

RELIGION AND REVOLUTION IN THE LIFE OF NED KELLY

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‘Although I have been bushranging I have always believed that when I die I have a God to meet.’

- Ned Kelly on death row October 1880.

Ned Kelly stood before Judge Redmond Barry in November 1880 to be sentenced to death for the murder of the ‘deeply religious,’ Sgt Michael Kennedy,¹ and two other police officers at Stringybark Creek two years earlier. Kelly declared that ‘before God’ his mind was as easy and clear as it possibly could be, a statement Barry considered blasphemous. He was ready, in his own words, ‘to go to a bigger court than this’ a court to which all, including Barry, must eventually go. The judge gave the sentence of death concluding with the declaration, more a formality than a prayer, ‘May the Lord have mercy on your soul’ No doubt to His Honour’s consternation, Kelly simply replied, ‘Yes I will meet you there.’²

This incident could of course be taken as evidence of Kelly’s well-known spite for the British legal system, his youthful arrogance, and his sense of his own importance. I would like to explore here, however, the possibility that it reflects genuine religious sentiment on Kelly’s part. In the final phase of his life, the rudimentary religious instincts that had been formed in him since his birth in the shadow of Mount Fraser’s extinct volcanic core near Beveridge, Victoria in 1854, might have been given a sharper and more definitive shape. In part this may have been due to the circumstance of life’s extremity where he now found himself. But is also significant (and little known) that Kelly was visited on death row by the Wesleyan Methodist preacher John Cowley Coles in September and October 1880 and that in these visits (at least in Coles’ account), Australia’s favourite wayward child showed a quite remarkable response to the preacher’s message of repentance and faith.

This paper will seek to tie together the themes of ‘religion’ and ‘revolution’ in the life of Ned Kelly, Australia’s most celebrated bushranger and one of its most enduring cultural icons. After a spate of bank robberies in northeast Victoria in the late 1870s Ned Kelly was finally captured during the Glenrowan Siege of June 1880. A rumour has persisted since that time that he carried in his pocket a draft constitution for an ‘Independent Republic of North-East Victoria.’ Though the evidence for this is sketchy, radical revolutionary sentiment is clear in Kelly’s famous 1879 ‘Jerilderie Letter’ and in other of his letters and can be seen as an expression of a long standing Irish resentment of British rule that extended back to the early settlement period.

¹ Photo caption, Ian Jones, *Ned Kelly: A Short Life* (Sydney: Hachette, 2003), between 118–119.

² John Hirst, *The Australians: Insiders and Outsiders on the National Character since 1770* (Melbourne: Back Inc., 2010), 31–33.

Russel Ward's classic 1958 work *The Australia Legend* considered the archetypal images, overwhelmingly masculine and often violent, that shaped the national myth. Ned Kelly is included in this 'white man's dreaming', of course, and Ward echoes the *Bulletin's* call for the 'annihilation of the Kellys' and the denial that the spirit they represented 'possessed any redeeming qualities whatever' as 'a wholly proper attitude.'³ In Ward, bushrangers were initially the product of a brutalising convict system, which gave rise to an opposition to 'tyranny' given support by a 'bush proletariat.' The adoption of a Robin Hood persona enabled 'gentlemanly ruffians' to legitimise their exploits in opposition to a rising post-Gold Rush middle class. Older rural bush settlers resented the appearance of this new bourgeoisie and the bushrangers were cheered on for their capacity to disrupt the privileged position of the wealthy.⁴ Of course Ward's 'radical collectivist' argument has been resisted by some, including John Hirst, who felt that Ward had overstated his case and failed to see the positive manner in which bush poets like Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson, viewed police and other figures of authority. Hirst, while not denying the existence of a 'pioneer legend,' saw it as a 'national rural myth, democratic in its social bearing, conservative in its political implications.'⁵

What is missing from Ward is any sense of the significance of religion in the shaping of the Australian national consciousness. (There is a debate to be had, of course, about whether such a thing as a 'national consciousness' can even exist but I will not explore that here.) Americans have their Puritan founding fathers and frontier circuit rider myths and British history would be inexplicable without a treatment of the millennia of ructions over religion, but it is a commonplace that in Australian history, religion has been a neglected theme. This calendar year has seen the publication of several important works that contribute to our understanding of the way religion has shaped Australia. These include Meredith Lake's cultural history of *The Bible in Australia*, Daniel Reynaud's book on Anzac spirituality and Stuart Piggin and Bob Linder's treatment of colonial Evangelicalism as the *Fountain of Public Prosperity*.⁶

What contribution to Australian self-understanding might be made by considering Ned Kelly one of the nation's most enduring and iconic personalities and the religious dimensions of his life experience? Ecclesiastical leaders and the religious press could show a surprisingly sympathetic attitude toward the Kellys, calling for prayer and compassion toward these benighted sinners alone and huddled in the bush. Certainly they should be brought to justice but they were, after all, lost souls for whom Christ had a special care. Such sympathy was not confined to the Catholic Church where one might expect to find empathy toward an Irishman at the receiving end of British justice. Both Kelly and his brother Dan were baptised by

³ Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1966, first published 1958), 153.

⁴ Ward, *Australian Legend*, 145–56.

⁵ John Hirst, 'The Pioneer Legend,' in *Sense and Nonsense in Australian History* (Melbourne: Black Inc, 2006), 195–96.

⁶ Meredith Lake, *The Bible in Australia* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2018); Daniel Reynaud, *Anzac Spirituality: The First AIF Soldiers Speak* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2018); Stuart Piggin and Robert D. Linder, *The Fountain of Public Prosperity: Evangelical Christians in Australian History 1740–1914* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2018).

Father Charles O’Hea, ‘possibly riding circuit from the village of Pentridge’⁷ who would also accompany him to the gallows, a vivid example of the way the Catholic Church had a cradle-to-the-grave-role in Ned’s life. But Protestant leaders such as the Archbishop of Melbourne James Moorhouse and the aforementioned Wesleyan preacher John Cowley Coles were also enmeshed in the Kelly story to varying degrees. Certainly Kelly’s is a Catholic life and should be considered as such but the colony of Victoria was not as monolithically Catholic as Ireland. The origins of Kelly’s religious world begin of course in Ireland where sectarian conflict was often a ‘pull factor’ in migration to Australia or indeed gave rise to a criminal sentence of transportation. Both causes figure in the Kelly family history as Red Kelly was transported for theft and James Quinn migrated looking for better opportunities for his family. Kelly’s mother Ellen’s family (the Quinns) were from Country Antrim in Northern Ireland where Scots Presbyterians had come to dominance. It is possible that they may have migrated to avoid sectarian strife but James Quinn said it was only to ‘improve their position.’ Indeed many of the Irish settlers in north-east Victoria were glad to be rid of the sectarian violence of their homeland and forge a new identity.

When Ellen Kelly married George King after the death of her first husband ‘Red’ Kelly, it was in the home of the Primitive Methodist minister, the Rev William Gould Jones, Ned serving as the formal witness to the union. When Father Scanlan rode by night from Benalla to Mansfield, armed with a revolver, to conduct Sergeant Michael Kennedy’s funeral service at St. Francis Xavier’s Catholic Church.⁸ It was quite an ecumenical occasion with Anglican Bishop James Moorehouse walking at the head of the procession alongside, and at the invitation of, Scanlan. Samuel Sandiford, the Anglican rector of Mansfield, and the local Presbyterian minister, the Rev. Reid also joined the procession. For an age marked by fierce sectarianism this degree of cooperation is quite notable. Kelly’s parent Ellen Quinn and Red Kelly were married in St. Francis Catholic Church, Melbourne, by Father Gerald Ward and Ned was born in Beveridge, Victoria in December 1854, though the official record of O’Hea’s baptism of Ned has been lost. A Catholic church and school were built in Beveridge in 1858 and Ned began school there in 1863 at 8 years of age. In 1864 the family moved north to Avenel. Phillip Morgan, who lived across the creek from the Kellys in Avenel, is described by Jones as among the ‘rigid Bible-black Chapel Methodists.’⁹ It was at Avenel that Ned saved Dick Shelton from drowning and was rewarded with the famous green sash proudly displayed to this day in Benalla. Aaron Sherritt was part of what Jones refers to as Kelly’s ‘Protestant circle’ of friends.¹⁰ The theft of eleven horses from the Moyhu property of James Whitty in August 1877 was the event that led to a warrant being issued for Dan and Ned Kelly’s arrest. Whitty was an Irish Catholic showing that the Kellys did not discriminate on religious grounds when it came to whose horses they would steal. In his self-described, ‘wholesale and retail horse and cattle dealing’ business anyone with available stock was fair game. Imprisoned at Pentridge in 1873, Kelly read the Douay Bible in the context of his close

⁷ Jones, *Ned Kelly*, 14.

⁸ Letter from James Moorehouse to Canon Harvey, cited in Edith C. Rickards, *Bishop Moorehouse of Melbourne and Manchester* (London: John Murray, 1920), 129.

⁹ Jones, *Ned Kelly*, 21.

¹⁰ Jones, *Ned Kelly*, 106.

relationship with Catholic Chaplain Charles O’Hea. Kelly’s biographer Ian Jones describes O’Hea as ‘the greatest single influence on Kelly in his convict years.’¹¹ Though the reading material was limited at Pentridge, Scots-Baptist James Ingram’s bookstore would later become was one of Ned’s favourite haunts in Beechworth.¹²

In spite of the obvious criminality, violence and brutality that Ned Kelly exhibited in his short life, at the popular level I think it would be fair to say that Kelly has always been viewed more sympathetically than not. This is not something read back anachronistically into a distorted past but began during his lifetime. Many alienated small farmers and farm labourers became Kelly ‘sympathisers’ during the ‘Kelly Outbreak.’ John McQuilton’s *The Kelly Outbreak* (1979) describes widespread agricultural ignorance, poverty, and disillusionment in north-east Victoria at this time.¹³ Colin Holden’s history of the Anglican Diocese of Wangaratta, *Church in a Landscape*, states that the Kelly Gang enjoyed support in the local community because struggling farm workers saw Kelly’s plight as an exaggerated form of their own situation. Rural newspapers of the day noted that the Kellys also enjoyed support among ‘the respectable and well-to-do’ people, including Anglicans, ‘who might in other circumstances appear as supporters of law and order.’¹⁴ The *Church of England Messenger* said that bushrangers could always count on finding ‘punctual provisions and trusty spies among the settlers in the remote districts.’¹⁵

Congregationalist missionary, the Rev John Brown Gribble (formerly a minister of the United Methodist Free Church) was present in the Jerilderie pub after Kelly had composed his famous letter and recalled how he threatened that the town would swim in its own blood.¹⁶ McDermott refers to the Jerilderie Letter as ‘The Apocalyptic Chant of Edward Kelly’ and in his penetrating essay he describes it as providing ‘the emotional blueprint that was to guide the trajectory of Kelly’s outlawry.’¹⁷ The Jerilderie Letter is a swelling, fulminating rant, dictated by a man unhinged by a sense of the injustice he and others have been dealt, that careers toward a final apocalyptic denunciation in the style of an Old Testament prophet.

I give fair warning to all those who has reason to fear me to sell out and give £10 out of every hundred towards the widow and orphan fund and do not attempt to reside in Victoria, but as short a time as possible after reading this notice, neglect this and abide by the consequences, which shall be worse than the rust in the wheat in Victoria or the druth [durth?] of a dry season to the grasshoppers in New South Wales I do not wish to

¹¹ Jones, *Ned Kelly*, 91-92

¹² Jones, *Ned Kelly*, 102.

¹³ John McQuilton, *The Kelly Outbreak 1887-1880: The Geographical Dimensions of Social Banditry* (Melbourne: University of Melbourne Press, 1979), 27.

¹⁴ Colin Holden, *Church in a Landscape: A History of the Diocese of Wangaratta* (Melbourne: Melbourne Publishing Group, 2002), 34.

¹⁵ *Church of England Messenger*, 18 November 1878, cited in Murna Sturrock, *Bishop of Magnetic Power: James Moorehouse in Melbourne 1876-1886* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2005), 141-42.

¹⁶ Alex McDermott, ‘The Apocalyptic Chant of Edward Kelly,’ in *The Jerilderie Letter* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2001), xxv.

¹⁷ McDermott, ‘Apocalyptic Chant,’ xxxiii.

give the order full force without giving timely warning, but I am a widow's son outlawed and my orders must be obeyed.¹⁸

Anyone familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures will hear the echoes of its themes – the tithe for the poor, concern for widows and orphans, ecological devastation and plagues of locusts as instrument of Yahweh's vengeance. Only here it is Kelly himself who takes the Avenger's stance, appropriating to himself the privileges of the deity.

In September 1877 Kelly had been arrested for riotous behaviour in Beechworth. Constable Thomas Lonigan (who would be the first to die at Stringybark Creek two years later) 'caught me by the privates and would have sent me to Kingdom come only I was not ready...'¹⁹ Kelly saw a providential hand determining the boundaries of his existence. He was immortal until God decided otherwise. Kelly considered any Irishman who joined the Victorian police not only to be 'a disgrace' to 'the mother that suckled him' but 'a traitor to his country ancestors and religion as they were catholics [sic] before the Saxons and Cranmore [sic] yoke held sway since then they were persecuted and massacred thrown into martyrdom and tortured beyond the ideas of the present generation.'²⁰ In this he sets the experience of the Irish in colonial Victoria into the longer narrative of sectarian conflict in Ireland and invokes St. Patrick as his progenitor.

It will pay Government to give those people who are suffering innocence, justice and liberty. [I]f 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 that Fitzpatrick will be the cause of greater slaughter to the Union Jack than Saint Patrick was to the snakes and toads in Ireland.²¹

An interesting incident in Morna Sturrock's biography of Bishop James Moorhouse brings the level of sympathy for the Kellys on the part of one particular clergyperson into focus.²² The second Anglican Bishop of Melbourne, Moorhouse was visiting north-west Victoria in October-November 1878. The newspaper headlines spoke of the 'Mansfield Outrage,' Sgt. Michael Kennedy having been shot dead by Ned Kelly, along with two other constables, at Stringybark Creek. Kennedy's body was brought into Mansfield and Moorhouse was called upon to preach there. Consoling his grieving widow the bishop strongly advised her against viewing 'the poor disfigured corpse' of her husband. Half his face had been shot off and a wild animal had chewed off his left ear sometime over the three days his body lay in the bush before it was discovered.

While standing in solidarity with the victims of the crime and insisting that the perpetrators should be tracked down and arrested, at the same time Moorehouse, in a letter to Canon Harvey, showed remarkable degree of sympathy for the Kelly Gang. 'Poor wretches! One cannot help pitying them, crouching among the trees like wild beasts – afraid to sleep, afraid

¹⁸ Ned Kelly, *Jerilderie Letter*, 83.

¹⁹ Ned Kelly, *Jerilderie Letter*, 48–49.

²⁰ Ned Kelly, *Jerilderie Letter*, 64–65.

²¹ Ned Kelly, *Jerilderie Letter*, 27–28.

²² Sturrock, *Bishop of Magnetic Power*, 139–42.

to speak, and only awaiting their execution. But bushranging is so horrible, so ruthless, so utterly abominable a thing, that it must be stamped out at any cost.²³

Two days after the funeral while preaching in the church at Mansfield he repeated these remarks, prayed for the murderers and told the people they should ‘pity the poor wretches who caused us to mourn over these disasters.’²⁴ Not long after the funeral, Moorhouse and his wife stopped at an inn in Benalla for a meal and a change of horses. They were surprised to notice Chief Commissioner Standish, who was overseeing a yearlong search for the Kelly Gang, leave the inn without speaking with them. As the Moorhouses moved on, they noticed a mounted policeman up ahead of them and others stationed here and there along their route as if keeping watch over them. Upon returning to Melbourne he was informed that the Kellys were angry at the Bishop’s influencing of public opinion against them and had planned to kidnap him, spirit him away to the mountains and hold him for ransom. While enjoying a smoke in the garden of the inn he had been in range of their rifles. However, some of the Kelly supporters thought such an action would damage their cause and so warned the police; hence the armed escort.²⁵ While Kelly scholar Ian Jones considers this story ‘terribly unlikely,’ it provides a tantalising possibility.²⁶

Dean Matthew Gibney, en route to Albury, upon hearing that Kelly was lying wounded in the stationmaster’s office after the Glenrowan siege alighted from the train and rushed to his side. Kelly asked him to ‘do anything he could toward preparing him for death.’²⁷ After an hour long conversation, included the hearing of confession, Gibney was satisfied that Kelly was sufficiently penitent to receive absolution. He remembered that ‘although he was evidently suffering the most intense agony and pain from the wounds on his hands and feet, he never uttered a strong or impatient word.’²⁸ The Christological references in this account are hard to miss as parallels with Christ’s passion are constructed in Gibney’s memory of the event. When Gibney urged the need to recite the penitential words of the sacrament, ‘Oh Jesus have mercy on me, and pray for forgiveness,’ Kelly replied, ‘It’s not now I’m beginning to say that: I’ve done it long before today.’²⁹

Dan Kelly and Steve Hart were still besieged and under fire in the Glenrowan Inn and when Gibney suggested to Ned that they might surrender to a priest, the latter showed concern for his confessor urging him not to attempt it. ‘Your cloth won’t save you...They may take you for a policeman in disguise.’³⁰ Instead, Gibney asked Kate Kelly to urge the boys to surrender but the police deterred her. All she could do was stand by helpless while her brother was burned to death in an inferno deliberately lit by the police. At this point Gibney removed his

²³ Moorehouse to Canon Harvey, cited in Rickards, *Bishop Moorehouse*, 129.

²⁴ Frank Clune, *The Kelly Hunters: The Authentic, Impartial History of the Life and Times of Edward Kelly, the Ironclad Outlaw* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1955), p. 174, cited in Sturrock, *Bishop of Magnetic Power*, 141.

²⁵ Rickards, *Bishop Moorehouse*, 130.

²⁶ Ian Jones, cited in Sturrock, *Bishop of Magnetic Power*, 283.

²⁷ Ian Jones, *Ned Kelly*, 327.

²⁸ Ian Jones, *Ned Kelly*, 327.

²⁹ Ian Jones, *Ned Kelly*, 327.

³⁰ Ian Jones, *Ned Kelly*, 327.

hat, made the sign of the cross on his own face and strode toward the entry of the burning inn, prompting the crowd to burst out in applause. Once inside he called out, 'For God's sake men, allow me to speak to you: I am a Roman Catholic priest!' but it was too late.³¹ They were all dead, Dave Mortimer's greyhound also lying dead beside them. Only Martin Cherry survived but only for the few minutes it took him to receive last rites from Gibney. As the Kelly sisters Maggie and Kate howled banshee-like over the sizzling, melting flesh of their brother and his mates, the tragic event drew to its inevitable end. They kissed the burnt bones of their beloved brother Dan as devotees might venerate a martyr's relics and called upon God to visit vengeance on their brother's murderers. Superintendent John Sadlier handed the charred bodies of Dan Kelly and Steve Hart to Dick Hart, Wild Wright and the Kelly sisters, for which they showed a touching gratitude. Reverently they covered the bodies with blankets and wheeled them away on a cart. The wounded Ned and the corpse of Joe Byrne were loaded on a train and taken to Benalla. The Kelly Outbreak had blazed ferociously over north-east Victoria; now, finally, it had burnt out.

The claim that when Ned Kelly was arrested he had in his possession a draft constitution of a 'Republic of North-Eastern Victoria' has gained considerable credence since it first appeared in Max Brown's *Australian Son* in 1948. The claim is made that an article in *The Irish Times* in the late 1920s mentions this though extensive searches of the *Times* archives have never uncovered the article. Then, in 1967, respected Kelly scholar and biographer Ian Jones presented a paper on 'A New View of Ned Kelly,' in which he raised the possibility of a Republican movement in the region during Kelly's lifetime. Melbourne Journalist Leonard Radic told Jones that he had seen a copy of the rumoured document in the Public Records Office in London in 1962, written in 'quaint, mock, legalistic language.'³² However, again, this document has never been discovered in spite of extensive searching. In spite of the lack of documentary evidence for a Declaration, Kelly scholars including John McQuilton (*The Kelly Outbreak* 1979) and John Molony (*I am Ned* 1980) have usually taken the idea of the declaration of a republic seriously.

John Harber Phillips QC concluded that the evidence for the existence of a Republican movement in Victoria in the 1870s and 1880s is quite strong. Such a movement would of course have been an act of high treason and Phillips suggests that this may be the reason why no documentary evidence exists. But this surely is arguing from silence. Though we usually think of Kelly's distinctive armour as the idiosyncratic and emblematic garb of a single individual, the fact that other members of the Kelly gang also wore makeshift armour, suggests to Phillips that they may have seen themselves as the avant-garde of a larger contingent of armed rebels. One eyewitness testified that Kelly had slipped away from the Glenrowan siege to address 150 armed men on a nearby hilltop equipped with gunpowder and another that rocket flares were set off to signal to these men.³³ According to Police Constable Bracken, one of Kelly's hostages at Glenrowan, Kelly had declared that the people

³¹ Ian Jones, *Ned Kelly*, 331.

³² John Harber Phillips, 'Ned Kelly and the North-East Victorian Republican Movement,' *Independent Australia* (Feb 2011). <https://independentaustralia.net/australia/australia-display/ned-kelly-and-the-north-eastern-victorian-republican-movement,3843> posted 19 Dec 2011, last accessed 27 Aug 2018

³³ Phillips, 'Ned Kelly and the North-East Victorian Republican Movement.'

of the region were ‘damned fools to bother their heads about parliament’ and ‘this is our country.’³⁴ Phillips suggests that the murder of Aaron Sherritt and the attempted derailing of the train as it headed for Glenrowan with police reinforcements may be seen as pre-emptive strikes against the police in the lead up to the declaration of a Republic.³⁵

There are precedents for this kind of seditious declaration. A Declaration of Independence was drawn up during the Eureka miners’ rebellion at Ballarat in 1854. The Presbyterian firebrand and passionate republican Rev John Dunmore Lang published a draft Declaration of Independence for Victoria. ‘We the people of the province of Victoria in Eastern Australia, being both able and willing to govern ourselves, hereby solemnly declare, in the presence of almighty God, from whom alone we derive our political rights, and in the sight of the whole civilized world, which we call to witness this our act and deed, that we are henceforth free and independent.’³⁶ Parliamentarian James McPherson Grant argued for a republic of Victoria in the pages of *The Age* newspaper, which he conceived rather grandiloquently as, ‘a great, free and independent Republic – the hope and salvation of the world.’³⁷ After four hundred to five hundred people gathered in Portland in the western part of Victoria in 1861, a separation league was formed which presented a petition to the House of Lords and the Governor of Victoria for the western part of the colony to secede and be renamed ‘Princeland.’ Perhaps not surprisingly, the crown rejected the proposal.³⁸ Certainly the social unrest, economic hardships, land wars between squatters and selectors, poorly administered land acts and police brutality and corruption in North-East Victoria from the 1870s provided a context for Republican sentiment to emerge and bubble over into armed resistance. It is just this kind of narrative that has become a popular part of the Kelly legend. The problem, again, is lack of evidence. As recently as June 2018, Stuart E. Dawson, Adjunct Research Fellow in the Department of History at Monash University has debunked the entire story of a Kelly-led Republican movement as ‘a complex historical fiction’ built more on wish fulfilment than any reliable evidence.³⁹ The fact that neither Ned Kelly nor any of his supporters nor any of the informers who gave information to the police ever said a single word about a republic surely counts strongly against the theory.

The death row visits of the Wesleyan Methodist preacher John Cowley Coles in September and October 1880, demonstrate that religion was more important to Kelly than revolution. This little known series of events shows, when set alongside his Catholic story that Kelly received ‘last rites’ from both Catholic and Protestant clergy.⁴⁰ Coles was able to admire a

³⁴ Phillips, ‘Ned Kelly and the North-East Victorian Republican Movement.’

³⁵ Phillips, ‘Ned Kelly and the North-East Victorian Republican Movement.’

³⁶ Phillips, ‘Ned Kelly and the North-East Victorian Republican Movement.’

³⁷ Phillips, ‘Ned Kelly and the North-East Victorian Republican Movement.’

³⁸ Phillips, ‘Ned Kelly and the North-East Victorian Republican Movement.’

³⁹ Stuart E. Dawson, *Ned Kelly and the Myth of a Republic of North-East Victoria*, Creative Commons Attribution, June 2018.

⁴⁰ John Cowley Coles, *The Life and Christian Experience of John Cowley Coles Giving the History of Twenty-seven Years of Evangelistic Work in the Colony of Victoria, Australia, and elsewhere, principally in connection with the Wesleyan Methodist Church; also Chapters on the Doctrine of Entire Sanctification by Faith, and the Endowment of Power; and an Account of the Social Condition and Mode of Life of the Diggers, in the early days of Gold Digging, in the same Colony; written (at the request of many friends) by Himself* (London: Marshall Brothers and Melbourne: M. L. Hutchinson, 1893), pp. 136–38.

certain nobility in Kelly's character while at the same time holding him to account for the criminality and violence of his actions. He held services for the inmates of the Melbourne Gaol and members of his Band Meeting were keen to know if he would be visiting Kelly. He applied to the governor of the gaol 'as representing a Christian Church' but the governor said, 'No, Kelly is a Catholic and has his own minister.' Not to be put off so easily Coles and his Methodist friends prayed that 'the Lord would open the cell door' in order that he might 'enter and see Kelly, in order to talk with him about his soul.' Soon after, at the conclusion of one of the prison services, a warder approached Coles and asked if he would like to see Kelly. He said he would but that the governor would not allow it. The warder told him there was a regulation that any prisoner who requested it could see the minister who had been conducting the service. The warder went to see if Kelly wanted to speak with Coles and was told that he did and that he had heard every word of the service from his prison cell. Coles gives a fascinating description of Kelly. 'This man by no means looked a ruffian. He had rather a pleasant expression of countenance. He was one of the most powerfully built and finest men that I ever saw. He treated me with great respect, listened to all I had to say, and knelt down by my side when I prayed.'⁴¹

As for Coles' ministerial approach to Kelly here is how he describes his advice to the captive bushranger.

I refused to hear anything from him about his bushranging exploits, but I kept him to this – that we might die any moment. I might not live another half-hour; but if he did not die before he was sure to be executed on a certain day, and that he was a sinner standing in need of a Saviour...He evidently wanted me to think that he did not care for his position, and that he would see it out like a man.⁴²

This was sometime after 22 September, 1880. Coles spoke with Kelly again, heavily ironed *en route* to the exercise yard, this time for only a minute or two, on 7 October, along with the Rev. R. Fitcher, who conducted the service that day. On the 20 October, after preaching at Kelly's request, Coles accompanied Kelly to his cell. Coles had preached from Amos 4:12, 'Prepare to meet thy God.' Immediately he set the prisoner straight on his purpose in such visits.

Do not think, Kelly, for one moment that it is out of any foolish curiosity to see you that I have sought these interviews with you; nothing of the sort. Indeed, I wish I could be spared the pain of seeing an intelligent young man like you in such an awful position. My sole object in speaking to you this morning is to impress on you the fact that you have a soul to be saved, or for ever lost; that Christ died for the chief of sinners, and if you will but be sorry for your sin and confess it to God and ask for mercy for Christ's sake, He will have mercy on you.⁴³

Kelly's response shows a remarkable openness and an exercised conscience as he reflected on his bushranging exploits. 'I have heard all that you said this morning...I believe it all.

⁴¹ Coles, *Life and Christian Experience*, entry for 22 September, 1880, 136.

⁴² Coles, *Life and Christian Experience*, entry for 22 September, 1880, 136.

⁴³ Coles, *Life and Christian Experience*, entry for 20 October, 1880, 137.

Although I have been bushranging I have always believed that when I die I have a God to meet...When I was in the bank at Jerilderie, taking the money, the thought came into my mind, if I am shot down this moment how can I meet God?'⁴⁴ Coles and Kelly then knelt side by side and prayed together. Upon standing Kelly crossed himself before thanking the preacher for his ministry. This was the last time the two men spoke together and Kelly went to the gallows on 11 November. Coles had no desire to attend the execution. 'I could have done the man no good by doing so,' he reflected, 'and was saved the pain of seeing a fellow creature ushered into the presence of God.'⁴⁵ Here is a touching portrait of a little known instance of pastoral care in a moment of personal crisis. Kelly the penitent Catholic Christian kneels beside Coles the forthright Wesleyan preacher, the two men together calling upon God to grant mercy to a fallen sinner.

It is unsurprising that Kelly's life ended the way it did – at the end of a rope held in the hands of the criminal justice system. But it also ended, as it had begun, as a Christian life. Not that Kelly was particularly devout, by any means. I have no interest in drawing Kelly's life as a hagiography or beginning any kind of canonisation process. But tracing the religious dimensions of his life show that the Christian faith, in both its Catholic and Protestant dimensions, was part of the social imaginary of the world he inhabited. The language of the Bible and of the church informed his conscience and his actions. What little education he had was given by the church and its book, and at key turning points in his life (Beveridge, Pentridge, Jerilderie, Glenrowan, Melbourne Gaol), Kelly gave serious consideration to the presence of God in his life and to religious instincts which impinged upon his conduct and his conscience in what could be seen as determinative ways. Where the idea of Kelly as a revolutionary republican has gained considerable traction in spite of the complete absence of historical evidence, the examination of Kelly as a religious figure remains uncharted territory. And this in spite of the fact that his religious instincts are clearly available in the sources ready to be drawn out and investigated.

Russel Ward claimed that 'the dreams of nations, as of individuals, are important, because they not only reflect, as in a distorting mirror, the real world, but may sometimes react upon and influence it.'⁴⁶ Would Australia's 'pioneer legend' have sounded any different notes, if the religious dimensions of Ned Kelly's life had been better known? Deborah Bird Rose argued in a 1994 article, 'Ned Kelly Died for Ours Sins,' that Indigenous stories of Ned Kelly and of James Cook, formed part of Aboriginal people's 'search for a moral European' and suggests the possibility that through an awareness of these stories 'coloniser and colonised [might] share a moral history and thus fashion a just society.'⁴⁷ It would be hard to trace in Ned Kelly the picture of 'the moral European,' but it is possible to trace the picture of the fallen and redeemed sinner, a figure of far greater spiritual depth and meaning than one known only for 'morality.' The 'Australian legend' may be reconfigured as a myth of 'creation and fall' in which the Dreaming was disrupted by colonisation. When 'the Lamb entered the dreaming' (to borrow from Robert Kenny) Nathaniel Pepper's world was indeed

⁴⁴ Coles, *Life and Christian Experience*, entry for 20 October, 1880, 1880, 137.

⁴⁵ Coles, *Life and Christian Experience*, entry for 20 October, 1880, 1880, 137–138.

⁴⁶ Cited in Hirst, but locate in Ward.

⁴⁷ Deborah Bird Rose, 'Ned Kelly Died for Our Sins,' *Oceania* 65:2 (Dec., 1994), pp. 175–186.

ruptured.⁴⁸ But in the theological curriculum, creation and fall are followed by redemption and new creation. The reconsideration of Ned Kelly, one of Australia's favourite wayward children, as a Christian figure may spin the Australian legend toward a new trajectory.

⁴⁸ Robert Kenny, *The Lamb Enters the Dreaming: Nathaniel Pepper and the Ruptured World* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2010).