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The True History Of The Kelly Gang

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The True History Of The Kelly Gang: Separating Fact from Fiction

Few tales in Australian history capture the imagination quite like that of Ned Kelly, the notorious bushranger who has been both vilified as a criminal and celebrated as a folk hero. The 2019 film **The True History Of The Kelly Gang**, directed by Justin Kurzel and adapted from Peter Carey's Booker Prize-winning novel, presents a gritty, poetic, and deeply psychological retelling of Kelly's life. But what exactly is the "true" history behind this story? And how does the film differ from the recorded facts? In this article, we will explore the real events, the novel's artistic license, and the film's unique interpretation, all while examining why this outlaw legend continues to resonate.

Who Was Ned Kelly? A Brief Historical Background

Edward "Ned" Kelly was born in 1855 in Victoria, Australia, to Irish immigrant parents. From a young age, he found himself on the wrong side of the law, often clashing with the police who he believed were corrupt and prejudiced against the Irish poor. After a series of escalating incidents—including an alleged assault on a police officer and the shooting of a constable while in custody—Ned became an outlaw. With his brother Dan, and friends Steve Hart and Joe Byrne (collectively known as the Kelly Gang), he embarked on a spree of bank robberies and murders that culminated in the infamous Siege of Glenrowan in 1880.

At Glenrowan, the gang donned homemade suits of armour fashioned from plough mouldboards. In a final shootout with police, all members except Ned were killed. Ned was wounded, captured, and later hanged at the Old Melbourne Gaol. His last words were reported to be, "Such is life." These factual endpoints form the skeleton of the story, but the flesh—the motivations, the family dynamics, and the psychological turmoil—is where the novel and film take creative liberties.

The Novel That Inspired the Film: Peter Carey's Masterpiece

Published in 2000, Peter Carey's *The True History of the Kelly Gang*is a fictional autobiography written in Ned's voice. Carey uses a raw, colloquial style, replete with missing punctuation and dialect, to immerse readers in Ned's mind. The novel is structured as a series of letters and documents that Ned composes for his daughter, claiming to reveal the "true" story—one that counters the sensationalised newspaper reports of the time.

Carey's version delves deeply into Ned's relationship with his mother, Ellen Kelly, who is portrayed as a fierce, sometimes manipulative figure. It also explores his sexual awakening, his admiration for a cross-dressing bushranger, and his desperate love for his family. While many of the historical events are recognisable, the novel invents characters, compresses timelines, and adds emotional depth that is absent in dry historical records. The result is a work that questions the very nature of truth and storytelling.

The Film Adaptation: A Bold, Visceral Vision

The True History Of The Kelly Gang is not a straightforward biopic. It is a moody, atmospheric, and often disturbing meditation on masculinity, colonialism, and identity. The cast includes George MacKay as Ned, Russell Crowe as the bushranger Harry Power, and Essie Davis as Ellen Kelly. The film strips away any romanticised notion of the Australian outback, replacing it with mud, grime, and haunting visuals.

Key scenes that stand out include Ned's forced cross-dressing as a child (a metaphor for his mother's desire to hide him from police), the brutal mentorship of Harry Power, and the final shootout where the armour-clad gang resembles ghostly knights. The film deliberately blurs the line between memory and fantasy, urging viewers to question what is real and what is constructed.

Major Characters in the Film

- Ned Kelly (George MacKay) – A conflicted young man torn between his mother's influence and his own desire for freedom.
- Ellen Kelly (Essie Davis) – A fierce matriarch who will do anything to protect her children, even if it means sacrificing their innocence.
- Harry Power (Russell Crowe) – An aging bushranger who teaches Ned the ways of the outlaw but also represents a dying era.
- Constable Fitzpatrick (Nicholas Hoult) – A menacing police officer whose actions spark the Kelly Gang's violent path.
- Mary Hearn (Thomasin McKenzie) – A love interest and later mother of Ned's child, representing a life he could have chosen.

The True History Of The Kelly Gang vs. Historical Facts

It is crucial to understand that both Carey's novel and Kurzel's film are works of fiction, not documentaries. However, they draw on real events, and understanding the differences enriches the viewing experience.

What the Film Gets Right

- The class conflict: Ned and his family were indeed poor Irish Catholics living under a largely Protestant, British-descended police force. Tensions over land, wealth, and justice were very real.
- The armour: The iconic iron suits are historically accurate, though in reality they were heavier and cruder than depicted. They were made from ploughshares and designed to block bullets.
- The siege: The final stand at Glenrowan happened on June 28, 1880, exactly as portrayed—a botched plan that ended in the death of most of the gang.
- Ned's capture and execution: After being shot multiple times in the legs (since his armour did not protect his lower body), Ned was taken alive and hanged in November 1880.

What the Film Takes Liberties With

- Cross-dressing as a child: There is no historical evidence that Ned's mother dressed him as a girl. This is a fictional device used to explore themes of vulnerability, survival, and gender identity.
- Relationship with Harry Power: While Ned did spend time with Harry Power as a teenager, the film amplifies the psychological abuse and sexual manipulation.
- Constable Fitzpatrick's role: In reality, Constable Fitzpatrick was involved in a tense incident at the Kelly home that led to violence, but the film invents a more personal, predatory relationship.
- The letter writing: Carey's novel posits that Ned wrote extensive journals for his daughter. No such documents survive, but Carey uses the conceit to give voice to Ned's inner thoughts.

Themes and Symbolism in The True History Of The Kelly Gang

Kurzel's film is rich with metaphor, and its themes are as relevant today as they were in the 19th century. The story is fundamentally about the fight against oppressive systems. For Ned, that oppression takes the form of the police, the British crown, and even his own mother's expectations.

Masculinity and Performance

The film constantly explores the idea of “performing” masculinity. Ned is told to be a man, to fight, to lead. Yet he is also forced to wear a dress as a child, creating a lifelong confusion about identity. The armour he later wears can be seen as a literal shell that protects his vulnerable interior—a mask of hyper-masculinity that hides his fear.

Colonial Violence and Irish Identity

The Kelly family represents the Irish underclass in a country ruled by British law. The film does not shy away from depicting police brutality and corruption, showing how systemic injustice can turn ordinary people into outlaws. Ned’s rebellion is framed as a desperate act of resistance, not mere criminality.

The Power of Storytelling

Both the novel and the film question who gets to write history. Carey’s title, “The True History,” is ironic, as the narrative is clearly fictional. Kurzel’s film similarly uses nonlinear storytelling and dreamlike sequences to suggest that “truth” is subjective. The real Ned Kelly may be gone, but the legend—malleable and ever-changing—continues to serve different agendas.

Reception and Legacy of the Film

Upon its release, **The True History Of The Kelly Gang** divided critics. Some praised its ambition, visual style, and strong performances, particularly from George MacKay and Essie Davis. Others found it too bleak and fragmented, lacking the emotional core of traditional biopics. The film premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival and later received limited theatrical release, finding a second life on streaming platforms.

Compared to other Ned Kelly films—such as the 1970 version with Mick Jagger or the 2003 Heath Ledger-starring *Ned Kelly*—Kurzel’s version is the most experimental. It does not seek to glorify or condemn, but to understand the psychological forces that shaped a legend. In that sense, it aligns with Peter Carey’s original mission: to present a “true” history that is emotional and personal, if not strictly factual.

Why the Story Still Matters

The Kelly Gang myth has endured for over a century because it taps into universal themes of injustice, rebellion, and the search for identity. In a modern context, where debates about colonial history, systemic racism, and police violence are ongoing, Ned Kelly’s story serves as a cautionary tale about what happens when a society fails its marginalized citizens.

Moreover, the film’s exploration of masculinity and mental health resonates with contemporary audiences. Ned’s struggle to reconcile his mother’s expectations, his own tenderness, and the violent world he inhabits makes him a tragic figure rather than a simple outlaw. The armour, both literal and figurative, is a powerful symbol of how people protect themselves from pain—only to become trapped inside their own defenses.

Conclusion: The Verdict on The True History Of The Kelly Gang

In the end, **The True History Of The Kelly Gang** is not a history lesson but a work of art. It invites viewers to question the narratives we inherit and consider the human cost of rebellion. Whether you approach it as a fan of Australian history, a lover of literary adaptations, or a seeker of bold cinema, the film offers a haunting portrait of a man caught between two worlds—the one he was born into and the one he tried to forge.

The true history of the Kelly Gang, then, is not a single story but a chorus of voices: the newspapers of the 1880s, the oral traditions of the Irish community, Peter Carey’s prose, and Justin Kurzel’s images. Each version adds a layer, and together they form a complex, often contradictory legend that refuses to die. Perhaps that is

the most honest history of all.

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