

Ned Kelly as the father of modern Australian literature

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This short paper explicates to some degree the literary value of Ned Kelly's *The Jerilderie Letter* (hereafter referred to as the Letter) and as a consequence separates it from its historical value as a primary source for the Kelly Myth. This is intended to support the unit of work I have developed for the Letter as part of the Reading Australia Project.

I would hope that enough information exists in the public domain for teachers to gain good insight into the Kelly Myth. Kelly's legacy is somewhat complex in our folklore, mostly because he can be positioned either as hero or villain depending on one's point of view. Witness Derryn Hinch, in the clip from *Sunrise* linked in the unit, comparing the shootings at Stringybark Creek to those in Walsh Street, Melbourne, in 1988. Witness the cult of celebrity built up around contemporary criminals such as Carl Williams, Mark 'Chopper' Read, and the repackaging of events in television shows such as the *Underbelly* franchise. These issues on their own might form a nucleus for interesting debate in English classrooms. However, I seek to position the Letter in particular as something altogether more interesting: the beginning of modern literature in Australia.

In her introduction to *Australian Classics: Fifty Great Writers and their Celebrated Work*, Jane Gleeson-White asks, 'What does a literary portrait of Australia look like? It is wild and riotous, interspersed with quieter moments; it is often located beyond the law, probing the boundaries of geography, family, culture, race and identity.' (Gleeson-White, 2007, p.3) Gleeson cites the example of *Robbery under Arms*, which prompted one contemporary commentator to report: 'What a curious comment it is on Australian history that the heroes of our best novels are convicts and bushrangers.' (2007, p.4) I am tempted to unpack that curiosity somewhat—why is it curious? Aren't these characters the most interesting in our imagination? However, where does the Letter sit in Gleeson-White's definition?

In his introduction to the Text Classics edition of the Letter published in 2012, Alex McDermott notes that 'The Jerilderie Letter not only prefigures the ambition of modernist literature to make the written and spoken words indivisible, as exemplified in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, but also harks back to the warrior's fiery polemic of Homer's *Iliad*, highly personal, dramatic, oratorical, and charged with competitive hostility.' McDermott then refers to Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang*; Carey used the Letter as his inspiration in attempting to capture and write in Ned's voice for the entirety of that extraordinary novel.

It's significant that the style and tone of the Letter emerge from the fact that it was dictated to Joe Byrne over a period of weeks between the Stringybark Creek shootings and the Kelly Gang's raid on the NSW town of Jerilderie in February 1879. The Letter is not governed by anything approaching formal usage of punctuation or structural conventions such as paragraphs. It synthesises a form of 'stream of consciousness' with 'the Irish tradition of storytelling [including] hyperbole, nicknaming, complicated terms of abuse ... repetition, simile, metaphors and imagery, all designed to aid in the oral acquisition of local and national myth and history and family lore' (Lonergan, 2004, p.4).

It's worth noting two additional things with regard to the literary significance of the Letter. Firstly, it is unique in being an account of an iconic Australian figure in his own words. Ned Kelly had little in the way of formal education and from an early age participated in 'the family business' of cattle and horse rustling. His father, John, died when Ned was very young and his mother was imprisoned on very dubious charges while still breastfeeding Ned's infant sibling. There are solid grounds for accepting that the Kelly Family experienced several injustices that culminated in Ned taking to the bush and forming his Gang, and these injustices (especially the notorious Fitzpatrick incident) are detailed in the Letter.

Secondly, Australians love an underdog. On this reading, the Letter is a long and sustained justification by Kelly of his actions. His career as a bushranger is a direct consequence, therefore, of the injustices meted out to Kelly and his family. This is perhaps why comparisons between Stringybark Creek and the Walsh Street police street shootings are somewhat ludicrous. Arguably the four policemen went looking for Kelly with the intention of shooting him and anyone caught with him; they were heavily armed and had straps ready to cart bodies out of the bush on their horses. That the Kelly Gang ambushed them is beyond dispute; arguably Ned's superior bush skills won the day. Whether or not the shootings were in self-defence as Kelly claims is difficult to pin down—what is important though is that Ned certainly acted on his belief that he was in mortal danger if he did not open fire first.

So in the Letter we have Ned in his voice explaining these events from his point of view in a long, mostly uninterrupted rush of language. The Letter is the work of an angry man, as McDermott also points out in his introduction and indeed Ned had plenty to be angry about. What then of the Letter's heritage as a work of Literature?

As already mentioned, it formed the core around which Peter Carey developed and wrote *The True History of the Kelly Gang*. In its Irish sense of storytelling it also adds considerably to our understanding and use of slang as part of the Australian sense of idiom. However, it is in positioning the Letter as a precursor to Joyce and the modernist stream of consciousness technique that we might find some genuine literary depth and richness in it. Of profound significance is the fact that the Letter can be different things to different audiences depending on purpose—it can read as a primary source document, whereby one of Australia's most notorious characters states his case in his own words; it can be read as a statement against authority and, concomitantly, the value of rebellion; it can be read as a justification for a series of crimes, with the resulting subtextual argument about whether crime can ever be justified.

The accompanying unit of work explores a couple of these threads and it is hoped that they are generative enough to stimulate further discussion, reading or analysis by students who develop an interest. On face value, the Letter is a challenging text, in the same way that opening *Ulysses* for the first time is a bit of a shock. However, it will reward patience, as is the case with any classic work of literature—which may be yet another debt we owe the man in the suit of armour.

Gleeson-White, J. (2007). *Australian Classics: 50 great writers and their celebrated works*. NSW: Allen & Unwin.

Lonergan, D. (2004). 'Ned's Irish accent.' *Tain*, August–September. 18–20. (A hyperlink to this article is included on the Resources page of this unit.)