

NED KELLY

*“If you kill one you’re a murderer.
If you kill a hundred you’re a hero.”*

Ned Kelly (Mick Jagger)

Writing in his autobiography *The Long-Distance Runner*,

Tony Richardson was brutally dismissive of his Australian western, Ned Kelly. The picture he directed and co-wrote with Ian Jones was, he said, “like having a stillborn child. The shape and features were all there, but without the breath of life.” Richardson famously stayed away from the film’s world premiere in London in July 1970, ditto the

film’s leading man Mick Jagger – at that point arguably the most famous rock star on the planet. Jagger would, just weeks later, earn strong notices for his closer-to-home turn as a reclusive musician in Nicolas Roeg and Donald Cammell’s *Performance*, which he had filmed before heading *Down Under* to play the nation’s most iconic outlaw.

But the tepid-to-hostile reactions to Ned Kelly effectively strangled Jagger’s nascent acting career in the crib; he wouldn’t take another dramatic role until 1987 (Julien Temple’s *Running Out of Luck*). It can hardly be said that the thespian ranks were significantly weakened by Jagger’s prolonged hiatus. Even admirers of Ned Kelly will concede that the film is significantly hampered by the miscasting of the main, eponymous role, Jagger essaying an Irish accent even more wayward than that of Rita Tushingham’s in Woodfall’s Dublin-set *Girl With Green Eyes*. “When we programmed this picture we thought Mick Jagger would be a big personality with the younger audience,” sighed studio executive Arthur Krim in a company post-mortem.

The role of Kelly, in real life a burly and imposing bruiser, could have been an ideal fit for Richard Harris—but Harris was 39 at the time of filming, and Kelly was hanged in Melbourne Gaol at the age of 25, in November 1880 (shown in the film’s monochrome prologue, which casts an ominous shadow over all that follows). By this point his career as a “bushranger” outlaw had made him famous across Australia and far beyond, via exploits encompassing horse-theft, bank robbery and the occasional murder.

But all sources agree that Kelly was no mere mercenary criminal. Indeed, his campaign against the repressive forces of respectability, law and order in the British colony made him a folk hero for countless poor, exploited and downtrodden subjects of the crown, especially those, like Kelly himself, of Irish extraction. Ned Kelly thus slots neatly into the “angry young man” Woodfall template that stretched all the way back to the very first release, *Look Back In Anger*, except here with the stakes considerably higher.

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The protagonist now is no mere factory-worker, borstal boy or disgruntled intellectual, rather a radical, rabble-rousing revolutionary (a “wild colonial boy” indeed) taking on the might of entrenched power from the lowest possible starting point, in a protean country of volatile frontier spirit. The film sketches this context in impressionistic, episodic fragments, with the great cinematographer Gerry Fisher unobtrusively evoking period and location (it was indeed entirely shot in New South Wales) via dusty Technicolor widescreen, aided and abetted by Woodfall stalwart Jocelyn Herbert’s production design and costumes.

Punctuated and commented upon in choric fashion by Shel Silverstein’s distinctly 20th-century country-and-western ballads, boomed out by Waylon Jennings, the film provides a leisurely survey of Kelly’s last few years. Shaky when dialogue is to the fore, it strikes more vibrant chords in its intermittent passages of violence—Richardson, as illustrated in *Tom Jones* and *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, often excelled in action sequences, especially if horses were involved.

He saves the best until last here, as Kelly—protected but fatally encumbered by the self-made rudimentary armour with which his image has long been internationally synonymous—stages a last stand in the aftermath of an abortive train robbery. A lone, hopeless David against the multiple, armed representatives of Goliath, he staggers along the tracks in the spooky fog of dawn as animal howlings and croakings give way to the ricochet of bullets. Too little and too late, perhaps, but at the eleventh hour Richardson’s misbegotten “stillborn child” does—finally and movingly—come alive.