



THE KATE KELLY PROJECT 2008

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The Ghost Of Mrs Foster

By *Merrill Findlay*

An extended abstract for a reflective essay on the life and death of Kate Kelly in Forbes, NSW. This work-in-progress draws on original research conducted in [Stage 1](#) of the [Kate Kelly Project](#).

So there I was exchanging banalities about the weather with passing joggers as I did my early morning walk around the lagoon, my primary social intercourse for the day, because writing's such a lonesome vocation, just you, your screen and a keyboard in a small room, and people who lock themselves away in small rooms for most of the day are considered rather weird in this town—which isn't nice. So maybe I needed a genre shift, I thought, as I nodded to a retired farmer and her companion dog. If I wrote for theatre or opera, for example, I'd get to talk with composers, dramaturgs, performers, directors, producers, even merchandisers, which would be much more sociable than prose. But then I'd need a new story to work on, or maybe an already familiar one I could re-emplot from a different point of view, and one big enough to bear the weight of my convictions, since stories aren't just stories anymore, they're creative interventions in the future. Stories can change the way people think and act in the world, as recent work in cognitive science, neurobiology, philosophy and narrative theory confirms. Most of our old familiar stories need re-emplotting anyway, I decided, because they no longer fit the challenges we're facing in the bush, like poverty, depression, suicide, prolonged drought, substance abuse, aging, declining population, globalisation, climate change, peak oil, biodiversity loss

And then the water rippled, the mist parted and a ghostly apparition emerged from the deep. Write about me, she said. Tell my story, because no-one knows the truth about me. It was Mrs William Foster, a young mother who's a legend in this town. She'd left her four kids with a neighbour one day, had to get away to clear her head, she said, and nine days later her body was found floating face-down in this very lagoon. The police claimed, somewhat prematurely it now seems to me, that there were no suspicious circumstances, and the medical examiner said the body was too badly decomposed for him to identify any signs of violence, so all the coroner could conclude was that Mrs Foster had simply drowned and that 'there was no evidence to show how [she] got into the water.' Case closed. That was October 1898. One hundred and ten years later countless questions remain unanswered about Mrs Foster's life and death in Forbes, some of which, I've since discovered, concern her husband's behaviour at the time. And Mrs Foster had a past: her first name was Catherine, although she often called herself Ada around Forbes, and her maiden name was Kelly. Yes, *that* Kate Kelly. Ned's sister. Every family in the district has a stake in her story, even mine, if only because, in 1898, the farm I grew up on was part of Burrawang Station where Mr Foster worked, that old Squatters vs Selectors epic the Kellys were much more famously part of.

As we explore the who-what-when-where-how-and-why's of content, plot, characterisation and music for this project, the composer and I are uncovering an extraordinarily multi-ethnic cast of characters and a rich folklore and musical vocabulary with which we can re-represent the 1890s from the perspectives of those who've been forgotten in mainstream histories, our collective forebears—Wiradjuri, Anglo, Celtic, Chinese, Syrian, Indian, Afghan, German, French—who lived through a time of great change and uncertainty like our own and have much to tell us about who we are now, and who we can yet become.

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