

2011

'Not Just Ned: A true history of the Irish in Australia'. Safeguarding against 'a shallower and a poorer play'

Sharon Crozier-De Rosa

University of Wollongong, sharoncd@uow.edu.au

Publication Details

Crozier-De Rosa, S. 2011, "Not Just Ned: A true history of the Irish in Australia'. Safeguarding against 'a shallower and a poorer play", *Seanchas Ard Mhacha: Journal of the Armagh Diocesan Historical Society*, vol. 23, no. 1,

Crozier-De Rosa, Sharon 2011: 'Not Just Ned: A true history of the Irish in Australia'. Safeguarding against 'a shallower and a poorer play' (Review Essay), *Seanchas Ard Mhacha: Journal of the Armagh Diocesan Historical Society*, 23/1

'Not Just Ned: A true history of the Irish in Australia'. Safeguarding against 'a shallower and a poorer play'¹

Sharon Crozier-De Rosa

'Not Just Ned'

As an Irish migrant to Australia, I was particularly keen to visit the 'Not Just Ned: A true history of the Irish in Australia' exhibition at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra. As it was, given teaching and research commitments, I just managed to catch the exhibition one week before it closed. (It ran from St Patrick's Day, 17th March, to 31st July.) So, what struck me immediately on entering the museum was just how crammed full of visitors the exhibition space was. Perhaps a bevy of people, like me, all squeezing in a last minute peek before the exhibition closed? Or, perhaps it was something more than that? That is, demonstration of the remarkable pulling power of stories about the Irish and the contributions, good and bad, that they have made, and continue to make, to Australian history. An official figure of over 68,000 people all travelling to the nation's capital to view the exhibition goes a long way towards supporting the latter assertion.

'Not Just Ned' claims to be a 'true' history of the Irish in Australia, thereby implying that there is a false one in existence. The 'false' history, the title intimates, is that connected with the romanticising and mythologising of the Irish Australian bushranger Ned Kelly and the Kelly gang story; a story that was ripe for achieving its eventual folklore status with its elements, real or imagined, of police harassment, unfair colonial administration, class-bias, anti-authoritarianism, and rebellion staged by an Irish underclass against a British ruling class. The entry of the Kelly story into Australian folklore from the late nineteenth century onwards, the exhibition implies, has led to popular 'histories' of the Irish in Australia that have been shaped by these notions of a much abused, anti-authoritarian underclass.

However, 'Not Just Ned' has different stories of the Irish to tell; some that support many of the elements of the Kelly saga, others that challenge or oppose them. The abundance of stories told through a wide-ranging, sometimes disparate collection of artefacts – from sound recordings to shipping records to football jerseys to dolls' houses to nuns' habits and cardinals' croziers – combine to form a story of the Irish in Australia from the first years of convict transportation to the present day that is complex, multi-faceted, diverse, and often paradoxical. If history is, as historian Lloyd S. Kramer believes, a 'collection of voices and views', then this exhibition provides access to a multitude of the merged voices that makes up the history of the Irish in Australia.²

The Exhibition

'Not Just Ned' begins by drawing you into the most popular expression of Irishness in Australia today, namely St Patrick's Day celebrations. Gaudy green Guinness hats, tinselled wigs and shamrock shaped glasses threaten to set the tone of the whole exhibition before you notice that another door exists through which you enter the main body of the show. From here the displays proceed, somewhat chronologically, from 'Arriving' in Australia (whether as convicts, 'free' settlers or as part of the colonial administration) to 'Settling' (pastoralism and exploration) to 'Building a new life' (drawing on aspects of daily life influenced by the Irish including politics, religion, education, medicine, industry, literature, and Irish nationalism which was, the scattered placement of this theme throughout the exhibition infers, an intrinsic part of Irish life in Australia throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) to 'A continuing presence' ('the craic' and sports) to 'Reconnecting with Ireland' (celebrating recent connections between Australia and Ireland from backpackers to Rose of Tralee contestants to St Patrick's Day banners) and finally to 'Story circle' (a collection of 'bite-size' stories represented by artefacts ranging from an Irish convict's certificate of freedom to a South Australian suffrage petition organised by Monaghan-born, Mary Lee, to a gold probe used to remove a bullet from Australia's first royal visitor, the Duke of Edinburgh, after an assassination attempt by Irishman Henry James O'Farrell).

Of course, it would be impossible to give fair treatment to all the exhibits in a piece as brief as this one, but there were a few that stood out to me as inviting individual

attention, if not simply for their importance or prominence in the Irish in Australia story, then at least for their appeal to my own interests!

My interest in female migration to Australia drew me to a number of artefacts that cast particular light on the experiences and the influence of women in the Australian colonies, and following that in the Australian nation, whether as convicts, free settlers, missionaries or, later, as Australian women in touch with and motivated by their Irish heritage. The early decades of female migration to the colonies are represented by a diverse display of objects like Irish Workhouse registers, emigration posters and convict works; all of which convey a sense of pathos regarding the reasons for the removal of these women from their homeland and their eventual fate in the new land. An 1836 poster from Cork advertising the benefits of female emigration to a colony that was in short supply of females is one such exhibit. Beside this is part of the Indoor Register from the Armagh Union Workhouse (1847-48) which contains the name of Martha Moore, a 16 year old resident of the Workhouse who, along with 4000 other Workhouse orphans, gained free passage to Australia under a British Government scheme conducted during the famines of 1845-50. And adding to these stories is that of convict women told through a hand-stitched quilt made by a group of female convicts on board the ship, the *Rajah*, which arrived in Tasmania in 1841. Thirty seven of those *Rajah* female convicts were from Ireland, forming a small proportion of the over 9200 Irish convict women transported to the Australian colonies – Irish women being over-represented in terms of all female convicts transported during late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.³ Together under dimmed lights, these exhibits invoke a sense of the sadness and the loneliness that was likely to have coloured the experiences of women who for whatever reason – famine, poverty, or criminality – unenthusiastically found themselves at the far reaches of the British Empire.

On a more positive note, the exhibition also remembers a number of women who were, more or less, agents of their own destiny: women like the many Catholic missionaries who worked in Australia (including the Sisters of St John of God in Western Australia); those who formed part of the governing classes of the colonies, whether as wives, daughters or sisters of colonial administrators (such as the daughters of the Governor of New South Wales, the fourth Earl of Belmore, 'one of

Ireland's leading peers of the realm', whose doll's house forms part of the exhibition); those who entertained the colonials (and here I'm referring to Elizabeth Rosanna Gilbert, better known as Lola Montez, who toured Australia during the gold rushes of the 1850s and whose extremely popular but risqué 'Spider dance' earned the reputation, at least according to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, of being 'the most libertinish and indelicate performance that could be given on a public stage'⁴); those who led the way in childhood education (particularly Irish-born, Mother Mary Gonzaga Barry, founder and first principal of Loreto College in Ballarat, Victoria, a college that offered an uniquely advanced education for girls); as well as those women of Irish origin who paved the way either for Australian women's rights (such as the previously mentioned Mary Lee who played an intrinsic part in gaining the vote for women in South Australia in 1894, a remarkable feat considering that Ireland and Britain only granted women the limited right to vote in 1918 and then expanded that right in 1928) or for recognition of the country's multicultural and multi-ethnic make-up (such as Irishwoman, Claire Dunne, who was foundation director of Australia's first ethnic radio station in the 1970s). Whatever the opportunities granted to and the limitations imposed on women's lives through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many women of Irish origin or descent, the exhibition demonstrates, distinguished themselves, honourably or otherwise!

Of course, this celebration of the many invaluable contributions made by the Irish to an ever-developing Australian society, does not preclude the exhibition from also recognising the involvement of the Irish in the near-destruction of a previous Australian existence. As white settlers in a land that, previous to white migration, was solely inhabited by an indigenous population, part of the Irish in Australia story is their complicity with the dispossession of those original inhabitants. And, although the exhibition does not dwell on this to any significant extent, on a number of occasions it does make this complicity clear. The narratives about the Irish nuns who worked tirelessly on mission stations in order to not only provide for the welfare of, but also to convert the Aboriginal population are not presented without acknowledgement of the fact, as is stated in the Exhibition publication, that in the past, these religious groups were 'agents of change that had a destructive effect on the culture and society of Indigenous Australians' including, of course, in the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their parents ('Stolen Generation').⁵ Frontier

violence involving the Irish, among other white migrants, is also sparingly represented by, for example, the Wathaurong weapons. Shields, clubs and boomerangs made by the local Wathaurong people of Victoria in the 1830s, borrowed from National Museums Northern Ireland, draw visitors' attention to the reality of frontier violence in colonial Australia. Collected by the Irish brothers, John and Robert William von Stieglitz, who were members of the earliest European settlement near Melbourne in the early to mid-nineteenth century – men who admitted to 'hunting' Aboriginal people who had killed white settlers – and then taken back to Ireland as Aboriginal relics when the brothers returned in the 1850s (hence the loan from National Museums Northern Ireland), these weapons are an uncomfortable reminder of mainstream colonial attitudes and actions towards an Indigenous population that was deemed to 'dying out' in the face of an incoming, superior, more civilised, more advanced European 'race'.⁶ What these 'relics' present, then, is an insight into Irish agency in the colonising endeavour – a far sight from the image of the victimised, rebellious and anti-establishment Irish as epitomized by the Kelly myth.

Australianness, Britishness and the Irish

Still, for all its comments on the essentially commanding position of the Irish as white colonisers, this exhibition is also revealing of the often precarious position of the Irish in what was from its inception a British colony. 'About the Irish in Australia', Senior Curator Richard Reid argues, 'there are always opinions, some favourable, some not'.⁷ Appreciation for the contributions of the Irish to Australian culture, then, has gone hand-in-hand with contradictory feelings of disapproval; each equally responsible for shaping the history of this ethnic group. To demonstrate the negative reception of the Irish in the early days of the colony, 'Not Just Ned' tells the story of the persecution of Catholics in Australia, the Irish forming an overwhelming proportion of the members of this faith, that is, up until the increased migration of other ethnicities, such as the Italians, in the years immediately after World War II. Church pews, stained glass windows and crucifixes, for example, recall the deportation of Catholic priests, like Father James Dixon in 1804 and Father Jeremiah O'Flynn in 1817, who were suspected of inciting Irish convict rebellion against British authorities. A bishop's robes directs us to a point, a century later, when Australia was firmly a federated nation, and when members of the Catholic clergy were still

drawing negative attention from British authorities. Cork-born Archbishop Daniel Mannix, renowned for his vehement and essentially successful opposition to Australian conscription during World War I, also gained notoriety for being, in all likelihood, the only Australian bishop ever arrested at sea. Fearful that he would make anti-British speeches once he arrived in Ireland in August 1920, at the height of the Irish War of Independence, British detectives removed Mannix from a liner that was carrying him across the Atlantic. Here, Mannix was following something of a precedent already set by Irish-born Cardinal Patrick Francis Moran before him (who led the Catholic Church from 1884 to 1911), in that by celebrating and drawing attention to aspects of Irish ethnicity, including support for Irish nationalism, they also drew the negative attentions of British authorities, whether from within or outside of Australia, and more generally, from anyone with continuing loyalty to the notion of the British Empire, like the growing Orange movement in Australia that increasingly acted as 'the voice for concerned Imperial Protestantism' in the face of perceived anti-imperial threats.⁸

Indeed, the exhibition's many comments on Irish nationalism expressed within an Australian context are timely in that they intersect with current historiographical debate concerning the construction and the make-up of an Australian identity, or identities. Recent scholars working on the issue of Australian national identity have based many of their arguments on the issue of whether Australian national identity was rooted in or co-existed beside or was hostile to that of Britishness. Neville Meaney, for example, has argued that between the years 1870 and 1960, Australians 'thought of themselves primarily as a British people'.⁹ Broadly supporting this assertion, although differing on other points, Russell McGregor maintains that Australian national identity was not opposed to Britishness nor did it simply co-exist with Britishness, rather, he argues, Britishness was inherent to Australianness.¹⁰ It formed the repertoire of myth and symbol, the ethnic foundations, necessary for the construction of a national identity. Britishness and Australianness, McGregor then argues, were mutually interactive.

Walking through 'Not Just Ned', and remembering that the Irish and their descendents formed somewhere between 20 and 30 per cent of the Australian population up to 1914, one would be forgiven for taking issue with arguments to the

effect that a sense of Britishness overwhelmingly dominated Australians' notions of themselves from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century.¹¹ For, what often stands out in this exhibition is a sense of, if not always antipathy then at least estrangement between a sense of 'Australianness' of Irish descent and that of British descent, particularly at times when events in Ireland were escalating with respect to nationalism, self-determination and independence. It is difficult, then, to see how Britishness alone can be argued to have formed the sole ethnic foundations necessary for the construction of an Australian national identity. Rather, a multifaceted, multi-ethnic sense of Australianness presents itself; one that, complicates any straightforward conceptualisations of 'Australianness' as essentially under laid only by Britishness. For, as Reid again argues, this time in reference to Cardinal Moran, Australia's first Catholic cardinal,

For him, 'Australianness' was not simply defined by the Protestant Reformation in Britain, 'Good Queen Bess', Admiral Horatio Nelson and the battle of Waterloo. It could also draw on centuries of Irish history stretching back to St Patrick, the conversion of Ireland and the cultural achievements of the land of 'saints and scholars'.¹²

By renaming Empire Day (24th May), as celebrated in Australian state schools, as 'Australia Day' in Australian Catholic schools in 1911, in recognition of his belief in the ascendancy of Australian nationalism over British imperialism, cardinal Moran contributed boldly to an ever-emerging notion of Australian national identity.

The present

The stories represented by that part of the exhibition that takes visitors up to the present day are much less contentious than those just recounted. Entertainment dominates in the form of Irish dancing dresses, fiddles, Toohey's beer bottles, Australian Rules football shirts, hurling sticks, Rose of Tralee dresses, and backpackers' backpacks. Here non-Irish visitors find 'Irish in Australia' artefacts that have more recently permeated Australian daily life and with which they are undoubtedly familiar: from images of the first and only non-Australian-born footballer to win the Australian Football League's most prestigious medal, the Brownlow medal, Jimmy Stynes (who won it in 1991) to a photo of Irish horse, Vintage Crop, winning the 1993 Melbourne Cup (the first overseas trained horse to do so) to one of renowned Australian author of Irish descent, Thomas Keneally's books on the Irish

(his 1967 book, *The Great Shame: A Story of the Irish in the Old World and the New*) to a film featuring Irish comedian, Jimeoin, at an Irish music session in *The Quiet Man*, a local Melbourne pub.

And the extent of the exhibition's connection with present-day Australian-Irishness does not end here. Instead, it assumes a more interactive dimension. Visitors are invited to explore the possibility of an Irish heritage via a genealogy centre. And for those more certain of their Irish roots, a 'Story Kiosk' beckons. A 'Video your story here' sign promises not only to capture your unique Irish story, but also to potentially reward you for doing so by entering you into a draw for a Waterford Crystal vase!

'a shallower and a poorer play'?

A study of Australia without attention to its Irish component, esteemed historian, Oliver MacDonagh once claimed, was not exactly 'Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark' but, he continued, 'it would certainly be a shallower and a poorer play'.¹³ This exhibition has set out to guarantee that this Australian story is not 'shallower' or 'poorer' and is successful in the attempt. However, despite its catchy or clumsy title (depending on which review you read), 'Not Just Ned' manages to make the Kelly story the centrepiece of the exhibition with its focal display of the four 'suits' of Kelly armour (those made from ploughs and worn at the fateful, last shoot-out between police and the Kelly gang at Glenrowan, Victoria, in 1880). Still, perhaps the 'Not Just Ned' story would have been poorer for not having done so. For, no matter how 'true' the story of the Irish in Australia presented here has been, it is still the daring escapades of an 'Irish' outlaw determined to defy 'British' colonial authority that captures the public imagination.

¹ It was intended that the 'Not Just Ned' exhibition would tour Ireland after closing in Australia. Significant talks about the possibility had been entered into. Unfortunately, however, due to difficulties experienced by the Ulster Museum, such a course was abandoned. For more on this, see 'Rare chance to show Australia's Irish history to Ireland missed', in *The Irish Echo*, <http://www.irishecho.com.au/2011/04/07/ireland-will-not-now-get-to-see-irish-australian-exhibition/8893>.

² Lloyd S. Kramer, 'Literature, Criticism, and Historical Imagination: The Literary Challenge of Hayden White and Dominik La Capra', in Lynn Hunt (ed.), *The New Cultural History*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1989, pp. 97-128, p. 118.

³ For those interested in reading more about female convicts, see Kay Daniels, *Convict Women*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, 1998 and Joy Damousi, *Depraved and Disorderly: Female convicts, sexuality and gender in colonial Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997.

⁴ Richard Reid, *Not Just Ned. A true history of the Irish in Australia*, National Museum of Australia Press, Canberra, 2011, p. 45.

⁵ Reid, p. 81.

⁶ Reid, p. 33.

⁷ For access to Senior Curator of the National Museum of Australia, Richard Reid's essay on the Irish in Australia, see: http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/irish_in_australia/irish_in_australia/ or go to the exhibition publication cited above. See Reid, p. 14.

⁸ Reid, p. 19.

⁹ Neville Meaney, 'Britishness and Australian Identity. The problem of nationalism in Australian history and historiography', *Australian Historical Studies*, 116 (2001), pp. 76-90, p. 79.

¹⁰ Russell McGregor, 'The Necessity of Britishness: Ethno-cultural roots of Australian nationalism', *Nations and Nationalism*, 12/3 (2006), pp. 493-511.

¹¹ Reid, p. 14.

¹² Reid, pp. 17-18.

¹³ Reid, 15.