

Superintendent John Sadleir



John Sadleir, who, as superintendent of police was in charge at Glenrowan when Ned Kelly was taken, passed away on 21 September 1919 at his home "Orwell", Kooyong Road, Elsternwick, Melbourne. His wife and two sons predeceased him. He is interred in Brighton Cemetery, Melbourne.

John Sadleir was baptised on 11 June 1833 from Brookville House, just south of Tipperary Town, Ireland. At the age of 19, he emigrated to Victoria, with two brothers, travelling in the first Australian voyage of SS Great Britain and landing in Hobson's Bay on 12 November 1852. Almost immediately he joined the initial intake of a cadet corps, which, though it lasted only a few years, preceded the formation of the state police of Victoria.

For the next 25 years, he was posted to various locations mainly in northern and north-eastern Victoria. His future wife, Isabella Maria Crofton, whose family he had known in Tipperary, arrived on SS Boomerang in 1855. He married her in St Kilda in 1857. Between 1858 and 1880 Maria had twelve children born variously in Beechworth, Hamilton, Melbourne, Sale, Kyneton, Mansfield and Benalla reflecting Sadleir's postings. Promoted to sergeant in 1853, Sadleir rose through the ranks of the police force. He was a sub-inspector in 1854, inspector in 1860, superintendent in 1874 and inspecting superintendent in 1892. A very keen horseman, he greatly enjoyed the bush patrol work he was frequently involved in. Entries in his diary for 1879 when he was posted to Benalla show many days in the saddle. On 28 January he rode from Mansfield to Benalla in 8 hours. In his 1913 book, he says, on a steamer sailing along the coast from Melbourne in 1867, "How sweet once again was the scent of the gum trees and the odour of the bush, compared with smoky and disease-haunted Melbourne".

Sadleir started his career on the Ballarat goldfields where he recognised the iniquities of the miner's licence system and he predicted the later insurrection at Eureka, although he was not present there. He was a hardworking and systematic policeman who was involved in much bush work and gold escort duties. He offered to join his friend Robert O'Hara Burke's 1860 expedition but Burke turned him down because of his family responsibilities. In 1877 he was posted to Mansfield and thus became involved in the hunt for the Kelly Gang. Writing many years later he said "The true picture of the bushranger shows him to be a very poor and sordid thing indeed. The Kelly's, in spite of a few successful enterprises, were as poor and unheroic as any of their kind. The more one reflects.....the more one wonders on the timidity and faint-heartedness of the people they had to do with, and that made these successes possible." Sadleir was probably more aware than any of his superiors of the voluntary and involuntary network of Kelly supporters. He relied on a number of police informants who supplied him with information at great risk to themselves. Throughout the period of the hunt, John was greatly impeded in his work by the outright antagonism between two of his colleagues, Hare and Nicholson and the inappropriate adoration of Chief Commissioner Standish for his subordinate Hare.

From 5.30 am on 28 June 1880, Sadleir took charge of the police operation surrounding Mrs Jones's hotel at Glenrowan. It is almost certain that more has been written about the events of this siege of the Kelly gang than any other day in Australian history. Sadleir's reports to his superiors, to the subsequent Longmore Police Commission (L.P.C.), and written in his memoirs and other publications, are those of the one person who was cognisant of the entire action and who had the responsibility of public safety. Many of the published accounts do not refer to John's knowledge that, subsequent to the mysterious eruption of two rockets, there were a large number of suspected Kelly sympathisers moving in the bush behind the public surrounding the police lines. Sadleir was convinced that the Glenrowan situation could be the spark of a local insurrection. (The significance of this has been fully outlined in John McQuilton's 1979 book.) He was greatly concerned that indiscriminant police fire could hurt members of the public and refused permission to rush the hotel because of the risk to police lives. Although the L.P.C. was highly critical of his handling of the siege, many newspaper reporters who were on the scene commended him for minimising fatalities. Against the instruction of his superiors, he released the bodies of the gang to their families which helped to defuse the tension. He also arranged for medical attention to the wounded Ned Kelly and spoke sympathetically to him in confinement.

In 1881 the Berry government in Victoria set up a Commission under Longmore to investigate the efficiency of the police and the circumstances preceding and attending the Kelly outbreak. This highly politicised body in John's words "went for scalps". He was highly critical of the L.P.C.'s procedures, particularly of their acceptance of evidence about individual's actions without any opportunities of rebuttal. He wrote a series of anonymous letters to the Melbourne Argus which so annoyed Longmore that he demanded the writer's name from the editor who refused to release it! An outcome of the findings of the LPC was that senior police officers resigned or were recommended

for demotion. Sadleir was admonished and the RC recommended he be moved to the bottom of the superintendent's seniority list.

It should be recognised that the Government of Victoria did not accept many of the recommendation made by the Royal Commission, and in the case of Supts. Hare and Nicolson, they were not retired, but re-instated and shortly after made Police Magistrates.

Supt. Sadleir was re-instated by Cabinet and he continued as a police officer until his retirement in 1896. In his later years and in retirement he took an active part in public affairs and was a lifelong member of the Victorian Historical Society, publishing several articles in its journal. He continued his interest in horse racing, in dog judging and other bodies such as the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. A prolific writer of Letters to the Editor he commented on issues such as the treatment of aboriginals, on the finances of a mutual society and was a commissioner of enquiry into the Queensland police in 1899. Five of his sons went to the Western Australian gold-rushes in 1894 and two of them, Ralph and Henry, founded a customs, shipping and transport agency which now operates throughout Australia.