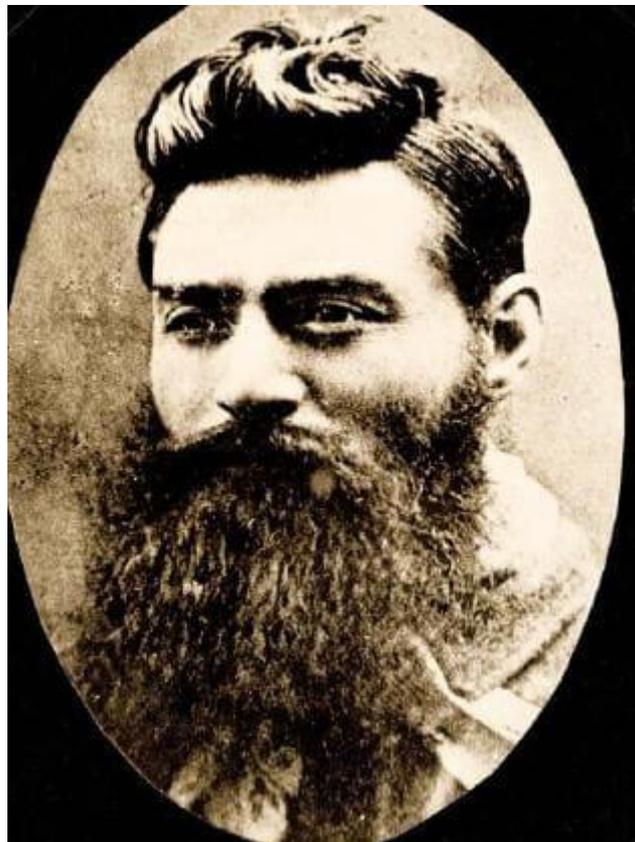


NED KELLY WAS A FAILED TERRORIST – NOT A FOLK HERO

DOUG MORRISSEY

MYTH-based accounts of the Kelly Outbreak offer little more than a misleading, cursory glance into the complex social world of community life in the region.

They hold the colonial Irish up as oppressed and in need of a political saviour. But it was [Ned Kelly and his criminal cronies](#) who disrupted and interfered with the smooth running of the community. The Greta community was not always harmonious and cooperative, but neither was it imploding from poverty, despair and conflict. The plundering lifestyle of [habitual criminals like the Kellys](#), Quinns and Lloyds, and those with little respect for law and order, is no measure of how the majority of people lived their daily lives.



A portrait of Ned Kelly from 1880, before his execution. (Pic: State Library of Victoria)

Law-abiding people avoided contact with the local toughs as best they could. There was no *Dad and Dave* culture of poverty engendering selector despair, alienation and powerlessness, no fertile ground for the rise of a social bandit, no revolutionary intent on the part of the Kelly Gang, only an escalation of criminal rebellion. If the Kelly Gang were social bandits they were exceedingly poor ones, [unable at Glenrowan to call on selectors or their own supporters for help](#) when the revolution was nigh. During more than twelve hours of fighting, not a single selector or Kelly sympathiser fired a gun in defence of Ned and his gang.

Traditional Kelly histories acknowledge Ned's involvement in horse and cattle stealing. But apart from a brief mention of a lively intercolonial livestock stealing trade operated by professional horse and cattle thieves, these histories prefer to view stock theft in the region as caused by community discord and selection failure. They regard stock theft as a class activity in which the object (horse and cattle theft), the victim (squatters) and the perpetrator (selectors) are clearly identified.



Ned Kelly in chains after his capture. (Pic: Supplied)

In this scenario, Ned's horse and cattle stealing activities are excused as typical of the behaviour of selectors and their sons, with these agrarian crimes carried out against wealthy and powerful squatters, reflecting, we are told, growing selector dissatisfaction and the pent up anger of the politically frustrated. Police, court and newspaper records do not support this theory of the selector class as the principal law-breakers.

Constantly overlooked, when discussing 19th century rural communities, are the deeply rooted standards brought from the old country by immigrants. These standards included traditional values, conventional morality, respect for authority and in particular religious conviction, all of which were of paramount importance to respectable people. They underpinned community attitudes and were the bedrock upon which the community was built. The predatory world of livestock thieves, bush larrikins and Kelly sympathisers, socially and culturally rubbed up against the traditionalist world of honest, law-abiding selectors and others, causing a clash of lifestyles, values and paradigms. A significant gulf existed between law-breakers and the law-abiding, a cultural and social chasm that grew wider still, when the Kellys' horse and cattle stealing crimes became bushranging, bank robbery and murder. Ned's lawless world was sustained by a network of livestock thieves and receivers

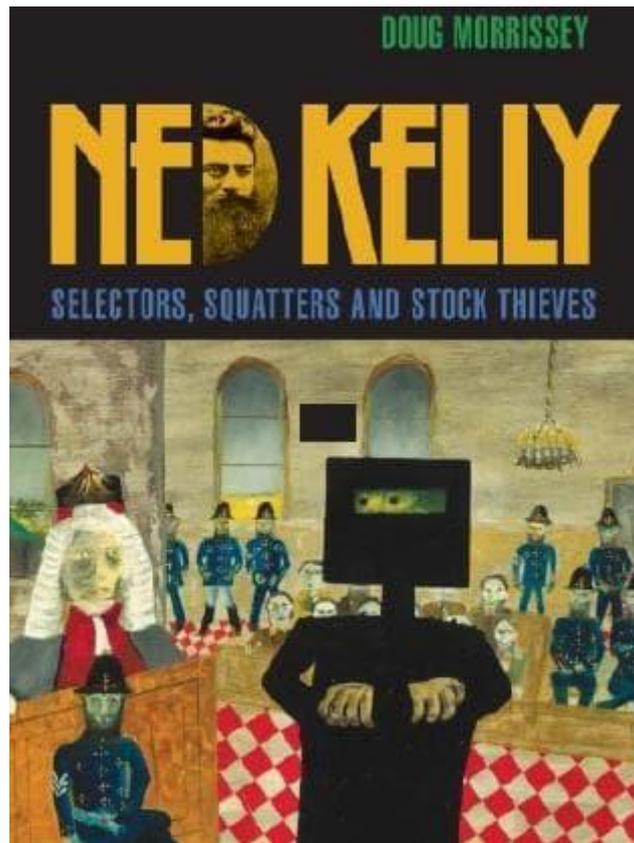
sharing in the profits and deflecting the attention of the police. They were no more than an aggressive and misbehaved minority who stole horses and cattle for a living and intimidated those around them.



Bush ranger Ned Kelly (right), in a photo believed to be taken in 1874, with an unidentified man on the left. (Pic: Supplied)

The north east was not being torn asunder by class conflict and land war. Selective incidents of local disputes involving selectors and squatters give a false impression of social relations. Squatters were not the powerful force they had been. Most accepted the inevitability of selectors settling on their runs and everybody felt strongly about anyone attempting to limit their access to water and wandering livestock. They all protected their properties. The selector/squatter land war of an earlier period still had political currency in Ned's community, but it was not in Ned's time a divisive, community-disrupting bogeyman.

Without proper analysis, community relationships become distorted and behaviours misrepresented as something other than what they were. The Kelly myth abounds in such distortions and falsehoods. The community story they tell is skewed and misleading, perpetuating the modern day fiction that Ned had sympathy and support from the majority of north east residents. When assessed from a neighbourhood perspective, the Greta community story exemplifies robust diversity and adaptation to circumstance, emphasising a complex spectrum of community purpose and response.



Doug Morrissey's new book Ned Kelly: Selectors, Squatters and Stock Thieves. (Pic: Supplied)

The rowdy shanty lifestyle with its larrikinism, gambling, fighting, petty crime, habitual drunkenness, prostitution and horse and cattle stealing was not the lifestyle chosen or lived by the majority of rural pioneers. Honest and decent living people, the overlooked silent majority of the north east community, fare badly in the history books when faced with the commotion and turbulence of crime and law-breaking. More interest is directed at the delinquent doings of those who break the law than in the principled behaviour of those who obey it. The old cliches of drunken shearers, ne'er-do-well swagmen and bold bushrangers were true; they do not however describe the decently lived lives of the majority of settlers or the traditionally conservative mindset of respectable people.

Australians see Ned Kelly as a national hero: a rebel in homemade armour, a career criminal with attitude, a wild west gun toting outlaw with an impulsive, reckless streak. Ned is a bad boy movie star before there were movie stars, doing things modern Australians thrill to see on the screen or read in a book but recoil from in real life. We should stop seeing Ned through rose-tinted glasses, stop making excuses and adding a fairy tale edge to his wicked deeds. Today a statue of Ned stands six metres tall in painted fibreglass armour, carrying a rifle and presiding over a Glenrowan tourist park devoted to falsifying his memory.

Ned and his gang should be remembered for their bullying ways, predatory horse and cattle stealing, and for the years of intimidating fear and terror they visited on the Greta community. The outlaw gang should be remembered for the bank robberies, the murdering of three policemen from ambush and the shooting of Aaron Sherritt point blank as he answered his back door — cowardly murders that were not

necessary or carried out in self-defence. Above all, Ned and his gang should be remembered for the cold-blooded intention behind their monstrous Glenrowan plan, a failed terrorist plot to massacre a trainload of police and civilians as a prelude to yet more crimes.

This is an edited extract from *Ned Kelly: Selectors, Squatters and Stock Thieves* by Doug Morrissey (Connor Court Publishing, \$39.95)