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Reawakening Ned

Robert McCrum talks to Peter Carey about wrestling with a national myth

Robert McCrum
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Observer: What is True History of the Kelly Gang about?

Peter Carey: Ned Kelly was the eldest child of an Irish convict father and a mother whose own family was always wild and sometimes criminal. When Ned's father died, his mother selected a farm under a Lands Act which did for the Kellys what it did for most poor farmers - kept them in continually desperate circumstances. Given the boy's poverty and family connections, it is not surprising that he was first jailed at the age of 15 nor that he soon became the apprentice of a famous bushranger.

Obs: What attracted you to his story?

PC: It is easy to look at this boy as a product of his class and circumstances, one more example of what happens when you imagine you can change your penal colony into a decent nation.

Yet the story of Ned Kelly, and the reason Australians still respond to him so passionately, is that he was not brutalised or diminished by his circumstances. Rather, he elevated himself, and inspired a particular people with his courage, wit and decency. It did not hurt that it took two years for the forces of the Crown finally to capture him. You rarely lose marks in Australia for outwitting the police. He was proof that our dismal history need not be read pessimistically. As Dame Mabel Brooks later said: 'If a cog had slipped in time, the Kelly boys would have been on Gallipoli, one probably a VC winner.'

Obs: Was he always an anti-hero?

PC: When he was hanged, there were great protests and since that time his popularity has only grown. This is, as I continue to tell my American friends, not like Jesse James. If it is like anything, it is like Thomas Jefferson. That is the sort of space Kelly occupies in the national imagination.

Obs: What do Australians make of the novel?

PC: When I told Australian friends that I was writing about Kelly, I was often met with didn't already know.

Obs: You're not the first to have explored this subject in fiction.

PC: The Kelly story is like a great, dark plain on which, here and there, passionate or violent scenes are played. All around these bright scenes are black seas of unseen incident and unknown feeling. We Australians had not even begun to imagine the emotional life of the characters in our great story.

Obs: For example?

PC: One quick example: it is no secret that Ned Kelly's father died when he was 12, that he was the eldest boy, that he took responsibility for his family and became 'the Man'. Ned and his mother were very close all his life, and his actions in his last two years seem largely motivated by his desparation to get her out of jail. Ellen Kelly was a wild woman. She had lovers, husbands, children by numerous fathers. If we only imagine her son as a hero, then we cannot allow him to be jealous of these men. But if we allow ourselves to think of him as a growing boy we can permit him to be human.

Obs: How long did you work on it?

PC: True History of the Kelly Gang took about three years to write but it would not be too glib to claim a much longer period, say 35 years.

Obs: When did the story first impinge on your consciousness ?

PC: Somewhere in the middle Sixties, I first came upon the 56-page letter which Kelly attempted to have printed when the gang robbed the bank in Jerilderie in 1879. It is an extraordinary document, the passionate voice of a man who is writing to explain his life, save his life, his reputation. He wants us to see the injustice suffered by the poor farmers of North-Eastern Victoria. He does not paint himself lilywhite but he wants us to see how it was three policemen died at Stringybark Creek.

The Jerilderie Letter is a howl of pain. It sometimes sounds nuts then its author can also write: 'If my lips taught the public that men are made mad by bad treatment, then my life will not have been thrown away.' And all the time there is this original voice - uneducated but intelligent, funny and then angry, and with a line of Irish invective that would have made Paul Keating envious. His language came in a great, furious rush that could not but remind you of far more literary Irish writers.

Obs: How did you approach such a massive and mythic subject?

PC: When the time came for me to write the book, I never doubted how I should begin the job. For it was Kelly's language that drew me to this story. In those eccentric sentences was my character's DNA. I found the letter reproduced but I did not attempt to parody Kelly's style. What I finally wrote grew not just from the Jerilderie Letter but my first 10 years of life which I spent in the very small country town of Bacchus Marsh. I once knew people who spoke more or less like Ned does in my novel. I could inhabit this voice like an old, familiar shoe.

Obs: Was there a specific moment of inspiration for the novel?

PC: I've lived in New York for 10 years now and somewhere in the middle of that period the Metropolitan Museum exhibited Sydney Nolan's paintings of Ned Kelly. I'd seen then several time and had always liked them, but in the cab uptown to the exhibition I felt a sudden rush of nervousness.

Obs: Why nervousness?

PC: Would they travel well? Would I still like these paintings in New York? What I discovered, in a city where art often seems to be about theory or fashion, were paintings which were beyond fashion, imbued with an apparent awkwardness, artlessness illuminated by enormous grace. I began to take my Manhattan friends to see the show and as I circled the rooms with my victims, telling the story, it struck me what a strange, powerful thing this was.

Obs: Has living in New York given you a better perspective on Australia in general and Ned Kelly in particular?

PC: In Sydney, I would have known they were great paintings, and I would have recognised a powerful foundation myth, but I would also have been aware that there was, say, a Ned Kelly Burger and a Ned Kelly Discount Muffler Store and I would know that the main street of Glenrowan, where the gang fought its last stand, is lined with souvenir shops. Absence simplified the story.

Obs: How does it feel to have set a book totally in Australia ?

PC: While it's true that neither Jack Maggs nor The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith were set in Australia, they were both about Australia in their different ways. So True History of the Kelly Gang continues that preoccupation, Also, it is set in the past, which is another country again, one none of us can ever return to. That being said, it gave me immense pleasure to take possession of my home again, to see it as strange, new and yet familiar, to draw on something very deep from my place and my experience and write in a language I felt was deeply mine.

Obs: You've adopted a 'naive' voice for the book. What were the difficulties you encountered?

PC: There are limitations of thought, knowledge and vocabulary that come with this decision, but they never felt a limitation to me, because I have always had a passion to write like this, to make a sort of poetry from the uneducated voice, to give a speech to the speechless. It was deeply satisfying to me. It was also very pleasing that in the month following publication in Australia, the State Library of Victoria finally purchased the original manuscript of the Jerilderie Letter.

Obs: What did you read at school and university?

PC: At school, I was fanatical about being a scientist. I recall reading Voss and not much else. Later, I failed my first year of science and went to work in advertising .

Obs: But no fiction up to that point?

PC: Oddly, this is where I began to receive a literary education. Faulkner's As I Lay Dying had an immense affect on me, and most of my novels bear the burn marks of this experience, those short chapters with their conflicting points of view, truth expressed by multiple perspectives. The other attractive thing about As I Lay Dying was the way it gave rich voices to the poor. When I finished True History of the Kelly Gang, I realised that Faulkner had not lost his power over me.

• Peter Carey's many novels include Illywhacker, The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith and Jack Maggs. Oscar and Lucinda (the winner of 1988 Booker Prize) was made into a film starring Cate Blanchett and Ralph Fiennes