

TRUE HISTORY  
OF THE KELLY GANG

**Peter Carey** is the multi-award-winning author of seven novels. His highly acclaimed short stories are now all in *Collected Stories*. His first children's book is *The Big Bazooohley*. His books have won every major literary award in Australia. *Oscar and Lucinda* won the Booker Prize in 1988. *Jack Maggs* won the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1998 and *True History of the Kelly Gang* received this award in 2001. Born in Bacchus Marsh, Victoria, Peter Carey now lives in New York with his family.

Booker Prize Winner 2001

PETER CAREY

TRUE HISTORY  
OF THE KELLY GANG

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

First published 2000 by University of Queensland Press  
Box 6042, St Lucia, Queensland 4067 Australia  
This edition published 2001

www.uqp.uq.edu.au

© Peter Carey 2000, 2001

www.peter-carey.com

This book is copyright. Except for private study, research,  
criticism or reviews, as permitted under the Copyright Act,  
no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system,  
or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior  
written permission. Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

Typeset by University of Queensland Press  
Printed in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group  
Cover design by Jenny Grigg

**Cataloguing in Publication Data**  
*National Library of Australia*

Carey, Peter, 1943-  
True history of the Kelly gang.

New ed.

1. Kelly, Ned, 1855-1880 — Fiction. 2. Bushrangers —  
Australia — Fiction. I. Title.

A823.3

ISBN 0 7022 3263 7

*for Alison Summers*

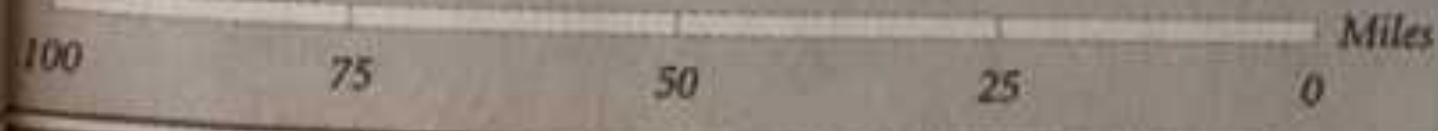
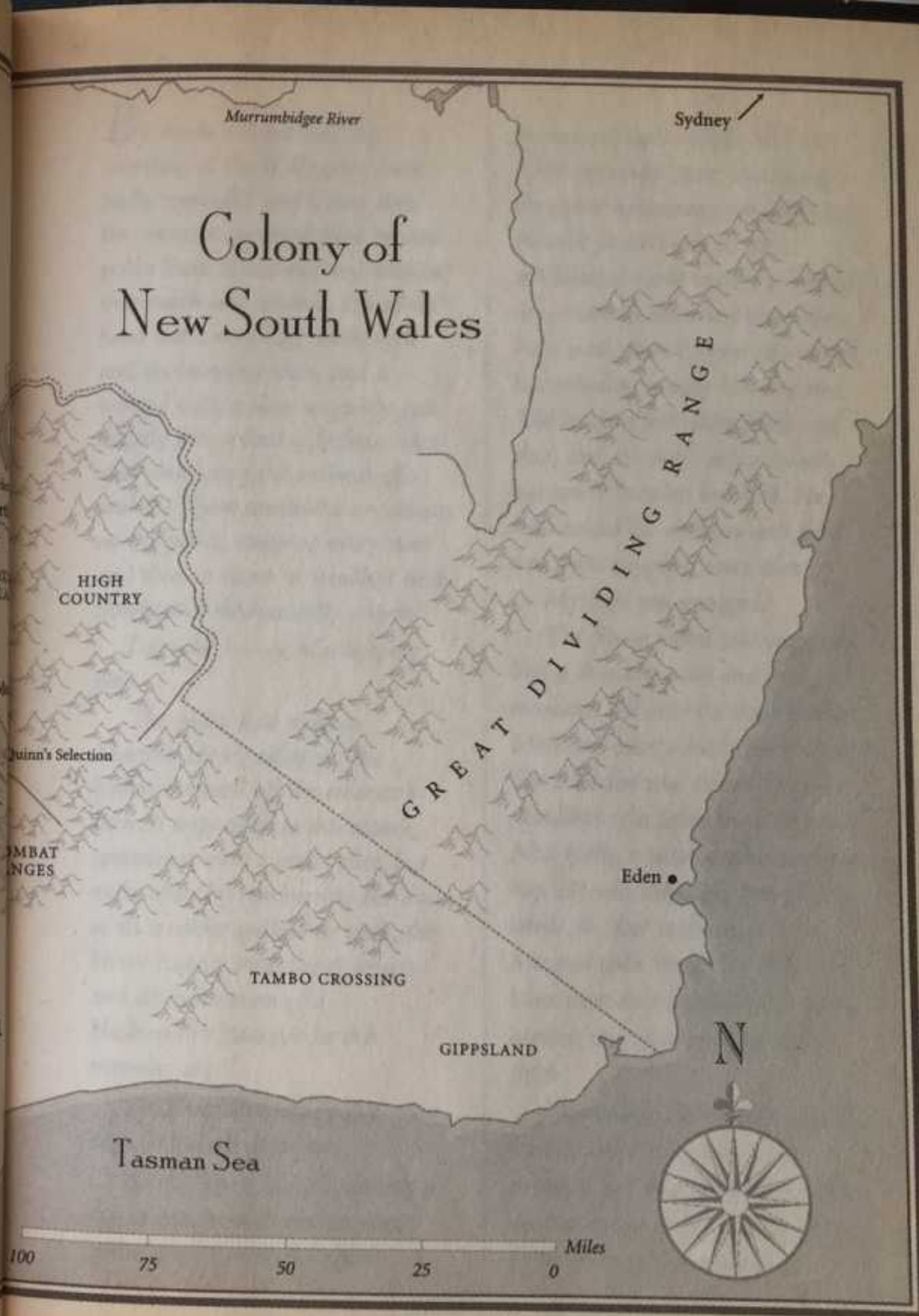
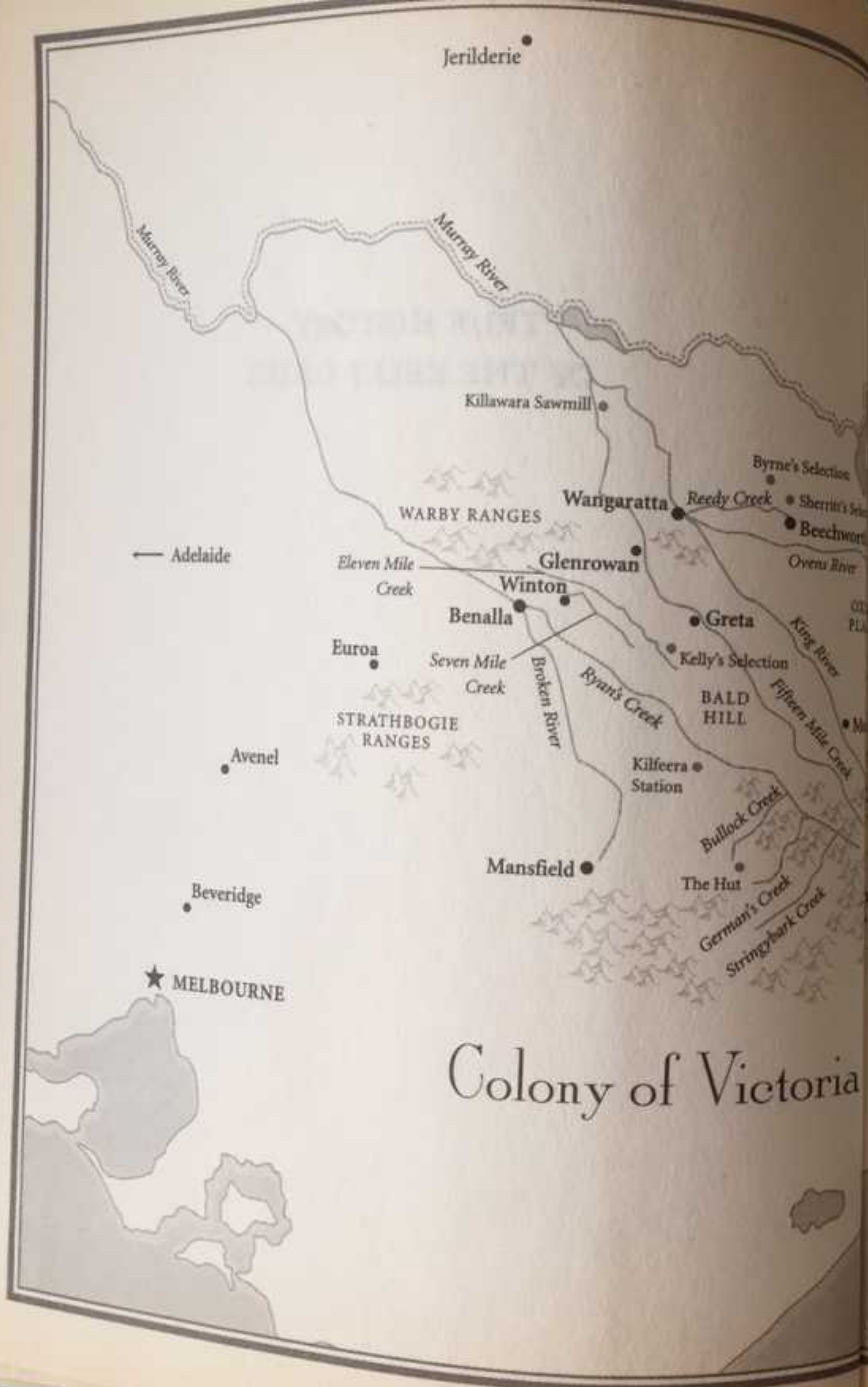


The past is not dead. It is not even past.

William Faulkner

TRUE HISTORY  
OF THE KELLY GANG







*By dawn at least half the members of the Kelly gang were badly wounded and it was then the creature appeared from behind police lines. It was nothing human, that much was evident. It had no head but a very long thick neck and an immense chest and it walked with a slow ungainly gait directly into a hail of bullets. Shot after shot was fired without effect and the figure continued to advance on the police, stopping every now and then to move its headless neck slowly and mechanically around.*

*I am the b----y Monitor, my boys.*

*The police had modern Martini-Henry rifles yet the bullets bounced off the creature's skin. It responded to this attack, sometimes with a pistol shot, but more often by hammering the butt of its revolver against its neck, the blows ringing with the clearness and distinctiveness of a blacksmith's hammer in the morning air.*

*You shoot children, you f----g dogs. You can't shoot me.*

*As the figure moved towards a dip in the ground near to some white dead timber, the police*

*intensified their attack. Still the figure remained erect, continuing the queer hammering on its neck. Now it paused and as its mechanical turret rotated to the left the creature's attention was taken by a small round figure in a tweed hat standing quietly beside a tree. The creature raised its pistol and shot, and the man in the tweed hat coolly kneeled before it. He then raised his shotgun and fired two shots in quick succession.*

*My legs, you mongrel.*

*The figure reeled and staggered like a drunken man and in a few moments fell near the dead timber. Moments later a crude steel helmet like a bucket was ripped from the shoulders of a fallen man. It was Ned Kelly, a wild beast brought to bay. He was shivering and ghastly white, his face and hands were smeared with blood, his chest and loins were clad in solid steel-plate armour one quarter of an inch thick.*

*Meanwhile the man responsible for this event had drawn his curtains and was affecting to have no interest in either the gunshots or the cries of the wounded.*



At dark a party of police escorted him and his wife directly from his cottage to the Special Train and so he neither witnessed nor took part in the wholesale souveniring of armour and guns and hair and cartridges that occurred at Glenrowan on June 28th 1880. And yet this man also had a keepsake of the Kelly

Outrage, and on the evening of the 28th, thirteen parcels of stained and dog-eared papers, every one of them in Ned Kelly's distinctive hand, were transported to Melbourne inside a metal trunk.

**Undated, unsigned, handwritten account in the collection of the Melbourne Public Library. (V.L. 10453)**

PARCEL 1

His life until the age of 12

NATIONAL BANK LETTERHEAD, ALMOST CERTAINLY TAKEN FROM THE EUROA BRANCH OF THE NATIONAL BANK IN DECEMBER 1878. THERE ARE 45 SHEETS OF MEDIUM STOCK (8" X 10" APPROX.) WITH STABHOLES NEAR THE TOP WHERE AT ONE TIME THEY WERE CRUDELY BOUND. HEAVILY SOILED.

*Contains accounts of his early relations with police including an accusation of transvestism. Some recollections of the Quinn family and the move to the township of Avenel. A claim that his father was wrongly arrested for the theft of Murray's heifer. A story explaining the origins of the sash presently held by the Benalla Historical Society. Death of John Kelly.*



I lost my own 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.

God willing I shall live to see you read these words to witness your astonishment and see your dark eyes widen and your jaw drop when you finally comprehend the injustice we poor Irish suffered in this present age. How queer and foreign it must seem to you and all the coarse words and cruelty which I now relate are far away in ancient time.

Your grandfather were a quiet and secret man he had been ripped from his home in Tipperary and transported to the prisons of Van Diemen's Land I do not know what was done to him he never spoke of it. When they had finished with their tortures they set him free and he crossed the sea to the colony of Victoria. He were by this time 30 yr. of age red headed and freckled with his eyes always slitted against the sun. My da had sworn an oath to evermore avoid the attentions of the law so when he saw the streets of Melbourne was crawling with policemen worse than flies he walked 28 mi. to the township of Donnybrook and then or soon thereafter he seen my mother. Ellen Quinn were 18 yr. old she were dark haired and slender the prettiest figure on a horse he ever saw but your grandma was like a snare laid out by God for Red Kelly. She were a Quinn and the police would never leave the Quinns alone.

My 1st memory is of Mother breaking eggs into a bowl and crying that Jimmy Quinn my 15 yr. old uncle were arrested by the traps. I don't know where my daddy were that day nor my older sister Annie. I were 3 yr. old. While my mother cried I scraped the sweet yellow batter onto a spoon and ate it the roof were leaking above the camp oven each drop hissing as it hit.

My mother tipped the cake onto the muslin cloth and knotted it. Your Aunty Maggie were a baby so my mother wrapped her also then she



carried both cake and baby out into the rain. I had no choice but follow up the hill how could I forget them puddles the colour of mustard the rain like needles in my eyes.

We arrived at the Beveridge Police Camp drenched to the bone and doubtless stank of poverty a strong odour about us like wet dogs and for this or other reasons we was excluded from the Sergeant's room. I remember sitting with my chilblained hands wedged beneath the door I could feel the lovely warmth of the fire on my fingertips. Yet when we was finally permitted entry all my attention were taken not by the blazing fire but by a huge red jowled creature the Englishman who sat behind the desk. I knew not his name only that he were the most powerful man I ever saw and he might destroy my mother if he so desired.

Approach says he as if he was an altar.

My mother approached and I hurried beside her. She told the Englishman she had baked a cake for his prisoner Quinn and would be most obliged to deliver it because her husband were absent and she had butter to churn and pigs to feed.

No cake shall go to the prisoner said the trap I could smell his foreign spicy smell he had a handlebar moustache and his scalp were shining through his hair.

Said he No cake shall go to the prisoner without me inspecting it 1st and he waved his big soft white hand thus indicating my mother should place her basket on his desk. He untied the muslin his fingernails so clean they looked like they was washed in lye and to this day I can see them livid instruments as they broke my mother's cake apart.

TIS NOT POVERTY I HATE THE MOST  
NOR THE ETERNAL GROVELLING  
BUT THE INSULTS WHICH GROW ON IT  
WHICH NOT EVEN LEECHES CAN CURE

I will lay a quid that you have already been told the story of how your grandma won her case in court against Bill Frost and then led wild gallops up and down the main street of Benalla. You will know she were never a coward but on this occasion she understood she must hold her tongue and so she wrapped the warm crumbs in the cloth and walked out into the rain. I cried out to her but she did not hear so I followed her skirts

across the muddy yard. At 1st I thought it an outhouse on whose door I found her hammering it come as a shock to realise my young uncle were locked inside. For the great offence of duffing a bullock with cancer of the eye he were interred in this earth floored slab hut which could not have measured more than 6 ft. x 6 ft. and here my mother were forced to kneel in the mud and push the broken cake under the door the gap v. narrow perhaps 2 in. not sufficient for the purpose.

She cried God help us Jimmy what did we ever do to them that they should torture us like this?

My mother never wept but weep she did and I rushed and clung to her and kissed her but still she could not feel that I were there. Tears poured down her handsome face as she forced the muddy mess of cake and muslin underneath the door.

She cried I would kill the b-----ds if I were a man God help me. She used many rough expressions I will not write them here. It were eff this and ess that and she would blow their adjectival brains out.

These was frightening sentiments for a boy to hear his mamma speak but I did not know how set she were until 2 nights later when my father returned home and she said the exact same things again to him.

You don't know what you're talking about said he.

You are a coward she cried. I blocked my ears and buried my face into my floursack pillow but she would not give up and neither would my father turn against the law. I wish I had known my parents when they truly loved each other.

You will see in time your grandfather were a man of secrets and what he said and done was different things though for now it is enough to know my mother had one idea about my father and the police the opposite. She thought him Michael Meek. They knew him as a graduate of Van Diemen's Land and a criminal by birth and trade and marriage they was constantly examining the brands on our stock or sifting through our flour for signs of larceny but they never found nothing except mouse manure they must of had a mighty craving for the taste.

Nor was your grandmother as unfriendly towards the police as you would expect if solely instructed by her testimony she might of wished to murder them but would not mind a little drink and joke before she



done the deed. There was one Sergeant his name O'Neil my mother seemed to like him better than the rest. I am talking now of a later time I must of been 9 yr. of age for our sister Kate had just been born. Our father were away contracting and our small hut were more crowded than ever now there was 6 children all sleeping between the maze of patchwork curtains Mother hung to make up for the lack of walls. It were like living in a cupboard full of dresses.

Into this shadowy world Sgt O'Neil did come with queer white hair which he were always combing like a girl before a dance he were v. friendly to us children and on the night in question he brung me the gift of a pencil. At school we used the slates but I never touched a pencil and was most excited to smell the sweet pine and graphite as the Sergeant sharpened his gift he were very fatherly towards me and set me at one end of the table with a sheet of paper. My sister Annie were 1 yr. older she got nothing from O'Neil but thats another story.

I set to work to cover my paper with the letters of the alphabet. My mother sat at the other end of the table with the Sgt and when he produced his silver flask I paid no more attention than I did to Annie & Jem & Maggie & Dan. After I made each letter as a capital I set to do the smaller ones such were my concentration that when my mother spoke her voice seemed very far away.

Get out of my house.

I looked up to discover Sergeant O'Neil with his hand to his cheek I suppose she must of slapped him for his countenance were turned v. red.

Get out my mother shrieked she had the Irish temper we was accustomed to it.

Ellen you calm yourself you know I never meant nothing in the least improper.

Eff off my mother cried.

The policeman's voice took a sterner character. Ellen said he you must not use such language to a police officer.

That were a red rag to my mother she uncoiled herself from her seat. You effing mongrel she cried her voice louder again. You wouldnt say that if my husband were not gone contracting.

I will issue one more warning Mrs Kelly.

At this my mother snatched up the Sergeant's teacup and threw the contents onto the earthen floor. Arrest me she cried arrest me you coward.

Baby Kate woke crying then. Jem were 4 yr. old sitting on the floor playing knuckles but when the brandy splashed beside him he let the bones lie quiet. Of a different disposition I begun to move towards my mother.

Did you hear your mother call me a coward old chap?

I would not betray her I walked round the table and stood next to her. Said he You was busy writing Ned?

I took my mother's hand and she put her arm around my shoulder. You are a scholar aint it he asked me.

I said I were.

Then you must know about the history of cowards. I were confused I shook my head.

Next O'Neil was bouncing to his feet and showing the full hard stretch of his policeman's boots said he Let me educate you young man. No said my mother her manner now completely changed. Please no.

A moment earlier O'Neil had a stiff and worried air but now there was a dainty sort of prance about him. O yes said he all children should know their history indeed it is quite essential.

My mother wrenched her hand from mine and reached out but the Ulsterman ducked behind the 1st set of curtains and emerged to prowl in and out and around our family he even patted little Dan upon his silky head. My mother were afraid her face was pale and frozen. Please Kevin.

But O'Neil was telling us his story we had to quiet to listen to him he had the gift. It were a story of a man from Tipperary named only A Certain Man or This Person Who I Will Not Name. He said A Certain Man had a grudge against a farmer for lawfully evicting his tenant and This Person etc. conspired with his mates to kill the farmer.

I'm sorry said my mother I already apologised.

Sgt O'Neil made a mocking bow continuing his story without relent telling how This Certain Man did 1st write a threatening letter to the landlord. When the landlord ignored the letter and evicted the tenant This Certain Man called a SELECT MEETING of his allies to a chapel in the dead of night where they drank whisky from the Holy Goblet and



swore upon the Holy Book then he said to them Brothers for we are all brothers sworn upon all that's blessed and Holy. Brothers are you ready in the name of God to fulfil your oaths? They said they was they swore it and when they done their blasphemy they descended upon the farmer's house with pikes and faggots burning.

Sergeant O'Neil seemed much affected by his own story his voice grew loud he said the farmer's children screamed for mercy at the windows but the men set their home alight and those who escaped they piked to death there was mothers and babes in arms the Sgt would not spare us either he painted the outrage in every detail we children were all silent open mouthed not only at the horror of the crime but also the arrest of the Guilty Parties and the treachery of This Certain Man who betrayed all he had drawn into his conspiracy. The accomplices was hanged by the neck until dead and the Ulsterman let us imagine how this might be he did not conceal the particulars.

What happened then he asked we could not answer nor speak nor did we wish to hear.

This Certain Man kept his life he were transported to Van Diemen's Land. And with that Sergeant O'Neil strode out our door into the night.

Mother said nothing further she did not move not even when we heard the policeman's mare cantering along the dark road up the hill to Beveridge I asked her what was meant by This Certain Man and she give me such a clip across the ears I never asked again. In time I understood it were my own father that was referred to.

The memory of the policeman's words lay inside me like the egg of a liver fluke and while I went about my growing up this slander wormed deeper and deeper into my heart and there grew fat.

Sergeant O'Neil had filled my boy's imagination with thoughts that would breed like maggots on a summer day you would think his victory complete but he begun to increase his harassment of my father rousing him from bed when he were drunk or fast asleep he also needled and teased me whenever he seen me in the street.

He would mock the way I dressed my lack of shoes and coats. I were

11 yr. old all knees and elbows and shy of any comment I couldnt walk past the Police Camp with my friends without him calling out some insult. I pretended to be amused for I would not give him the satisfaction of seeing blood.

It were during Sgt O'Neil's hateful reign we heard Mr Russell of Foster Downs Station was to sell off a great mob of bullocks and cows in calf also a famous bull he was said to have brought from England for 500 quid. It were a much bigger event than we was accustomed to in Beveridge just a straggly village on a difficult hill reviled by all the bullockies between Melbourne and the Murray River. <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> way up the hill were a pub and blacksmith and portable lockup then farther west a Catholic school. That hill were too much effort even for the bitter winds which turned around and come howling back towards our hut below. West of the road the water were salt. Our side had good water but it were still known as Pleurisy Plains. No one ever come to Beveridge for their health.

The sale changed all that and suddenly there was squatters and stock agents come to visit even a veterinarian from Melbourne all these strangers set up camp beside the swamp between our place and the hill. There was gaffing & flash talk & grog drinking & galloping up & down the Melbourne road it were good as a circus to us boys to hang about the boggy crossing and see the fancy riding. Day by day Jem and me run the long way to school to see what new tents were set up at the swamp. We was on tenterhooks awaiting the beasts but it were not until dusk on the day before the Auction we heard that particular mournful bellowing on the wind it were a mob of cattle being driven over a track they did not know.

I told Jem I was going to meet them.

Me too.

We wasnt finished tending to the pigs and chooks we did not care our feet was bare the ground were hard and rocky though we was used to it and run right through the Indian corn. Said Jem We'll be whipped.

I don't care.

I don't care neither.

We had just gained the swamp bulrushes when the beasts come into view flooding down the smooth green hill of Beveridge like a breaking



wave it were the gleaming wealth of all the nations pouring down towards us and the water. Cor look at them blacks said Jem.

Of the 7 stockmen 5 was blackfellows they rode ahead of the coming storm with flash red scarves round their necks and elastic sided boots upon their feet. Said Jem Look at them boots.

Damn them I said. Yes damn them said Jem we was raised to think the blacks the lowest of the low but they had boots not us and we damned and double damned them as we run. Soon we gained the rutted ruined Melbourne road where we passed Patchy Moran he were 16 yr. old rawboned and lanky but we was faster any day.

Wait you little b---rs.

But we wouldnt wait for Patchy or no one else splashing through Boggy Crossing to the splintery top rail of the yard. Moran made no comment on our victory but lit himself a cigarette and the leftover beard of tobacco fell in glowing cinders to the earth. Look at them effing niggers.

We already seen them.

I heard the rattle of a bridle and turned to see my father's tormentor had ridden up behind us Sgt O'Neil had his stirrup leathers so long the iron could be held only with the tip of the toes it were the English fashion. His horse was 17 hands he thought himself high and mighty but if you had give any of us boys a pony we would of left him in the dust.

Patchy Moran said Look at them niggers Sergeant did you see their adjectival boots how much would that cost do you reckon Sir boots like that?

O'Neil did not answer but leaned forward in his saddle looking down at me beneath the visor of his shako his eyes as watery as a jar of gin. Ah young Kelly he said.

Hello Sergeant said I so accustomed to his teasing that I thought Moran's remark about the blackfellows' boots would lead to comments about my own bare feet. Said I thats a mighty bull they got by Jove we heard he was worth 500 quid.

Said O'Neil I just saw your father. I knew from his lazy drawl he had something worse than shoes to hurt me with. He said I just seen Red

Kelly galloping across Horan's paddocks dressed like a woman can you picture that now?

I couldnt see the policeman's expression in the failing light but he spoke so very conversationally. Patchy Moran laughed but stopped midbreath I looked towards poor little Jem he sat on the rail staring grimly at the ground his brow furrowed in a torture of confusion and my friends gone v. quiet around me.

Pull the other one Sergeant.

Your father was seen by Mr McClusky and Mr Willett and myself he was wearing a dress with roses on its hem can you ever imagine such a thing?

Not me but you can Sergeant its the very thing you just done.

You watch your lip young fellow do you hear? When your father saw us he galloped away down the north face of Big Hill. He can ride I grant him that but do you know why he would go that way?

No.

Oh said the Sergeant he was off to be serviced by his husband I suppose.

I leapt upon his high armoured boot I tried to twist him off his saddle but he only laughed and swung his horse around so I was almost crushed against the fence.

Thus were the great day destroyed. I told Patchy Moran I did not come to see a nigger show Jem said he did not want to see one neither. We walked home together through the dark. We did not say much but was very melancholic. She'll strop us won't she Ned?

No she won't.

But of course our mother had the razor strop laid out ready on the table she hit my hand 3 times and Jem once. We never told her what O'Neil had said.

I doubt I had the courage to repeat O'Neil's slander to my father but I were anyway denied the opportunity for he had departed once again to shear the fat merino sheep for Mr Henry Buckley of Gnawarra Station.



As it were spring he should of been engaged on his own land but couldnt afford it and on the way to Gnawarra he nearly died.

A vicious Sydney black by the name of Warragul had gotten a mob together made of the remnants of different tribes my father had done nothing against Warragul but when he arrived at the Murray River near Barnawatha a shower of spears sailed out of the bush and struck his donkey dead beneath him. My father dragged his carbine from its saddle holster and by careful use of his remaining powder were able to keep Warragul's mob at bay until dark. Then he retreated into an abandoned hut he barricaded the door and windows and so imagined himself safe but in the early hours of the morning he woke.

The roof were on fire and the hut surrounded by shouting savages.

He used the last of his powder to shoot into the faces of blackfellows who was peering through the gaps between the logs but when the powder were gone he had nothing more to look forward to than death and begun to say his prayers while the blacks thrust their spears through the gaps. The roof were already burning falling in lumps when Father paused from praying long enough to realise the spears was only entering from the front. He removed the barricade from the rear window and with the blacks keeping watch on one side of his funeral pyre he made his way out the downwind side thereafter hiding in a hollow log for 2 days before he were discovered by Mr Henry Buckley himself and thus finally delivered to Gnawarra.

At the time my father had been battling for his very life Sergeant O'Neil's slander spread about the Catholic school the source of this contagion being Patchy Moran.

I cautioned him You say that one more time I'll whip you.

Patchy Moran were a good foot taller his voice broken like a man. Said he You are an adjectival tinker you can't give me orders.

And with that he punched me in the temple so I fell.

Regaining my feet I faced him again he hit me hard enough to push the pudding out of me. I were bent over wheezing to get my wind back he called out I were a sissy and the son of a sissy. He seemed a giant all hair and pimples I thought he soon would kill me but I closed with him on the barren ground beneath the peppercorn tree and then by skill or

luck I got round his dirty neck and pulled him to the ground. How he hollered to be brung down how he kicked & bucked & twisted rolling me amongst the tree roots and the gravel. I felt a red hot sting on my back and rolled him over. There were a bull ant also fastened to his pimply neck.

I wouldnt let him go not even when I felt a 2nd bite myself I hope you may live your life without a bull ant bite for it is worse than any wasp or bee. Patchy howled in my arms cursing and pleading but I held his shoulders to the earth as he thrashed and drove his tormentors into greater fury still.

Take it back.

He bawled the snot run down his lip.

Take it back.

He said he would not take it back but in the end he couldnt tolerate the pain he cried Damn you damn your eyes I take it back. Brother Hearn heard his blasphemies so did 16 other scholars standing by the school-house door observing us. No one said nothing they stood v. quiet and watched Patchy Moran rip off his shirt and britches the girls all saw his private skin.

I were soon ill from my great number of bites but no one said no more about my father from that time.

I thought my problems over and I once again imagined there were never a better place on earth than where I lived at Pleurisy Plains. I could not conceive a better soil or prettier view or trees that did not grow crooked in the winds. I were often in the swamp it were a world entire with eels and bird eggs and tiger snakes we tried to race them along the Melbourne road. Then one mild and dewy morning I went out to find some worms and discovered my younger sister Maggie seated on a cairn of them brown pitted rocks the ancient volcanoes had throwed around the plains of Beveridge. Our father often had us busy tidying the earth in this manner. This particular pile of rocks was in a thistlepatch near our back door and Maggie were using it as a throne while she squeezed milk from the thistles onto her warts. She asked would I please squeeze some on a difficult place behind her elbow.

I were very fond of Maggie she were always my favourite sister as true



and steady as a red gum plank. As I set down my worms and dripped the white sap over her warts she warned she had found something I would not like.

What?

You'll have to move them rocks.

I already moved them once.

You better do it again.

There were no more than 8 rocks Maggie helped me roll them to one side and I discovered the freshly broken earth beneath.

Its something dead.

It aint nothing dead.

From down amongst the thistles she produced an old gooseneck shovel with a broken handle.

I took it from her hand and dug until I uncovered something hard and black it were 3 ft. x 2 ft. It were also deep so I levered and jemmied and soon dragged a battered tin trunk out to the light of day. It were inside that trunk I found the thing I wish I never saw.

It were a woman's dress v. soiled along the hem the roses was exactly as Sgt O'Neil had said. There was also masks made of red paint and feather I hardly seen them it were the dress that made my stomach knot a mighty anger come upon me.

I heard our sister Annie calling and I whispered I would kill Maggie if ever she mentioned what we seen. Her dark little eyes welled up with tears.

Annie were demanding I bring firewood she come down the path in a mighty fret with her thin shoulders hunched forward and her hands upon her hips. If youse don't come now you'll get no adjectival dinner.

I split the wood all right but then carried it back to the thistle patch and made a fireplace from the rocks.

What are you doing? You can't do that you know it aint permitted.

Just the same she give me the matches I asked for. She were a worrywart she retreated back to the doorway while I burned the horrid contents of the trunk. By the time she come back I were poking the last bits of dress into the flames.

She asked me what I were destroying but all us children had suffered

from O'Neil's story and she knew the answer to her question well enough.

Said Annie You better bury that trunk. Her face were pinched her mouth set with worry she were only 11 yr. old but she must of already saw her future it were written on her face for all to see.

A 2nd time she ordered me to hide the trunk so I dragged it down the back and shoved it under the lower rail of the horse yard.

You can't do that.

I pulled the trunk through all the manure into the middle of the yard.

You'll get the strop said she.

I never doubted it would be worse than that and when our father come ambling up the track 3 days later I awaited my thrashing it were as sure as eggs turn into chickens.

At 1st he didnt see the trunk he were surveying his crop of Indian corn doubtless pleased he had not been speared or burned and had money in his pocket. But finally he saw his broken secret lying in the air and while the little children all run around crying for him to dismount he stared silently down at the blackened trunk his eyes small inside their puffy lids.

Where's your ma?

Baby Kate took ill she's gone to Wallan to the Doctor.

My father dismounted and then carried his saddle and bags into the hut I were waiting by the door to get my punishment but he never even looked at me. After a little while he gone up the pub.

I lost my own father from a secret he might as well been snatched by a roiling river fallen from a ravine I lost him from my heart so long I cannot even now properly make the place for him that he deserves. Forever after I unearthed his trunk I pictured him with his broad red beard his strong arms his freckled skin all his manly features buttoned up inside that cursed dress.

Up to that point I had been his shadow never losing a chance to be with him. In the bush he taught the knots I use to tie my blanket to my saddle dees also the way I stand to use a carpenter's plane and the trick



of catching fish with a bush fly and a strip of greenhide these things are like the dark marks made in the rings of great trees locked forever in my daily self.

I don't know if my mother realised what were hidden in the trunk she never said nothing and it were left to lie in the middle of the dusty yard and when it rained the horses drank from it.

A rich man driving his buggy past our home might see the tin trunk in the yard and the pumpkins growing on the skillion roof but he would never imagine all my father's issue the great number of us packed behind the curtains breathing the same air snoring farting blind and deaf to each other as a newborn litter.

I had long taught myself to be deaf to my parents' private business but after digging up that trunk I would stay awake at night listening to my mother and my father talking.

I learned not a thing about the dress I discovered it were land my parents whispered about and in particular the Duffy Land Act of 1862 it gave a man or widow the right to select a block between 50 and 640 acres for £1 per acre part payable on selection the rest over 8 yr. My mother were for it but my father were against it he said the great Charles Gavan Duffy was a well intentioned idiot leading poor men into debt and lifelong labour. He were correct as it happened but when my mother abused my da for cowardice the terrible turmoil in my heart were somehow soothed. Only a simpleton she said would try to farm 20 acres like my da were doing. I thought yes you must be a mighty fool.

This debate about the Land Act were life or death and my mother enlisted her family who was presently our neighbours but in the midst of buying land far away in the North East.

The Quinns was purchasing 1,000 acres at Glenmore on the King River they was Irish and therefore drunk with land and fancy horses all the old hardships soon to be forgotten. The Quinn women come visiting with soda bread and surveyor's maps the men was tall and reckless they cursed and sang they fought anyone they did not like and rode thoroughbreds they could not afford to buy. My uncle Jimmy Quinn were a man by now there were a dreadful wildness in his eyes like a horse that has been tortured. The Quinns would of tossed my father down the well if

they had seen the dress but they chivvied and joked and finally prevailed upon him to sell everything he owned in Beveridge he got a total of £80.

But when my da finally had the cash put in his hand the thought of giving the government so large a sum were more than he could bear and when the new owners arrived to take possession he borrowed a cart and shifted us to rented land on the outskirts of the township of Avenel. So while my mother's brothers and sisters went on to farm 1,000 virgin acres at Glenmore my father transported us 60 mi. to a district of English snobs and there to my mother's great outrage he slowly pissed away the 80 quid on rent and booze. I were his flesh and he must of felt me draw further away but he were proud and did not try to win me back.

The question of our lost opportunity were now always present my mother could not leave it alone my father would sit solid in his chair and quietly rub the belly of his big black cat. I am thinking now of one night in particular when he broke his silence.

Your family arent bad fellows said he at last.

If you're planning to speak ill of them you can stop right there.

Oh I aint got nothing against them personal.

Of course not they was always good to you.

I'm sure the land will do the job. Them rocks aint nothing but the land can't touch this land Ellen.

And us with no meat but the adjectival possums.

We aint got beef its true.

Not even mutton.

But do you notice we aint got no police? Now thats an interesting thing I wonder why that is do you imagine your family is as lucky up at Glenmore?

Oh no not this again.

Well you must agree the Quinns attract the traps as surely as rabbit guts will bring the flies.

My mother shrieked a plate or cup were dashed against the wall.

Well Ellen said he I know you're very low about your farm but I would rather die than go to prison.

You great galoot no one wants to put you in prison.



So you say.

No one she cried her voice rising. Are you mad?

And why was the traps always visiting us do you imagine?

You have been a free man 15 yr. they don't want you back again.

The Quinns bring attention its the truth.

O you adjectival worm.

My mother were now sobbing Maggie also I could hear her little rabbit noises on the far side of the curtain. Then my mother said my father would rather his children starve than take a risk and beside me Jem pulled his pillow tight across his ears.

The land were very good at Avenel but there were a drought and nothing flourished there but misery I were the oldest son I thought it time to earn my place.

There were no dam or spring upon our property each day I took the cows to water them at Hughes Creek. In a good year it would of made a pretty picture but in the drought that creek were no more than a chain of sandy waterholes. It were across this dry river bed that Mr Murray's heifer calf come calling out my name I were very hungry when I heard her and knew what I must do. I had never killed nothing bigger than a rooster but when I saw the long line of the heifer's crop above the blackberries I knew I could not be afraid of nothing. Her eye were a little wild but she was a poll Hereford and very sleek. I later heard that Mr Murray had made a great investment on her and poddied her with corn and hay which must be true for there were no feed in any of his paddocks and although he owned 500 acres his stock was out grazing on the roadsides finding what nourishment they could. I did not care I bailed her up and led her down the creek into a thick stand of wattles with a clearing in the centre. She did not like the rope around her neck she fought and bucked and would of done herself a damage had I not bound her hind legs and tied them to a wattle trunk. She began to bellow terribly. Soon she were trussed up like a Christmas chook but I had no pity nor did I have a knife. I ran up through the scrub to fetch one from the hut. Inside my mother were occupied trying to plug the spaces between the

slabs with clay and straw so I took the carving knife from beneath her very nose she never even noticed.

Said she Theres one of Murray's beasts caught down the creek.

You must be mistaken.

I can hear it bellowing from here.

I said I would attend to it and let her know.

Within the year I would of learned to kill a beast very smart and clean and have its hide off and drying in the sun before you could say Jack Robertson but on this 1st occasion I failed to find the artery. I'm sure you know I have spilled human blood when there were no other choice at that time I were no more guilty than a soldier in a war. But if there was a law against the murder of a beast I would plead guilty and you would be correct to put the black cap on your head for I killed my little heifer badly and am sorry for it still. By the time she fell her neck was a sea of laceration I will never forget the terror in her eyes.

And this is how my ma found me with the poor dead creature at my feet and my hair and shirt soaked with blood and gore.

We have beef I said we'll feast on her.

But my words was bolder than my upset heart and I were very pleased she relieved me of the bloody knife I didnt know what next to do having not the faintest idea of how to butcher the heifer and yet not wanting the privilege to go elsewhere. My mother took my gory hand and led me across the dusty paddock to the hut and after tying up the dogs she ministered to me with soap and water all the time berating me and saying I were a very bad boy and she was angry with me etc. etc. but this were for the benefit of the other children who was listening at the door and watching through the chinks between the logs. My ma cleaned me so very gentle with the washer I knew she must be pleased.

Of course Annie could be relied upon to tell my father what I had done before he even got the saddle off his horse. He had been delivering butter to people with English names a job that always put him out of temper so when Annie showed him the dead beast he come inside to give me a hiding with his belt a mark on my leg I carry to this day. When it were dark he took a lantern down by the creek and skinned and butchered my beast and carried the 4 quarters back across the paddock



one at a time and then burned the head and hung the hide and cut out the MM brand so none could accuse us of stealing Murray's heifer. He salted down what meat would fit into a barrel and the rest he ordered my mother to cook at once.

All through this Annie would not speak to me even Maggie kept her distance but very late that night we had a mighty feast of beef and I noticed it were not just my excited brothers who ate their fill.

2 days later I were sent home from school at lunch time to collect my homework which I had forgot again I found a strange bay mare tethered beneath our peppercorn tree it had VR embroidered on the saddlecloth in silver Victoria Regina. I knew it were the police. I entered the hut and my father were sitting in his usual chair watching a lanky fair haired Constable spreading out the heifer's hide across our table.

Come on John said Constable Doxcy putting his hand right through the hole where the brand had been. John we know whats missing here.

As you can see said my father I slaughtered a cow and made a greenhide whip.

Ah you made a whip.

Correct my father said but did not protest or struggle against the accusation.

So be a good fellow will you John and bring me the whip.

My father did not say nothing he did not move he stared at the Constable with puffy eyes.

Perhaps you never made a whip at all.

O I must of lost it.

Must of lost it.

I'll bring it up to you soon as I find it.

More likely it were the brand John. Did you cut out Mr Murray's brand?

No I made a whip.

Did you ever hear of Act 7 and Act 8 George IV No 29?

I don't know.

It is a law John it says that if you duff another fellow's heifer then you're going to go to adjectival gaol and you can bring me any adjectival whip

you like but unless it can fill this hole exactly John you're going in the adjectival lockup. We don't like Irish thieves in Avenel.

I can't bear prison my father spoke as plainly as a man who don't like Brussels sprouts.

Well thats a shame said Doxcy as he moved towards him.

I done it I said I thrust myself forward.

I put my hand on Doxcy's hard black shoulder belt and he rested his hand upon my arm.

You're a good boy Jim said he.

I'm Ned I done it.

The policeman asked my father Is this so?

But my father would say nothing he were like some creature drugged by spiders.

I turned back to Doxcy demanding he arrest me and he laughed ruffling my hair and smiling a foolish sentimental smile.

Pack up your things John he said to my father you can bring a blanket and a pannikin and spoon.

I done it I said the brand were MM I done it with the carving knife.

Shutup my father says his eyes now alive and angry. Shut your gob go back to school.

Thus were Father taken from me handcuffed to the stirrup iron of Doxcy's mare.

In the days before our father were imprisoned we Kelly children would walk to school along the creek but now we took a new path through the police paddock where the lockup stood. Apart from this stockade the paddock had no feature other than a dreary mound of clay which marked the grave of Doxcy's mare. Even this miserable sight my father were denied for there was not one window in them heavy walls. At 1st we would shout out to him but never got any answer and finally we all give up excepting Jem who run his hands along the frost cold walls patting the prison like a dog.

I dreamed about my father every night he come to sit on the end of



my bed and stare at me his puffy eyes silent his face lacerated by a thousand knife cuts.

I were so v. guilty I could never of admitted that life without my father had become in many ways more pleasant. Only when his big old buck cat went missing did I frankly tell my ma I were pleased to see it gone.

Do not misunderstand me our lives was far harder for his absence. The landlord provided no decent fences so the mother and her children was obliged to build a dogleg fence 2 mi. long to save our cows from impounding. In any case our stock would still escape the fines was 5/- for a cow 3/- for a pig. This we could ill afford. Our mother were expecting another baby she were always weary yet more tender than before. At night she would gather us about her and tell us stories and poems she never done that when my da were away shearing or contracting but now we discovered this treasure she had committed to her memory. She knew the stories of Conchobor and Dedriu and Mebd the tale of Cuchulainn I still see him stepping into his war chariot it bristles with points of iron and narrow blades with hooks and hard prongs and straps and loops and cords.

The southerly wind blew right through the hut and it were so bitter it made your head ache though it aint the cold I remember but the light of the tallow candle it were golden on my mother's cheeks it shone in her great dark eyes bright and fierce as a native cat to defend her fatherless brood. In the stories she told us of the old country there was many such women they was queens they was hot blooded not careful they would fight a fight and take a king into their marriage bed. They would of been called Irish rubbish in Avenel.

Our mother grew bigger. We boys laboured beside her in the garden it were a good loam soil and we was set to improve it further. That 1st winter we had parsnips and potatoes only. We had to sell the wagon and 2 horses but kept our small herd of dairy cows. We produced 2 lb. of butter per day but rarely had anything except lard for our own bread. Jem and I tramped into town and back delivering the butter on foot walking right past our father's lockup not calling out to him no more. Each day I waited for the night to fall who can imagine from where happiness will come?

On the 5th of August 1865 I come home in the loud dripping dark.

It had been raining already for a week the creek were a river roaring so I did not hear Mother's cries until I were at the door. I picked up a shovel and inside I discovered her lying on the earthen floor. When she saw me she sat up and explained she was beginning to have her baby. The handy woman were already gone to Hobbs' Creek for another birth so my mother had sent Maggie to borrow the Murrays' horse and ride to fetch old Dr May. That were 2 hr. previous and now the pain was very bad and my mother feared Maggie had been thrown off the horse or drowned crossing the creek.

Annie were the oldest but of a nervous disposition she had chosen this occasion to have the gastric fits. So while my mother laboured Annie vomited into a bowl beside her. I helped Mother onto her bed which were made from 2 thick saplings set into the wall and a piece of jute bag suspended between the shafts. Thinking her darling Maggie dead she cried continually. Jem were just 7 yr. and Dan were only 4 yr. they was both disturbed to see their mother in such distress.

In the hours that followed she could find no comfort or relent finally directing me to place a quilt over the table which she climbed upon at the same time instructing us all to go back behind our curtains. Dan begun bawling in earnest the table were revealed to be too short and my mother could not lie down as she had planned. Little Jem tried to help and were shouted at for his trouble. Mother instructed me to come and hold her hand then squatted on the table it had one loose leg my father had neglected to repair. The light were very poor just the one tallow light burning but I could see my mother's pain and were vexed I could do nothing to please her. She asked for water but would not let me go to fetch it. She cursed me for a fool and my father for abandoning her. All the while we expected the doctor but there were no sound from outside not even a mopoke nothing save a steady rain on the bark roof and the thumping of flotsam in the flooding waters of Hughes Creek.

All through the endless night I stood at her side and with every hour her cries and curses got wilder in the end Dan and Jem just fell asleep.

Around 4 o'clock Mother got herself once more onto the table and I thought the baby were finally coming but she swore at me and would not let me look. I heard a high thin wail like a lamb and knew my sister



were arrived but she told me keep my back turned and find her best scissors in her tin box and then to put them in the flame of the fire. I done as ordered.

I heard her shifting on her table she gave a little cry of pain then she spoke more tenderly. All right come on here and see the little girl.

My mother sat on the table holding your Aunty Grace to me. She were a little foal a calf her eyes were wide her newborn skin glistening white and bloody nothing bad had ever touched her.

Cut says Mother cut.

Where I asked.

Cut she said and I saw the pearly cord going from her stomach down to the dark I shut my eyes and cut and it were just as the old scissors crunched into the flesh that Maggie led Dr May into our hut and there he saw a 11 yr. old Irish boy assisting at his sister's birth. He seen the earthen floor the soot black scissors the frightened children peering out from behind the curtained beds and all this he would feel free to gossip about so every child at Avenel School would soon get the false idea I seen my mother's naked bottom.

After the old drunk checked my sister with his instrument he handed her to me and attended to my mother. Don't drop her lad said he it were not likely I held our precious baby in my arms her eyes so clear and untroubled. She looked me frankly in the face and I loved her as if she were my very own.

By the time he finished doctoring to my mother it were dawn a luminous grey light filled the little hut and all the world seemed bright and new. I were happy then.

Said she Go tell him now.

I'll go later.

Go now.

But I did not wish to leave my new sister with her soft downy black hair and her white white skin how it glowed like a sepulchre inside that earth floored hut. Go tell your da he has a little girl.

So as the Doctor ambled his groggy way along the track I cut across through the wet winter grass. There were a low mist lying across the paddock lapping the edges of my father's solitary gaol. I approached the

logs they was always damp and stained green with moss and mildew they give off a bad smell like dog shit in the rain.

You got a girl I yelled.

The magpies was carolling the lories screeching and fighting in the gums but from the walls of the lockup come no sound at all.

Her name is Grace.

No answer the prison were silent as the grave but then I seen a movement from the corner of my eye it were my father's big buck cat standing on the mound where the mare were buried. The cat looked at me directly with its yellow eyes and then he arched his back and swished his tail once more as if I was no more than a robin or a finch. I threw a stone at him and went home to see my sister.

Soon all the scholars at Avenel School heard of my role at the birth. They never dared venture nothing to me but Eliza Mutton said something to Annie it made her most distressed. Them scholars was all proddies they knew nothing about us save Ned Kelly couldnt spell he had no boots Maggie Kelly had warts Annie Kelly's dress were darned and fretted over like an old man's sock. They knew our pater were in the logs and when we come to school each day they learned from Mr Irving that all micks was a notch beneath the cattle.

Irving were a little cock with a big head and narrow shoulders his eyes alight with finer feelings he did not wish to share with me. It took the whole year until September before he would appoint me ink monitor by then he had no other choice for everybody with an English name had taken a turn. I cannot now remember why I desired such a prize only that I wanted it a great deal. When my time came at last I vowed to be the best monitor that were ever born. Each morning I were 1st to school lining up the chipped white china inkwells upon the tank stand then I washed and returned them to their hole in every desk.

Monday mornings I were permitted to also make the ink climbing up on Mr Irving's chair and taking down the McCracken's powder from the upper shelf it had a very pungent smell like violets and gall. I measured



4 tblspn. with every pt. of tank water it were not a demanding task but required I get to school by 8 o'clock.

It were on account of this I saw Dick Shelton drowning.

In my desire to avoid the lockup I had walked to school along Hughes Creek which were very swollen from the spring rains all sorts of rubbish piled up in the current  $\frac{1}{2}$  burnt tree trunks broken branches fenceposts a drowned calf with the water rushing across its empty eye. From the opposite bank I seen a boy edging out into the water. At the time I thought he had a fishing rod but later I learned he were using a pole to pick up the new straw hat that were swept into the flood and caught up in a jam. He stepped into the creek the black water drove up his legs he were no more than 8 yr. old.

I hollered Go back but he never heard above the thunder of the creek. There were a bed of twigs like a lyre bird mound he tried to jump onto. Then he were gone.

Never one to wait I were swimming in the flooded creek before I knew it the water so fast and cold it would take your breath like a pooka steals your very soul. It were v. rough sweeping me violently down into a wide pool you would not credit the power of it. I glimpsed the boy's white face young Dick Shelton knew himself a goner and no more for this world. I got his arm but we was washed on down together more under than above the flood.

50 yd. down the creek has a dogleg where the proddies swim in summer. The pair of us was driven close to the bank against an old river red gum submerged in flood. It were slippery as a pig but I were able to gain sufficient purchase to drag his drenched and soapy body back from that other world where he had imagined himself consigned.

Though the little chap were  $\frac{1}{2}$  drowned I got him upon my back he were crying and vomiting and agitating a great deal. He wore boots but my own feet was bare as usual I set off straight through the bush towards the Royal Mail Hotel where I knew his father were the licensee. It were a sharp and rocky bit of ground I chose.

The yardman at the Mail were a failed selector named Shaky White he were burying night soil in the scrub when he seen us coming and he started hollering Missus Missus Jesus Christ.

An upstairs window in the pub flew open a woman screamed a moment later Mrs Shelton were running down the yard towards her son but even in her great emotion she never ignored the Catholic boy and I were taken into her hotel and given a hot bath in a large white tub. I had never seen a bathtub until that day it were a blessed miracle to lay in that long smooth porcelain with all the steaming water brought to me by Shaky in 10 buckets I never saw so much water used to wash.

Then Mrs Shelton brought her older son's clothes to wear while mine was laundered they was soft and had a very pleasant smell. I would of given anything to keep them but Mrs Shelton didnt think of making that offer instead she put her plump arm around my shoulder and led me downstairs saying I were an angel sent by God.

In the dining room I discovered a merry fire and a man in a 3 pce. suit doing great damage to a plate of eggs and bacon but apart from him the room were empty. Mrs Shelton sat me at a table near the fire it were set with shining silver knives & forks & cruets & salt & pepper & a sugar bowl with a curved spoon. I knew my mother would have liked it very much.

Mrs Shelton asked would I prefer cocoa I said yes she asked would I like a breakfast and presented me with a menu. I never seen such a thing before but soon I got the gist of it and used it well. I had begun the day with bread and dripping now I was ordering lamb chops and bacon and kidney it were very tasty. There were carpet on the floor I can see the pattern of the red roses to this day. Mrs Shelton wore a bright yellow dress and a gold bangle on her wrist she wept and smiled and stared at me all the time I ate she said I were the best and bravest boy in the whole world.

Mr Shelton had been in Seymour overnight but soon arrived in his wagon and rushed into the dining room in his muddy gumboots and oilskin coat. He tried to give me  $\frac{1}{2}$  a crown but I wouldnt hear of such a thing.

Mr Shelton were tall and broad with long side whiskers and his thin straight mouth would of looked mean were his eyes not so bright and brimming.

Is there nothing you wish for boy?

Nothing.



It were not true I would of liked a dress for my mother but I didnt know how much one would cost.

Very well said he then let me shake your hand. I took his hand but confess that I were not nearly so noble as my speech suggested. I walked to school in my nice borrowed clothes and a pair of shining pinching boots I were so disappointed I were sick at heart.

The following morning a buckboard drew up at the schoolhouse Mr Irving were always fearful of inspectors he got suddenly nervous as a quail.

Wipe clean your slates he commanded while trying to make some order of his pigpen desk. He were fast with multiplication but very queer and jerky in this crisis and now it didnt help him that his head were big for he couldnt reckon where to hide his fret saw.

To Caroline Doxey he said Go to the window see if it is a gentleman with a case. Smartly smartly Caroline.

He has a parcel.

Yes but does he have a satchel?

Oh Sir it is only Dicky Shelton's father.

Mr Irving were a king amongst children and didnt like visitors to his castle so he was out the door before the publican could enter. We could hear their voices clearly.

Damn it Irving roared Mr Shelton I'll do what I adjectival like.

The door banged against the wall and Esau Shelton burst inside with the odour of stale hops and raisin wine they was his constant friends.

Ah children cried he granting us a rare sight of his teeth.

Mr Irving come following behind rubbing his big pale hands together and telling us unhappily that we must listen to Mr Shelton.

Now look here little children said Mr Shelton and he placed his brown paper parcel amongst the litter on the teacher's desk. My son Dick nearly drowned yesterday did you know that? No? My Dick would be in heaven now were it not for someone in this very room.

The scholars now began to crane their necks and look enquiringly around and Annie seemed she might die folding her hands in her lap and staring ahead with glassy gaze. Jem were 7 yr. and so copied what his older

sister done but my barrel chested Maggie never feared it were she who raised her hand.

It were my big brother Ned.

The blood rushed to my face.

Correct said Mr Shelton v. solemn please come and stand up here Ned Kelly.

I knew he were going to give me the brown paper parcel I had no doubt it contained the respectable clothes I always wanted. As I rose I caught the eye of Caroline Doxey she smiled at me the 1st time ever. I put my shoulders back and walked up to Mr Irving's platform.

Mr Shelton bade me face the class then shut my eyes there were the crinkling of the paper the smell of camphor and the smooth feel of silk against my cheek.

I thought thats women's stuff it were a dress to give my mother.

Open your eyes Ned Kelly.

I done as ordered and saw his little slit of mouth all twisted in a grin and then Eliza Mutton and George Mutton and Caroline Doxey and the Sheltons and Mr Irving staring at me with his wild bright eyes. I looked down at my person and seen not my bare feet my darned pullover my patched pants but a 7 ft. sash. It were peacock green embroidered with gold TO EDWARD KELLY IN GRATITUDE FOR HIS COURAGE FROM THE SHELTON FAMILY.

At the very hour I stood before the scholars in my sash the decapitated head of the bushranger Morgan were being carried down the public highway — Benalla — Violet Town — Euroa — Avenel — perhaps it would be better had I known the true cruel nature of the world but I would not give up my ignorance even if I could. The Protestants of Avenel had seen the goodness in an Irish boy it were a mighty moment in my early life.

If these events made a big impression on my own young mind they made an even bigger one on Esau Shelton. What phantoms haunted his top paddock I have no way of knowing but it is very clear he could not stop dwelling on how his son were nearly dead and the more time that passed



the more he felt the agony. He had been previously known as a tight lipped b——r not suited to his profession but now dear Jesus he could not be shut up and must offer endless accounts of young Dick's rescue to every bullocky selector or shearer who come to prop up his long bar. He never considered the embarrassment his emotions might be causing others it were his own peace of mind he sought.

Not many nights after I brung the sash home to my mother I were woken by the low growling of our kangaroo dogs and then detected the faint odours of stale hops.

Then come a most distinctive whisper from the night Mrs Kelly Mrs Kelly might I trouble you?

My mother replied with that hiss so particular to the mothers of young babes. What is it you want Mr Shelton?

But what is it you want Mrs Kelly?

My mother stayed silent but I could hear Mr Shelton scraping the mud off his boots as if he were intent on entering regardless.

What are you thinking Mrs Kelly?

What am I thinking? And any of her children would of recognised the dangerous rise and hook on its last word. Mr Shelton she said I'm lying here wondering who might be adjectival fool enough to wake my baby.

Beg pardon Mrs Kelly I'll come back tomorrow.

I don't want you back tomorrow Mr Shelton. She rose from her bed and knocked the pegs from the door and I watched through the curtain as the big smelly man shambled to the table and begun to noisily arrange his pipe and tobacco amongst our dirty dishes. He appeared pretty much a wreck as far as I could judge.

Mother wearily pulled her possum skin around her shoulders and waited impatiently for her guest to speak he was tongue tied and required a v. loud impatient sigh to get him rolling again.

Mrs Kelly said he at last your boy has given me back my son.

We know that Mr Shelton just tell me what is bothering you.

Its the sash he admitted.

I thought please Jesus don't talk about the sash I valued that reward more than anything I ever owned but my mother had taken a shocking

set against it on account of her opinion the Sheltons should have offered money.

The sash?

I'm thinking.

Go on Mr Shelton she encouraged.

Frankly it just don't seem sufficient.

There were a very long silence.

Would you like a cup of tea Mr Shelton?

No Mrs Kelly there is nothing you can offer me.

Some oatcake?

I just ate.

Would you take a brandy to settle your digestion?

Mrs Kelly you're a woman who lost her husband just like I nearly lost my son.

Don't cry Mr Shelton they aint neither of them exactly dead.

Thats it Mrs Kelly that is what my wife has pointed out to me. I have the power to bring Mr Kelly back to you.

Though I couldnt see my mother's face I did see her back shiver like a cat with ringworm.

How do you mean?

Mr Kelly is in the lockup you'll forgive me mentioning it.

It is a private subject.

I made an enquiry of Constable Doxey.

That aint your business Mr Shelton.

You'll forgive me he says it is a matter of £25.

But my mother did not want her husband back. Oh no she cried I will not let you.

But I must Mrs Kelly I am bound to it.

Mr Shelton it is a lovely sash you give our Ned but if you don't watch out you'll spoil him. He's a good boy but very headstrong and don't need no encouragement to take more risks he's lucky he didnt drown himself.

But surely you aint saying you wish his father left in gaol?

No cried my mother I'm saying you shouldnt make a fuss of my boy.

But you would not object to your husband being freed?

Dear Jesus cried my mother what sort of woman do you think I am?



What else could she say? One week later her husband walked back into her life. We was seated round the table eating tea when he come and stood behind me. I twisted in my seat but didnt know whether to rise or what to say.

Get out of my adjectival chair.  
I squeezed down the long bench and my father took his place he rested his freckled forearms on the table and asked my mother the baby's name. I could not take my eyes off the arms all puffy white and sweaty like cheese wrapped up too long in summer.

Grace as you know.

How would I know?

I sent Ned to tell you.

Again my father turned his eyes on me and I felt he were looking into my heart at all the sins I committed against him and he pushed his stew away telling my mother to give him what money she had hidden. I thought she would say no but she emptied her sock and give him all she had and my father walked back out into the night. We was all very quiet after he were gone.

You may think it strange that a man can survive transportation and the horrors of Van Diemen's Land and then be destroyed in a country lockup but we cannot credit the tortures our parents suffered in Van Diemen's Land — Port Macquarie — Toongabbie — Norfolk Island — Emu Plains. Avenel lockup were the final straw for your grandfather he did not speak more than a dozen words to me from that day until his death.

Once he worked with us putting in the oats but he no longer liked the light of day and mostly remained inside the hut. By late spring the following year he were so bloated you could hardly see his eyes was lost and lonely and angry in the middle of his swollen face. We moved around him as if he were a pit too deep to fall into. Dr May come and told us he had dropsy and we paid a great deal of money for his medicine but there were no improvement and our father lay on his crib he could hardly raise his head to sip the rum.

Mother and I now did all the ploughing we seeded 20 acres but it were too late in the season. One day at noon it were a hot December day

the sky were blue and the magpies carolling my mother returned to the hut then come straight back out to fetch me.

Come she said come now.

We entered the hut together our bare feet caked with soil our hats already in our hands and there we saw our poor da lying dead upon the kitchen table he were bulging with all the poisons of the Empire his skin grey and shining in the gloom.

I were 12 yr. and 3 wk. old that day and if my feet were callused one inch thick and my hands hard and my labourer's knees cut and scabbed and stained with dirt no soap could reach yet did I not still have a heart and were this not he who give me life now all dead and ruined? Father son of my heart are you dead from me are you dead from me my father?