

THE 1946-47 NED KELLY PAINTINGS

by SIDNEY NOLAN

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EXHIBITION DATES

Auckland City Art Gallery
March 15 to April 10, 1968

Canterbury Art Society Gallery, Christchurch
April 18 to May 12, 1968

National Gallery, Wellington
May 20 to June 2, 1968



SIDNEY NOLAN

A FESTIVAL EXHIBITION ORGANIZED BY
THE AUCKLAND CITY ART GALLERY
IN ASSOCIATION WITH QANTAS

THE 1946-47 **NED KELLY**
Collection lent by Sunday Reed of Melbourne
PAINTINGS BY SIDNEY NOLAN

AUCKLAND CITY ART GALLERY 1968

I NED KELLY

Edward (Ned) Kelly was born in Victoria, Australia in 1854. His father, an Irishman transported for an agrarian offence, settled as a farmer after his release, but was continually hounded by the police and is supposed to have died as a result of ill treatment by them. His widow was left with eight children. It seems that the Kellys were a marked family, and Ned grew up with a deep sense of injustice, and a personal hatred of the police and their method.

In April 1878, Ned and his brother, Dan, went bush to avoid arrest. Joe Byrne and Steve Hart accompanied them. From April to October they gold-mined at Stringybark Creek, where three of four policemen, sent to hunt them down, were killed. Sergeant Kennedy, fatally wounded, being shot by Ned. Within a week an act of parliament outlawed the gang. In December they robbed the Euroa bank of £2,000, and in February 1879 the Jerilderie bank in southern New South Wales. Armour for the four and a helmet for Ned were forged: an informer, Aaron Sherritt, was shot dead by Joe Byrne, his former friend.

In June 1880, at Glenrowan, the gang held the hotel in order to capture a train load of police. Plans misfired and the gang was besieged. Dan Kelly, Hart and Byrne were killed in the hotel; Ned, in full armour was wounded and captured outside.

Ned Kelly was sentenced to death on October 28, 1880,
and hanged in Melbourne Gaol on November 11, his last
words being: *Such is life.*

II SIDNEY NOLAN

*Myth-maker of Australian Painting**

That Sidney Nolan is the most famous Australian painter today and the greatest that Australia has produced is not due simply to his exotic subjects, to the fact that he was the unknown artistic hero who came to confound the establishments and European champions of art or to any iconoclastic intention in Nolan himself. As a painter and one concerned with a vision of the unity of life, he is a natural.

It was the freshness of his touch and the lively single-mindedness of his imagery that first impressed Rome, Paris and London; no odour of the art school clung to his Kelly; he was not concerned with the geometrical abstraction and socialist realism that inhibited the thirties. He was no heir to any modern tradition. He restored the magical ingenuousness of the image without expressionist, cubist, or programmatic overtones.

Detachment enhances the ambiguity of his approach; in presenting parrots, wildflowers, rivers and ant-hills, his seriousness is countered by humour, his innocent sincerity with wry facetiousness. Yet they remain authentic.

This paradoxical vision is exemplified in the rough colonial

*Text by Elwyn Lynn: reprinted from *Qantas Airways* magazine, May, 1964, and *Asian-Australian* magazine *Hemisphere*.

outlaw, Ned Kelly; he takes a semi-mythical desperado and makes of him, as Dr Bernard Smith says, a joking saint; but behind the helmet that Kelly made to protect himself, and which finally made him vulnerable, the eyes sometimes glare with revenge; he makes of forlorn country hotels and towns, ephemeral cardboard structures, but they are also monuments to endurance; the perilous trails of explorers are often depicted with comic fragility; the convict, desperate to disappear into the bush does not notice that the bars on his garb are imitating those on the trees.

Nolan is a supremely unprogrammatically artist: the symbols in his work refer specifically to myths but they are not to be interpreted in terms of those myths or as attached to a specific tradition. The Kelly myth is to give cues to a mythic world based on a vision of the unity of life. This paradoxical nature of his outlook helps explain, too, how he imbues the desiccated interior with humanity.

Despite such paradoxes, one may discern underlying themes in his work. The remoteness of the outback, the moon-cratered eroded mountains, lonely mines, desolate townships, a naked, lost woman in the jungle, lone carcasses surrounded by empty space, vague memories of almost forgotten soldiers of Gallipoli, those two half-willing, half-protesting outcasts, Ned Kelly and Arthur Rimbaud, and the explorers adrift in the vastness; all are allied to the notion of dedication in isolation.

It is as though one can only stake out a personality in the hinterland of Australia and of history. The theme is emphasised by other series that Nolan has pursued. Successful in themselves, they lack the same impact: the sixty-six paintings on glass he did in 1949 of Eureka are too whimsical to convey a sense of embattled loneliness; Mrs Fraser, whose

ship was wrecked and who betrayed the convict who helped her to safety, is isolated, but she wants to escape, for to her the ragged loneliness is hateful.

Betrayal and alienation are not Nolan's consistent themes. Leda and the Swan are isolated figures, but Nolan's intention is not clear: why does he sink the sunlit Mediterranean myth in gloom? The more recent Gallipoli works have a theatrical, even artificial obscurity, remote rather than isolated.

The lack of identification extends to the anonymity of those clusters of soldiers he showed at the Tate in June of last year. The isolation is certainly one of pictorial reminiscence, like turning over old photographs, but it is the immediacy of the isolation that makes the Kelly series so compelling. His present style is highly diffused.

He said of his paintings of animals in Africa, shown at the Marlborough Gallery in London this year, that he wanted the animals to waft up from the jungle; in the same way the Gallipoli heroes waft up from a sepia-tinted past.

Edward Lucie-Smith of *The Listener*, commenting on the Tate paintings, thought Nolan was a teacher, but did not indicate where his didacticism lay. Indeed, Nolan is, in contrast to a mythologist like Max Beckmann, an a-political painter: though he made in 1956 an ironic comment on Picasso's politics by including the familiar dove in his painting on the Hungarian revolt, he avoids the topical and the political.

He is committed to his work alone; he returns constantly to previous motifs. He had painted *Leda and the Swan* in 1945; the Kelly series of 1945-47 was resurrected in 1954-57; the first painting he showed in the recently formed Contemporary Art Society in 1939 was of Rimbaud.

Rimbaud was the subject of extensive catalogue notes and three works at the recent Marlborough exhibition. The flat, undifferentiated head on a neck of the Moon Boy reappears in the decor to Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* in 1961, as an ambiguous phallic symbol, mushroom cloud or seed-pot.

In 1962 at the Skinner Galleries in Perth he showed recent explorers and townships, still Nolan territory and people, but looser and more fluid.

It is the hero that really holds his attention. This is possibly why he did not return to the unheroic Mrs Fraser, naked, crawling in the jungle. Maybe these works were too bitter; myth does have a way of taking the bitterness out of life.

Is this why he has not returned to the hero-less Eureka works and why he seems as yet unable to articulate fully his ideas about Gallipoli? He needs a hero, close to the aspirations and despairs of self-aware men.

Kelly, the bushranger, who defied the state and was hanged, Rimbaud, who wrote most of his poetry by twenty and set out to make a fortune in north Africa, the explorers who crossed some of the driest lands on earth – these were no mere victims, but men with a firm grip on reality.

All were most articulate; Kelly's letters and proclamations, Rimbaud's letters and poems and the explorers' diaries are amazingly self-conscious and percipient.

The clarity of this self-awareness is reflected in the directness of the imagery Nolan used. Some of the crispness has been lost in the more diffused recent work; Rimbaud and the explorers swim in a viscous, rainbow-hued land. If men, birds and beasts no longer seem cut from galvanised iron, the same principle of the mythical heroes remains the same.

Nolan was quite aware of these issues. *Angry Penguins*,

No. 4, not only contained a long article by Albert Tucker on *Art, Myth and Society*, a translation of three of Rimbaud's poems by Sunday Reed, but also this by Nolan himself: 'Arthur Rimbaud, born in 1854, was a specialist from the beginning. Whether in his poetry, which established a legend less durable, more adorable than Shakespeare, or in his acts in Africa, he bears the birthmarks of an angel naked and possessed.'

This, from 1942, should help dispel the notions that Nolan was naive and that his work is based on Rousseau and sunlight, as he once said.

Nolan is not presenting a series of pictorial illustrations of these heroes; he is evoking and commenting on a myth at the same time. What he does with myth is quite different from the aims of socialist realists, German expressionists and New Realists like Beckmann.

These used myths to comment on society, to realise their conceptions of the world as intensely as possible through symbols. Most comparable to Nolan is Max Beckmann (1884-1950); he drew frequently upon classical myths, but overwhelmed them with his own subjective meanings. What parallels he drew between past and present, what attitudes he was adopting defied conjecture.

Nolan is the truer myth-maker, because his myths remain predominantly public. The Kelly pictures tell a story, reveal aspects of the Kelly myth, but are not identical with that myth. The processes of the identification of a people with a myth cannot be discussed here, but it is clear that the hero must be many men: Kelly rampageous, Kelly at peace, Kelly the Guardian Angel, Kelly revengeful, Kelly the killer, but not Kelly executed: heroes are immortal.

He plays a sophisticated game with harmless hero worship,

in a century neurotic with dictators. Kelly is a combination of Charlie Chaplin, Superman, the Revengeful Spirit – like Hamlet's Ghost who came on when the stage was fully lit.

This lightness and humour is quiescent at present; the theatrical overtones of Leda's plight or the memories of Gallipoli do not permit its shattering presence; the African studies have all the melting charm of Fragonard (and, alas, some of the flashiness of a Boldini), but irony and detachment, the ability to parody oneself a little, are in abeyance.

The recent images of Rimbaud are of a man lost in mystery, faded, hardly kept alive by memory. The technical virtuosity is beyond question, but it is for the early Kellys, the provincial, the colonial innocent, unspoiled by city slickness; the explorers and townships where sky meets soil like a broad, blue flat knife; the carcasses tortured even in death; and for that untrammelled spontaneity, that Nolan is celebrated at present.

For complete biographical details and documentation on Sidney Nolan, see the Sidney Nolan Retrospective Exhibition catalogue published by the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1967. Copies of this catalogue are available from the *Riverbend 1964* exhibition by Sidney Nolan touring New Zealand this year.



THE PAINTINGS

The quotations accompanying each title were extracted by Sidney Nolan from the Royal Commission's Report of 1881, from newspapers and from the book *The Complete Inner History of the Kelly Gang and their Pursuers* by J. J. Kenneally: Melbourne, J. Roy Stevens.

1

Landscape

The 'Kelly Country' is that portion of north-eastern Victoria which extends from Mansfield in the south to Yarrawonga in the north, and from Euroa in the south-east to Tallangatta in the north-west.

2

Ned Kelly

We rob their banks
We thin their ranks
And ask no thanks
For what we do.

3

The burning tree

At one time during a police search in the Warby Ranges I allowed the men, seeing they had no warmth for weeks, to set fire to an old hollow tree.

4

Constable Fitzpatrick & Kate Kelly

Kate, in the exercise of her domestic duties, was passing by Fitzpatrick when the latter seized her and pulled her on to his knee.

5

Morning camp

Ned Kelly knew all our camps in the Warby Ranges. He would describe the constables who used to go and look for the horses at daylight, and the one who was told off to light the fire and boil the billy of tea.

6

Township

The peaceful town of Mansfield.

7

Steve Hart dressed as a girl

He appears to have been possessed of a considerable courage and resource, and during the period of his outlawry frequently rode about in feminine attire.

8

Quilting the Armour

Mrs Skillion, who was Margaret Kelly, sat out in the evenings sewing the soft blue quilting into the head-piece of the armour.

9

Death of Constable Scanlon

He was in the act of firing again when Ned Kelly fired, and Scanlon fell from his horse and died almost immediately.

10

Stringybark Creek

If left alive Kennedy would, Kelly said, be left to a slow torturing death at the mercy of ants, flies,

and the packs of dingoes. Therefore he decided to put an end to the sufferings of the wounded sergeant, and, as the latter momentarily turned his head, Kelly fired and shot him through the heart.

11

The watch tower

From the tower, which we mounted in shifts, a good view could be had of the town in all directions, and in particular of the roads by which we might expect the outlaws to arrive.

12

The alarm

A peacock which used to sleep on the top of a tin shed. The bird was accustomed to making warning cries at the approach of any stranger.

13

The chase

I am sure the police would not ride them down in a day; they would have to hunt them down, but not ride them down – the outlaws were well mounted.

14

The encounter

Should a constable encounter one of these outlaws, he should apprehend him with the maximum efficiency and devotion to duty.

15

Marriage of Aaron Sherritt

We police regarded him as a valuable and cunning spy. He got married on Boxing Day, 1879. Constable Barry was at that time in charge of the search party hidden in the cave. After his marriage we regarded him as less trustworthy.

16

Defence of Aaron Sherritt

Mrs Sherritt: 'They (the police) were in that position when Dan Kelly was in the room. I was put under the bed. Constable Dowling pulled me down, and then Armstrong caught hold of me, and the two of them shoved me under.'

17

The evening

At times, when the troopers and black-

trackers had made camp, I would ride ahead in the evening; thinking perhaps to find some clue to the outlaws' movements by travelling alone.

18

Bush picnic

On one occasion the outlaws had arranged to have a picnic some distance from Violet Town. The Kelly's friends flattered the constable and shouted freely for him. He got pretty full and someone suggested dancing on the green. Good music was available and Ned Kelly took the merry constable as his partner in a buck set.

19

The questioning

The troopers enquired at the homestead as to the whereabouts of the outlaws, but were told to ask the old man who was up bathing himself in the dam.

20

The slip

The gully was exceedingly rough and precipitous. So much so that on one occasion as we were

ascending in single file one of the packhorses lost its footing and fell.

21

Mrs Reardon at Glenrowan

I came into the yard and screamed for the police to have mercy on me. 'I am only a woman; allow me to escape with my children. The outlaws will not interfere with us - do not you.'

22

Siege at Glenrowan

At about eight o'clock in the morning a heart-rending wail of grief ascended from the hotel. The voice was easily distinguished as that of Mrs Jones, the landlady. Mrs Jones was lamenting the fate of her son, who had been shot in the back by the police, as she supposed fatally. She came out of the hotel crying bitterly and wandered into the bush on several occasions, etc.

23

Burning at Glenrowan

'I got no answer, of course, and I looked in and found the bodies of Dan Kelly and Steve Hart lying

together. As far as I could tell they were burnt from the waist up.' Very Rev. Dean Gibney.

24

Glenrowan

Such is life.

25

The Trial

Judge Barry then passed sentence of death, and concluded with the usual formula 'May the Lord have mercy on your soul.' Ned Kelly: 'Yes, I will meet you there!'

IV SUNDAY & JOHN REED

A biographical note by Barrie Reid

To surround the words ascribing 'ownership' of the 1946-47 Ned Kelly series of paintings with some true meaning requires more than the conventional 'who's who' biographical formula. Indeed, merely to state a few aspects of John Reed's public record - a founder, in 1938, of the Contemporary Art Society of Australia and its President for many years; co-editor of that astonishing avant-garde journal *Angry Penguins*, 1943-47, which published not only many Australian writers destined to become well-known but New Zealanders such as Frank Sargeson and Greville Texidor; director of the publishing firm of Reed and Harris, 1943-47; co-editor of *Ern Malley's journal*, 1952-55; a founder and Director of the Museum of Modern Art and Design of Australia, 1958-65 - would be to avoid the essential record. The real biography has to do with the expression by Sunday and John Reed together of a remarkable creativity, a creativity which seeks to infuse all aspects of living with qualities of sensibility, love and imagination.

In no sense in which the words are usually understood are Sunday and John Reed 'collectors' or 'patrons'. Rather they have been, and are now, involved in companionship with the creative spirit of the artist, a spirit which they share.

In a country with little real understanding of the central role of the artist in human affairs they have made a way of life which has contained values many artists have recognized, values which have confirmed and sometimes extended the always challenging, unruly and disrupting creative act.

After their marriage in 1932 their house became a landmark for the young Melbourne painters of that time. In the forties it was the work of this group – Vassilieff, Tucker, Nolan, Joy Hester, Arthur Boyd and John Perceval – which was responsible for a remarkable flowering of Australian Art. Nolan had first brought his work, half-a-dozen small abstract drawings, to John Reed's office in 1938 and John Reed had immediately responded to the extraordinary originality of these early fragile things. Later Nolan made his home with Sunday and John Reed and here it was, in their dining-room used as a studio, that the Kellys and many other beautiful works were painted. At their first exhibition the Kellys were virtually ignored by critic and connoisseur. Nolan gave them to Sunday Reed. Since then they have been exhibited many times, in London, Paris and other centres.

Because the Melbourne painters of the forties now are well known, and in some cases have established international reputations, it is natural to identify Sunday and John Reed with the artists of that time. This is far from the case. Their involvement with all aspects of creativity has affected many younger painters. Today their house is full of new paintings very different from the work of the forties. It is a world constantly enriched by new insights and is so much a part of today that one feels that tomorrow, like Nolan in 1938, a young, tough spirit will come through the gate. His work will be rejected by accepted art circles.

But, like Nolan then, he will be one of those creating the true forms of our time and place.

Melbourne, January, 1968