

Modern Ideologies and the Ned Kelly Myth: The Interpretation of the Ned Kelly Story in Jean Bedford's *Sister Kate*

BAO Lin¹

Abstract: This paper studies the well-known contemporary, fictional story about Ned Kelly: Jean Bedford's *Sister Kate* in 1982. It examines the representations of Ned Kelly in the novel and explores the social, cultural ideologies in its time. It approaches the topic by locating the texts' representations and discourses in relation to the cultural issues of the times it was produced in. Bedford's new adaptations shed lights on Australia's contemporary issues and its harsh colonial past.

Key words: ideology; the Kelly legend; masculine myth; feminist views

INTRODUCTION

On the occasion of the centenary of Ned Kelly in 1980, Jean Bedford challenges the traditional masculine dominant myth of Ned Kelly. Bedford takes the gender issue as her central topic to reinterpret the Kelly myth from Kate Kelly's perspective. Through the experiences of the Kelly women, we learn about the "victim of victims" position of Irish women in colonial Australia. Kate is a representative of the bush women who experience the harshness of life and being oppressed, despised and vulnerable at work and at home.

Why does Bedford choose a woman's perspective to reinterpret the Kelly gang legend and why does she choose Kate Kelly? In *Kelly Country: A Photographic Journey*, we read an historical account of Kate Kelly:

Kate Kelly lies buried in the Forbes Cemetery on the Lachlan Plains. It is a long way from the hills and valleys of the North-East. Kelly folklore holds a special place for Kate, often casting her as a heroine who rode with the Gang, an accomplished horsewoman who regularly brought the Gang news and supplies and who constantly outwitted the police with her bush skills. Ironically, it was her sister Maggie Skillion who filled these roles in the Kelly story. With Maggie and brother Jim, however, she did play a part in the agitation for a reprieve for her brother Ned after the sentence of execution had been passed. (Kelson and McQuilton 156)

Even though Kate did not really fill those roles in the Kelly story and did not save her brother, her tragedy, which was partly due to the influence of her brothers, caught people's attention:

¹M.A. of University of Western Australia in the field of Australia Literature Studies; Tianjin Foreign Studies University, 300204, China.

*Received 19 April 2010; accepted 10 August 2010

Kate was deeply affected by the fate of her brothers and in a curious incident in Melbourne allowed herself to be paraded on the stage of the Apollo Theatre in Melbourne (with brother Jim) on the evening of Ned's execution. The police stepped in and closed the show. She and Jim tried a second time in Sydney and again the police closed the show. Kate drifted away from the family and married William Foster in 1888. She drowned in the Lachlan River ten years later. Although the colonial inquest drew no conclusion about the manner of her death, it is difficult to shake the notion that she took her own life. Her children were raised by Ellen Kelly and Jim. (156)

Therefore, it is understandable that people give prominence to Kate's heroine image in the Kelly myth since "Kate was deeply affected by the fate of her brothers" and because Kate's mysterious life and unexplained death leave people much room to speculate. For the centennial celebration of Ned Kelly's death and also as a salute to the flourishing feminist movement, Jean Bedford conceives a romantic, tragic story of Kate's life. The story is a continuation of the Kelly gang's, in which the main plots are based on Kate Kelly's life and death.

The centenary in 1980 is recorded as an unprecedented social celebration of Ned Kelly as national hero:

As the centenary of the execution approached in 1980, various groups began to organize to mark the event. They ranged from local historical societies to the more left-wing groups in the labour movement. The largest event took place at Glenrowan. Despite a bitterly cold and wet day with a wind that swept down from snow-covered Alps, thousands gathered to watch a re-enactment of the siege. (156)

In contrast to the public's enthusiasm for and the Commonwealth government's commemoration of the centennial, the Victorian government demonstrated a very different view:

The Victorian government refused from the start to mark the centenary in any way, shape or form. Indeed, it even rumbled about placing obstacles in the paths of those seeking to commemorate the day. The Commonwealth government, however, took a different view. It issued a commemorative stamped envelope and a commemorative stamp to mark the occasion. Was this the first step on the part of government to recognize Kelly as part of the country's official history? (156)

Whether it was the first step of the Commonwealth government to recognise Ned Kelly as part of Australia's public culture or not, the centenary was undoubtedly a celebration of the Kelly myth in folklore and literature. In addition to the Glenrowan re-enactment of the Kelly myth, Bedford's version is a literary re-enactment or retelling from a new storyteller, Kate. In Bedford's novel, Kate's traumatising experiences are given prominence and the Kelly gang's mateship and masculinities are highlighted through Bedford's interest in nature. She also emphasises Kate's expression of emotion and imagination, and her departure from the traditional attitudes and forms of rebellion against established social rules and conventions.

KATE IN THE SHADOW OF THE KELLY GANG

Jean Bedford's focus is not on the Kelly gang but on Kate's life in the shadow of her brothers and her lover Joe Byrne. Kate is the medium through which people read a different version of the Kelly story. The focus in this version pivots on the time after the Kelly gang's death and its influence on their families, especially on Kate Kelly, who loved and was deeply influenced by the gang.

Gillian Whitlock comments that Bedford's way of writing fictionalises history and relocates it in terms of an individual's life following the trend of Australian women's writing during the period 1970-90:

writing in Australia emerges in a complex cultural context: one which includes the ongoing effects of a masculinist nationalist mythology, the legacy of settler colonialism (the colonial offspring of Albion, as Kate Grenville puts it), the dispossession of the indigenes and, recently, the effects of post-war immigration from Europe (beyond Britain) and Asia. The authority of

colonial and nationalist histories has been difficult to erode; nevertheless, women writers continue to do this. Generally, women writers here distrust the unified, homogeneous historical discourse. [...] Women writers fictionalise history in different ways. As we have already seen, recent life writing relocates history in terms of the individual life in a way which asserts the importance of the private life—recall again Modjeska's assertion that in the way we live our lives there are no boundaries, and some things don't know how to take their place. [...] In *Sister Kate*, Jean Bedford retells the Ned Kelly story from the perspective of his sister, dramatically altering the reading of the legend by including, again, an unauthorised figure. (Whitlock 254-55)

According to Whitlock, Bedford fictionalises the history of the Kelly gang and focuses on the individual life of Kate Kelly not because of Bedford's distrust of a unified homogeneous history or nationalist myth but because of her desire to emphasise the female character Kate Kelly, whose personal experiences mirror and extend the male characters' behaviour during and after the Kelly gang rebellion. In doing so, Bedford blurs boundaries and shows the disordered nature of Kate's later life. Her horse-riding skills, alcoholism and the traumatic memory of Joe are all aspects that involve a breaching of the boundaries of the proper feminine role, and of the boundaries between past and present, and public and private.

Although Bedford is writing about Kate Kelly's life, she portrays the heroine as being in the shadow of the male characters. Kate Kelly is described as being rebellious and valiant in fighting with the Kelly gang, but mostly, she is shown to emotionally depend on men, especially on her lover Joe Byrne and her brother Ned Kelly. Generally, Jean Bedford is writing from a feminist perspective about a heroine living in the context of patriarchy. However, the women in Bedford's novel are depicted as being marginalized and sacrificing themselves for their men folk. Their values and positions are only defined in relation to their men as sisters, lovers, wives and mothers of their children. Though Kate is central in Bedford's story and in Part I she resists the usual feminine role of domestic servant to the gang while they are in the bush later she becomes a servant in Part II, and in Part III, a wife and mother. Her involvement with the gang is achieved through love, romance and relationships rather than through being accepted as a warrior. Bedford shows little tendency to surmount or defeat men's dominion and authority. Hence, Bedford does not dramatically alter the Kelly gang legend, despite introducing Kate into the story. Bedford writes of women living on men and men whose idea of women resonates with the notion of "Women as Other":

Women are constantly defined in relation to men. Whether they are similar to men, different from or complementary to them, men, masculinity and male behaviour are always the reference points. Most obviously, women are defined in familial terms as carers and nurturers. Their identity and status derive from their relation to the explicitly gendered categories of mothers, daughters and wives. Women are thus defined not only in relation to men, but as dependent on men and subordinate to them. (McDowell and Pringle 3)

Bedford's Kate resists being reduced to such an identity. She struggles to escape the influence of her brothers and Joe by leaving home, changing names, marrying others. But she cannot sustain this life and finally becomes dependent on men as a server, a wife, a mother and a victim living on alcohol and pink pills.

WOMEN AS "VICTIM OF VICTIMS" IN KATE'S TIME

The Kellys were an Irish family, and we can better understand the representation of Kate by viewing her in that context. *The Real Matilda* provides a historical record of the condition of Irish immigrants in the late 19th century, which helps us understand the harshness of the Kelly women's life in Bedford's novel:

In the nineteenth century between one-third and one-quarter of Australia's population was Irish, the percentage of single female immigrants sometimes running far higher. The Irish clustered most markedly on the lowest rungs of the status hierarchy. [...] (Dixson 155)

Because of their large numbers and the low status, the Irish suffered extreme hardship in the colonial society and Irish women bore the heaviest load. They were not only expected to be good wives and mothers to take care of the children, and do housework but also they were the scapegoats for their men's sufferings:

Irish males were the victims of long centuries of English colonial cruelty, contempt and arrogance. By coming to Australia, the Irish did not shake off their past heritage, neither its treasures, its dreams nor its nightmares. The Irish were classed as 'victims', and as masters are prone to do, the English defined their victims as wretchedly unworthy beings. Even if and as a victim passionately rejects his master's definition, a deep and treacherous corner of the heart accepts it and turns it inward in self-hate and self-denigration. Survival demands he turns it back, outwards, as much as he can. Usually, a victim achieves only limited success in this; changing early versions of the self is hard going. But nothing stops him trying. Part of their self-hate, thus, Irish males turned outwards on to the Anglo-Saxon Protestant master; part, alas, on to Irish women. Irish women are thus the 'victim of victims' (Lenin's phrase, the 'slave of slaves', rises to haunt us again). (156)

The phrase "victim of victims" vividly portrays the life of female Irish immigrants around Kate Kelly's time. Irish immigrants in general suffered severe prejudice and injustice. Their oppression by the colonial authorities was the reason for the Kellys' revolt. In Bedford's novel, more than once, we read how Kate rebukes the colonial government and its officers: "There's no law to protect us from the likes of you bullying bastards" (Bedford 10). "You leave us alone, you stinking pile of dung" (11). We can also sense the afflictions suffered by her family through Constables Flood and Fitzpatrick: "Flood harried us as he always had, his men always about the property day and night. [...] They followed Gracie and me to school and waited at the gate when we came out. It was like a plague of insects [...]" (6). Fitzpatrick comes to "frighten children and old women" when Ned, Dan and George are fleeing (20-21) and "[h]e did not understand that we watched him as kookaburras might watch a snake, hoping to strike before the venom is released, then battering it to death with their heavy beaks" (23). The previous quote is a good example of how the Irish directed their hatred back against their oppressors.

Kate's family is marginalized and isolated not only within the mundane society of that time but also in the religious world. Kate's reproach to the local priests is evidence of their underprivileged condition: "There were not any priests handy; there never had been when we needed them" (5). Kate and her family's suffering appeal to the readers ethically and emotionally and convince us that her family had to fight against the authorities to live a normal life. Their misery builds up a credible image of the Kelly gang and helps justify their revolt as rebellion. In Kate's view, it is a war between a group of gallant bush men and corrupt authorities.

In Bedford's novel, she not only portrays the colonial authorities victimizing the Kelly women, she also portrays the Kelly gang victimizing their women. Though the gang do not directly hurt their women, their crimes involve and victimize their women indirectly. Ellen and her baby are arrested because the authorities could not catch Ned and Dan: "[Fitzpatrick and his men] were bent on destroying us—like a nest of rats the farmer comes on with his plough—not caring that they hurt women and children but only wanting to root us out completely" (25).

Kate's words vividly illustrate the "victim of victims" position of the Kelly women and indirectly impair the heroic image of Ned Kelly. Ned and Dan cannot protect their women and moreover pass their misfortune onto their women and make their women more vulnerable to attack by the police. The Kelly women become their men's scapegoats. Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman explain the Kelly women's victimized situation in Bedford's writing in their chapter "Dialogue with History":

Although the novel seems to support an idealized view of Ned and his associates, it nevertheless counters that view with the story of the decline and fall of Kate Kelly—in part a victim of the Kelly legend as it accumulates power. For Kate, Ned and her would-be lover Joe Byrne are always absent: history (that is, his story) in this novel takes place elsewhere, with 'the women and girls... left as always'. (Gelder and Salzman 147)

MEN IN KATE'S LIFE

The men in Kate's life are irresponsible, selfish, ruthless and mean, and only cause her anguish and agony. The Kelly gang, the man in Adelaide, the pub boss William Scott, the professor, Ben Roberts and Bill, all suffer tribulation in some way but they cruelly transfer it onto women. Thus, Kate and the other women in the novel are all represented as the real victims with no men to save them from danger and difficulty.

Sister Kate tells the life story of Kate Kelly in three parts following chronological order: from the little Kate, sister of Ned Kelly and lover of Joe to young Kate, the workmate of Ivy and Elsie, a pub waitress and housemaid to middle-aged Kate as a wife and mother. The narrative point of view shifts between first- and third-person narration, beginning with Kate's own first-person narration and then moving to an omniscient point of view, which effectively indicates Kate's muddle and decline in health and mind. The story begins with Kate's desperate devotedness to the Kelly gang, follows with her trying to escape her dependence on them and ends with her descending into mental decline and drowning herself. In each part, Bedford emphasizes different themes. These are Kate's rebelliousness, her sisterhood with the other two women at work and her marriage and motherhood. However, one thread constantly runs through the whole writing, that is, Kate's emotional dependence on the Kelly gang, especially Joe Byrne's love and her struggle to be independent from them.

Bedford tries to show the significance of Kate's role in the descriptions of her mastery over the bush and her outwitting the police when bringing supplies to the gang hiding in the bush: "I rode out one day to where Dan and his friends were mending fences. I took them bread and meat and a flask of whisky [...]" (Bedford 8). Though the Kelly gang are in serious danger, Kate insists on staying with them and fighting with them. Her bravery and fortitude are demonstrated by her words and activities:

'Let me come with you,' [Kate] said. 'I want to live here with you and help you fight them.' Edward did not laugh, but he said, 'No. You're needed at home, Kitty. Maggie can't do everything herself.' He put his arm heavy on my shoulders. 'But you can come and stay with us sometimes. You will help us more, too, by reporting to us about the coppers.' (34)

Ned's statement that Kate is "needed at home" indicates woman's position and value at that time in colonial history. It is a tragedy Kate cannot be a fighter. Bedford stresses the conflict between Kate's desires and men's requirements and the social values of the time, which are at the root of Kate's tragedy. Though Kate does not join the battle against the police directly, she takes a secondary role. She proves herself helpful in the rebellion:

The autumn days were turning frosty, and I wore my new red wool jacket. I carried warm shirts for the men and blankets, and some salt beef from our grandmother Quinn in case they got snowed in. (49)

Kate's frequent bringing of necessities for the gang members and her meetings with Joe demonstrate her companionship with gang members and her love for Joe. It is very important for the Kelly gang hidden in the swamps to have Kate as their supplier and messenger. Kate is represented as both a victim and a hero:

I went many times to the hideout in the hills, with provisions, or messages, or only to spend a few days with Joe, and each time the atmosphere at the camp was worse. (55)

Because of Kate's worship and love of Ned and Joe, she is entirely dominated by them and willing to sacrifice for them. For Ned, she is messenger and supplier and for Joe, she is lover and supporter. She is enthralled physically and mentally by men. Hence, even after their death, Kate cannot escape from their domination and is obsessed by them until her death. In this sense, *Sister Kate* has elements of romance.

CONCLUSION

Bedford reinterprets the Kelly myth through Kate's perspective around the time of the centenary of Kelly's death. She centres her historical fiction on Kate's experiences and begins with Kate Kelly's girlhood experiences, her bravery, and brightness in fighting with the Kelly gang, her love affair with Joe Byrne and

the death of the Kelly gang in the siege; and she ends with how she is affected by their rebellion and death in her later life.

Kate is depicted as living under the shadow of the Kelly gang, which indicates that she, like other Irish women of her time, is a “victim of victims”. Kate is harmed again and again by the men in her life: her brothers, her lover Joe, her employers and sexual partners (the professor, Ben Roberts, the pub boss Mr. Scott and her husband Bill). They ruin her both in a physical and a mental sense. Though Kate is shown to struggle with perseverance against unfairness in society, at work and even at home, she finally fails and tries to escape the reality by drowning herself.

Sister Kate is an example of 1980s women’s writing with a certain feminist view, since the story demonstrates the destructive effects of masculine society on women and also illustrates women’s awareness of their own exploited positions. Bedford rewrites the Kelly myth from Kate’s point of view. Kate, however, is shown to be under men’s influence in most parts and though she tries to escape the dominance of the men, she chooses to follow them in a romantic and finally tragic way.

Bedford’s novel changes the way we view Kate and the Kelly gang legend. It is Kate’s own account of her life, in which she is a central, not a “nonsignificant other”. (Bressler 144) It shows that Kate and Ellen and the other women struggle to possess the same rights as the male characters. Thus, it offers new understandings of colonial Australian society, and also reflects on the relative positions of men and women one hundred years later:

Feminism’s goal is to change this degrading view of women so that all women will realize that they are not a nonsignificant Other, but that each woman is a valuable person possessing the same privileges and rights as every man. Women, feminists declare, must define themselves and assert their own voices in the arenas of politics, society, education, and the arts. By personally committing themselves to fostering such change, feminists hope to create a society in which not only the male but also the female voice is equally valued. (Bressler 144)

Thus, Bedford annotates this traditional masculine legend with a feminist view and explores gender issues. Bedford questions and complements the traditional masculinity of Australian mythology by adding the women characters and highlighting their roles in history. *Sister Kate* is, therefore, “an extension of the widespread highwayman tradition” (Seal 164) and a significant but subversive feminist work..

REFERENCES

- Bedford, Jean. (1982). *Sister Kate*. Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin Books.
- Brewster, Scott. (2006). “Sigmund Freud.” *The Literary Encyclopedia*. The Literary Dictionary Company. 2004. <<http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=5177>>. Accessed on 30 Oct.
- Dixon, Miriam. (1994). *The Real Matilda: Woman and Identity in Australia 1788 to the Present*. 3rd ed. Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin Australia.
- Gelder, Ken and Paul Salzman. (1989). *The New Diversity: Australian Fiction 1970-88*. Fitzroy, Vic.: McPhee Gribble.
- Kelson, Brendon and John McQuilton. (2001). *Kelly Country: A Photographic Journey*. St. Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland Press.
- McDowell, Linda and Rosemary Pringle, eds. (1992). *Defining Women: Social Institutions and Gender Divisions*. Cambridge: Polity in association with the Open University.
- Whitlock, Gillian. (1992). “Graftworks: Australian Women’s Writing 1970-1990.” Ed. Carole Ferrier. *Gender, Politics and Fiction: Twentieth Century Australian Women’s Novels*. 2nd ed. St. Lucia [Qld.]: University of Queensland Press. 236-58.