True History of the Kelly Gang: Little resemblance to the real story

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Director Justin Kurzel and scriptwriter Shaun Grant's *True History of the Kelly Gang* is loosely based on Peter Carey's Man Booker Prize-winning novel of the same title about the late 19th century Australian bushranger Ned (Edward) Kelly. The film had a brief season in Australian cinemas early this year and is currently available on video-streaming platforms.

Kelly, who is widely known in Australian folklore as an anti-establishment outlaw, has been the subject of numerous biographies, films, poetry and songs. Australian artist Sidney Nolan's iconic series, painted in 1946–47, about the bushranger's life is a striking and influential work.

Bushranging—a form of banditry in 19th century Australia—initially emerged between 1790 and 1830 as an escape from, and form of survival against, Australia's tyrannical convict labour system. In the latter part of the 19th century, bushranging developed in response to endemic rural poverty and was animated to a large extent, particularly with Kelly, by hatred of wealthy landowners (the so-called squattocracy) and the colonial state apparatus and its vicious and corrupt police force.

Kurzel's *True History of the Kelly Gang* is the 16th movie devoted to Kelly. The first of these was an hour-long account in 1907 directed by Charles Tait and reportedly the longest-ever feature film up to that time. Other better-known versions include one by British director Tony Richardson in 1970 starring the Rolling Stones' Mick Jagger, and another in 2003 directed by Gregor Jordan with Heath Ledger in the lead.

Kurzel (*Snowtown* [2011], *Macbeth* [2015], *Assassin's Creed* [2016]) is a decent filmmaker whose often striking imagery and atmospheric style can be effective. His latest film, however, is a disappointing and unconvincing work that bears little resemblance to Carey's book or the real Kelly story.

While "True History" in the film's title is meant to be ironic, Kurzel and his writing partner Shaun Grant have adopted an anything goes approach.

Grant told the *Guardian* newspaper: "You know that history aficionados will say 'that didn't happen!' But you can't please everyone. And who really knows what happened back then? I'm all for messing with it and playing with it."

Kurzel and Grant, of course, are free to interpret the story any way they please, but it is precisely this playful "messing" that sinks the film.

Rather than truly explore the historic context that produced Kelly, the movie is dominated by contemporary "identity" preoccupations and muddled references to the outlaw's psychological motivations. There are ambiguous Freudian allusions to Kelly's relationship with his parents, suggestions of so-called 'toxic masculinity' and repressed homosexuality, along with passing references to national identity and individual "destiny."

Viewers, however, are given almost no understanding of why Kelly and his gang were so feared by the colonial elite. The film also offers no serious indication of the popular loathing of the police and its oppressive operations. Likewise, *True History of the Kelly Gang* says nothing about the widespread opposition to Kelly's execution amongst the rural poor and urban workers.

Kelly, whose Irish-born parents were poverty-stricken small farmers, was born in 1855, the third son in a family of eight. After the death of his father, the 14-year-old Kelly was apprenticed to Harry Power, a notorious bushranger. Before he had turned 20, Kelly had served two prison terms on charges he always insisted were false—one for six months over a minor offence and then three years for allegedly receiving a stolen horse. Kelly, along with his mother Ellen's second husband George King, later ran a livestock-stealing operation.

In 1878, Kelly and his mother were involved in a violent confrontation with Police Constable Alexander Fitzpatrick, a notorious drunk, in the family home. While Kelly and his brother Dan went into hiding, Ned was indicted for attempted murder. His mother was arrested and found guilty of aiding and abetting the attempted murder and sentenced to three years hard labour.

Over the next two years Ned, friend Joe Byrne, Dan Kelly and Dan's friend Steve Hart, robbed banks and hid out in the dense bushland of the Victorian colony's northeast, sustained by a wide circle of local sympathisers.

Kelly won widespread support, especially when he began burning the mortgages of small farmers during bank robberies, and following the part publication of his 56-page "Jerilderie Letter" in which he tells his side of the story. The letter, which was dictated to Joe Byrne during the gang's bank robbery and two-day takeover of the New South Wales town of Jerilderie in

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1879, is regarded by several historians as one of the first written appeals for an Australian republic.

The letter, which was sent to a Victorian politician, denounces the police, the Victorian colonial government and the British Empire, and demands an end to ongoing police harassment of his family and other small landholders. It was this roughly expressed but passionate declaration—spellbinding in parts and still studied in some Australian schools—that inspired Peter Carey's cleverly conceived novel.

"It will pay Government to give those people who are suffering innocence justice and liberty," Kelly declares. "If not I will be compelled to show some colonial stratagem which will open the eyes of not only the Victorian police and inhabitants but also the whole British army, and no doubt they will acknowledge their hounds were barking at the wrong stump, and that [Constable Alexander] Fitzpatrick will be the cause of greater slaughter to the Union Jack than Saint Patrick was to the snakes and toads in Ireland" (see: Jerilderie Letter).

Police harassment of the Kelly family and other dirt-poor, heavily indebted small farmers known as "selectors" had little to do with stopping livestock thieves or bank robbers. Suppression of the so-called Kelly Outbreak was the colonial authorities' response to anyone attempting to challenge their domination or promoting republican and other rebellious sentiments.

Kelly and his gang were eventually tracked down, following major police mobilisations and mass arrests of alleged supporters in northeastern Victoria. It followed the gang's failed attempt to derail a large trainload of police hunting the outlaws, and a bloody 12-hour siege in Glenrowan when Kelly confronted police in steel armour and helmet. Weighing in at over 41 kilograms, the armour temporarily protected him from police bullets.

While the rest of the gang were shot and killed, Kelly was captured, put on trial, found guilty of murder, robbery and other charges and sentenced to death. Large public meetings supported Kelly and a 32,000-strong petition called for his reprieve, but the 25-year-old was hanged on November 11, 1880.

Thousands of workers in Melbourne, the Victorian capital, poor farmers and itinerant rural workers recognised that Kelly's execution was a grave injustice. A royal commission in 1881, in fact, confirmed many of Kelly's allegations against the police. The six-month investigation and its 721-page report substantiated widespread state corruption and led to the reprimand, suspension or demotion of numerous police officers.

Apart from *True History of the Kelly Gang's* opening narration, which briefly mentions Irish oppression, the film provides only limited social context. No other poor rural families or main characters, even those in the gang, are given serious attention. Ned (George MacKay) and his mother, Ellen (Essie Davis), in fact, are the only characters actually explored, however confusedly, in the entire film.

The film is divided into three sections. The first, which deals with Kelly's boyhood and his teenage years with Harry Powers (Russell Crowe)—is relatively engaging. The later parts of the movie—with Kelly presented as a sort of punk rocker and the gang engaged in cross-dressing and wearing war paint—are bewildering and monotonous.

Arguably the worst aspects of the film are those that present Kelly and his family as self-destructive or, as Constable Fitzpatrick later declares, "You Kellys can't even help yourselves." Fitzpatrick (Nicholas Hoult) is not portrayed as the corrupt and drunken figure that he was in Carey's book and in reality, or part of a repressive state apparatus.

The film ends with Thomas Curnow, a local schoolmaster who betrayed the gang, addressing a large crowd in the Victorian State Library. Curnow is given a standing ovation after declaring that Kelly was nothing more than a "horse thief and murderer."

There's no indication here of the popular anger at the injustice of Kelly's execution. The Kelly family, and others like them, were not an aberration. As a former police trooper noted in a Queensland newspaper at the time: "You will find hundreds of such families around any township in these colonies—poor devils, not originally bad, until a fussy or an ignorantly ambitious policeman makes them so for some one of these mistakes, which are often magnified into crimes."

True History of the Kelly Gang is a wasted opportunity. It could have been used to explore the sharp social divide that dominated late 19th century Australia and the real nature of the colonial elite's repressive state apparatus. The "Kelly Outbreak," as it was officially known, and its suppression was a sign of things to come. About ten years later, colonial police and military troopers were unleashed to brutally crush a determined nationwide strike by tens of thousands of sheep shearers and urban industrial workers. It was the largest and most violent state attack on the working class at that point in Australian history.

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