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REVIEW

FICTION

Imagining the truth


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Where is the Kelly Country? What man has mapped its bounds?
Has it a site or centre like old-time battle grounds?
I who was born and nurtured among the outlaws
friends
Cannot supply the answer where fact with fiction blends.

So begins a poem by Edward Harrington which appeared in Bohemia in 1966, just one among the more than 1200 renderings in song, story, play, poem, history, folklore, art, and journalism of the brief exploits and inevitable violent demise of Australia's legendary Ned Kelly, the country's most famous bushranger who with his small gang prowled the northeast of Victoria in the 1870s. In True History of the Kelly Gang, Peter Carey's rich and wonderful new novel on the subject, Carey has indeed mapped Kelly Country; in fact, he's gone so far as to frame the book with literal maps which serve as end papers. But Carey, although himself born and nurtured among the outlaws' descendents, admirers, and detractors, seems to spend the whole novel tweaking at the knot of fact and fiction which has bound up the Kelly myth and nearly obliterates the man.

At first glance, it would appear the Kelly myth had been done to death. Ballads, broadsides, and pamphlets vied with newspaper reports to spread word of the gang's adventures even before Ned's capture, and a laudatory, quickly suppressed newspaper report in their Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore (1993) with the truth. He begins:

I lost my father at 12 yr. of age and know what it is to be raised on lies and silences my dear daughter you are presently too young to understand a word I write but this history is for you and will contain no single lie may I burn in Hell if I speak false. (7)

A reader familiar with the Carey œuvre cannot help but remark the contrast with the opening lines of Illywhacker in which the narrator tells us he is 139 years old and an inveterate liar. Here the goal is truth, the truth which will redeem, and the specifics of Kelly's life and death are accordingly marshaled with great concern for historical accuracy, insofar as that is knowable. In the acknowledgments which interestingly follow rather than begin the novel, Carey describes an exhaustive research process and cites particular sources to which he "turned, almost daily, when [he] was lost or bewildered or simply forgetful of the facts" (355). Because facts are so important here, the complexity of historical causality is frequently honored in the novel when a cleaner narrative line might have been more memorable and easier to follow. An example is complex machinations and turns of event which accompany Kelly's attempt to publish the famous "Jerilderie Letter," a 10,000-word manifesto and apology which he did write, which does survive, and which is accurately excerpted in the text. Yet all this attention to detail and the convoluted design of actual events is undercut by the fact that their telling is addressed to a person who, like her mother Mary Hearn, never existed. How can the truth be conveyed to a fiction?

Further complications arise from stylistic elements of Kelly's narrative voice. The passage quoted above will suggest one of its salient features: the omission of punctuation. This fondness for what our English teachers used to call run-on sentences is in fact to be found in the Jerilderie Letter, and thus faithfully reflects Kelly's style as it has been bequeathed to us. But it also gives the narrative a headlong quality which accords nicely with the pace of events while also suggesting their rush towards disaster. A doom hangs over the story from its very beginnings, and its telling, uninterrupted by the pauses that despite its many versions, he "had always felt this important part of Australian history had not been fully imagined.”

In this remark, which pairs the notion of history with that of imagination, Carey perhaps gives us a hint of what he hoped to accomplish. If so, the project would be right up his alley. Previous novels, from Illywhacker through Oscar and Lucinda, Jack Maggs, and even The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith have teased apart the intertwined threads of the past as recorded, remembered, and re-imagined, and have played with great skill and equal relish on the paradox that history's deepest truths may be discovered in its lies. The particular project here seems to be of this same ilk, but executed by means of the onion layers of narrative perspectives in which the novel wraps the voice of its protagonist.

At the innermost layer is the voice of Kelly himself. Virile yet naive, clear-sightedly cynical, unlettered but often immensely lyrical, tender, yet sternly recurring to familiar moral touchstones, the voice tells the story of Kelly's life up to the time of his capture and is directed to the baby daughter he does not yet know he will never see. Its concern from its opening pages is with the truth. He begins:

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forced by punctuation, pulls us as well as its protagonist toward its bloody early end. Moreover, since the novel opens with the Glenrowan massacre which destroyed the Kelly gang, that end is always in sight, a structural choice which gives the novel its almost monochromatic emotional tone; even its moments of intense joy, such as those of Kelly's meeting with Mary and his celebration of his daughter's birth, are painted with black borders.

Another feature of the narrative voice is its tendency to use the plural form of past tense verbs with singular subjects, as in "I were suddenly more happy than I ever hoped to be," and "there were no malice in him" (201). Although these "errors" underscore Kelly's illiteracy, they do additional narrative duty in imparting a hint of the subjunctive mood to his sentences. In other words, the reader has the sense that instead of hearing indicative descriptions of events and feelings, these are reaching him or her embedded in wishes, hypotheses, hopes, and longings. "I were suddenly more happy than I ever hoped to be" becomes in the reading, "Would that I were more happy than I ever hoped to be."

The enigmatic and suggestive voice of Kelly himself dominates the text, but it is interrupted, edited, and mediated to us in a variety of ways. The most obvious interruption comes in the form of interpolated newspaper clippings, whose own authenticity is called into question in two ways: first because they have been edited for accuracy and fairness by Mary Hearn, who, Kelly writes, "sits watch on these sentences like a steel nibbled kookaburra on the fences in the morning sun" (290) and whose corrections of fact and interpretation decorate the margins of the enclosed clippings; and secondly because Carey has said he started from actual newspaper clippings, but edited them himself in ways presumably more thoroughgoing than Mary's. A thematically more important mediation comes from Thomas Curnow, the historical personage who betrayed the gang to their intended victims at Glenrowan and who is supposed here to have escaped the carnage with thirteen packets of papers, variously stained and damaged, of which the novel is purportedly composed. Within the fictional construct of the novel, Curnow not only preserved these papers, but annotates and introduces them, offering an explanatory note before each packet is transcribed into the text. So in addition to those of the journalists and Mary Hearn, his voice stands between us and Ned Kelly's. And it may do so more intrusively than we might imagine, a possibility suggested in a further narrative layer, which is offered by the unidentified S.C., perhaps a descendant of Curnow's. S.C. speaks near the novel's end to tell us

The evidence provided by the manuscript suggests that in the years after the Siege of Glenrowan [Cumow] continued to labour obsessively over the construction of the dead man's sentences, and it was he who made those small grey pencil marks with which the original manuscript is decorated. (350)

This remark of course calls into question everything we've previously read. How much has been Ned Kelly? How much Curnow's schoolmasterish corrections and revisions? Two final narrative permutations deserve mention. Framing this whole set of voices, interlocked as a nest of Russian dolls, is the voice of a wholly anonymous narrator who at the novel's opening describes Kelly's last stand at Glenrowan and at its close his last moments before execution. The first account includes the historically erroneous claim that Kelly's last words before dropping through the trapdoor on the gallows were "Such is life." This account is followed almost immediately by the voice of the author, in propria persona, thanking his wife, son, and research sources, and acknowledging his indebtedness and obligation to historical accuracy.

So what do we make of all these narrative layers, with their different degrees of deference to historical "truth"? Furthermore, how is the centrality of "truth" inflected by Carey's naming of the novel, his electing to call it True History of the Kelly Gang, rather than The True History... or A True History...? In the already cited unpublished interview, Carey responded to a question on this matter to the effect that "a true history" would have sounded too timid, and "the true history" too appropriative. What, then, does "true history" convey?

My guess is that Carey, who agrees with William Faulkner that distinctions between past and present are meaningless and concurs with Mark Twain in further suspecting the distinction between truth and lies, is nonetheless embarked here on the very un-postmodern project of mining the past for a kind of truth. In his recent collection of essays The Writer at Work, C. K. Stead defines the author as "a man discovered in the action of making linguistic choices" (80). In making such choices for a series of narrators, Carey perhaps aims at discovering the minds not only of the man who committed Kelly's "outrages," but also of those who recorded, judged, mythologized, and remembered them. It seems to matter a great deal to Carey in this novel that he get it right: at least that he unearth the "true" essence of Kelly and his "true" meaning for Australian national consciousness from the ignominious grave to which the outlaw's mortal remains were consigned and from the many variously honorific treatments his deeds were later accorded. Although neither of Kelly's last requests - that his mother be released from prison or that he be buried in consecrated ground - were honored by authorities, the author can right those wrongs to some degree by locating that perfect blend of fact and fiction to which the poet Harrington alluded and which yields the only truth available. For all our sakes, let us hope Peter Carey, whose every new novel comes as a joyous surprise, continues this kind of enterprise.

True History of the Kelly Gang won the 2001 Booker Prize as well as the Victorian Premier's Award

**FICTION**

Refabricating the Unfashionable Real


Diana Brydon
University of Western Ontario

This reissue for the North American market of Gail Jones' electrifying short story collection, first published in Australia in 1992, should draw the work of this important young writer to a significantly larger audience. To read The House of Breathing is to enter narrative as "intimate and substantive as