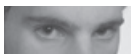




Short-listed for
the CBCA 2003
Eve Pownall
Award for
Information
Books

Black Snake: the Daring of Ned Kelly

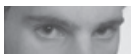
Carole Wilkinson



Public Opinion

For a long time after the Kelly Outbreak, journalists continued to call Ned Kelly a criminal. They referred to the people who had supported him as, 'the worst portion of humanity'. As late as 1966, a magazine article said Ned was 'one of the most cold-blooded, egotistical, and utterly self-centred criminals'. When a film about the Kelly Gang was released, 27 years after Ned was hanged, the government tried to ban it. They were concerned that a film portraying the Kellys as heroes would encourage other young men to become outlaws.

It wasn't until much later that books were written that saw the Kelly Outbreak as part of a struggle by poor people to own their own land and make a decent living. Nowadays, among the many books available, it's hard to find one that doesn't portray Ned as an exceptional man and a hero.



An Unbiased History?

Initially, I intended to write an unbiased account of events. I wasn't going to say whether Ned was a hero or a villain. I was just going to present the facts and let the readers decide. To make sure Ned got to defend himself, I planned to include quotes from his letters. But by the time I came to write the book, it wasn't possible for me to be unbiased. The truth is, I'd become a Kelly sympathiser.

At the same time, I didn't want to pretend that the Kellys hadn't hurt people. The wives of the murdered policemen had lost their husbands, the children their fathers. The Kelly Gang had stolen

hundreds of horses and not always from rich people. Many people lived in fear of the gang perhaps holding them up and shooting them if they didn't do as they were told.

To show this side of the story, I wrote the fictional pieces at the beginning of each chapter. Some are from the point of view of people who didn't like the Kellys. Others are from supporters and family members. Writing from someone's point of view means to see events through their eyes—to put yourself in their shoes. I tried to imagine what it would have been like to be alive when the Kelly Gang were on the run.



Writing History

Even though there is some fiction in *Black Snake*, it isn't a novel. It's non-fiction. When I decided to write it, the first step was to find out all the facts.

I started researching on the Internet. I got a rough idea of the sequence of events of the Kelly Outbreak from web sites of museums and libraries, as well as web sites created by people interested in Ned. While online, I also checked the catalogue of my local library to see what books they had on the subject. Then I headed off to the library to borrow the books.

At the back of non-fiction books there is usually a bibliography. This is a list of books that the author used to help them to write their own book. When I'd read everything available at my library, I started looking for these books. I found most of them at the State Library of Victoria.



Historical Sources

I wanted to reach my own conclusions, not just accept other people's opinions about Ned. So I read many original documents of the time. The Public Records Office of Victoria holds many documents about Ned. They have his original criminal records and court records. They also have the Jerilderie letter, the Cameron letter, letters to the Governor of Victoria, even the short letter that Ned wrote when he was 15—that's where the title, *Black Snake*, came from.

The State Library of Victoria has newspapers from the era on microfilm.

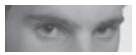
At the time I was writing the book, the National Trust held a Ned Kelly exhibition in the Old Melbourne Gaol. It displayed all sorts of relics, from the gang's armour to the door from Ned's grandfather's house. You could walk through the building where Ned was imprisoned, stand in his cell, and see the gallows where he was hanged.



Imagining the Past

To write a book set in the past—even a work of non-fiction—I had to be able to imagine what it was like: how people dressed, what houses looked like, what work they would have done. I needed to know that cars hadn't been invented, telephones weren't in use, and women usually rode horses side-saddle. Writing fictional pieces meant I had to know even more detail. How was bread made? How did people communicate over long distances? What did policemen wear?

Once again, books were my main source of information about daily life at the time of the Kelly Outbreak. Ned lived from 1854–1880. Photography had been invented by then, so there were photos of families, farms and towns which helped me get a picture of what country Victoria was like back then.



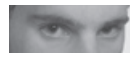
Ned's Legacy

Even with all the information that is available about Ned, we can only guess at his motives. Did he really want to improve things for all poor people or was he just interested in making things better for his own family? Was he really thinking about forming a republic?

Whether he intended it or not, his actions did have an effect. Because of the Royal Commission into the way the police handled the hunt for the Kellys, changes were made to the police force. Senior officers were made more responsible for their actions. Some people say that Ned's actions improved the lot of poor farmers and land ownership became easier.

If Ned was planning on creating a republic in Victoria, that's one thing that didn't happen!

Ned was to become a national—distinctly Australian—hero. Many of the early white settlers were convicts from Britain. This unique history is something that Australians used to be ashamed of. Nowadays, people are often proud to discover their ancestors were convicts. Australian pioneers are seen as people who wouldn't give up fighting for a better life, even if it seemed impossible to achieve. Today we might call them 'battlers' or 'underdogs'. Ned, fighting injustice for his family, has become a hero for many people.



Activities

1. What would it have been like to come in contact with the Kellys. Imagine if you had gone to the same school as Ned Kelly. Do you think Ned would have been quiet, or a rowdy bully? How would you feel towards him if you found out his dad was in jail? Would you be surprised that he'd saved Dick Shelton from drowning? Write a short piece about it.

There might be other people whose point of view you would like to take. You might like to role-play your ideas in groups.

2. Have a look at some of the original documents about Ned on the Internet:

• <http://nedonline.imagineering.net.au/Masterframeset.html>

Ned Online is the site of the Public Records Office of Victoria. Here you'll find copies of all Ned's letters.

• www.ironoutlaw.com/html/documents.html

See some of the newspaper articles about Ned.

• <http://catalogue.slv.vic.gov.au/webvoy.htm>

Look at the State Library of Victoria collection of Ned Kelly photographs. Click on Pictures Catalogue. Then type **Kelly, Ned** in the search box and click on **by or about a person**. Click to search. Pick a picture you'd like to see. Click on the red number. Then click on the red, underlined digital image title.

3. What would everyday life have been like back then? As a class, list the differences, for example, there were no cars or television when Ned was alive. How would your day have been different?

4. Make a list of young Australians who are in the news at the moment. Do you think any of them will be remembered as heroes a 100 years from now?

Carole Wilkinson



Carole is the author of the best-selling *Ramose* series, and *Dragonkeeper*. *Black Snake: the Daring of Ned Kelly* was made an honour book in the CBCA awards, 2003. She is currently working on a novel about the modern Olympics and another about Alexander the

Great. She is based in inner city Melbourne, and is interested in the history of everything.

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