kelly saga, roughly a century before, in February 1879 at the Jerilderie branch of the Bank of New South Wales, Ned took cash and bills from the safe but destroyed deeds and mortgages, believing financial institutions were "slavers and poor-man crushers".

It seems safe to observe that Ned Kelly and the University will continue to

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