

The Fiery Outlaw: Incendiarism and the Tarnishing of a Bushranging Folk Hero

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ABSTRACT: This essay examines the significance of fire in fashioning myths surrounding Ned Kelly and his gang. Beginning with an analysis of the role of fire in Francis Hare's memoir *The Last of the Bushrangers*, the paper considers the importance of the absent fire, both for the Kelly gang and their would-be captors during the months leading up to the Siege at Glenrowan in June 1880.

Arguing that fire takes on symbolic as well as practical properties, the piece considers sensational re-tellings of the Kelly Gang's final showdown. It also addresses the ways in which the burning of the Glenrowan Hotel became a spectacle when it was represented in the media and in fictional accounts.

Through a discussion of J.S. Borlase's controversial serial, *Ned Kelly, the Ironclad Australian Bushranger* (1891) the article considers the use of fire to undermine Kelly's reputation as a folk-hero. Borlase's representation of Ned Kelly as a bushfire-lighter is, this essay argues, an attempt to undermine a widespread view of Kelly and his gang members as chivalric Robin Hood figures. Borlase draws upon a tradition of Irish political incendiarism in which fire is deployed as a punitive weapon. Given Kelly's Irish heritage and the rise of Fenian activity in mainland Britain in the 1880s, Borlase's alignment of Kelly with Irish arsonists is a clear political statement, which downplays the criminal's connection to Australia and its countryside.

Fires have long been associated with the drama surrounding the Ned Kelly story, largely as a result of the dramatic end to the siege at Glenrowan. As is well-known, Ned Kelly himself was taken alive and later sentenced to death by the notorious 'hanging judge', Sir Redmond Barry. However, two other gang members, Dan Kelly and Steve Hart, were burned to death at the Glenrowan Hotel, when police--despairing that a field gun ordered from Melbourne would not arrive in time, set fire to the building where Kelly and his followers had held more than sixty people hostage. Fire has been an essential element in the fashioning of the myths surrounding Ned Kelly and his gang, and this essay will examine the representation of fire, along with its literal and figurative uses, as a weapon against the outlaws. I shall also consider the degree to which fire has contributed to the myth-making surrounding the Kelly Gang and its relation to the Australian landscape.

Superintendent Francis Hare, the police officer in command of attempts to capture the gang, was fascinated by the criminals' knowledge of the Victorian countryside. His memoir, *The Last of the Bushrangers* (1892) notes that the gang, 'knew every inch of the ground, bushes and mountains... they knew every inch of the locality at their command' (p. 3), making it almost impossible to capture them in the bush. Elsewhere, Hare writes of the 'impassible' country and 'impenetrable scrub' (p. 98), echoing the words of many a nineteenth-century pastoralist, whose responses to such landscape were to burn it into submission. Of course, the gang's success was not simply about knowing the countryside, but also their ability to harness popular support. Through a network of informants known as the 'bush telegraph' the gang was able to avoid a number of traps. Furthermore, as Hare registers, Kelly's chivalry, his care for the underdog and his oft-reported kindness to women, all galvanized support at a time when impoverished bush-dwellers were routinely harassed by the authorities.

Hare and his men were dogged in their pursuit of the gang and his work, *The Last of the Bushrangers*, charts the protracted process of stalking the outlaws across Victoria and New South Wales. With a keen eye for prolepsis, Hare gives fire an important role throughout his account, looking for campfires across the darkened landscape as beacons that might reveal Ned Kelly's whereabouts. After the Jerilderie bank robbery, the informant (who was probably working for both sides) Aaron Sherritt interprets a distant fire as evidence of the gang's proximity, although he later claims (possibly having warned the outlaws off) that the fire was, in fact, on an opposite range, giving only the illusion of nearness.

While this faraway campfire subtly pre-empted the larger blaze that was to defeat the criminals, fire however, also became something of an obsession for Hare and his men, who struggled with the privations of outdoor life. While the Kellys, according to Hare's account, were able to contend with the hardships of life in the bush, Hare (who had camped out for somewhere between eight and nine months) and his team of police officers found it much more of a challenge. As Hare remarked, though, much of the difficulty stemmed from the fact that his team were unable to build fires for fear of giving away their presence to the outlaws, for, 'Bushmen think nothing of camping out for months, but ask any of them in winter months to camp out without a fire, and see how long they will stand it'. (p. 211) As Bill Garner reminds us, pitching a tent in the bush in the nineteenth century was typically an act of necessity, rather than choice, and Hare's men were forced to engage in a particularly extreme and uncomfortable version. Hare describes the utter relief when,

I agreed [to a request to build a fire], and took them to a most retired gully, and told them they might light a fire that night. They were so surprised, it acted like magic on them. They selected a large hollow tree, set fire to it, and there was a grand blaze. They heaped up wood all round, and sat all night enjoying themselves. (p. 211)

The unexpected nature of this fire makes it a real luxury for the policemen, and as a result, Hare describes them as 'different men' the next day. While it is burning, the fire draws attention to the men's metropolitanism, as they place bets on how long it will take the tree to fall, the number of 'native bears' who might be in the tree as it hits the ground, while also wondering, 'who would catch the first opossum'. According to Hare they are 'like a lot of school-boys out for a holiday' and this assessment encapsulates the paucity of their bush knowledge.

Having been shot in the wrist by Ned Kelly, Hare was unable to witness the burning of the Glenrowan Hotel. Faint through blood loss, he was forced to retreat from the scene and to seek medical attention. The chapters of his account dealing with the burning of both the inn and the remaining gang members are, therefore, given over to a report from the Melbourne newspaper, *The Age*. The fact that, after following the gang so closely for so long, Hare missed the siege's fiery denouement might also go some way to explain the significance he attaches to other fires in his writing. As a memoirist, Hare is bound to the real, and I do not wish to underestimate the importance of fire to a troop of men who are missing its warmth. But fire also assumes a quasi-symbolic role in Hare's writing, where it can be a giveaway signal, but where it is also associated with the restorative. Just as traditionally, fire has been associated with civilization, so for Francis Hare it was a marker of a return to order, through the warming of his men and the restoration of their spirits. Fire, in Hare's account is a comfort which can also be a giveaway for those in hiding, but it is absolutely not a weapon.

The report from *The Age* is somewhat reticent in its treatment of the deaths of Steve Hare and Dan Kelly. Avoiding mention of the barbarism involved in burning men alive (even notorious criminals), the piece, instead, focuses on the death of one man caught up in the siege, Martin Cherry (who is misnamed 'Sherry'), and on his attempted rescue by a local priest, Father Tierney. As it turns out, Cherry's death was not a result of the fire, but the account of his attempted rescue allows the journalist to displace compassionate emotions (that might otherwise be directed towards Steve Hare and Dan Kelly) onto the incident:

The thought that the unfortunate man would be sacrificed, and perish in the flames with the determined bushrangers who had made so long a stand, caused a feeling of horror to pervade the crowd'. (p. 292)

While for Hare (whose silence on this issue is telling), fire is equated with order, here its abuse results in a destructive chaos that is difficult to defend.

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A 1930s account from the *Sunday Times* of Perth, with the somewhat lurid title, 'Hysteria Over Hanging of the Famous Outlaw', goes still further, as it seeks to unravel some of the 'bushranging embroidery' surrounding the gang's exploits. Focusing on events at Glenrowan, it offers a detailed account of the fire that is almost orgiastic, with spectators relishing the scene:

However much the reader might differ with such 'sentimental hysteria' [surrounding the gang] he would needs be lacking something of the finer qualities of mercy could he read, without a touch of regret, the pathetic end of the majority of the gang, burned alive in the Glenrowan publichouse [sic], with hundreds of spectators dancing around in frenzy, their passions reminiscent of the stories of the public burnings of the witches in those medieval days that are now spoken of as 'the dark days' (*The Sunday Times*, 20 November 1938, p. 27).

This vivid report invests the event with qualities that are almost supernatural, implicitly comparing the gang members with witches, while at the same time pointing to a crowd that is itself almost possessed, with its 'frenzy', passions and, later in the account, 'blood lust'. There is something almost satanic in the reporter's description of Ned as 'black-bearded Kelly', while Constable Charles Johnson's exclamation, 'Let us fire it [the hotel] and burn 'em out like rats' (p. 27) adds to the sense of melodrama.

As this sensationalized re-telling moves towards its conclusion, however, fire again takes a central position. The report's anonymous author recounts the scramble to gather combustible materials to smoke out the remaining gang members. Eventually, a straw stack 'that was at once shield and offensive weapon' is put together and the resulting scene is highly dramatic:

The plan was a tremendous success and a mighty shout went up when the walking strawstack, strangest of antagonists, marched on the house like a yellow hispid giant...The strawstack carried by Johnson reached the house, finding the end wall at which there was least danger...For a moment or two there seemed to be hesitation: then the yellow heap raised itself a little as though trying to peep in at the upper window; lowered a little; hesitated again: leaned against the weatherboards and a shrieking howl came from several hundred throats as Johnson became

visible, wriggling out backwards: then became a crouching form, doing something; then fled speedily towards the dark shadows of the nearest trees (p. 27).

This description conveys the thrilling tensions experienced by the crowd at Glenrowan, who treat the fire as a spectacle and engage in the Northern hemisphere practice of standing to watch a burning building. The account is striking, however, for its similarity to stories of rick-burning in nineteenth-century Ireland, thus offering a neat reminder of Ned Kelly's self-identification as a political criminal.

As the story from the *Sunday Times* draws to an end, the fire becomes all-consuming. The trapped victims become secondary to the flames, which then take on an entrancing anthropomorphic quality. The blaze robs them of all agency, in direct contrast to the mastery the gang had previously asserted over their environment. The passage continues in appropriately pacy language,

Then a twisting...wreathing and roaring fiery serpent, it raised its head to the skies, spouting forth a stupendous swaying cloud of black green smoke, and soon the front of the house was a mouth of flame, a cavern of the intensest redness, a strange whirl of terrible brightness' (p. 27).

The article draws to a conclusion with a section entitled 'Death's Inferno', which includes an eye-witness account:

into the glare he saw a man leap, a black figure that flung arms aloft...A trooper saw that too, sharp and black in a lake of flame, and his carbine spoke. At the same instant the ceiling fell and immediately another wall and some beheld in a flash two other hideous and tortured phantoms that dropped to writhe in agony. Then came the green black smoke that hid all. (p. 27)

Just as the fire has been transformed into something close to human, so here the two criminals take on supernatural qualities in a process that takes the mythologization of the gang to the opposite extreme. Instead of appearing as folk heroes, akin to Robin Hood, Rob Roy or Gilder Roy (all parallels that were invoked during the Kelly Gang's brief reign of terror), here Hart and Kelly are rendered demonic, with their writhing and blackness appearing to signal their likely fates in the afterlife. This point is reinforced by the journalist's rather macabre summing up,

Thus horribly ended the careers of the Kelly bushrangers—literally in 'the fires of hell' cremated'. (p. 27)

Judgmental and devoid of compassion though these words sound, they echo Ned Kelly's own prophetic remark to Redmond Barry on delivery of his death sentence. In response to Barry's cursory repetition of the words usually uttered to condemned prisoners, 'May the Lord have mercy on your soul', the court records show that Kelly responded, 'I will go a little further than that and say that I will see you there, where I go'. Ned was, then, like the reporter from *The Age*, also thinking of the ultimate fire, as he contemplated his afterlife.

The account from the Perth *Sunday Times* seems positively tame when compared with J.S. Borlase's *Ned Kelly, the Ironclad Australian Bushranger* (1881), which began to appear in serial form shortly after Kelly's execution. The story was a controversial one and attracted negative attention from a number of critics. A brief review in the *Southern Argus* described the tale (which was published from London in thirty-eight parts, priced at a penny each) in the following terms,

The work is a most pernicious one, and is calculated to do a considerable amount of harm. We have surely enough larrikinism to deal with without the introduction of such exciting trash as this' (Saturday 21 January 1882, p. 2),

while the *Saturday Review* concluded,

We have no hesitation in saying that the life of Ned Kelly, the ironclad bushranger is as disgraceful and disgusting a production as has ever been printed. (26 November 1881)

While Francis Hare depicted a Ned Kelly who was at one with the landscape and admired by the community, Borlase subverts this vision of a Robin Hood-style hero. Many of those who encountered the Kelly gang recalled Ned's strong sense of fair play and a genuine compassion underlying his criminal exploits. Indeed, while Hare is often appalled by Kelly's crimes, his memoir also reveals a deep admiration for the bushranger's treatment of women and his attempts to avoid violence. Several of the women caught up in the gang's exploits spoke afterwards of Ned's charm and charisma, and Hare incorporates these anecdotes into his account to create a portrait of a complex, engaging and, at times, even likeable bushranger. Borlase's re-invention of Ned Kelly wilfully reimagines him as a type of melodramatic stage villain, for whom no act of depravity is too great.

There is no suggestion that Borlase knew Ned Kelly. Although the author had emigrated to Australia in the mid-1860s, he returned to London at the end of that decade, having attracted police attention for

deserting his wife, in addition to falling under suspicion of literary plagiarism. Whereas Hare's Kelly is considerate and loath to attack, Borlase's ironclad villain is almost completely amoral, his one redeeming feature being his affection for his adopted daughter, Rose.

From the story's outset, Borlase seems bent on dismantling the folk hero elements of Kelly's character, and in claiming to be penned by one of his captors, the work pits itself deliberately against Francis Hare's account. Borlase's fictional Kelly remains in full command of the landscape and the chivalric elements to his character are almost completely effaced. Nowhere is this process more evident than in a slightly preposterous (and wholly fictitious) sub-plot which sees Ned attempt to betroth himself to the adventurer and exotic dancer, Lola Montez. Ambushed by the gang, Lola rejects Ned's advances, shooting a small piece out of his ear with a handgun and declaring, 'Better death than to fall alive into the power of such a villain as you'. (p. 16) Undeterred, this blackguardly version of the bushranger responds by informing the dancer that her chance at marriage has now passed and that he will take her into concubinage instead. Laughable though the melodrama of these scenes may be, they are notable for the way they deliberately pit themselves against true-life accounts of Kelly's redeeming qualities, particularly in the consideration he is reputed to have shown towards women.

It is through fire—the weapon that arguably galvanized posthumous support for the Kelly Gang—that Borlase attempts to completely undermine the idolatry surrounding Ned and his men. In another incredible sub-plot, which sees two shifty gang-members plotting against their leader and almost succeeding in their betrayal, Ned is distracted from robbery and becomes a fire-setter. As he declares his intentions, his language is remarkably similar to that of another arsonist who appears out of the bush in Borlase's later, and equally sensational, story, 'Twelve Miles Broad' (1885), and he appears almost insane as he envisions the consequences of his fire-lighting:

'Ay', he muttered to himself, 'if the north wind but lasts, as I feel sure it will, I'll roll a sheet of flame down upon your homestead, Andrew M'Pherson, that shall give you and yours a foretaste of hell. If you manage to escape, it will yet render you a houseless beggar, and it will take a swift stock-horse to carry you out of its reach with life... Ah, my girl, the one and only love of my life, even though Andrew M'Pherson's victim, you shall be fearfully avenged tonight, and all the devils in hell shall dance with glee'. (p. 26)

Ned here sounds like a stage villain, rather than a dashing bushranger, with his equation of the flames of a bushfire with the fires of hell. The speech encapsulates the great danger that bushfires posed to settlers, who

could be ruined overnight by a fast-moving blaze. As Borlase's story unfolds, we see a mania underlying Ned's actions, along with a determination that the fire must succeed. The narrator tells us,

Ned Kelly, far away in the deserted hut in the bush, struck match after match and threw them, flaring brightly, in amongst the long dry grass and the little patches of tea-tree scrub that grew close up to the unhinged hut door' (p. 27).

Entranced by the danger, the repetitive striking of 'match after match' reveals that this Ned Kelly is a cruel sadist in the grip of an obsession. Borlase consolidates this (mis)representation a little later in the narrative when Kelly comments to a police officer, 'I prefer wreaking personal vengeance'. (p. 30)

Borlase's depiction of Ned Kelly the fire-setter is partly the result of a formulaic approach to representing the Australian colony to the British reading public. As markers of Australia's exotic otherness, a bushfire and a dramatic rescue were almost *de rigueur* in nineteenth-century fiction. However, Borlase's decision to make Ned responsible for the fire is a politically loaded one which, I would argue, draws upon contemporary anti-Irish prejudice, while at the same time attempting to undermine the affinity between Kelly and the landscape which characterized so many accounts of his exploits.

Ned himself was caught up in an arson incident in real life when in 1868 his uncle James set fire to the Kelly family home in Greta, while his mother, Ellen, and three of her children were inside. James was arrested, convicted of murder, and sentenced to death for his crime, although his sentence was later commuted to fifteen years' hard labour. There is, however, no evidence that either James or Ned Kelly ever deliberately lit a bushfire, and Borlase's imagined version of events may well reflect contemporary anti-Irish prejudice. Gemma Clark has noted a strong tradition of arson as a 'protest crime' in nineteenth-century Ireland, in part because of the sheer spectacle created through the burning of property. As Clark observes, 'It combines huge practical and physical damage with a powerful psychological weapon: a burning house or haystack advertises quite dramatically the singling out of an individual'. ('Arson in Ireland', p. 2) Kelly's attack on the M'Pherson homestead is consistent with Clark's account of the spectacular nature of incendiarism. Furthermore, I would argue that for Borlase, fire was a logical extension of Kelly's heritage. To re-imagine him as an arsonist was to highlight his Irishness, while downplaying his connection to the Australia and the countryside that he attacks.

There is a pleasing circularity to Borlase's story, which begins and ends with fire. However, whereas the descriptions of the fire at the

M'Pherson homestead are elaborate in their attention to the 'lurid smoke' and the trees 'belching forth flames' (p. 28), Borlase's rendition of fire at Glenrowan is brief and perfunctory. In contrast to the report from *The Age*, the narrative does focus, albeit briefly, on the two gang members caught up in the siege, rather implausibly (because this account is written in the first-person) showing them agree to take each others' lives, rather than waiting to be burned alive. The narrator regards the 'pile of smoking ashes' that remains as the 'funeral pyre' of the Kelly gang' (p. 456) and the story then cuts to a very swift account of Ned's trial and execution. The brevity of Borlase's siege description may perhaps be explained by the desire to bring the serial to a conclusion after its lengthy run. However, I would suggest that it also reveals an authorial discomfort at this official use of fire in order to defeat the gang.

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In summary, Fire has played a major role in the retelling and re-fashioning of the Kelly drama. From the fire of the last stand to the imagined torching of the M'Pherson residence, the connections between Ned Kelly and fire persist to this day, pointing to the vitality (and possibly also the ethnicity) of the man who inspired such loyalty and evaded police capture for so long. Borlase may have attempted to undermine his reputation as a folk hero by reconfiguring Kelly as a vengeful monomaniac whose relationship with the landscape was one of abuse rather than harmony. However, his account is largely neglected today and for many the ironclad bushranger remains an icon of resistance with an unbreakable connection to the Victorian terrain and its inhabitants.

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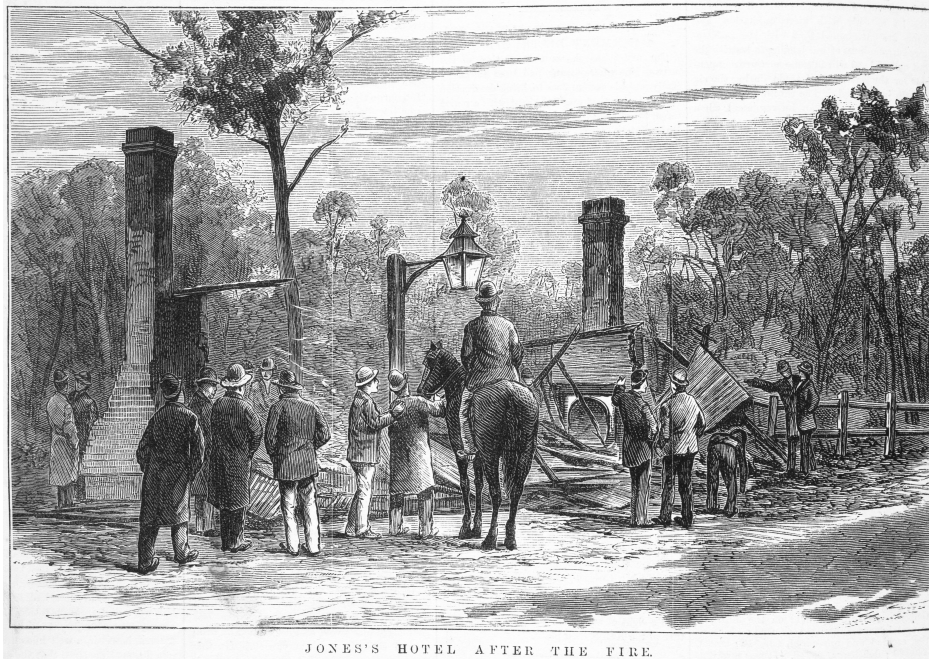
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JONES'S HOTEL AFTER THE FIRE.

The Illustrated Australian News, 17 July, 1880. With permission of the State Library of Victoria.