How have different media engineered the myth of Ned Kelly?

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The iconic legend of Ned Kelly has been represented in several different media including novels, poems, songs, musicals, paintings and motion pictures. This bombardment of images of a noble bushman in bullet proof armour has emphasized Ned Kelly as a 'true' Australian hero. However the man remains elusive. We can never know the whole truth about him; we can only invent it. The constant repetition of Ned Kelly in different media is crucial to the memory making of the legend, because it ensures that this positive viewpoint remains dominant. Hence the repetition of a subjective interpretation not only romanticises an historical figure but at the same time extend the 'myth' to a 'legend.' Australia's national identity relies heavily upon such 'legends.' Peter Carey's novel *The True History of the Kelly Gang*, Sidney Nolan's art series and the world's first feature film in 1906 by the Tait brothers are prime examples of how the different media have generated the historical myth of Ned Kelly. Due to their ability to reach mass audiences they 'have familiarised more people with history than historians,' which has subsequently aided the creation of the iconic Kelly legend. Also the artistic license they have taken in their historical representations means that the actual historical facts surrounding Kelly have become secondary to the glorified myth.

In, *The Australian Legend*, Russel Ward states that 'nearly all legends have some basis in historical fact.' Russell Nye further clarifies this, stating that 'these facts do not speak for themselves they say something only when chosen, arranged and interpreted.' Therefore the legend of Ned Kelly has been shaped by the way historical facts have been represented. According to the legend, Ned Kelly wore an armoured suit; was a hero to the underprivileged, in particular Irish immigrants who were persecuted by the British establishment; he was a bushranger who was intensively protective of his family; and, although barely educated, it is alleged that Ned wrote some of the most passionate and poetic literature in his Jerilderie letter.

The generation of such a distinct legend provides Australian society with a sense of its own independence among other nations. The legend of Ned Kelly 'seemingly has a compelling quality that appeals to something deeply rooted in the character of the 'average' Australian.' He is accepted and respected as Australia's national character; 'a people's idea of itself and this stereotype, is often absurdly romanticised and exaggerated,' through several different media.

Most of these representations of Kelly including Carey, Nolan and the Tait brothers claim to be historically accurate but only focus on glorified aspects of the legend. Such media generally tend to distil a subjective, 'sexed up' version of the historical events about Kelly. These dramatised representations are often taken to be fact, which in turn distorts the historical truths. Also, the sheer quantity of Kelly material currently available on the commercial market testifies not just to the durability of the engineered myth, but also to its continuing profitability as a commodity circulating within an increasingly globalised market. The effect of 'this kind of
The unitary notion of history' is somewhat similar to that of 'telling a fairy tale story of (a) nation's development and calling it history when it is in fact myth... Thus the exploitation of the 'story' of Ned Kelly has distinguished the underlying historical truths and given the generated Kelly myth its 'legendary' status.

This 'legendary ideal' is evident in the first known positive interpretation of Ned Kelly. On the 21st June 1900 during the Boer war, the Melbourne Punch Magazine published a cartoon that depicted the bailing up of President Kruger, who was escaping on a train. This was among the first of the Australian political cartoons, invoking Ned Kelly's historical memory, to fix a national problem. Therefore this source can be seen as one of the first steps in Ned Kelly becoming mythologised.

In 1906 the heroic characteristics of the Ned Kelly myth were once again emphasized in the world's first feature film, The Story of the Kelly Gang, by John and Frank Tait. The Australian-produced film ran originally for 40 minutes and although reviews were scathing, huge crowds still attended its premiere in Melbourne. The reviews used such phrases as 'deplore the effect its glorification of criminality would have on young minds' and 'it is the sort of bellow drama that the lower orders crave for and two-thirds of Australia will want to see it...'. Even in 1906 the support for Ned Kelly was seen as coming from the 'lower orders' and contributed to an explosion of bushranger films. These films followed a formula whereby the swashbuckling outlaw shot it out with idiotic police but produced such ire from authorities that a general ban was placed on these films in 1912. However, despite the ban, The Story of the Kelly Gang had already reached an iconic status in the Australian psyche.

The idea of 'social banditry' further heightened the concept of Australia's national identity which is supposedly classless, anti-authority and values mateship. A corollary of this is a male-gender bias, which is related to the harsh environment of the Australian bush and how survival and success were rarely guaranteed. At the same time the rejection of the female contribution is also due to the 1906 social context of the time and this has been remedied to some extent, for example, Jean Bedford's novel, My Sister Kate.

Nonetheless the national genre of Australian films has depended upon images of land which viewers identified as Australian. Routt argues there are three generic images of the land and these are; the nearly featureless plain, the desert and 'the land of the bushranger films is... the hill country.' The 'hill country is geographically as well as socially at the margin of the hill country.' Hence 'just as the hill country was a marginal landscape so is The Story of the Kelly Gang marginal history... (as it is) at the margin of respectability. The assumption is that audiences would have treated this film pragmatically taking from it 'whatever truth suited their needs.' As a result a subtle even delicate intermeshing of fact and fiction occurs, where drastically different interpretations seem to disclaim the existence of a single historical truth about Ned Kelly, which is known as the Rashomon effect.

A prime example of this underlying concept would be Ned Kelly's famous last words. Although two newspapers, The Age and Herald Sun, reported Kelly's last words as 'Such is Life' and two other newspapers as 'Ah well, I suppose it has come to this. Such is life,' another source, Ned Kelly's gaol warden, writes in his diary that when Ned Kelly was prompted to say his final words that he opened his mouth and mumbled something that the warden could not hear - and since the warden's office is closer to the scene of the hanging than the witnesses' allotted space, Ned Kelly's last words actually remain uncertain. This evidence disputes claims made by Elton, that 'documentary records are the ultimate arbiter of historical accuracy and truth.' The very fact that Kelly's last words have become of great significance to the legend and his legacy, demonstrates the power of collective memory and the subjective nature of documentary records. In this sense, the changing political, social, and historical context of such documentary records can be also be seen as key features in the perpetuation of the sense of Australian nationalism and hence the Kelly legend.
Subsequently during the 1940s the presentation of history seemed to shift from the traditional to that of a postcolonial viewpoint. After World War 2 historians began to question the stability of the Empire and the very basis of ‘Imperialism’ and ‘Colonialism,’ and this process invariably entailed the revision or rejection of previous historical accounts which narrated European expansion as largely unproblematic. This aggressive Australianism was nowhere more marked than in Australian writing and art – depicting it as a frontier land, a land of hardship and adversity where men triumphed over the elements. The continuing impacts of colonialism are also central to postcolonial accounts of the past. Such characteristics are also similar to the representations of the Kelly legend.

This change in interpretations could account for the increase in popularity of the Kelly myth, as it was during this period that the Jerilderie letter was released to the public after years in private ownership, and the ban on bushranging films was lifted. It was also during this postcolonial period that Sidney Nolan exhibited his iconic Ned Kelly paintings. Therefore one can surmise that the changing social context of the postcolonial period influenced Nolan to paint a positive interpretation of Ned Kelly; ‘the present influences our idea of the past...’

Sidney Nolan, a sixth-generation Irish Australian, was also captivated by the melodrama of the Ned Kelly story after reading J.J. Kenneally’s, *The Inner History of the Kelly Gang* (1929), and a transcript of the Kelly trial in 1945. Encouraged by Sunday Reed, following a hitch-hiking tour of the Kelly country in northern Victoria with Max Harris, Nolan painted the whole series in rapid succession. Nolan produced a total of 45 Ned Kelly paintings between March 1945 and July 1947, but it was the twenty seven that he gathered together for an exhibition in 1948 which have gained iconic status. These paintings, although not recognised at the time of their creation, have become of legendary status due to the postcolonial emphasis placed on society’s collective memory of the Kelly myth. They have now become of ‘real importance to a sense of Australian culture, history and identity.’ However, despite their significance most historians discuss written representations of the past; more books have been published about the Kellys than any other subject in Australian history. However the influence of such artwork over Australian society and collective memory should not be overlooked. The paintings are instantly recognisable and are one of the key components in perpetuating the myth of Ned Kelly.

As Clendinnen states ‘a successful myth only grows more potent with exploitation...’ a durable myth commands general recognition and affection yet remains sufficiently capacious to contain a jumble of personal associations. By not always following the historical facts, Nolan is able to use his artistic license to glorify the accepted view of Kelly and in the process increase the engineered myth at the expense of the historical truth. Hence, Nolan incorporates aspects of his own life and influences into the artwork. This is evident through the personal comments Nolan makes about his paintings; ‘This is really about myself. I used to climb the water tower at Horshamm...’ as well as ‘My uncle Jack used to wash himself with a bar of laundry soap in the dam...’ and ‘That quilt is real. A friend who was in the army with me gave it to me...’ Thus one may conclude that such paintings provide information, which is sometimes as much about the artist as the subject. This approach parallels E.H. Carr’s argument of subjectivity in history, that the ‘truth is important. (But) It always has to be partial; it always has to be as I see it.’

Nolan conveys his subjective representation of the Kelly myth in narrative form. The twenty seven paintings tell a story of the Kelly legend leading up to ‘the climax of the tragedy.’ Nolan’s work possesses a remarkable directness of statement, a superb sense of space, a bright freshness of feeling and an unusual capacity for creating a memorable image. Kelly is symbolically painted in his armour to show a separation between him and the other characters. The police are also strategically positioned to imply a sense of stupidity ignorance and incompetence, as in the paintings ‘The Encounter (1946)’ and ‘The Defence of Aaron Sherritt (1946). Nolan’s Kelly is just the right size, neither a grandiose hero figure nor a proletarian outsider filled with
self righteousness and self-pity, but a kind of absurd relative, an eccentric brother, a joking saint who appears at odd moments merely to assert his eternal, if subterranean, existence in the Australian memory. 

Despite their powerful impact, historians disregard the paintings as historical representations, just as they disregard fiction as having any place in history. As Hayden White argues, it is the language and linguistic protocols that fundamentally shape the writing of history. Sidney Nolan has also influenced several other contemporary works. For instance in 2000, Peter Carey based his novel, The True History of the Kelly Gang on Nolan’s art series, Kelly’s Jerilderie letter, Irish folktales, and Robert Drewe’s novel Our Sunshine. The title of Carey’s novel is self-mocking, since the number of texts about Ned Kelly and the things that are known about him and his life suggest that we will never know the ‘true’ history.

Similar to Nolan’s paintings, there also is a sense of subjectivity and personal connection about the novel as Carey puts a very Freudian, psychoanalytic spin on the Kelly story by making the relationship between Ned and his mother central in the story. Ned ‘adores’ his mother and feels guilty about his father’s imprisonment for the theft that Ned himself had unwittingly committed.

The novel is divided into thirteen sections, named ‘parcels,’ somewhat similar to that of the Jerilderie letter. Carey transcribes much of the letter and tries to maintain the passion of its language, whilst at the same time changes it from a public manifesto into a private and personal letter from Ned to his fictionalized unborn daughter. Hence Carey invents scenarios to make his novel seem more authentic and also to emphasize the sympathetic view of the Kelly myth. For instance, there are several accounts which dispute the claim that Ned had such a close relationship with any woman. Hayden White and Inga Clendinnen describe this type of historical narrative as a ‘fictive’ view of the past, which ‘requires significant narrowing of vision and manipulation of the truth.’

The novel’s epigraph further emphasizes the notion of selectivity and subjectivity. It suggests that ‘history is an unending dialogue between the past and the present,’ that the past is not a sealed-off, self-contained historical period, but rather something that continues to live in the present – perhaps through the way the stories are retold, to treat the past as a text that can be woven in different ways. This links to Henry Reynolds argument that ‘present values and preoccupation will always help to determine which aspects of the past will be thought important.’ Hence, by emphasizing the racial discrimination of Irish migrants and their triumph over the British establishment, as a result of the revolt of the Kelly Gang,

‘...we showed them what convict blood could do. We proved there were no taint we was of true bone, blood and beauty born... they knew full well the terror of the unyielding law the historic memory of UNFAIRNESS were in their blood.’

Carey draws a distinct contrast to the contemporary ideology of ‘multiculturalism’ in Australian society. In this sense Carey is making a social comment about the positive changes that have occurred within Australia, with regards to the treatment of migrants. Nonetheless Carey’s contemporary views and imagination impinge upon his interpretation of the Ned Kelly myth, which in turn leads to the idea that historical truths have become insignificant.

Although Carey is only reproducing his interpretation of the already established subjective view of Ned Kelly, he is also recreating Kelly’s past through a blend of fact and fiction. This links to the argument; ‘Is History Fiction?’ Historians such as Geoffrey Barraclough argue that ‘the history we read (including that from
Historians) is strictly speaking not factual at all, but a series of accepted judgments." \(^{54}\) Historian, Barbara Tuchman agrees; ‘I see myself as a storyteller, a narrator...’ \(^{55}\)

However Inga Clendinnen believes that novelists such as Carey have no place in history and argues that ‘historians are concerned with what men and women have actually done... (whereas) novelists enjoy their space for invention because their only binding contract is with their readers, and that is not to instruct or to reform, but to delight.’ \(^{56}\) Within her article in the Quarterly magazine in 2006, Clendinnen makes reference to an interview with Carey about his novel The True History of the Kelly Gang at a Brisbane writers’ Festival a few years ago,\(^{57}\) where she directly attacked Carey; ‘It doesn’t matter what is out in the real world: this is art and you are making it to suit your needs.’ \(^{58}\) In other words, Carey has suppressed certain historical facts in order to suit his purpose and entertain his audience.

Carey invents scenarios to make his novel seem more authentic and also to emphasize the glorified view of the Kelly legend. For instance, he has an eleven-year-old Ned helping his mother in childbirth. This highlights the family’s physical isolation and lack of community support and shows Ned’s love for his mother. Carey draws on the rumour about the relationship between Kelly and another bushranger, Harry Power. Carey presents Kelly in this relationship as a reluctant apprentice bushranger. By adding fictitious information like this, Carey is able to emphasize certain aspects of the Kelly legend and hence Ned Kelly becomes suitable to a contemporary audience. In this sense, Carey is evaluating the contemporary question of Australia’s identity and national character; ‘...It is a people’s idea of itself and this stereotype, though often absurdly romanticized and exaggerated, is always connected with reality in two ways. It springs largely from a person’s past experiences, and often modifies current events by colouring men’s ideas of how they ought ‘typically’ to behave.'\(^{59}\)

Due to the changing social, political, and historical contexts, as well as new methods of historical thought, Australia’s national identity has changed over the past century. This has in turn influenced different media in perpetuating the myth of Ned Kelly. The 1906 film premiered during a time where Australia was forging its national identity and hence needed to establish its own national heroes. Thus these ideals were reflected in the film through the representation of Ned Kelly as a heroic man who defied authority and the emphasis on the Australian landscape. After WW2 postcolonial thought became dominant as Australians began to question the power of the ‘mother country’. This lead to a rise in Australian nationalism and meant that anti-authoritarianism, especially against British establishment were emphasised within different media to promote Australia as an individual country and not just part of the Empire. Hence Nolan’s twenty-seven paintings depict a sympathetic interpretation of the Kelly myth. Lastly, Carey’s contemporary novel The True History of the Kelly Gang, demonstrates the multicultural views of Australian society in the twenty-first century. Carey emphasises the cultural discrimination of the past in order to give a sense of reconciliation to the present.

Despite the changing context of the Kelly legend, the engineered myths still hold a greater significance than the historical truths. As with other mythic narratives surrounding oppositional figures like Ned Kelly, the legend continues to depend on the manipulation of Australia’s collective memory, which has been reinforced through different media.
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FOOT NOTES

8. Russel Ward, op. cit., p. 34
9. Deborah Hope, ‘Ripping Tales from the Vault,’ The Weekend Australian, March 18-19 2006. Hope quotes Melleuish saying that the changing of school curriculum is an ‘attempt by historians to ‘sex up’ Australian history for bored students by fixating on violence in the past, from conflict with Aborigines to Ned Kelly…’
10. Graham Huggan, op. cit., p. 5
11. Inga Clendenin, ‘Serious Nationalism is put Together by the Individual,’ in HTA, 29th January 2006.
22. The Jerilderie letter was not released to the public until the late 1940s.
44. Richard Guilliatt, ‘The Fist Action Hero,’ The Weekend Australian Magazine, November 25-26 2006. Guilliatt states that another twenty minutes were added to the film in 1907.
55. Sydney Mail, Feb, 1907, p. 3
66. The Bulletin, Jan, 1907, p. 8
77. Richard Guilliatt, op. cit., p. 26. These bans, instigated by the police of New South Wales, remained in place until the late 1940s in NSW.
88. The film was added to the UNESCO Memory of the World register in June 2007 and joins Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony and the Gutenberg Bible on an international register of historical documents of world significance. Other Australian documents include Captain Cook’s Endeavour journal and the Mabo case manuscript.
21. Ibid, p. 14
22. Ibid, p. 14
23. Ibid, p. 14
24. Ann Curthoys and John Docker, Is History Fiction? 2006. Makes reference to Rashoman, (ed) Peter Burke, New Perspective on Historical Writing, about the 1950 film by Akira Kurosawa - best known example of the use of multiple viewpoints. ‘The film evocation of the importance of point of view and the impossibility of determining what actually happened was so powerful that the ‘Rashomon effect’ entered the language to denote incompatible accounts and memories.’
26. Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, The Houses of History, New York University Press, USA, 1999. Postcolonial histories included the perspectives of the colonized and often revise the understanding of their experiences. The colonised peoples were placed at the centre of the historical process, emphasizing their culture and agency.
27. Don Whittington, In Search of an Australian, Australia, 1974, p. 20
30. Brain Kennedy, www.nga.gov.au 'Nolan's grandfather had been a police sergeant in the party pursuing Ned Kelly at Beechworth in Victoria.'
31. www.ironoutlaw.com It has been alleged that this is the first positive writing about Kelly
32. Sunday Reed was the wife of John Reed, Nolan's close friend. The two shared a love for painting.
33. The series is painted on hard composition board using a high grade enamel called Ripolin. Ripolin was extremely fast-drying and therefore demanded an immediacy of execution. It allowed a great colour range and, being very fluid, the canvas or board had to be lying flat while it was being painted.
34. In the mid 1950s another series, 'The Glenrowan Siege 1955' - a subdued representation of two paintings of 1946, 'Glenrowan Siege' and 'Burning at Glenrowan.'
36. Keith McMenomy, op. cit. Preamble (vi)
38. This is a subjective view of history and demonstrates a movement away from the Empiricist interpretation.
40. Ibid, pg 60 Nolan's comments on 'The Questioning' (1947)
41. Ibid, pg 54 Nolan's comments on 'The Defence of Aaron Sherritt' (1946)
44. Mary Eagle and John Jones, op. cit. p. 150
47. Robert Drewe's novel, Our Sunshine is the basis of 2003 Ned Kelly by Gregor Jordan, starring Heath Ledger.
48. Carey always justifies Kelly's wrong-doings with a reason that is morally right; thus giving the impression that Kelly was a noble young man trying to protect his family.
49. Keith McMenomy, op. cit., p. 163
52. William Faulkner - 'the past is not dead. It is not even past.'
53. E. H. Carr, op. cit., p. 67
54. Henry Reynolds, Why Weren't We Told? Viking, Ringwood, 1999, p. 4
57. Barbara Tuchman, op. cit., p. 34
58. Ibid; p. 34
59. Inga Clendinnen - '...As the session went on, the interrogation became increasingly hostile. I have forgotten the questions, but I have not forgotten the tone: On what grounds did you de-emphasise Kelly's Uncle's association with the police? What evidence do you have for the green sash affair? How do you justify your claims as to the time taken to get from Jerilderie to Whoopky Doo on an average-to-good horse?' And Carey would slide further and further down his chair and say 'I made it up. His interrogators were insisting he had written history. He knew he had written fiction.'
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Four Wheel Drive Adventures; *Stringybark Tours*; Warwick Hair
Old Melbourne Gaol; *Melbourne's most captivating Attraction: Ned Kelly in Pictures*