

His own words



A main source of knowledge of Ned Kelly is through his own words. The most famous of Kelly's writings is the Jerilderie Letter, left with a printer after the Kelly gang robbed a bank in Jerilderie in 1878. In fact the Jerilderie letter was not written by Kelly, but was dictated by him to Joe Byrne. However, all Kelly experts agree that this letter clearly gives us Ned's 'voice'.

Let's look at some extracts from that letter, and see what we can learn about Ned Kelly from them.

Extract 1

This extract gives Kelly's version of an incident for which he was convicted of a crime – sending a bull's testicles to a woman, implying that her husband was not 'manly' and needed them. A horse belonging to the McCormacks had wandered away. A hawker, Gould, found the horse, and had his boy take it back. The McCormacks accused Gould of having 'borrowed' the horse to pull their wagon out of a bog. Ned Kelly spoke up in support of Gould. This extract from the Jerilderie letter (which is virtually unpunctuated) gives Kelly's version of what happened next.

I pleaded Goulds innocence and Mrs McCormack turned on me and accused me of bringing the horse from Greta to Goolds waggon to pull him out of the bog I did not say much to the woman as my Mother was present but that same day me and my uncle was cutting calves Gould wrapped up a note and a pair of the calves testicles and gave them to me to give them to Mrs McCormack. I did not see her and I gave the parcel to a boy to give to her when she would come instead of giving it to her he gave it to her husband consequently McCormack said he would summons me I told him neither me or Gould used their horse. he said I was a liar & he could welt me or any of my breed I was about 14 years of age but accepted the challenge and dismounting when Mrs McCormack struck my horse in the flank with a bullock's shin it jumped forward and my fist came in collision with McCormack's nose and caused him to loose his equilibrium and fall postrate ... I was sentenced to three months for hitting him and three months for the parcel and bound to keep the peace for 12 months.

- 1 Would you say this was a boyish prank, or something more serious?
- 2 What qualities or characteristics (both positive and negative) does Ned Kelly show in this incident?

Extract 2

Kelly always blamed Constable Fitzpatrick for the sequence of events that led to his being declared an outlaw. In the Jerilderie letter Kelly described how he had heard that the police harassed his family after the Fitzpatrick incident.

I ... heard how the Police used to be blowing that they would not ask me to stand they would shoot me first and then cry surrender and how they used to rush into the house upset all the milk dishes break tins of eggs empty the flour out of the bags on to the ground and even the meat out of the cask and destroy all the provisions and shove the girls in front of them into the rooms like dogs so as if anyone was there they would shoot the girls first but they knew well I was not there or I would have scattered their blood and brains like rain I would manure the Eleven mile with their bloated carcasses and yet remember there is not one drop of murderous blood in my Veins ... But if I hear any more of it I will not exactly show them what cold blooded murder is but wholesale and retail slaughter something different to shooting three troopers in self defence and robbing a bank.

- 3 What qualities or characteristics (both positive and negative) does Ned Kelly show in this part of the Jerilderie letter?
- 4 A writer, Alex McDermott, has recently criticised Peter Carey's portrayal of Ned Kelly in the award-winning novel *True History of the Kelly Gang*. McDermott argues that Carey's picture of Kelly – 'a man in full: devoted son, loving husband, fretful father, and loyal friend' (interview www.randomhouse.com/knopf/authors/carey) – is far too gentle and mild. He says that in Carey's portrait 'the marvellous self-publicising beast who chilled 19th-century sensibilities has been deprived of tooth and claw' (*Eureka Street*, January-February 2001.) Do you think this extract shows Kelly with 'tooth and claw'? Explain your reasons.

- 5 McDermott argues that the Jerilderie letter shows Kelly's brutal nature; a Kelly expert, Ian Jones, says it is just 'intimidation' by Kelly. Suggest how you might decide whether Kelly's words were evidence of his brutality, or just intimidation.

Extract 3

Here Kelly describes the killing of one of the three police at Stringybark Creek, Sergeant Kennedy.

I told McIntyre to tell them to give up their arms, he spoke to Kennedy who was some distance in front of Scanlan he reached for his revolver and jumped off, on the off side of his horse and got behind a tree when I called on them to throw up their arms and Scanlan who carried the rifle slewed his horse around to gallop away but the horse would not go and as quick as thought fired at me with the rifle without unslinging it and was in the act of firing again when I had to shoot him and he fell from his horse. I could have shot them without speaking but their lives was no good to me. McIntyre jumped on Kennedys horse and I allowed him to go as I did not like to shoot him after he surrendered or I would have shot him as he was between me and Kennedy therefore I could not shoot Kennedy without shooting him first. Kennedy kept firing from behind the tree my brother Dan advanced and Kennedy ran I followed him he stopped behind another tree and fired again. I shot him in the arm pit and he dropped his revolver and ran I fired again with the gun as he slewed around to surrender I did not know he had dropped his revolver. The bullet passed through the right side of his chest & he could not live or I would have let him go had they been my own brother I could not help shooting there or else let them shoot me which they would have done had their bullets been directed as they intended them. But as for handcuffing Kennedy to a tree or cutting his ear off or brutally treating any of them, is a falsehood, if Kennedys ear was cut off it was not done by me and none of my mates was near him after he was shot I put his cloak over him and left him as well as I could and were they my own brothers I could not have been more sorry for them this cannot be called wilful murder for I was compelled to shoot them, or lie down and let them shoot me.

- 6 Why, according to Kelly, did he shoot Kennedy?
- 7 At what point in this incident did Kelly kill Kennedy?
- 8 If you ONLY had the Jerilderie letter as evidence of the life and character of Ned Kelly, what could you say about him?

Extra Information

Kelly later talked about the killing to various people, who recorded these aspects of the event:

- Kennedy was still alive when Kelly reached him.
- Kennedy spoke of his home, his family (a wife and five children, including a young baby), and the 11-month old son he had recently buried in Mansfield cemetery.
- Kelly was touched, and offered Kennedy his gun, inviting him to shoot him.
- Kennedy said he forgave Kelly.
- Kennedy wrote a note, and asked Kelly to deliver it to his wife.
- Kelly promised he would.
- Kelly, seeing Kennedy was dying and in great pain, went to shoot him.
- Kennedy begged him to let him live.
- Kelly shot him in the heart.
- The gang then turned out Kennedy's pockets, and took a gold watch from the body.
- Kelly never delivered the note, and denied taking the gold watch – though it was found on Joe Byrne's body after Glenrowan. Byrne also took rings from Lonigan and Scanlan, and wore them until his own death at Glenrowan.

Based on Ian Jones 1995, *Ned Kelly: A Short Life*, Lothian, Melbourne and Keith McMenomy, 2001, *Ned Kelly*, Hardie Grant Books, Melbourne.

- 9 Does any of this additional information change your judgement about Kelly? Explain your reasons.
- 10 Look at the Jerilderie letter. You can find it at www.slv.vic.gov.au/slv/exhibitions/treasures/jerilderie/. Have half the class select incidents other than those quoted above that might reflect badly on Kelly; and the other half select elements that might show Ned Kelly in a good light. Discuss your selections.
- 11 The Jerilderie Letter shows how we must be careful in accepting how people use evidence. List some questions that you would need to ask before accepting what somebody using the Jerilderie letter as evidence said about Kelly. For example, one question might be: Is the person selectively quoting from the letter?