

## NED KELLY v THE MAN FROM SNOWY RIVER: WHICH FILM-INDUCED DESTINATION BRAND TO CHOOSE?

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### Abstract

In 2006 Tourism Victoria announced plans to change the destination brand for the north-east of the state of Victoria in Australia. Formerly 'Legends, Wine and High Country', the new brand will be 'Victoria's High Country'. In adopting this new brand, Tourism Victoria is linking this region with the popular adventure film *The Man From Snowy River* (1982). Whilst a fictional story, the film's historical background is the nineteenth century mountain cattleman of the area. The choice of this brand projects the mountain cattlemen of the high country as the defining cultural heritage of the region. However, the area also has another strong cultural heritage which has been projected widely through film, art, music and other media. This is the bushranger Ned Kelly. For many years the area has been unofficially known as Kelly Country.

The choice being made by Tourism Victoria is also being duplicated by Destination Marketing Organisations elsewhere. In choosing to base a destination's brand on a particular film, they are also choosing to not utilise other potential films or sources. Whatever film is chosen for a destination image, it comes with certain cultural baggage. Films, and the stories they are based on, have meanings which differ markedly from person to person. Projected into the present and utilised for a destination brand they may offer contested or dissonant views of the region's cultural heritage. In choosing one film, there is also a choice of which cultural heritage is preferred.

*This paper was presented at the Tourism and Travel Research Association Conference in Dublin, Eire, 2006. It is still very much a work in progress arising from my earlier research on cultural heritage and tourism.*

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## **NED KELLY v THE MAN FROM SNOWY RIVER: WHICH FILM-INDUCED DESTINATION BRAND TO CHOOSE?**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In 2006 Tourism Victoria announced plans to change the destination brand of 'Legends, Wine and High Country' for the north-east of the state of Victoria in Australia. This destination brand had been introduced in 1997, when Tourism Victoria had created brands for all of the state's eleven rural regions. However, market research indicated that the three concepts within the brand were confusing and the destination brand had low levels of recognition. The new brand will be 'Victoria's High Country'.

Destination Marketing Organisations, such as Tourism Victoria, seek to develop brands which convey attractive, possibly unique, attributes. Increasingly, the trend is to utilise existing images from popular culture, particularly from films and television featuring the destination (see for example Beeton, 2005; Frost, Croy and Beeton, 2004). In adopting the new brand of Victoria's High Country, Tourism Victoria is linking this region with the popular adventure film *The Man From Snowy River* (1982). Whilst a fictional story, the film's historical background is the nineteenth century mountain cattleman of the area. The choice of this brand projects the mountain cattlemen of the high country as the defining cultural heritage of the region.

However, the area also has another strong cultural heritage which has been projected widely through film and other media. This is the bushranger Ned Kelly. For many years the area has been unofficially known as Kelly Country (see for examples Betram, 1983; Kelson and McQuilton, 2001). The 1997 brand of Legends, Wine and High Country attempted to incorporate both Ned Kelly and the Man (Tourism Victoria, 1997). The recent decision to focus the brand on the Man has provoked controversy amongst operators and communities within the region. It is notable that the Royal Automobile Club of Victoria has taken an opposite path to Tourism Victoria, switching from North East Victoria to Kelly Country in its regional maps.

The choice being made by Tourism Victoria is also being duplicated by Destination Marketing Organisations elsewhere. In choosing to base a destination's brand on a particular film, they are also choosing to not utilise other potential films or sources. While some destinations search desperately for a film to hang their brand on, others suffer from a surfeit of films to consider. Wyoming, for example, might weigh up utilising *Brokeback Mountain* against *Shane*. The Australian Outback might choose between drawing on *Crocodile Dundee* versus *Priscilla: Queen of the Desert*. New Zealand might be faced with choices as to at what stage it scales down its usage of *Lord of the Rings* for destination marketing.

Whatever film is chosen for a destination image, it comes with certain cultural baggage. Films and the stories they are based on have meanings. These meanings may differ markedly from person to person. In the case of North East Victoria, the two films which are being considered are based on nineteenth century history. The view of that history differs. Projected into the present and utilised for a destination brand they offer two contested or dissonant views of the region's cultural heritage. In choosing one film, there is also a choice of which cultural heritage is preferred and which is being downgraded.

### **THE MAN FROM SNOWY RIVER AND NED KELLY**

The film of *The Man From Snowy River* was based on a highly popular poem of the same name. This was written by A.B. 'Banjo' Paterson and first published in the *Bulletin* magazine in 1890. An anthology of Paterson's poetry entitled *The Man From Snowy River and Other Verses* is one of the highest selling volumes in Australian literature (for Paterson's life, see Davison, 1998; Semmler, 1966). The 13 verse poem simply tells of a group of cattlemen chasing after a valuable horse

which has escaped and joined a gang of brumbies (wild horses). At first some of the cattlemen laugh at the Man (he is never named) because his horse is small and scrawny. However, it is the Man who proves his worth in ultimately recapturing the horses.

The 1982 film was a lavish historical epic. While the simple story was fleshed out, it essentially remained true to the original poem. A commercial success, it was followed by a sequel (1986) and a television series. In 2000 it was utilised as part of the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympic Games. Following on from this a theatrical production – *The Man From Snowy River Arena Spectacular* – successfully toured Australia. This has now become a permanent ‘dinner and show’ attraction on Queensland’s Gold Coast. In north east Victoria, the film led to the establishment of an annual Man From Snowy River Bush Festival at Corryong.

Ned Kelly (1855-1880) was an outlaw (bushranger). His story is outlined in Figure 2. Born of poor Irish parents, a bitter feud with local police led to his becoming a fugitive. This culminated in the Siege of Glenrowan, where Ned’s plan to derail a police train went wrong, he was captured and the rest of his gang killed. It was at Glenrowan that he wore his homemade iron helmet, with which he is widely associated.

**Figure 1: Ned Kelly Timeline**

December 1854	Born at Beveridge, north of Melbourne
1871-1874	In prison for receiving a stolen horse
15 April 1878	Constable Fitzpatrick claims that he is wounded by Ned after incident at the Kelly house. Ned’s mother is jailed over the incident and Ned, brother Dan and friends Joe Byrne and Steve Hart go into hiding.
25 October 1878	Stringybark Creek Massacre. In a gun battle with a police party sent to search for him, Ned kills three policemen.
10 December 1878	Kelly Gang rob the bank at Euroa. A week later the Cameron Letter is sent, outlining their grievances.
8-10 February 1879	Posing as police, the Kelly Gang take over the NSW town of Jerilderie, robbing the bank and leaving the Jerilderie Letter.
26-28 June 1880	Kelly Gang take over town of Glenrowan. Their plan is to wreck a special police train and shoot any survivors. They wear armour for protection. The plan goes wrong and they are besieged by the police. Dan, Joe and Steve are killed and Ned captured.
11 November 1880	Ned hanged for the murder of the police at Stringybark Creek.

Source: Holland and Williamson 2003: 6-7; Jones 1995.

Ned Kelly has featured in ten films (see Figure 2). In addition to films, Ned has been the subject of numerous songs, books, paintings (including the famous Sidney Nolan series), plays, a television mini-series and an opera (Holland and Williamson, 2003). Like the Man From Snowy River, he featured in the opening ceremony of the 2000 Sydney Olympics.

**Figure 2: Ned Kelly films**

Year	Title	Comments
1906	The Story of the Kelly Gang	Often referred to as world's first feature film. Banned in 1912
1920	The Kelly Gang	
1923	When the Kellys Were Out	
1934	When the Kelly rode	Banned, re-released in 1934
1947	A Message to Kelly	Not completed
1951	The Glenrowan Affair	
1970	Ned Kelly	Starred Mick Jagger
1993	Reckless Kelly	Comedy by Yahoo Serious
2003	Ned Kelly	Starred Heath Ledger
2003	Ned	Comedy cashing in on Ledger film

Source: Holland and Williamson, 2003: 21-24.

*Ned Kelly* (2003) was a major production starring Heath Ledger, Orlando Bloom, Naomi Watts and Geoffrey Rush. To tie in with its release a number of major museum and art exhibitions were staged (Frost, 2006A; Holland and Williamson, 2003). A Ned Kelly Trail was developed in North East Victoria and its brochure featured Heath Ledger and scenes from the film. Tourism Victoria confidently predicted a major tourism boom (Tourism Victoria 2003). However, the film was only successful in Australia and to a lesser extent Ireland. These film tie-ins of exhibitions and a trail, built on well-established tourist interest in Ned Kelly. This is particularly apparent in Glenrowan, which is dominated by tourist attractions and shops devoted to Ned (Beeton, 2004; Frost, 2006A; Pearce, Morrison and Moscardo, 2003).

### **Dissonance and Destination Image**

The choice between these two film-induced destination images may be seen as an example of *heritage dissonance*. Tunbridge and Ashworth coined this term to describe situations where heritage provoked amongst various stakeholders a 'discordance or a lack of agreement and consistency' (1996: 20). The term dissonance originally denoted music played in contrasting and jarring styles. This musical analogy is most appropriate here, for the anthemic score from *The Man From Snowy River* contrasts with the Irish folk songs associated with Ned.

Ned Kelly is arguably Australia's greatest cultural icon. He is 'the closest thing Australia has to a national hero' (Seal, 1996: 145) and 'Ned lives in Australian minds. Everyone knows who he is' (Gammage, 1998: 362). As an outlaw, forced into crime by persecution Ned Kelly represents a universal story. The historian Hobsbawm coined the term 'social bandit' for outlaws who explicitly or implicitly represent the oppressed. Hobsbawm argued that social bandits occurred wherever rural societies were under pressure to change or produce an excessive surplus for an elite. Citing examples from the Americas, Asia and Europe, Hobsbawm also included Ned Kelly as a social bandit (Hobsbawm 2001). The folklorist Seal saw outlaws as a cultural tradition in Britain, the USA, Australia and elsewhere and argued that outlaws were aware of this tradition and tried to follow its conventions (Seal 1996: 145). He particularly linked Ned Kelly to Robin Hood, Billy the

Kid and Jesse James (Seal 1996: 147). It is also important to understand that Kelly was contemporary with the great American outlaws; Kelly was executed in 1880, Billy the Kid was gunned down in 1881 and Jesse James in 1882. Kelly was of Irish parentage, and his story may be seen as a quintessential Irish story (Frost, 2006A).

However, there is an alternative view of Ned Kelly. He was, after all, a convicted murderer. Indeed, his killing of three police at Stringybark Creek made him the single highest murderer of police in Australian history. For a long period, there was a strong semi-official position that he should not be admired or celebrated in any way. In 1912 films of Ned Kelly were banned and later films only escaped the censor by presenting him as a villain justly punished (Holland and Williamson, 2003: 21). In 1956 the play *Ned Kelly* was to be staged in Melbourne during the Olympic Games, but was banned by authorities as it presented the wrong image to international visitors (Holland and Williamson, 2003: 18). During my schooldays, Ned Kelly had no part in the curriculum, and as an Honours student at the University of Melbourne in the 1980s I was told it was inappropriate to write a history essay on Ned.

The negative view of Ned has also focussed on the style of tourist developments at Glenrowan. Many towns in rural Victoria may be characterised as *Tourist Shopping Villages* (Frost, 2006B). A concept originally developed in Canada, these are 'defined as small towns and villages that base their tourist appeal on retailing, often in a pleasant setting marked by historical or natural amenities' (Getz, 1993: 15). This is an appropriate description of Glenrowan, except that the attractions and souvenirs on offer are generally tacky and downmarket. This poor view of Glenrowan has been magnified by a now well-known coverage of the bad experiences had there by the American travel writer Bill Bryson (2000). A cultural heritage Gold Coast, complete with Giant Ned Kelly statue, Glenrowan may be seen as discordant with the gentrified ambience often associated with nineteenth century streetscapes. While refining Glenrowan is often mooted, so far little has occurred.

Other towns connected with Ned also seek to capture tourist shopping in a heritage setting. For many years Beechworth was ambivalent as to what extent it should feature Ned (Griffiths, 1987). However, recently Beechworth has rebranded itself as 'Australia's best preserved Ned Kelly town'. Ironically, the focus at Beechworth is on the court, gaol and police cells, symbolic of the authorities and their attempts to capture and punish the bushranger.

The Man From Snowy River provides a respectable alternative to Ned Kelly. The poem was one of the standards of school curriculum. Paterson, a country lawyer, wrote poetry which consistently focussed on the squatters (large landowners). Unlike the other bush poets of his generation, he was disapproving of bushrangers and minor miscreants (Semmler, 1966: 4). As portrayed in the film, the Man is honest, respectful, aspires to property of his own and has a strong work ethic (stating that when he takes on a job he sees it through to its finished).

The appeal of these two film-induced images may be divided along gender lines. With a strong female lead, an emphasis on horses and no violence, *the Man From Snowy River* seemingly attracts a strong female audience. In contrast, *Ned Kelly* may come across as a western-style action film and discourage viewers. As such, a destination image based on the Man may be viewed as softer and having a broader appeal.

However, while the Man provides an appealing romanticised vision of the bush worker, he is limited by being a fictional invention. When a number of cattlemen claimed to be the real Man, Paterson retorted that he was entirely fictional (Semmler, 1966: 72). Nonetheless, both the film and later destination marketing strive to portray the character as authentic. The film does this neatly, by including Paterson as a character (a solicitor dabbling in poetry) who witnesses the Man's exploits. Current destination marketing for the region supports the claim that a Jack Riley from Corryong was the real Man, a historical entity contemporary with Ned Kelly.

## CONCLUSION

Two films reinforce two cultural heritage images which may be utilised for destination branding. There are two possible options for a destination marketing organisation to take. The first is to choose one and portray that as the cultural heritage of the destination. Such a choice promises a safe path which will not confuse potential visitors.

However, this first option takes no account that dissonance 'is intrinsic to the nature of heritage ... It is not an unforeseen and unfortunate by-product of the heritage assembly process' (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996: 21). Indeed cultural heritage demands dissonance. If a destination's heritage is sanitised and lacks conflict and passion, then it may also lack interest. A second option is to make a virtue of this dissonance. In the case of north east Victoria it may be to present both Ned Kelly and the Man as emblematic of its nineteenth century history. Though representing two perspectives, if set off against each other they may project an intriguing and attractive image.

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