

# KELLY CULTURE

NED KELLY HAS BEEN PROMINENT IN THE MINDS OF AUSTRALIANS SINCE THE 1870S. BUT WHO WAS HE REALLY? A MAJOR EXHIBITION EXPLORES THE PLETHORA OF IMAGES.

**W**ho was Ned Kelly, really? Folk hero, larrikin or gentleman? Or just plain mad and bad?

Kelly was a puzzle of contradictions. A robber who was always short of cash, a man who hated conflict but was dogged by it, a fugitive who renounced escape to save his brother.

More than 100 books have now been published on the subject. Plus half-a-dozen musicals and films, a ballet, an opera and a cartoon strip.

In a flurry of recent interest, the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympics starred Kelly in the *Tin Symphony*. Novelist Peter Carey scooped a swag of literary prizes worldwide for his *True History of the Kelly Gang*. A new film starring Heath Ledger, Geoffrey Rush and Naomi Watts is just about ready for international release. Twenty artists are commissioned to produce artworks based on Kelly.

Even in his own lifetime, Kelly was most notable for what he represented rather than what he was, historian Ian Jones says. And his enemies shaped the myth more than his allies.

After an initial burst of activity in the 1880s, interest in Kelly died down until the 1940s wartime search for a national identity, then the social change of the late 1960s. The centenary of the Glenrowan siege and Kelly's death made 1980 another milestone. Now, in a new millennium, Kelly is a beacon on our cultural landscape, his armour a national icon.

Kelly awareness forms patterns over the past 124 years, say the curators of a new exhibition,



*Kelly Culture: reconstructing Ned Kelly.* Ranging across music, performing arts, visual arts, cinema and literature, the centrepiece is the most complete suit of Kelly's armour ever shown – with armour worn by all four Kelly Gang members, rare documents such as the famous Jerilderie Letter, photographs, Kelly's death mask and rifle.

Images of Kelly are as diverse as the genres of music, from the heroic ballads and poems that began in the 1870s – while the Gang was still at large – to Smoky Dawson's 1948 country elegy for Ned's brother, Jim Kelly. More recently, Kelly features in movie soundtracks, rock music and opera. Visitors can listen to a mini juke box playing Kelly tracks by performers including Smiling Billy Blinkhorn, Midnight

Oil and Ashley Davies, who will also perform live his 2001 music/narration/film collaboration with Ian Jones.

Tony Richardson's *Ned Kelly* (1970) forged an unlikely connection with its casting of rock star Mick Jagger as Kelly. Stills photographs by Robert Whitaker will be on display. The film was roundly condemned, but the casting has gone a long way towards extending awareness.

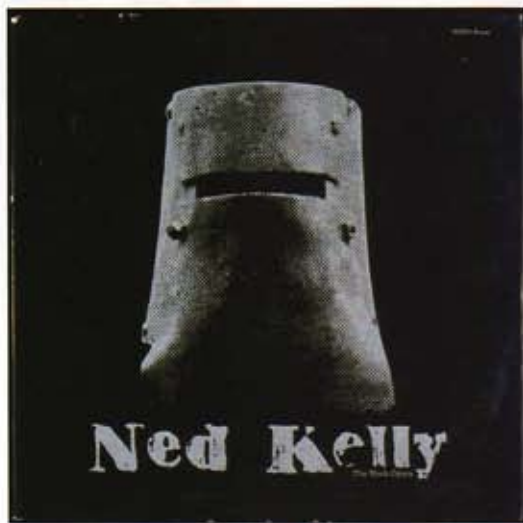
Whitaker sees the main thrust as political – Irish/English. "You had the police side, which was a story of viciousness and not really good policing. A lot of police were English and there was a particular resentment towards the Irish, who made up a considerable amount of this population. I hadn't realised how much support Ned Kelly had; Tony Richardson

gave all his supporters shamrock green scarves that signified the flag of Ireland."

Marianne Faithfull was originally to co-star. "She had taken some form of noxious substance and knocked herself out of the whole film production," Whitaker continues, "which made the film extraordinarily difficult. Had Marianne been in, it would have been an absolute classic ... but the spark had gone.

"The whole film became focused on Mick Jagger and he's quite short in stature and wasn't really the bushranger I'd hoped to see, but who else was there? Standing with a 45 Colt pistol he looked a bit limp actually, so ... the whole thing was just a mess."

*Kelly Culture: reconstructing Ned Kelly* runs through March and April at the Keith Murdoch Gallery, State Library.



Clockwise from top:  
Ned Kelly: the Rock Opera 1974. Courtesy Reg Livermore archive  
The Jerilderie letter  
A Man of Wealth & Taste Vintage silver gelatin Robert Whitaker 1969