

Not Just Ned: A true history of the Irish in Australia
An exhibition developed and presented by the
National Museum of Australia

OBJECT BIOGRAPHY

Isabella Mary Kelly and her branding irons

Objects which survive to reveal the lives of women in bygone eras often centre around middle-class costume or domestic items like fine china. While I personally love such personal pieces of the past they can give a lop-sided view of women's histories.

An exception is Isabella Mary Kelly's branding irons. Normally associated with men's work on the land these irons reveal a more complete story of the activity of rural women in the 19th century. What makes these irons significant is that Kelly herself, a Dublin born, single woman of capital, bred horses and ran cattle for more than thirty years in the Manning Valley. This district is inland from Port Macquarie and Newcastle and close to Taree, New South Wales. When Kelly finally sold up in 1865 she had been subject and instigator of multiple litigation cases, wrongfully imprisoned and her house had been burnt to the ground by an enemy. Her health was badly affected by prison life necessitating convalescence with friends in Sydney. Thirteen months after receiving a meagre compensation for her wrongful imprisonment Kelly died, heartbroken but not totally broke. Her funeral provisions included a notice in the Sydney Morning Herald; she is buried in Rookwood Cemetery.

Decades after her death, Kelly's story became the subject of wild fancy by unscrupulous journalists on slow news days. She became transformed from an educated, worldly woman to the 'the wild woman of Manning Valley', with accompanying falsities describing cruelty and sexual promiscuity. The photograph of Kelly, holding a riding crop and with stern expression has been used as part of the evidence built about her fictional ferocious character. One



The story of Isabella Mary Kelly is a highlight of the exhibition *Not Just Ned: a history of the Irish in Australia* at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra. 'K' and 'MK' branding irons used by Kelly, on loan from Geoff Boyle, are on display in the exhibition. Image courtesy of Maurie Garland and the Manning Valley Historical Society.

tale relates instances where she horse whipped not only her male convicts but other townspeople! Parallels can be drawn between Kelly and Belle Starr of the Wild West, another woman who fell prey to posthumously written wild stories that damaged her true character.

The ignominy of Isabella Mary Kelly's memory has been further tarnished with an unfortunate association with bushrangers. For, in the Mount George area, north of Wingham, there is a creek called 'Kate Kelly's creek'. The legend of Ned Kelly's famous sister, who is believed to have helped the gang enormously while they were on the run, seems to have extended far beyond 'Kelly country' of the Benalla and Mansfield regions. However, Kate Kelly never made as far as the Manning Valley and the creek was originally named in memory of Isabella Mary Kelly. Fortunately, the good folk at the Manning Valley Historical Society have not forgotten her and have made great efforts to set the facts straight. Her branding irons, lovingly kept by her friends and their descendants all these years, will feature in *Not Just Ned*, a symbol of this woman's tenacity and lasting importance to the people of Manning Valley.

Not Just Ned: A true history of the Irish in Australia is on show at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra from 17 March-31 July 2011. Admission charges apply.

For more information about the exhibition visit www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/irish_in_australia

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