

Ned Kelly: Australian Icon

Bruce Tranter

and

Jed Donoghue

University of Tasmania

Contact

Dr Bruce Tranter

School of Sociology and Social Work

Private Bag 17,

University of Tasmania

Hobart, Tasmania

Australia, 7001

email: Bruce.Tranter@utas.edu.au

Keywords: Ned Kelly, outlaw, bushranger, rebel, icon.

Ned Kelly: Australian Icon

Abstract

The myths associated with outlaws or 'social bandits' are important elements of national identity in many developed countries. Long after his death, the outlaw Ned Kelly lives on in Australian culture through various media, ensuring his position as a symbol of Australian identity. Images of Ned Kelly were even projected to a global audience during the opening ceremony of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games.

Drawing upon national survey data we show that Ned Kelly has symbolic importance for a majority of Australians, although attitudes regarding his status as hero or villain vary considerably. Younger, left leaning, working class Australians and consumers of popular culture view Kelly as important, while tertiary educated, political conservatives tend to downplay his significance.

Perceptions of Ned Kelly's character also influence attitudes regarding to his national significance. Those who believe he was forced to become a bushranger, loyal to his family and friends or a friend to the poor view him as symbolically important. Alternatively, critics who believe Kelly was treacherous, a thief, or a murderer, understate his symbolic influence.

Ned Kelly: Australian Icon

Introduction

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 industrialised 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 1996: 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 2002: 2).

This research is a case study of the most important Australian outlaw - Ned Kelly. Utilising a dedicated module of questions commissioned for a national survey, 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. We seek to discover if Kelly is a national symbol for the majority of Australians, invoking strong positive or negative feelings. We 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 (2001: 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 summarised 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 1979: 273).

Hobsbawm (1972: 504) maintained '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 and Thomas 1928: 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 and Australian Identity

...Ned Kelly is widely revered and is the best known character in Australian history (Hirst 2007: 31)

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 stylised representations of the outlaw based upon the artist Sidney Nolan's 'Kelly series' of paintings (Nolan et al. 1985). For most Australians they would have been instantly recognisable as Ned Kelly, because as Seal (2002: 158) put it, '[W]hen there is a need to signify 'nation'...we reach for those tried and true icons of the bush, the digger and Ned Kelly'. Nevertheless, while Ned Kelly is one of only a handful of historical figures Australians recognise, they have mixed feelings as to his status as hero or villain.

Much of the previous empirical research on Australian identity is based upon attitudinal survey questions that tap abstract identity constructs (e.g. Jones and Smith 2001; McAllister 1997; Jones 1997; Kemp 1977). In contrast, this research is an empirical case study of perhaps the most recognizable 19th Century Australian – Ned Kelly – and his relationship to contemporary culture. Three key research questions are examined here. First, we attempt to gauge the importance of Ned Kelly as a symbol of Australian identity. Based upon the ubiquitousness of Kelly’s image in Australian culture (Jones 1995), a majority of Australians are expected to view him as an important symbol of Australian identity. Second, how can we account for Kelly’s enduring salience? Kelly is extremely well known in Australia, but what is the basis of the divide over his status as hero or villain? We attempt to account for differences of opinion over Kelly by drawing upon recurrent themes from the literature on social banditry (e.g. Hobsbawm 1960; Seal 1996, 2002), and then examine how these themes apply to his particular case.

Finally, previous Australian identity researchers uncovered distinct social divisions in relation to national identity (e.g. Tranter and Donoghue 2007; Holton and Phillips 2004; Jones 1997). We expect attitudes toward Ned Kelly will vary according to socio-demographic background, particularly on the basis of age, education and political ideology, but also expect to find regional and class based cleavages. The rebellious qualities personified in Ned Kelly are expected to be more palatable to younger, working class Australians – those who tend to be major consumers of popular culture – and to the left in politics.

Data and Method

We developed several questions to examine Ned Kelly as a symbol of Australian identity for the 2007 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA; see Phillips et al. 2008).¹ The AuSSA is a cross-sectional survey of Australians aged 18 and over, with a sample drawn randomly from the 2007 Australian Electoral Roll, with mail out, mail back administration of questionnaires conducted between 11 July and 21 November 2007. There were 2,583 respondents to the survey in which our questions were included representing a response rate of 39%.

The first question was:

'Ned Kelly was a bushranger whose image appeared in the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympic Games. How important do you think Ned Kelly is as a symbol of Australian identity?'

The response categories of this dependent variable have an ordinal structure and were analysed using ordered logistic regression models (see Agresti and Finlay 1997: 599–606) using SAS version 9.1.² The regression approach allows us to statistically adjust for correlations between the independent variables and to estimate the net association between each independent variable and the dependent variable. Several independent variables were operationalised. New South Wales has a rich history of bushranging (Macdougall 2002) and while Ned Kelly hailed from Glenrowan in Victoria, he crossed the border into NSW and was active there. Our expectation was therefore that he might be seen as more important in Victoria and NSW. We operationalised dummy variables for sex, Catholic religious denomination (as Kelly and his supporters were predominantly Irish Catholics), self assessed class location (working class + lower class), marital status (married) and a left-right political orientation scale³. Marriage serves as a proxy measure for moral conservatism, while a continuous variable measures respondent age in years. An attitudinal dummy variable measuring the importance of maintaining order in the nation is also added, as concern with law and order was expected to be associated with negative attitudes toward the bushranger.⁴

Consumption of 'high culture' is greater among the highly educated and those in managerial and professional occupations (Emmison and Frow 1999:102-3). We expect bushrangers are of little interest to consumers of 'high culture' among contemporary Australians, although exceptions include Sidney Nolan's 'Kelly series' of paintings. Consumers of popular culture (Bourdieu 1984: 16) may be more likely than consumers of middle brow or high culture (Gans 1974: 70) to see Ned Kelly as an important symbol of Australian identity. To examine this hypothesis a scale was developed from four AuSSA questions to measure the extent to which popular culture 'shaped Australia'.⁵

Drawing upon Hobsbawm (2000; 1960) Cashman (2000) and Seal (1996), we developed questions to capture some of the reasons why Ned Kelly remains so well known. The aim was not to seek the 'truth' regarding what Australians know about

Kelly, rather what people ‘believe’ about the outlaw (Ward 1980 in Seal 2002: viii). We empirically assessed some outlaw characteristics and also included descriptive terms that relate specifically to Kelly. Following pilot testing we were confident that the most relevant descriptive terms were captured in the question, but also offered an ‘Other, please specify’ option. The final version of our question asked:

‘Please choose two items from the following list that best describe Ned Kelly’

Forced to become a bushranger

A thief

Brave

Anti-authority

A murderer

An Australian Icon

Treacherous

A friend to the poor

Loyal to family and friends

Other please specify

Two ‘dummy’ independent variables were created to measure positive and negative attitudes toward Ned Kelly for the regression models. The positive attitudes variable summed first or second choices for the items ‘forced to become a bushranger’, ‘brave’, ‘an Australian icon’, ‘a friend to the poor’ and ‘loyal to family and friends’. Negative attitudes comprised responses to the items ‘a thief’, ‘a murderer’ and ‘treacherous’. The analysis begins with a consideration of the importance of Ned Kelly as a symbol of contemporary Australian identity.

Analyses

Fifty seven percent of Australian adults view Ned Kelly as either a very important or important symbol of Australian identity (Table 1) suggesting that it is not just artists, authors and journalists who recognize Kelly’s role, but also a substantial proportion of ‘ordinary’ Australians.

Why is Kelly still seen as an important figure so long after his death? In Table 2 we go some way to answering this question. When asked to describe Ned Kelly, the most frequently chosen first response was ‘forced to become a bushranger’ (22%), followed closely by ‘Australian icon’ (21%), both responses signifying a high level of sympathy

for Kelly. On the other hand, 20 per cent saw Kelly as ‘anti-authority’ while a further 17 per cent appear to believe he is best described as ‘a thief’. Only 2 per cent of the sample viewed Ned as ‘brave’. The second choice responses once again saw ‘loyal to family and friends’ (20%), ‘anti-authority’ (19%), and ‘Australian icon’ (17%) as the most frequent responses, while ‘thief’ and ‘forced to become a bushranger’ also drew responses of 11 and 10 per cent respectively. These results show that while a majority of Australians believe Kelly is symbolically important, they are divided strongly over whether his status is positive or negative.

[Tables 1 and 2 about here]

We employ ordered logistic regression analysis, presenting odds ratios for each of the independent variables in Table 3.⁶ The independent variables are introduced as five blocs, demographic variables in model 1, adding class, coalition party ID and ideology in model 2, a scale measuring the influence of sporting events on shaping Australia in model 3, positive and negative attitudes toward Kelly in model 4, and lastly the full model.⁷ This approach illustrates the relative influence of certain independent variables upon the dependent variable and how they are mediated by the introduction of other independent variables to the regression equation.

Sex has no statistically significant association with attitudes toward Ned Kelly at the 95% level of significance, however, highly significant age effects are apparent. The symbolic importance of Kelly appears to decline with age, although without panel data we cannot tell if this is a generational or ageing effect. Secondary education and marital status also predict attitudes toward Kelly in the multivariate case (model 1), although in preliminary analyses (not shown) we found only minimal state based and regional differences, so these variables were excluded from the regression equation. This is an important finding as it suggests Kelly’s importance is relatively uniform across the country. Education is an important discriminating factor in identity research. In this instance, tradespeople are approximately 1.3 times more likely than those with other or no post secondary qualifications to see Kelly as important, a statistically significant although not particularly strong effect. Married people are about 1.3 times *less likely* (i.e. $1 \div 0.79 = 1.27$) than singles, widows, divorcees, separated or those in de facto

relationships to view Kelly as important, while being born in Australia shows no significant effect.

The self identified working and lower classes are more likely than the middle class to acknowledge Kelly's importance (model 2). On the other hand, moving toward the right of the ideology scale is associated with reduced symbolic importance. Similarly, those who identify with conservative political parties (i.e. the Liberal and National coalition) are less likely than Labor, Green or other party supporters to view Kelly as important. The cultural consumption scale (model 3) is positively associated with the dependent variable suggesting support for Kelly is linked to the consumption of popular culture.

While respondents' social and political background are associated with attitudes toward Kelly, the Nagelkerke pseudo R^2 indicates that only a small proportion of the variance in the dependent variable is statistically 'explained' by the independent variables (model 1 R^2 .04; model 2 R^2 .03; model 3 R^2 .04). The R^2 increases dramatically to .21 however, when attitudinal characteristics associated with Kelly are entered into the equation (model 4). Positive descriptors are strongly associated with Kelly's symbolic importance; while negative attitudes substantially reduce one's likelihood of claiming the outlaw is important. Those for whom maintaining order in the nation is a priority also view Kelly as less important.

In the full model, education, religious denomination, marital status, political party identification and maintaining order are non-significant at the 95% level. The symbolic importance of Kelly for Australian identity is influenced very strongly by the way people view the bushranger, as an heroic figure, or as an anti-hero, but also according to their class location, political ideology and their views regarding the importance of popular culture for shaping the Australian nation.

[Table 3 about here]

Discussion

... whether we celebrate or denigrate him, love him or loathe him, Ned Kelly remains inextricably bound up with our sense of national identity (Seal 2002: xvii).

Australians have few historical figures to celebrate, at least none comparable to heroes such as Lord Nelson, George Washington or Napoleon Bonaparte. They lack easily identifiable military, political or foundation heroes. Indeed, the best-known heroes are the Anzacs, a laudable group who were defeated by Turkish forces at Gallipoli in 1916. Admiration for the underdog and a dislike or ambivalence regarding those elevated to higher office is allegedly part of the Australian character (Hirst 2007). A lack of identifiable foundation heroes may go some way to explaining why a 19th Century outlaw is arguably the only 'heroic' colonial figure recognised by a majority of Australians.

Another 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 1996: 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 2001:196). Our research 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, "[O]ther nations glorify authority and openly embrace the officialdom culture. We eschew such notions. (Here's to you, Ned Kelly)".

For some Kelly was an underdog, who stood against injustice and police corruption in support of his family and friends. A rebel not afraid to break the rules, exemplified in the expression ‘as game as Ned Kelly’ (Hirst 2007:31). However many revile the outlaw, regarding him as a dangerous thief, bank robber and police killer who sought to undermine the social order and stability of the Australian colonies. This research provides empirical evidence of the social divisions concerning Kelly, in the way different assessments of his character shape attitudes toward his standing as a national symbol. Attitudes are also circumscribed according to demographic and political background. Younger people are more likely to acknowledge Kelly’s symbolic importance for national identity, and ideologically, the left exhibit more favourable attitudes toward Kelly than the right. Political party identification plays a similar role. Supporters of the Australian Labor Party and the Greens see Kelly in a generally more positive light than Liberal partisans. Such findings are largely consistent with extant political divisions in Australia.

While divisions over the importance and character of Ned Kelly remain, artists (especially Sydney Nolan’s work), academics, authors, filmmakers, and journalists still tap the wellspring of his legend for their creative and commercial ends. In the process they ensure the myths associated with Kelly are enshrined in Australian culture and continue to symbolise the rebellious aspect of the Australian character. Outlaws such as Robin Hood and Jesse James are very well known figures in England and America, and are often portrayed as champions of the poor and oppressed. In Australia, the bushranger Ned Kelly plays that role and remains a symbol of resistance to authority.

References

- Agresti, A. and B. Finlay. 1997. *Statistical Methods for the Social Sciences*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Bennett, T., M. Emmison and J. Frow (1999) *Accounting for Tastes: Australian Everyday Cultures*, Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction: a social critique of the judgment of taste*, London : Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Cashman, R. 2000. 'The Heroic Outlaw in Irish Folklore and Popular Literature' *Folklore* 111(2):191-215.
- Gans, H. 1974. *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste*, New York: Basic Books.
- Hirst, J. 2007. *Australians: Insiders and Outsiders on the National Character Since 1770*, Melbourne: Black Inc.
- Hobsbawm, E. 2000. *Bandits*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Hobsbawm, E. 1972. 'Social Bandits: Reply', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 14(4): 503-505.
- Hobsbawm, E. 1960. *Social Bandits and Primitive Rebels*, Free Press, Glencoe, Illinois.
- Holton, R. and Phillips, T. 2004. 'Personal Orientations Towards Australian National Identity Among British-born Residents', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 27(5): 732-56.
- Jones, F. and P. Smith 2001. 'Diversity and commonality in national identities: an exploratory analysis of cross-national patterns' *Journal of Sociology* 37(1): 45-63.
- Jones, F. L. 1997. 'Ethnic Diversity and National Identity' *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, 33: 285-305.
- Jones, I. 1995. *Ned Kelly: A short Life*. Melbourne: Lothian Books.
- McAllister, I. (1997) 'Political Culture and National Identity' in Galligan, B., I. McAllister and J. Ravenhill (eds) *New Developments in Australian Politics*, Melbourne: Macmillan.

Macdougall, A. 2002. *An Anthology of Classic Australian Folklore*, Melbourne: The Five Mile Press.

Molony, J. 2001. *Ned Kelly*, Melbourne; Melbourne University Press.

Nolan, S., L. Elwyn and S. Bruce 1985. *Sidney Nolan's Ned Kelly: the Ned Kelly paintings in the Australian National Gallery and a selection of the artist's sketches for the series*, Australian National Gallery Canberra: Australian National Gallery.

O'Malley, P. 1979. 'Class Conflict, Land and Social Banditry: Bushranging in Nineteenth Century Australia' *Social Problems*, 26: 271-283.

Phillips, T., Mitchell, D., Clark, J. and K. Reed. 2008. *The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes*, [Computer file]. Canberra: Australian Social Science Data Archive, The Australian National University, 2007.

Seal, G. 2002. *Tell 'em I died Game: The Legend of Ned Kelly*, Flemington, Victoria: Highland House.

Seal, G. 1996. *The Outlaw Legend: A cultural tradition in Britain, America and Australia*, Cambridge University Press.

Smith, A. 1996. 'LSE Centennial Lecture: The resurgence of nationalism? Myth and memory in the renewal of nations' *British Journal of Sociology* 47 (4): 575-98.

Theophanous, A..1995. *Understanding Multiculturalism and Australian Identity*, Melbourne: Elikia Books.

Tranter, B. and J. Donoghue. 2008. 'Bushrangers and Australian Identity' *Journal of Sociology* (In print).

Tranter, B. and J. Donoghue. 2007. 'Colonial and Postcolonial Aspects of Australian Identity' *British Journal of Sociology* 58(2): 165-183.

Tranter, B. and J. Donoghue. 2003. 'Convict Ancestry: a neglected aspect of Australian identity' *Nations and Nationalism* 9(4): 555-577.

Ward, R. 1958. *The Australian Legend*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press.

Warhurst, J. 1993. 'Nationalism and Republicanism in Australia: The Evolution of Institutions, Citizenship and Symbols' *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 28 (Special issue): 121-35.

West, B. 2001. 'Crime, Suicide, and the Anti-Hero: "Waltzing Matilda" in Australia' *Journal of Popular Culture* 35(3): 127-141.

¹ The AuSSA data were obtained from the Australian Social Science Data Archive, Australian National University, Canberra.

² The dependent variable contained the response categories 'Very Important'; 'Important'; 'Unimportant' and 'Very Unimportant'.

³ 'In politics, people talk of 'the left' and 'the right'. How would you place your views on this scale generally speaking?' The 11 point scale ranged from 0 (far left) to 10 (far right).

⁴ The question was: 'People sometimes talk about what the aims of this country should be for the next ten years. Please indicate which one of these you consider the most important? And which would be the next most important? (Order in the nation...).

⁵ Question: 'There have been a lot of important national and world events over the past 100 years that have helped shape Australia. Different individuals and groups, however, relate to some historical episodes more than others. On a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 is Not at all important, and 7 is Very important, how much importance do the following have for you?' - The 1932 Ashes 'bodyline cricket series; Australia's soccer world cup qualification over Uruguay in 2005; Australia II 1983 America's Cup victory; Cathy Freeman's Gold Medal at the Sydney 2000 Olympics. An additive scale of these variables was highly reliable (Cronbach's Alpha .81).

⁶ Odds ratios larger than 1 reflect positive associations, less than 1 refer to negative associations.

⁷ The positive and negative attitudes dummy variables are moderately correlated ($r = -.50$) but regression diagnostics suggest high multi collinearity is not present.