

THE KELLY FAMILY: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION



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For the Kate Kelly Project

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Photo: Matriarch Ellen Kelly and family members, including Kate (far left), in front of their Greta homestead in 1881.

The Kellys of North Eastern Victoria were, in many ways, a very typical C19th Irish Catholic family. John “Red” Kelly, was transported to Australia for the theft of two pigs in his native Tipperary, and his wife, Ellen Quinn, arrived with her family as a ‘bounty migrant’ from Antrim. The couple eloped in 1850 because of protests from James Quinn who was opposed to his favourite daughter’s relationship with a ticket-of-leave man. They were married in St Francis’ Church, Melbourne.

Red was determined to keep out of trouble. He soon bought a parcel of land at Beveridge, some 42 kilometres north of Melbourne, and built a rough homestead for his family. The couple’s first son, Edward “Ned” Kelly, was born around the time of the Eureka Stockade in 1854. Kate was born in 1863.

Red and Ellen were forced to sell their Beveridge block and relocated to Avenal about 90 kilometres further north in the Goulburn River valley where they rented land and ran a small herd of dairy cows. In 1865 Red was convicted of stealing a calf and was gaoled because he was unable to pay the fine. He never recovered from this experience and died of ‘dropsy’ on his release, leaving Ellen with 7 young children. Ned was 12 years old, and Kate was not quite three.

Six months after her husband’s death Ellen took up a selection in her own right at the Eleven Mile Creek near the village of Greta and not far from Beechworth. The move brought young Ned in regular contact with his uncle, Jimmy Quinn who, by this time, had a long criminal record. Uncle Jim introduced the boy to some very bad company. His prison mates included the Canadian “Flash” Johnny Gilbert who was a member of Frank Gardiner’s gang at the time of the Escort Rock Robbery. Gilbert later joined Ben Hall’s

gang and was shot dead by police near Binalong in May, 1865. He is known to have visited the Quinn family and Ned may have met him as a child, or at least heard about his exploits. However, it was from 'highwayman' Harry Power that Ned learned his practical bushranging skills, and for some time worked with him as his apprentice.

Ellen Kelly and her family lived a very frugal existence on their selection at Greta and supplemented their farm income in anyway they could. But young Ned couldn't keep out of trouble. In the mid-1870s he and his brother Dan, along with their mates Joe Byrne and Steve Hart, went into business with Ellen's new American husband, George King. They called what they did 'wholesale and retail horse-trading', which meant they stole horses in Victoria, changed the brands and sold them in NSW, and vice versa. But the catalyst for the birth of the Kelly Gang was an incident which occurred one evening in April 1868, when a drunken local trooper, Constable Alexander Fitzpatrick, paid the family a visit to arrest Dan on an outstanding warrant.

The Kellys knew Constable Fitzpatrick well. He regularly socialised with them and was, from all accounts, besotted with fourteen-year-old Kate. What really happened on that night remains shrouded in contradiction and mystery. In one version Fitzpatrick makes a drunken pass at Kate and Ellen responds by whacking him over the head with a fire shovel. In the ensuing scuffle Fitzpatrick's gun is accidentally fired and he suffers a cut on his wrist, possibly caused by a door latch. But this was not the version of events that Fitzpatrick reported to his superiors, and his story was believed. Ellen Kelly, her oldest daughter Maggie husband's, Bill Skillion and a neighbour Brickly Williamson, were all arrested, charged and found guilty of the attempted murder of a police officer. The men received a sentence of six years, and Ellen—with a babe-in-arms— was sentenced to three years. Ned vowed revenge for his mother's unjust imprisonment, and the rest is history ... In October 1878 the Kelly Gang killed three policemen in a shootout at Stringybark Creek, and over the next 6 months robbed banks at Euroa in December, 1878 and Jerilderie in February, 1879.

The Kelly Gang's actions may have been inspired by Ben Hall and 'Mad Dog' Morgan, since there are similarities between Hall's capture of the town of Canowindra in 1863 and the Kelly Gang's hold-up of the entire town of Jerilderie. Indeed, as Steve and Dan were riding away from Jerilderie, they are said to have shouted "Hooray for the days of Dan Morgan and Ben Hall".

Ben Hall's story is well known and doesn't need repeating here, but you might not be as familiar with Morgan, a callous and blood thirsty man who terrorised and murdered his way around southern NSW. The Victorian Police boasted that if he crossed the border they would capture him and Morgan accepted the challenge. In April 1865, after bailing up

Peechelba Station in north-eastern Victoria, he was ambushed and shot by Victorian Police. His headless remains were buried in the Wangaratta cemetery.

After the Jerilderie raid the Kelly Gang went to ground for close to 16 months. They received assistance from sympathisers and family, and Ned's sisters, Maggie and Kate, supplied them with food, clothing, ammunition and news, even though the family was continually harassed by the police.

In June 1880 the Gang bailed up the tiny railway town of Glenrowan not far from Greta. For more than two days they based themselves in Anne Jones's Glenrowan Inn where they held most of the townsfolk captive. They planned to derail a special police train on its way Beechworth, but their plan was itself derailed by the local school teacher, Thomas Curnow, who was able to warn authorities. The police surrounded the hotel under cover of darkness and waited. What has since become known as Ned Kelly's Last Stand or the Siege of Glenrowan lasted for more than 4 hours. Gang member Joe Byrne received a fatal shot to the groin, and the two charred bodies later found in the hotel were, in all likelihood, were the remains of Dan Kelly and Steve Hart. Ned was shot in the legs by the police and captured. He was sentenced to death in Melbourne by Judge Redmond Barry, the same man who sent his mother to prison for three years.

Maggie and Kate did everything they could to raise funds for Ned's defence, but despite their pleas for clemency and a petition with over 30,000 signatures, Ned was hanged at Melbourne Gaol at 10 am on 11th November 1880 -- while a crowd of over 5,000 people waited outside the prison walls. His head was severed to make a death-mask and the rest of his body was buried in an unmarked grave within the prison grounds.

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