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The reluctant outlaw

TRUE HISTORY OF THE KELLY GANG

Peter Carey

Faber & Faber £9.99
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Paula Shields

"The past isn't dead. It isn't even the past." With an observation from his hero William Faulkner, Peter Carey fires the parting shot over his True History of the Kelly Gang. The shadow of Ned Kelly, in full metal jacket at that last showdown at Glenrowan, looms large in Australian folklore, his legacy that great (white) Aussie tradition of rebelling against unfair rule, particularly of the English variety, toned down now to a general irreverence for authority, pomp and ceremony. Kelly still cuts a divisive figure in his homeland—icon to many, embarrassment to others—so the choice of title is something of a gauntlet, challenging the presumptions of both camps perhaps, but there is no denying the author's empathy with the doomed bushranger Carey sets out to put flesh on the bones of the legend, humanising the Wild Colonial Boy and unearthing the man beneath the myth. The front cover shows an archive family photo of the mother and young children standing outside their front door, the original Kelly Gang, a far cry from the armed desperadoes of later reputation. The story contains 13 parcels of letters the outlaw has allegedly written to explain himself to the authorities, the general public and, most poignantly of all, to the daughter he will never know.

As told here, Ned's childhood unfolds in endless struggle (leavened by the odd comic moment), vulnerable to a range of feckless adults with either too little power or too much, especially the males, who whether family or police, instead of looking after their young, seem only to make things worse. Harsh law and order is matched by unyielding land, with poverty completing a relentless triumvirate. Little wonder, then, that Ned's skirmishes with the law begin sooner rather than later, with the stealing of a calf by the age of 12.

His mother Ellen also plays a pivotal, turbulent role in her son's destiny, with her own family's history of being on the wrong side of the law, her desperate, single-handed efforts to raise her ever-growing family, and the stream of suitors who use and abandon her, drawing Ned into the ambiguous position of helpmate and father figure early on. She is one of the first to betray him, selling him unawares to an ex-suitor, the bushranger Harry Power who makes an unwilling accomplice of young Ned, earning him his first substantial (and unjustified) reputation with the police.

There are a few surprises, however, in this version of Kelly's life, not least his daughter, and his tender tones to her, but also his friendship with Sergeant Fitzpatrick, accusations that he is a police informer, that his mother is his girlfriend, (theirs is an ambiguous bond) and his enduring naivety (the supposed hardened criminal is repeatedly duped by those around him).

Ultimately, in spite of two contented years working and living quietly at the Killawarra sawmill (away from his family tellingly), in spite of his love affair with the beautiful Mary Hearn which begets his daughter, we know there can be no happy ending. A sense of foreboding gathers momentum as events overtake Ned. He remains almost to the end a reluctant outlaw. Witness his faith in writing to a politician as a solution, numerous foiled attempts to clear his name, even to print his own words—but the police's murderous intent towards the gang, not to mention the unjust incarceration of his mother, eventually leaves him little choice. This heartbreaking tale depicts the making of a criminal by the society and circumstances of his time.

Carey and Kelly (cerebral novelist, homespun outlaw) seem an unlikely combination in some ways, but what the author and his subject most obviously share is their nationality. Ned Kelly attempting to be heard in his own words, is also the first-person narrative of Australia, the story of the white settlers (I hope...
the Aborigines have their Peter Carey too), their battle with harsh climate, poor land, all-powerful police, corrupt judiciary. His latest opus follows a trend which has been described as the Empire writes back, in which postcolonial novelists—for instance, Chinua Achebe and Ben Okri (Africa), Salman Rushdie (India)—use the novel (an English art form originally) to tell their own stories. Similarly, the True History is also one strand of the story of Irish emigration.

Kelly, of Tipperary lineage, describes the social status of the Irish in 19th-century Australia as “a notch beneath the cattle”, light years away from the trendy export we’ve become. And yet, this tempestuous world of tribalism and poverty, shebeens and superstition, changelings and Cu Chulainn, how close this past literally is, set little more than 100 years ago, how near to the surface of modern Ireland and modern Australia, whatever we like to think.

Rootless

THE WANDERING JEWS

Joseph Roth

trans. Michael Hoffman


Carlo Gébler

The author of this brilliant work is Joseph Roth. Born in 1894, in Galicia, then part of Austria-Hungary, he is best known for his novels. The Wandering Jews, however, (translated here into English for the first time) reveals a previously unknown side to the great man; it reveals Roth the polemicist, the rhetorician, and even Roth the marshaller of statistics. It’s as surprising as it would be to discover that Philip Roth (no relation) had rebuked Germaine Greer with a polemical work called The Male Eunuch.

The Wandering Jews is the product of two streams in Roth’s life; one overground—his journalism—the other underground—his autobiography. After service in the Austro-Hungarian army during the Great War, Roth became a left-wing journalist, first in Vienna, then in Berlin. The war, the Russian Revolution and the re-drawing of national frontiers after the Treaty of Versailles (1919) had displaced hundreds of thousands of people in eastern Europe, most of them Jews. Roth wrote numerous articles about the appalling circumstances of these miserable wanderers, and some of this journalism was incorporated into his book.

Besides the fact that he had the material, Roth had two more reasons to write the book. One, he believed it was essential to counter the anti-Jewish propaganda that was swirling around. Two, he admired the dispossessed because he believed they were the last bulwark left against the western European middle-class and their vile materialism. It is no accident Roth starts The Wandering Jews with a reverse dedication. This book, he states, is not for Western European readers and he is not interested in their endorsement. No, he says, this book is for the downtrodden, homeless Jews.

The Wandering Jews does two things: it describes, as Roth says, the human beings who constituted the Jewish problem (his term), and it casts about for a solution. As far as describing the Jewish wanderers’ life is concerned, this book is brilliant. Roth’s technique is to combine loving portraits—an Odessa dock worker and elegant Parisiennes, a musical clown from Radziwillow and young builders from Palestine (incidentally, all windows, for me, onto a vanished world)—with deft generalized analysis of the Jewish predicament. Angry writing often fails because it isn’t grounded, but here the case studies bring the theory to life. As a result, Roth’s polemic reaches parts of the psyche polemic normally never reaches. By comparison to Roth, Pilger and company are just ineffective argufiers.

As far as offering solutions to the Jewish problem, the book is less successful. Roth was not enamoured of Zionism and the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. For him, the principle reason for being a Jew was that one didn’t subjugate others. He didn’t care either for migration westwards to America, or the assimilationist policies practiced in the Soviet Union. He loathed the first because it turned Jews into bourgeois consumers and the second because it made them into proletarians. For Roth, all the available solutions amounted to suicide, for each involved the abandonment of Jewishness (what ever it is or was).

I closed his book thinking he didn’t actually believe the Jewish problem required solution, because secretly he thought it was a blessing in disguise. Marginalisation was what kept Jews Jews, and for Roth, a Jew and proud to be a Jew (though he makes no mention of his origins in the work) keeping Jewish was all that mattered. Roth, the journalist may have campaigned against the mistreatment of Jews, yet he also believed being Jewish (and putting up with all that that involved) had made him what he was.