

# the kelly gang unmasked

Review written by  
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Normally, the chances of my recommending yet another book about Ned Kelly and his Gang would be slim to non-existent. I would rather suggest you read the dictionary, because the plot is so much better and the characters so much nicer.

But a new publication entitled *The Kelly Gang Unmasked* is the exception to the rule.

Author Ian Macfarlane uses original source material to present the facts of the matter. In doing so he brings into question the entire myth of poor Ned, a country lad forced into a life of crime and bloodshed because of harassment by thuggish and corrupt police.

Macfarlane builds his case methodically and the picture of Ned which emerges is not a pretty one. A violent young man born into a dysfunctional and aggressive criminal family, Ned turned to a life of crime while barely out of his childhood. "Apprenticed" at an early age to the well-known bushranger Harry Power, he later turned police informer and put Power in so as to save his own hide.

However, Ned's "giving up" of his mate did not mean he was giving up a life of crime, as he went on to play a leading role in a highly successful gang of stock thieves who operated throughout north-east Victoria and southern New South Wales.

The various events in Ned's sorry saga are all recounted, only in this work the police are not portrayed as buffoons bent on hounding an innocent man, but are shown to be people who generally tried to do a difficult and dangerous job to the best of their ability.

Throughout his life Ned Kelly constantly tried to justify himself by claiming his misdeeds were "forced" upon him by the actions of others, his explanations constantly changing depending on his mood, and possibly his state of sobriety. Strangely, no matter how illogical his excuses, they have been seized upon by Kelly apologists as justification for the things he did.

Many aspects of the Kelly story mirror the behaviour of criminals of our own time. A group of police was ambushed and mercilessly slaughtered because they dared to search for a man accused of shooting at a policeman. The murderers then plundered the policemen's bodies before taking to the bush. The Police formed what we would describe as a "Task Force" to track down the offenders. One of the Kelly gang (Byrne) was a drug addict, a known opium user. Ned's mother was a "cougar" who, following the death of her first husband and the subsequent breakup of a short term relationship, married a much younger man. Her new spouse subsequently disappeared under mysterious circumstances, after claims he ill treated his wife. The gang later murdered a suspected police informer.

Nor is Ned the "Robin Hood" of Australian legend. He stole from rich and poor alike, and the gang's lack of concern for human life can be seen at the final show down at Glenrowan. Ned and his accomplices engineered a confrontation with police, thereby deliberately placing at risk a large number of civilian hostages they appear to have used as a "human shield".

In the ensuing gun battle two civilians were killed in the cross-fire and one was injured and died some time later.

Yet another was wounded when fumble fingers Ned accidentally discharged a revolver he was playing with, shooting one

of the civilians in the eye. This person died later the same year.

After Ned's capture Macfarlane demonstrates how Ned's legal team leaked confidential information to the press and sought to manipulate the legal process in order to gain advantage at the trial.

Macfarlane also reveals how the Royal Commission into the police handling of the Kelly outbreak was "stacked" with a number of commissioners who had an anti-police bias. Little wonder then that the Royal Commission's findings savaged the Force.

The creation of the Kelly myth dates from the time the Kellys were on the run in north-east Victoria. Even then it was characterised by people who spread false information, totally at odds with the truth, apparently because of their own anti police bias. The reasons for the later elevation of Ned Kelly to the status of an Australian icon remains a mystery to me – all the more so now that I have read Ian Macfarlane's book.

Sadly, given the level of uncritical support Ned enjoys in the community, I doubt the evidence presented by Macfarlane will change the minds of those who believe in "Saint Ned".

For the rest of us this work provides a fascinating insight into one of the great Australian sagas and sets many aspects of the story to rights.

I found it to be a compelling read and I highly recommend it.



**The Kelly Gang Unmasked by Ian Macfarlane (Oxford University Press)**

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