

# Ned Kelly



## Armoured icon

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### Abstract

Myths associated with outlaws or 'social bandits' are important elements of national identity in many countries. Long after his death the outlaw Ned Kelly lives on in Australian culture through various media, ensuring his enduring symbolic importance for national identity. National survey data indicates Kelly's salience for a majority of Australians, although attitudes regarding his status as hero or villain vary considerably. Younger, left-leaning, working-class Australians and consumers of popular culture view Kelly as important, while tertiary-educated, political conservatives tend to downplay his significance. Perceptions of Kelly's character also influence attitudes regarding his national significance. The lack of foundation heroes in a nation built not only by free settlers but also by English convicts and Irish rebels goes some way to explaining why a 19th-century outlaw is one of the few historical figures recognized by a majority of Australians.

**Keywords:** Australian identity, bushrangers, national identity, Ned Kelly, outlaws

### Social bandits and outlaws

This research is a quantitative case study of the Australian outlaw Ned Kelly. Utilizing a dedicated module of questions commissioned for a national survey, we seek to demonstrate the symbolic importance of a 19th-century outlaw for contemporary Australians, suggesting that colonial bush myths remain salient for many citizens of a multicultural society. We show that, for a majority of Australians, Kelly is an important symbol who invokes strong feelings rather

than ambivalence. We also attempt to establish why this long-dead outlaw is still relevant in the 21st century by operationalizing recurring themes from the literature on outlaws and social bandits.

Historical figures feed into representations of the national character, such as the independent, frontier spirit embodied by the early settlers and pioneers of the USA and Australia. Outlaws comprise important elements of national identity in many advanced industrialized countries and form an important part of the 'collective memory'. The archetypal Anglophone outlaw is undoubtedly Robin Hood, a mythically important but historically elusive character (Knight, 1994: 11), who remains 'a cultural symbol of considerable potency in the English-speaking world' (Seal, 1996: 25) and personifies many mythical qualities associated with outlaws, such as 'innocent beginnings ... chivalry ... fair play ... robbing the rich to give to the poor' (Cashman, 2000: 205–9). Myths surrounding outlaws share common themes cross nationally, such as 'friend of the poor, oppressed, forced into outlawry, brave, generous, courteous, does not indulge in unjustified violence, trickster, betrayed, lives on after death' (Seal, 1996: 11). The overwhelmingly positive qualities associated with heroic outlaw myths are not always based in historical fact, but 'exist in most of the world's folklores, celebrated particularly in song and narrative' (Seal, 2002: 2).

Drawing mainly upon folklore and fictional literature, Hobsbawm (1960) developed the notion of 'social bandits' to describe a particular type of heroic rural outlaw. For Hobsbawm, social bandits were more than criminals; they were seen as champions of the people, particularly by poor and oppressed peasants. The relationship between bandits and peasants was also reciprocal, as bandits relied upon the support of local people in order to evade capture (Hobsbawm, 2000). Social bandits for Hobsbawm were the heroes of peasant-based social movements, protests and rebellions, although as West (2001: 137) points out, it is not 'just the manner of the Robin Hood archetype that transforms criminals and outlaws into social bandits. It is the way they are interpreted to defy rules and capture through daring and cunning.' Hobsbawm's four criteria in relation to social bandits can be summarized as:

the bandit does not leave his community ... he reflects the moral values and ideology of the community ... his predatory activities are consistent with this ideology – his victims are those defined as enemies by the community ... he is supported in word and deed by the community. (O'Malley, 1979: 273)

Hobsbawm's notion of social bandits has not passed without criticism. Blok (1972: 502) argued that Hobsbawm 'over-emphasises the element of social protest and obscures the significance of the links which bandits maintain with established power-holders'. As an example, Barrington-Moore (1968 cited in Blok, 1972: 497) claimed that in 19th-century China 'local inhabitants would bargain with the bandits in order to be left in peace', while 'local gentry leaders

were on cordial terms with the bandits'. Hobsbawm has also been attacked on methodological grounds, as he tended to draw upon the work of 'literate, urban, middle-class writers with no first hand experience of bandit-folk ties, real or imagined' (Slatta, 2004: 23). Nevertheless, the relevance of social bandits to our research lies in the salience of outlaw myths.

Hobsbawm (1972: 504) maintained that 'the myth cannot be entirely divorced from the reality of banditry', a point that is particularly important for students of national identity, for it is the myths surrounding historical figures that come to be integrated into representations of the national character, rather than the facts, analogous to Thomas' famous dictum: 'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (Thomas and Thomas, 1928: 572). Social bandit folklore still resonates in advanced societies. We contend that the universal characteristics associated with outlaw heroes – rebellious but brave, fighters against injustice and oppression, chivalrous in their treatment of women and the poor, and embodying a sense of fair play – comprise the characteristics generally associated with Ned Kelly for many Australians.

## Ned Kelly and Australian culture

... Ned Kelly is widely revered and is the best known character in Australian history (Hirst, 2007: 31)

Nineteenth-century Australian outlaws were known as 'bushrangers', with Macdougall (2002: 115) claiming the term was used in Australia as early as 1805. Hirst (2007: 31) points out that '[B]ushrangers did rob (and not just from the rich) and murder, but even in their own time they elicited admiration from respectable people'. Nixon (1982) has documented 100 bushrangers and, although many more evaded the historian's gaze, few have survived as household names across Australia. Some of the best known include Ben Hall, 'Mad' Dan Morgan, 'Captain Thunderbolt' and 'Captain Moonlite' (Nixon, 1982). Others, such as Frank Gardiner, enjoyed celebrity status throughout the colonies in their heyday but have since lapsed into relative obscurity. For the majority of Australians, Ned Kelly, the 'armoured outlaw', is still the best known bushranger.

Kelly has been the subject of several major films, most recently the unimaginatively titled *Ned Kelly* released in 2003, academic tomes (e.g. Jones, 1995; Seal, 1996) and novels such as Peter Carey's Booker Prize winning *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2001). Famous for the home-made armour he and his gang members wore at their last stand, Ned Kelly is an enduring figure in Australian culture and mythology. He still features in metropolitan newspaper articles and is venerated in the towns associated with his history – known as 'Kelly country'. The Commonwealth government even commemorated the centenary of his death by issuing a postage stamp (Seal, 1996: 148).

Kelly's image has been used to market a variety of products, from soap, towels and coffee mugs to replicas of his armour. As a *brand*, he has been 'aggressively mined' by the mass media as 'a source of borrowed meaning and identity' (Klein, 2001: 73); as Jones (1995: 339) put it: 'Ned Kelly has become a commodity to be packaged and promoted.' Yet Kelly's popularity extends far beyond those with interests in his commodification. While word-of-mouth transmission of his exploits has diminished, the architects of popular culture still carry a torch for Ned. As an extract from a prominent Australian newspaper illustrates: 'Ned Kelly's life and myth have inspired paintings, novels, films and songs. One cannot understand the Australian spirit without coming to terms, like it or not, with his life and legend' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 1988).

The best example of Kelly's standing among contemporary Australians was the spectacular opening ceremony of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, where a group of armoured Kelly figures paraded around waving mock firearms spouting streams of sparks. Significantly, the figures did not resemble the bearded outlaw; they were stylized representations of the outlaw based upon the artist Sidney Nolan's 'Kelly series' of paintings (Nolan et al., 1985). For most Australians, these figures would have been instantly recognizable as depicting Ned Kelly, because as Seal (2002: 158) put it: '[W]hen there is a need to signify "nation" ... we reach for those tried and true icons of the bush, the digger and Ned Kelly.' Nevertheless, while Ned Kelly is one of only a handful of historical figures Australians recognize, they have mixed feelings as to his status as hero or villain.

Born in Australia in 1854, Edward Kelly was arguably the last of the Australian bushrangers (Hirst, 2007; Williams, 2007). Leader of the notorious 'Kelly Gang', consisting of his friend Joe Byrne, younger brother Daniel Kelly and Dan's friend Steve Hart, Ned and Dan took to the bush following an incident at the Kelly homestead when Constable Fitzpatrick was assaulted. Kelly is characterized as 'driven to outlawry when he defended his sister against the advances of a drunken constable' (Jones, 1995: 338). Police were dispatched to capture the Kellys and in the ensuing gun battle at Stringybark Creek in 1878, three policemen – Lonigan, Scanlon and Kennedy – were shot and killed by Ned and his companions. The four men were outlawed and subsequently committed several bank robberies in the late 1870s, most famously in the towns of Euroa in Victoria and Jerilderie in New South Wales.

Kelly was captured by police at the siege of the Glenrowan Inn (the only occasion he wore armour) and hung in the Melbourne Gaol on 11 November 1880. Like other social bandits, the Kelly gang had a large following, comprised mainly of friends and relatives for whom the police were the enemy. McQuilton (1979) argued the 'Kelly outbreak' could be traced to disputes between rich squatters and poor selectors,<sup>1</sup> with Wesley (2000: 178) claiming that Kelly's popularity 'lay in his rebellion against unequally

distributed property and authority'. It also tapped ongoing tensions between the Irish and their descendants and wealthier British settlers (Hirst, 2007), tensions exacerbated by the fact that most colonial police were also of Irish descent (Partington, 1994: 62). The mythology surrounding Ned Kelly is therefore not only historically significant, it also contains a 'cultural' (Irish) aspect of Australian identity.

Interest in Kelly taps a notion of identity that is socially constructed – the bushranger as folk hero and larrikin.<sup>2</sup> Constructionists critique the essentialist notion that 'identity is given naturally' and that 'individual persons can have singular, integral, altogether harmonious and unproblematic identities' and take issue with 'accounts of collective identities as based on some "essence" or set of core features shared by all members of the collectivity and no others' (Calhoun, 1994: 13). As Anderson (1991: 6) put it, nations are 'imagined'. Many Australians can render an account of Ned Kelly's life, although as Smith (1996: 583) cautions: 'it is notoriously difficult to disentangle the elements of genuine shared memory from those of exaggeration, idealization and heroization which we associate with myth and legend'.

Nation has been defined by Smith (1991: 14) 'as a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members'. Such a conception of nation contains the fundamental features of national identity (Smith, 1991: 14). National identity is multidimensional and linked to class, ethnic and religious identity (Smith, 1991: 14), but there 'is no singular, irreducible, national narrative, no essentialist "national identity"' (Bell, 2003: 73). Drawing upon earlier research (see Day, 1998; Holton, 1998; Ward, 1958; Wesley, 2000), we argued that the Australian narrative: 'includes the "discovery" of Australia, British colonization and "white" settlement (Aboriginal myths tend to be ignored), convict transportation, bushmen and pioneers, bushrangers, ANZACs, immigration post-Second World War, and Australian sporting heroes' (Tranter and Donoghue, 2007: 168).<sup>3</sup> One aspect of this narrative is examined further here by concentrating upon bushrangers. More specifically, how the best-known Australian outlaw – Ned Kelly – symbolizes Australian-ness, why he is important and his association with national identity.

## Measuring identity

Much of the previous empirical research on Australian identity was based upon attitudinal survey questions that tap abstract identity constructs (e.g. Jones, 1997; Jones and Smith, 2001; Kemp, 1977; McAllister, 1997).<sup>4</sup> Australian quantitative identity researchers have concentrated upon subjective forms of national identity by examining aspects of attachment to 'Australia' or the importance of identifying with 'Australia', that Phillips (1998: 286) refers to as 'inclusive conceptions of Australian identity'. For

example, Jones (1997), and Jones and Smith (2001) drew upon Anthony Smith's (1991: 11–12) 'ethnic' and 'civic' forms of nationalism in their operationalization of 'nativism' and 'civic culture'. Jones (1997: 291) argued that 'nativists' look 'backward to a vision of Australia that is fading', while 'civic culture, a more abstract and open concept, looks forward to a future already in the making'. 'Exclusive' conceptualizations include examinations of 'how Australians feel toward a range of "others"' and 'endorsing traditional and popular Australian values and ways of life' (Phillips, 1998: 288).

In contrast, this research is a quantitative case study of the most recognizable 19th-century Australian – Ned Kelly – and his relationship to contemporary culture and identity. Three key research questions are examined here. First, we attempt to gauge how important Ned Kelly is as a symbol of Australian identity? Based upon the ubiquitousness of Kelly's image in Australian culture (Jones, 1995), a majority of Australians are expected to view him as an important symbol. Second, how can we account for Kelly's enduring salience? Kelly is extremely well known in Australia, but there are divisions over his status as hero or villain. What is the basis of this divide? We attempt to explain differences of opinion over Kelly by drawing upon recurrent themes in the literature on social banditry (e.g. Cashman, 2000; Hobsbawm, 1960; Seal, 1996, 2002) and then examine how these themes apply to this particular case.

Finally, previous Australian identity researchers uncovered distinct social divisions in relation to national identity (e.g. Holton and Phillips, 2004; Jones, 1997; Tranter and Donoghue, 2007). We expect that attitudes toward Ned Kelly will vary according to socio-demographic background, particularly on the basis of age, education and political ideology, but also expect to find class-based cleavages. The rebellious qualities personified in Ned Kelly are expected to be more palatable to younger, working-class Australians – those who tend to be major consumers of popular culture – and to the left of the political spectrum.

## **Data and method**

We developed several questions to examine Ned Kelly as a symbol of Australian identity. These were included as a module in the 2007 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA; see Phillips et al., 2008).<sup>5</sup> The AuSSA is a cross-sectional survey of Australians aged 18 and over, the third survey in a biennial series. The sample was drawn on a random basis from the 2007 Australian electoral roll, with mail out, mail back administration of questionnaires conducted between 11 July and 21 November 2007. The sample was stratified to be proportional to the population of each state, with three questionnaires administered to separate samples of the Australian electorate. There were 2583 respondents to the survey in which our questions were included representing a response rate of 39 percent.

Questions were designed to establish the extent to which Ned Kelly is symbolically associated with Australian identity. Respondents to the 2007 AuSSA were asked:

Ned Kelly was a bushranger whose image appeared in the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympic Games. How important do you think Ned Kelly is as a symbol of Australian identity?

The response categories of this dependent variable have an ordinal structure and were analysed with ordered logistic regression models (see Agresti and Finlay, 1997: 599–606) using SAS version 9.1.<sup>6</sup> The regression approach allows us to statistically adjust for correlations between the independent variables and to estimate the net association between each independent variable and the dependent variable. Several independent variables were operationalized. New South Wales has a rich history of bushranging (Macdougall, 2002) and, while Ned Kelly hailed from Glenrowan in Victoria, he crossed the border into NSW and was active there. Our expectation therefore was that he might be seen as more important in Victoria and NSW. We operationalized dummy variables for sex, Catholic religious denomination (as Kelly and his supporters were predominantly of Irish Catholic descent), self-assessed class location (working class + lower class),<sup>7</sup> marital status (married) and a left-right political orientation scale.<sup>8</sup> Marriage serves as a proxy measure for moral conservatism, particularly when age and education are controlled as is the case in the multivariate models below. Those in married or in de facto relationships are also more likely to support a ‘backward’-looking ‘vision of Australia’, according to Jones (1997: 291), although they were less likely to identify with their colonial ancestors (Tranter and Donoghue, 2003). A continuous variable measures respondent age in years with an attitudinal dummy variable capturing the importance of maintaining order in the nation. The latter variable is used to tap concern over law and order issues and is expected to be associated with negative attitudes toward the bushranger.<sup>9</sup>

Consumption of ‘high culture’ is greater among the highly educated and those in managerial and professional occupations (Emmison and Frow, 1999: 102–3). We expect bushrangers to be of little interest among contemporary consumers of ‘high culture’, although exceptions include Sidney Nolan’s ‘Kelly series’ of paintings and Peter Carey’s novel. Consumers of popular culture (Bourdieu, 1984: 16) may be more likely than consumers of middlebrow or high culture (Gans, 1974: 70) to see Ned Kelly as an important symbol of Australian identity. Unfortunately, no direct measures of cultural consumption were included in the AuSSA. However, education and income are important signifiers of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) and serve here as proxy measures of this concept.

In earlier research we found that 82 percent of Australians believe sporting heroes influence ‘the way Australians see themselves’, with sporting achievements central to Australian notions of national pride (Tranter and

Donoghue, 2007: 172). As Wesley (2000: 178) puts it: 'Australia's sporting prowess is often spoken of by Australians in terms of the country's superiority in sports in *per capita terms*.' McAllister (1997: 20) also maintains that while Australians' 'sense of national pride ... is one of the highest in the world, the only aspect of Australian society which people express great pride in is its sporting achievements'. We measure pride in sporting achievements as an aspect of national pride and because it encompasses elements of patriotism. We examine this notion of national pride with a scale developed from four AuSSA questions to measure the extent to which sporting events 'shaped Australia'.<sup>10</sup>

Drawing upon Hobsbawm (1960, 2000), Cashman (2000) and Seal (1996), we developed questions to capture some of the reasons Ned Kelly remains so well known. The aim was not to seek the 'truth' regarding what Australians know about Kelly, but rather what people 'believe' about the outlaw (Ward, 1980 in Seal, 2002: viii). We empirically assessed some outlaw characteristics and also included descriptive terms that relate specifically to Kelly. Following pilot testing we were confident that the most relevant descriptive terms were captured in the question, but also offered an 'Other, please specify' option. The final version of our question asked:

Please choose two items from the following list that best describe Ned Kelly

Forced to become a bushranger

A thief

Brave

Anti-authority

A murderer

An Australian icon

Treacherous

A friend to the poor

Loyal to family and friends

Other, please specify

We recognize that two items are potentially problematic – 'Australian icon' and 'Anti-authority'. The former is somewhat ambiguous, but it does serve to capture the notion of Kelly as a figure of great importance to Australians. The responses (in Table 2) indicate that, while a substantial proportion chose the 'Australian icon' item as their first or second response, it did not comprise the largest response category, and therefore did not 'swamp' the remaining responses. 'Anti-authority' may be viewed either as a negative term by conservative respondents, or more positively



**Table 1:** How important do you think Ned Kelly is as a symbol of Australian identity (%)?

| <i>Ned Kelly is ...</i> |        |
|-------------------------|--------|
| Very Important          | 13.6   |
| Important               | 43.0   |
| Unimportant             | 35.5   |
| Very Unimportant        | 7.9    |
| N                       | (2584) |

*Source:* Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2007)

by those with rebellious dispositions, as appears to be borne out in the evidence presented in Table 3.

Two ‘dummy’ independent variables were created to measure positive and negative attitudes toward Ned Kelly for the regression models. The positive attitudes variable summed first or second choices for the items ‘forced to become a bushranger’, ‘brave’, ‘an Australian icon’, ‘a friend to the poor’ and ‘loyal to family and friends’. Negative attitudes comprised responses to the items ‘a thief’, ‘a murderer’ and ‘treacherous’. The analysis begins with a consideration of the importance of Ned Kelly as a symbol of contemporary Australian identity.

## Analyses

Fifty-seven percent of Australian adults view Ned Kelly as either a very important or important symbol of Australian identity (Table 1), suggesting that it is not just artists, authors, film-makers and journalists who recognize Kelly’s symbolic role, but also a substantial proportion of ‘ordinary’ Australians. While it could be argued that our survey questions elicit responses that would not otherwise be forthcoming, as survey questions can measure ‘non-attitudes’ where respondents ‘offer opinions on issues they know nothing about’ (Schuman and Presser, 1980: 1214), in the case of Kelly’s importance other evidence suggests this is unlikely.

While they are often portrayed as heroic figures in folklore and fiction, elsewhere we found that bushrangers ‘contribute relatively little to Australian identity’ (Tranter and Donoghue, 2007: 173). However, when we asked a random sample of Australians if they could name four Australian bushrangers, 80 percent identified Ned Kelly, with the next most frequently mentioned Ben Hall (29%), Captain Thunderbolt (12%), Mad Dan Morgan (12%) and Dan Kelly (11%) (Tranter and Donoghue, 2008). In other words, the great majority of Australians recognize Ned Kelly as a bushranger and, we contend, a substantial proportion of them consider him to be symbolically important nationally.

**Table 2:** 'Choose two items from the following list that best describe Ned Kelly' (%)

|                               | <i>1st choice</i> | <i>2nd choice</i> |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Forced to become a bushranger | 21.8              | 10.4              |
| A thief                       | 16.5              | 11.8              |
| Brave                         | 1.8               | 3.9               |
| Anti-authority                | 19.6              | 18.7              |
| A murderer                    | 6.6               | 8.6               |
| An Australian icon            | 20.9              | 17.2              |
| Treacherous                   | 0.5               | 2.4               |
| A friend to the poor          | 2.8               | 5.9               |
| Loyal to family and friends   | 8.5               | 20.0              |
| Other                         | 1.0               | 1.2               |
| N                             | (2212)            | (2169)            |

*Source:* Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2007)

Why is Kelly still an important figure so long after his death? In Table 2 we go some way to answering this question. When asked to describe Ned Kelly, the most frequently chosen first response was 'forced to become a bushranger' (22%), followed closely by 'Australian icon' (21%), both responses signifying a high level of sympathy for Kelly. On the other hand, 20 percent saw Kelly as 'anti-authority' while a further 17 percent appear to claim he is best described as 'a thief'. Surprisingly, only 2 percent of the sample viewed Ned as 'brave'. The second choice responses once again saw 'loyal to family and friends' (20%), 'anti-authority' (19%) and 'Australian icon' (17%) as the most frequent responses, while 'thief' and 'forced to become a bushranger' also drew responses of 11 and 10 percent respectively. These results show that, while a majority of Australians believe Kelly is symbolically important, they are divided strongly over whether his status is positive or negative.

A cross-tabulation of the 'importance of Kelly' question with the first and second choice response descriptors further illustrates this division in Table 3. Positive responses to Kelly's character tend to be associated with beliefs that he is symbolically important and negative views associated with unimportance. For example, 69 percent of those whose first choice was 'forced to become a bushranger' saw Ned Kelly as an important symbol of Australian identity, compared to only 20 percent who believe him to be a murderer. Similarly, those who saw Kelly as an 'Australian icon', 'loyal' or 'friend to the poor' were very likely to believe him to be important symbolically. The 'anti-authority' item stands out, with responses very evenly split between important and unimportant. This may reflect a certain ambiguity over the term for Australians, where 'anti-authority' is not necessarily viewed as a negative characteristic, but also an aspect of the democratic,

**Table 3:** Importance of Kelly by descriptions of Kelly (%)

|                             | <i>Important</i> | <i>Unimportant</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|-----------------------------|------------------|--------------------|--------------|
| <i>First choice</i>         |                  |                    |              |
| Forced to be a bushranger   | 68.6             | 31.4               | (488)        |
| A thief                     | 23.0             | 77.0               | (374)        |
| Brave                       | 83.7             | 16.3               | (43)         |
| Anti-authority              | 48.0             | 52.0               | (435)        |
| A murderer                  | 20.0             | 80.0               | (150)        |
| An Australian icon          | 82.6             | 17.4               | (465)        |
| Treacherous                 | 8.3              | 91.7               | (12)         |
| A friend to the poor        | 73.8             | 26.2               | (65)         |
| Loyal to family and friends | 70.3             | 29.7               | (192)        |
| Other                       | 63.2             | 36.8               | (19)         |
| N                           |                  |                    | (2243)       |
| <i>Second choice</i>        |                  |                    |              |
| Forced to be a bushranger   | 66.1             | 33.9               | (224)        |
| A thief                     | 36.1             | 63.9               | (255)        |
| Brave                       | 77.6             | 22.4               | (85)         |
| Anti-authority              | 49.9             | 50.1               | (405)        |
| A murderer                  | 30.2             | 69.8               | (189)        |
| An Australian icon          | 66.9             | 33.1               | (375)        |
| Treacherous                 | 23.1             | 76.9               | (52)         |
| A friend to the poor        | 70.3             | 29.7               | (128)        |
| Loyal to family and friends | 70.8             | 29.2               | (435)        |
| Other                       | 65.4             | 34.6               | (26)         |
| N                           |                  |                    | (2174)       |

*Source:* Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2007)

rebellious or larrikin qualities associated with traditional views of Australian identity – also embodied in myths surrounding the ANZACs. Clearly, opinions on Ned Kelly’s symbolic status are strongly influenced by how people view his character in moral terms.

We employ ordered logistic regression analysis, presenting odds ratios for each of the independent variables in Table 4,<sup>11</sup> to consider how background variables such as sex, age, educational attainment, religion, marital status, self-assessed class location, political party identification, ideology and attitudes toward Ned Kelly associated with his symbolic importance in the multivariate case. The independent variables are introduced as five blocs, social background variables in model 1, class and political affiliation (i.e. coalition party ID) and political ideology in model 2, a scale measuring patriotism in the form of the influence of sporting events on shaping Australia in model 3, positive and negative attitudes toward Kelly in model 4, and lastly the full model.<sup>12</sup> This approach illustrates the relative influence of certain independent variables upon the dependent variable and how they

are mediated by the introduction of other independent variables to the regression equation.

Sex has no statistically significant association with attitudes toward Ned Kelly at the 95 percent level; highly significant age effects are apparent, however. The symbolic importance of Kelly appears to decline with age, although without panel data we cannot tell if this is a generational or an ageing effect. Marital status also predicts attitudes toward Kelly in the multivariate case (model 1), although in preliminary analyses (not shown) we found only minimal state-based and regional differences, so these variables were excluded from the regression equation. This is an important finding as it suggests that Kelly's importance is relatively uniform across the country. Education is often an important discriminating factor in identity research. In this instance, tradespeople are approximately 1.3 times more likely than those with other or no post-secondary qualifications to see Kelly as important, although this effect was not statistically significant at the 95 percent level. Those on higher incomes (\$78,000+) were around 1.3 times less likely to view Kelly as important (i.e.  $1 \div 0.76 = 1.32$ ), while being married is associated with lower assessments of symbolic importance. Being born in Australia had no significant impact at the 95 percent level.

The self-identified working and lower classes are more likely than the middle class to acknowledge Kelly's importance (model 2). On the other hand, self-location on the right of the ideology scale is associated with reduced symbolic importance. Similarly, those who identify with conservative political parties (i.e. the Liberal and National coalition) are less likely than Labor, Green or other party supporters to view Kelly as important. The national pride scale (model 3) is positively associated with the dependent variable, suggesting that support for Kelly is linked to patriotism and the consumption of popular culture in relation to iconic Australian sporting achievements.

While respondents' social and political background are associated with attitudes toward Kelly, the Nagelkerke pseudo  $R^2$  indicates that only a small proportion of the variance in the dependent variable is statistically 'explained' by the independent variables (model 1  $R^2$ .04; model 2  $R^2$ .03; model 3  $R^2$ .04). The  $R^2$  increases dramatically to .21 however, when attitudinal characteristics associated with Kelly are entered into the equation (model 4). Positive descriptors are strongly associated with Kelly's symbolic importance; while negative attitudes substantially reduce one's likelihood of claiming the outlaw is important. Those for whom maintaining order in the nation is a priority, also view Kelly as less important.

In the full model, education, religious denomination, marital status, political party identification and maintaining order are non-significant at the 95 percent level. The symbolic importance of Kelly for Australian identity is influenced very strongly by the way people view the bushranger, as an heroic figure, or as an anti-hero, but also according to their class location, political

**Table 4:** Importance of Ned Kelly as a symbol of Australian identity? (Odds ratios)

|                                 | <i>Social background</i> | <i>Class and politics</i> | <i>National pride</i> | <i>Attitudes to Kelly</i> | <i>Full model</i> |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|
| Men                             | 1.04                     | –                         | –                     | –                         | 1.03              |
| Age (years)                     | 0.982***                 | –                         | –                     | –                         | 0.984***          |
| Trade qualification             | 1.25                     | –                         | –                     | –                         | 1.13              |
| Catholic                        | 1.22*                    | –                         | –                     | –                         | 1.10              |
| Married                         | 0.81*                    | –                         | –                     | –                         | 0.84              |
| Respondent income (\$78,000+)   | 0.76*                    |                           |                       |                           | 0.83              |
| Born in Australia               | 1.21                     | –                         | –                     | –                         | 1.12              |
| Working or lower class          | –                        | 1.49***                   | –                     | –                         | 1.40***           |
| Coalition party ID              |                          | 0.80*                     | –                     | –                         | 0.95              |
| Political ideology scale (0–10) | –                        | 0.921***                  | –                     | –                         | 0.934**           |
| Positive attitude to Kelly      | –                        | –                         | –                     | 2.65***                   | 2.32***           |
| Negative attitude to Kelly      | –                        | –                         | –                     | 0.26***                   | 0.25***           |
| Maintain order in the nation    | –                        | –                         | –                     | 0.76***                   | 0.88              |
| Sport shaped Australia          | –                        | –                         | 1.065***              | –                         | 1.067***          |
| Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>       | .04                      | .03                       | .04                   | .21                       | .28               |
| N                               | (2327)                   | (2306)                    | (2533)                | (2483)                    | (2116)            |

Notes: \*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2007)

ideology and their views regarding the importance of popular culture for shaping the Australian nation. The positive association between salient sporting events and Kelly's symbolic importance situates him clearly in the realm of popular culture.

## Discussion

... whether we celebrate or denigrate him, love him or loathe him, Ned Kelly remains inextricably bound up with our sense of national identity. (Seal, 2002: xvii)

This research has confirmed empirically what many know intuitively, that Ned Kelly is perhaps the only 19th-century Australian still recognized nationally. As a case study of a social bandit, it also represents an attempt to explain why Kelly 'enjoys' such a lofty status in contemporary Australia. Australians celebrate few historical figures, at least none of the stature of Lord Nelson, George Washington or Napoleon Bonaparte. As a settler society with a short

history of European colonization, Australians have fought in several theatres of war, but have never fought a war on home soil, and have not experienced a civil war or revolution. They therefore lack easily identifiable cultural, military or political foundation figures. Indeed, the best-known heroes are the ANZACs, a laudable group rather than notable individuals, who, while they fought bravely, were defeated by the Turkish forces at Gallipoli (1915–16). A lack of foundation heroes goes some way to explaining why a 19th-century outlaw is one of the few historical figures recognized by a majority of Australians.

Another reason Ned Kelly remains an iconic figure is that he straddles several dimensions of national identity. Kelly's stance against the police taps historical elements of English–Irish animosity when the English authorities were colonial overlords. Anti-English aspects of the Kelly myth in part account for the opposition of right-wing conservatives and pro-monarchists who downplay his symbolic importance. Kelly's conflict with the police and English landowners can be linked to the egalitarian and social justice strands of Australian identity (Theophanous, 1995), with early Irish-Australians on the receiving end of some rough justice from police and wealthy landowners or 'squatters' (Jones, 1995). Outlaws such as Kelly: 'were celebrated because they were seen, rightly or wrongly, to embody the spirit of defiance and protest, a symbolic striking back of the poor and dispossessed against those perceived as their oppressors' (Seal, 1996: 197).

The construction of identity is reinforced through everyday symbols and language, such as the frequent appearance of Kelly in art, books, film and newspaper articles. Billig (1995: 69) argues: 'national identity is more than an inner psychological state or an individual self-definition: it is a form of life, which is daily lived in the world of nation-states'. Kelly's influence upon the lives or imagination of a substantial number of people is reflected in the fact that before he was hung in 1880, 32,000 people petitioned the Governor for a stay of execution (Molony, 2001: 196). Our research shows that Kelly still has symbolic value for a majority of Australians more than a century after his death. For many he is remembered as a colourful figure who exhibited the anti-authoritarian and rebellious qualities that have come to be associated with the Australian character.

In myth, Kelly was an underdog, who stood against injustice and police oppression in support of his family and friends, a rebel not afraid to break the rules, exemplified in the expression 'as game as Ned Kelly' (Hirst, 2007: 31). Our findings largely support the existence of such notions, but also make an empirical contribution to studies of outlaws and social bandits. Although few respondents saw Kelly as brave, a large majority believed he was forced into bushranging, but remained loyal to family and friends, recurrent themes in the literature on social bandits. On the other hand, a substantial proportion of Australians appear to revile the outlaw, regarding him as a thief, bank robber and police killer who sought to undermine the

social order and stability of the fledgling Australian colonies. While our research confirms his iconic status, it also provides empirical evidence of the social divisions over attitudes toward Kelly, as assessments of his character traits shape views of his symbolic standing.

Attitudes toward Kelly are also influenced by social and political background. Younger people are more likely to acknowledge his symbolic importance, while ideologically those on the political left exhibit more favourable attitudes toward him than those on the right. Political party identification reflects a similar pattern, with supporters of the Australian Labor Party and the Greens viewing Kelly in a more positive light than Liberal partisans. Such findings are largely consistent with extant political divisions in Australia. The Australian Labor Party (ALP) has favoured constitutional change toward a republic over the existing monarchical arrangements,<sup>13</sup> echoing Kelly's republican aspirations, as the outlaw was allegedly carrying a letter outlining plans for a North Eastern Victorian Republic when captured (Jones, 1995: ch. 16; Molony, 2001: 155). According to Warhurst (1993: 106) the ALP has 'been influenced by a strong residue of anti-British feeling stemming from the predominance of Catholics of Irish-Australian descent'. By contrast, members of the conservative coalition parties (the Liberal and National parties) tend to be 'emotionally attached to the monarchy and tradition' (Warhurst, 1993: 104), with former Prime Minister Howard effectively thwarting the 1999 constitutional referendum for an Australian Republic by not offering bi-partisan support (McAllister, 2001).

At the time of the Australian bicentennial celebrations in 1988, it became fashionable to locate a convict ancestor, particularly one from the first or second fleet of transportees (Bennett, 1988; Sayle, 1988). However, we found elsewhere that claims to convict ancestry were to a large extent socially constructed, with claimants likely to be younger and working class with less than tertiary education (Tranter and Donoghue, 2003). Jones (1997) also found older, high-status conservatives were less likely to be associated with 'backward-looking' notions of identity, which would include the recognition of embarrassing reminders of Australia's colonial heritage, such as convicts and bushrangers. There are some parallels with the symbolic importance of Kelly. Higher-status Australians may consume literature featuring outlaws (e.g. Peter Carey's acclaimed novel), but are less likely to identify positively with Ned Kelly. Rather, younger, working-class Australians who express pride in their sporting heroes are most likely to acknowledge Kelly's symbolic importance. Cosmopolitan 'elites' appear to prefer a bushranger on the bookshelf to a convict in the closet.

While divisions over the importance and character of Ned Kelly remain, artists, academics, entrepreneurs, journalists, film-makers and writers continue to tap his legend for their creative and commercial ends. In the process they ensure that the myths associated with Kelly are enshrined in Australian culture and continue to symbolize the rebellious aspects of the Australian

character. Robin Hood and Jesse James are household names in England and America and often portrayed as champions of the poor and oppressed, Ned Kelly has a similar standing in Australia. In a nation built not only by free settlers but also by English convicts and Irish rebels, Australia continues to celebrate aspects of its colonial and penal history, and Kelly as a romantic symbol of resistance to authority.

## Acknowledgement

The authors thank the three anonymous reviewers of the journal for their helpful suggestions and comments.

## Notes

- 1 Squatters were pastoralists who ‘squatted’ on land ‘beyond the official limits of settlement ... occupy[ing] their runs by simply “squatt[ing]” on them’ (Macintyre, 2004: 73–4). Although the term ‘squatter’ was initially derogatory ‘it soon came to designate a privileged class of large landholders, the ‘squattocracy’ (Macintyre, 2004: 73–4). Selectors were small farmers who often struggled to make a living ‘on holdings that were often unsuited to agriculture’ (Macintyre, 2004: 97). Selection Acts, initiated in Victoria in 1860 and later passed in all colonies, ‘provided for selectors to purchase cheaply up to 250 hectares of vacant Crown land or portions of runs held by pastoral leaseholders’ (Macintyre, 2004: 97).
- 2 Hirst (2007: 63) maintains that the term ‘larrikin’ derives from Britain. In Australia it originally described a ‘tough violent, young trouble maker’ but over time came to refer to ‘a mischievous or frolicsome youth’, although the term could be ‘applied to a man of any age or approach to life’.
- 3 ‘ANZAC’ is the acronym for the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps soldiers who served in the First World War.
- 4 For a review of Australian identity studies see Phillips (1998).
- 5 The AuSSA data were obtained from the Australian Social Science Data Archive, Australian National University, Canberra.
- 6 The dependent variable contained the response categories ‘Very Important’, ‘Important’, ‘Unimportant’ and ‘Very Unimportant’. The ordered logistic regressions predict the cumulative odds of each independent variable influencing the dependent variable.
- 7 Self-assessed class was measured using the question: ‘Which social class would you say you belong to?’ The response categories were: 1. upper; 2. middle; 3. working; 4. lower.
- 8 ‘In politics, people talk of “the left” and “the right”. How would you place your views on this scale generally speaking?’ The 11-point scale ranged from 0 (far left) to 10 (far right).
- 9 The question was: ‘People sometimes talk about what the aims of this country should be for the next ten years. Please indicate which one of these you consider the most important? And which would be the next most important? (Order in the nation ...).’
- 10 Question:

There have been a lot of important national and world events over the past 100 years that have helped shape Australia. Different individuals and groups, however, relate to some historical episodes more than others. On a scale of 1 to 7, where 1



is Not at all important, and 7 is Very important, how much importance do the following have for you? – The 1932 Ashes ‘bodyline’ cricket series; Australia’s soccer world cup qualification over Uruguay in 2005; *Australia II*’s 1983 America’s Cup victory; Cathy Freeman’s gold medal at the Sydney 2000 Olympics.

An additive scale of these variables was highly reliable (Cronbach’s Alpha.81).

- 11 Odds ratios larger than 1 indicate positive associations, those less than 1 refer to negative associations. For example, in Table 4, model 1, Catholics are 1.22 times more likely than other religious denominations or the non-religious to view Kelly as important rather than not important.
- 12 The positive and negative attitudes dummy variables are moderately correlated ( $r = -.50$ ) but regression diagnostics suggest high multi colinearity is not present.
- 13 The Australian head of state is still the British monarch. While the Governor General of Australia can be an Australian, he or she is merely the monarch’s Australian representative (Tranter, 2003).

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