

BANDITS AND BUSHRANGERS

by
Jim Hoy

One evening in the early 1870s my wife's great-great-grandfather heard a knock on the door of his farm house in southeast Kansas. The young man standing there asked if he might sleep in the barn that night, and, in accordance with the customs of hospitality of the time, he was both granted permission and also invited to take breakfast with the family when the night was over. Next morning, as the meal was ending, the sound of hoof beats filled the yard and the stranger excused himself from the table and bade the family farewell. "Better hurry, Jess," called one of the half dozen horsemen milling around just outside the gate, as he handed the stranger the reins to a fiery black stallion. The family's suspicions as to the identity of the stranger were confirmed when Great-great-grandmother Russell, in clearing the table, found a twenty dollar gold piece under the stranger's plate. Their polite but taciturn young guest had been none other than Jesse James, the legendary Robin Hood of the Prairies, a chivalrous bandit, invariably solicitous toward any woman who happened to be in a bank or on a train he was robbing, who was renowned for his generosity to the poor at the expense of the rich, his fame and image forever secured by the martyr's death he suffered at the hands of one of his own band, the traitorous Robert Ford, who for the reward money, shot Jesse in the back as he was straightening a picture on the wall of his home in St. Joseph, Missouri, where he was living under the name Mr. Howard with his wife and small children.

It is a rare family indeed along the Kansas-Missouri border, if its roots go back to the Civil War era, that does not have a Jesse James story in its family folklore. Farther west it might be a Dalton Gang story (as in my own family), or perhaps one about Sam Bass or Billy the Kid. In California, Joaquin Murieta and Gregorio Cortez are celebrated in song and legend. Jesse James may have begun as a terrorist, pillaging with the Confederate-sympathizing guerilla leader William Clark Quantrill (subject of a recently-released film by Ang Lee, by the way), but he entered legend as a social bandit, a defender of the poor and downtrodden who was, himself, hounded by an unjust legal system.

According to legend, Jesse often asked for temporary lodging, usually incognito, sometimes even in the disguise of a woman, but he invariably left behind a gold coin in gratitude for the kindness he had received, sometimes

under a plate, sometimes in a flour sack, sometimes openly handed to his hosts. My favorite among his acts of charity concerns his novel way of saving a family's farm from the clutches of an unscrupulous money lender. Jesse would give the desperate settler the needed cash to pay off the cold hearted banker due later that very day to arrive at the homestead and foreclose on the mortgage. Instead of going home with the expected deed to the property, however, the puzzled but pleased banker would head back to town with a sack of gold coins, leaving behind a happy farmer holding a paid-up note, all papers duly and properly signed. Along the way, however, Jesse and his gang would waylay the banker, taking back the very gold he, Jesse, had earlier given to the farmer to give to the banker. Justice, in the eyes of the oppressed if not the law, had been served.

In a world where, as Woody Guthrie wrote in his ballad praising the character and deeds of twentieth century outlaw Pretty Boy Floyd, some people rob with a six gun, some with a fountain pen, our emotional sympathies naturally align themselves with the rough justice of the six gun wielded against the forces of a corrupt and unfeeling establishment. Whoever the outlaw hero, the mythic import of his (or her) deeds remains constant: Individualism valiantly struggling against, and occasionally triumphing over (although more often falling martyr to) the smothering strictures of the system. The social bandit is firmly embedded in American folklore and popular culture.

In Australia, as well, a vital strain of individualistic anti-authoritarianism has manifested itself in the glorification of the bushranger, figures such as The Wild Colonial Boy, Bold Ben Hall, Frank Gardiner, and most famously, Ned Kelly. Jack Donahue, the original of the Wild Colonial Boy, has been called the first mythological figure in Anglo-Australian culture; Ned Kelly its greatest. Cliff Hanna, in *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia* (1988), has noted "an enduring...bond between Australia and its bushrangers." He goes on to assert that other countries have "worshipped outlaws and law officers alike: Australia elevated its thieves and murderers into legends and reviled those who sought to capture them." I would assert that America is equally enamored of its outlaws and denigrating of its constabulary, for I know of no folk song that glorifies any of our legendary lawmen (e.g., Wyatt Earp, Bat Masterson, Wild Bill Hickok), but it is the rare outlaw, indeed, even such dastardly lowlifes as Jake and Ralph Fleagle, who does not have his own ballad.

Consider the case of Billy the Kid, whom legend has accorded twenty-one notches on his pistol at the time of his death, at age twenty-one, shot in

ambush by a former friend turned lawman, Pat Garrett. There have been poems about Billy, songs about Billy, histories and biographies by the dozen, novels and films by the score. He has been portrayed on the screen by Paul Newman, Kris Kristofferson, and Emilio Estevez (twice), among dozens of others. Larry McMurtry has written a major novel (*Anything for Billy*) about him. From what I can tell, trying to be as objective as one can given the adulatory tone of most of these works, Billy Bonney (or Antrim or whatever his real surname may have been) was a murdering young punk who most likely deserved his fate, but that is not how he is remembered by Americans. He may or may not be America's greatest mythical character (as Ned Kelly, whose hands are equally covered in blood and who has been equally revered in song, drama, and novel, is said to be in Australia's), but Billy the Kid is unquestionably the greatest mythical figure in the American West. In an interesting folkloric attempt to link Australian and American mythic frontier traditions, Ned Kelly's mother has been reputed (falsely, needless to say) to have been the sister of Buffalo Bill Cody's father.

My favorite exploit among Australian bushrangers is that of Harry Redford, who gained fame as a cattle duffer (i.e. rustler). Legend has him stealing a thousand cattle and driving them some two thousand miles over uncharted territory from western Queensland to the sale yards at Adelaide. His actual feat was nearly as spectacular, although probably a few hundred miles short of the reputed two thousand, and he was the second man, not the first, to drive stock over the route. Redford, with four companions, named McKenzie, McPherson, Doudney, and Brooks, did draft off a thousand head of prime cattle from Bowen Downs near present-day Longreach in west-central Queensland, then head them toward South Australia in early April 1870. When the cattle reached the junction of the Thomson and Barcoo Rivers, McPherson and McKenzie returned to their homes, leaving only three men to handle the stock. Redford and his two companions continued down Strzeleeki Creek, reaching Wallelderline Station in northeastern South Australia in June. There they sold a purebred white bull that Redford had earlier tried to leave behind but was too soft hearted to kill. A couple of hundred miles further southwest, at Blanchewater Station, Redford and his companions accepted Sir Thomas Elder's offer of five thousand pounds for the mob, continuing on to Adelaide where they sold their horses. Doudney and Brooks disappear from history at this point, but Redford was arrested three years later and charged with cattle theft. It seems that the overseer at Bowen Downs, detecting the loss of his prize

bull as well as noting the absence of a large number of cattle, had followed the cold trail to Wallelderline Station, where he recognized his bull. From there he tracked down the sale of the other cattle and the horses and traced Redford to New South Wales. At his trial in Roma, Queensland, where McKenzie and McPherson had turned state's evidence, leaving no doubt whatever about his guilt, Redford was nevertheless found not guilty. Apparently his peers on the jury were impressed by the audacity and the success of his venture, which had taken him through country that had killed Burke and Wills only a decade earlier, especially since many of them, too, had increased the sizes of their own holdings by duffing cattle from the squatters. At any rate, Redford gave up crime after his acquittal and was drowned a few years later in the Northern Territory. Harry Redford is undoubtedly better known in Australian literature by the nickname given him by Rolf Boldrewood in his novel *Robbery Under Arms*: Captain Starlight. Many of the deeds imputed to Starlight, like the nickname itself, appear to be the product of Boldrewood's fertile imagination. But then the author, whose real name was Thomas Alexander Browne, obviously had a talent for coining *nom de guerres*.

Other well-known bushrangers include Ben Hall, whose career in crime came about only after he had been twice arrested on false charges of aiding genuine bushranger Frank Gardiner. After returning home from his second trial and finding his livestock dead and his wife and son gone, Hall decided to become the bushranger he was accused of being anyway, later taking over Gardiner's gang when he had retired to Queensland after making off with a huge haul from the Great Gold Escort Robbery in 1862 at Eugowra Rocks in New South Wales. The law caught up with Gardiner two years later, and he was given a thirty-two year sentence, commuted after ten years for good behavior (on condition that he leave Australia). Hall's end was less fortunate, shot by "the traps" (i.e. the police) as he was camped alone. Hall's most reliable helper, John Gilbert, was also shot by troopers less than a week later. His end, and his companion John Dunn's escape, are stirringly recounted in Banjo Patterson's poem, "How Gilbert Died."

There's never a stone at the sleeper's head
 There's never a fence beside,
 And the wandering stock on the grave may tread
 Unnoticed and undenied,
 But the smallest child on the Watershed

Can tell you how Gilbert died.

Betrayed by the old man who was supposed to be sheltering them, Gilbert died so that Dunn could escape, but Dunn, too, was soon captured and died by the hangman's noose at age 22.

I do not know whether the Jack Dean celebrated in Henry Lawson's poignant poem, "Taking His Chance," was historical or not, but the daring of a man who will risk death for a dance with his girl, who greets death not with a fervent prayer to God to save his soul but with a defiant request for a gesture of the earthly love that has caused his death: "Just kiss me, my girl, and I'll ehance it, he said," this defiance of the ultimate authority for a material reward in the face of imminent mortality epitomizes the allure of the bushranger, and of the outlaw.

Not all soeial bandits were men. Although greatly outnumbered by their male counterparts, nonetheless both Australia and America produced female badmen. One of the more daring female bushrangers was Elizabeth Jessie Hiekman, who also used the surnames Kemp, Martini, Hunt, and McIntyre. In the 1920s, after killing her husband while defending herself from his physical abuse, Jesse escaped into the rugged country north of Sydney, west of Newcastle, and south of Musswellbrook. There she became a cattle duffer, adept at losing her most dogged pursuers with her superior bushcraft. Fifteen years earlier, in 1906 and 1907, Lizzie Kemp had been the female ehampion roughrider of Australia, performing in a circus and buckjump (i.e. brone-riding) show. Although she spent some time in jail for her thefts, her death came not from the authorities but as a result of a fall from a horse, compounded by pneumonia.

In America undoubtedly the most famous woman outlaw was Belle Starr, born Myra Belle Shirley at Carthage, Missouri, in 1848. Before her marriage to Sam Starr, a Cherokee Indian outlaw related to the more notorious outlaw Henry Starr, Belle had borne a daughter, Pearl, whom she claimed to have been the ehild of the notorious Cole Younger. She was also the common law wife of Jim Reed, and bore his son, Eddie. She married Starr in 1880, then helped him steal some horses, for which they both did time. After her release she eontinued to be involved in outlawry. Sam was killed in 1886 and a couple of years later Belle remarried, this time to a Creek Indian named Jim July. Belle was ambushed by shotgun in 1889, her murderer unknown, although possibly her jealous husband. Like Billy the Kid and Ned Kelly, but unlike Lizzie

Hickman, Belle Starr was mythologized, first in a dime novel published soon after her death, and has since been the unworthy heroine of numerous laudatory histories, films, and novels, including Speer Morgan's post-modernistic *Belle Starr*.

This brief recounting of some of the more notorious American outlaws and Australian bushrangers has the disadvantage of omitting the stories of lesser known lawbreakers. I have not, unfortunately, had the opportunity to discover many of those from *Downunder*, but my research into the folklife of the American West has turned up some fascinating tales of men such as the horse-stealing policeman, Hurricane Bill Martin; the bank-robbing marshal, Henry Newton Brown; and Dave Rudebaugh, the only man ever feared by Billy the Kid.

Whether famous or obscure, the bandit and the bushranger continue to exert a strong hold on the popular imaginations of their respective countries. Consider, for instance, that sympathetic ballads have been composed about contemporary lawbreakers Gordon Kahl, a North Dakota income tax rebel, and Claude Dallas, a loner living off the land in northern Nevada and southern Idaho, who killed two game wardens who had come to arrest him for poaching deer. Or consider the current mythologizing that is developing around Eric Rudolph, the suspected bomber at the Atlanta Olympics, who is at this writing still eluding a massive manhunt in the mountains of North Carolina. Whether Ned Kelly and Jesse James, or Mad Max and Rambo, the lone individual who takes on the forces of conformity, win or lose, is guaranteed an admiring and enthusiastic audience.