

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

## OBJECT BIOGRAPHY

### The Kelly gang armour

Most Australians are familiar with the story of Ned Kelly and his gang. The tale of four handsome young men who terrorised the countryside in the 1880s in the name of an Australian Republic has inspired many books, songs, movies and is part of school curriculum. For many, Ned Kelly has come to stand for our anti-authoritarian character, something which some say sprouted here from Irish roots. The big question curators get asked about the Kelly gang is why is it that these thieves and murderers have become heroes? I personally think the main reason is the existence of the armour. Armour was made for each member of the gang while they were on the run, before the thwarted derailment of the train at Glenrowan and made a spectacular appearance at the siege at Glenrowan Hotel. The armour was a strong statement of the Gang's intention to continue their life as outlaws, to shoot and kill the police who pursued them but be bullet proof themselves. No other bushranger is remembered for this extraordinary, and murderous, act of defiance.

While the armour was effective in repelling bullets, it was cumbersome, heavy and adversely affected the Gang's ability to shoot and ride, two essential skills required by those in the bushranging profession. The major fatal flaw of the suits was that they were not made to cover the whole body. Indeed, it was through a gap in the armour that Joe Byrne met his end via a policeman's bullet and Ned himself was captured after being shot in his unprotected legs by Sergeant Steele.

After the gang was defeated at Glenrowan the armour was salvaged by police, you can



**Armour worn by all four members of the Kelly gang, including armour (pictured) worn by Ned Kelly 1879 which is on loan from the State Library of Victoria will be on display in the exhibition *Not Just Ned: A true history of the Irish in Australia* at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra.**

imagine the wonder they caused in those who beheld them then. The armour is now reunited at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra and on exhibition in *Not Just Ned*, for the first time outside of Kelly country, and they continue to be awe inspiring.

From the scientific analysis that has been undertaken by the Museum's Conservators, in collaboration with the University of Canberra and Ansto, it seems that the armour was constructed in a makeshift bush forge, not in a sympathetic smithy's shop. This means that it is most likely that the Gang member themselves would have shaped the pieces of plough shares and constructed the suits in a campfire in the bush or on a farm. Whether the Gang personally pillaged the plough shares from local farms or if their supporters gave them to the Gang, or a combination of both, is not known.

Although the Gang were cop killers and would have been, justifiably, despised by law enforcers and their families, those who salvaged the armour still recognised its significance to Australian history. If it was not for this foresight and the continued preservation of the suits I believe the legend of Ned Kelly and his gang may have faded from memory.

*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](http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/irish_in_australia)

Curator's notes prepared by Cinnamon Van Reyk, Curator, National Museum of Australia