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“Outlawed” in Oz: A *Film & History* Associate Editor Visits Australia

Deborah Carmichael

At the invitation of the National Museum of Australia in Canberra, I had the opportunity to travel to the land down under in early February 2004 to participate in an international conference, “Representing Outlaws: Bushrangers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries in Popular Culture.” This invitation grew out of the museum’s interest in our 2003 (volume 33) issues on “The American West(s) in Film, Television, and History.” I had the pleasure of “guest editing” those issues and the privilege of working with many fine scholars. Those issues resulted from *Film & History*’s successful conference in Kansas City in November 2002. The National Museum’s interdisciplinary conference on the outlaw in popular culture included film, history, literature, folklore, music, and art.

After a welcoming speech by aboriginal representative Mrs. Ruth Bell, keynote speakers, folklorist and cultural historian Graham Seal and Professor Stephen Knight of Cardiff University opened the conference by exploring “what is an outlaw hero, and how are they made?” Warren Fahey, a prominent Australian folklorist, performer and broadcaster offered lively folk tune serenades celebrating outlaws and national culture.

Film events included *Ned Kelly* (2003) by feature film producer Nelson Woss and *Besieged: The Kelly Legacy* (2003) by documentary producer and director Gregory Miller. Both of these Australian filmmakers provided a behind-the-scenes look at film productions based on historical, yet legendary subjects. Marilyn Dooley of Screensound Australia, the National Screen and Sound Archive, provided rare silent footage and underscored the problems of preservation efforts facing film archivists. (My visit to the permanent exhibition on the history of Australian broadcasting and film at Screensound offered a comprehensive media study.) Novelist Gary Langford spoke on his fictionalization of the Kelly story, *The Adventures of Dreaded Ned* (1980). Langford also shares scriptwriting credit for the television movie *The Bushrangers* (1975).

Although Ned Kelly, Australia’s preeminent outlaw, loomed large in the presentations, participants also discussed international figures as well. Professor Stephen Knight, British expert on the legend of Robin Hood, outlined the “metamorphoses of the leading brand-image in outlaw tradition,” tracing the legend’s affinity to outlaw stories found in other cultures. Dr. Zhang Ye of the *Australian Chinese Times* discussed traditional codes and values

of the “Water Margin Bandits” from 12th century China. Barry Carr of Latrobe University examined the cultural interpretations of Pancho Villa in traditional 19th century *corridos* and 20th century *narco-corridos* music. Stephen Foster of the Australian National University examined the controversial cinematic representation of Indian Bandit Queen Phoolan Devi.

In addition to the outlaw as portrayed in art, history, and media, representatives of the National Museum of Australia, the National Trust (Victoria) and the State Library of Victoria—Ian Coates, Diane Gardiner, and Allison Holland—discussed the difficult problem of avoiding a validation of violence when planning an exhibit featuring criminal subjects. As cultural repositories serving a diverse audience that task requires a difficult balance in presentation. Although officially “outlaws,” the likes of a Ned Kelly or Phoolan Devi were considered folk heroes to their contemporaries, as well as to the generations who grow up with the embellished legends of these criminals. Because there are more popular culture tales than physical artifacts available, a curator’s task becomes even more complicated. All of these are issues that those of us beyond the museum walls may not appreciate.

This brief description of some of the many excellent presentations cannot do justice to the diverse ‘conversation’ this conference produced. I’m sure we all departed with new research projects in mind, as well as questions to be sorted out in later reflection. I know I have much more to learn about Ned Kelly! And I highly recommend the very civilized practice of morning and afternoon tea breaks to stateside conference planners.

I would be a poor guest if I did not briefly comment on the fine staff at the National Museum and the work they accomplished. The conference was convened in conjunction with a special exhibit, “Outlawed: Discover the Stories Behind the World’s Rebels, Revolutionaries, and Bushrangers.” This large installation features fourteen international outlaws from Asia, Europe, Australia, and America spanning centuries of his-



Kelly Gang Armour.

Courtesy of the National Museum of Australia.

tory and folk legend. Creating a cohesive exhibit of international scope would seem problematic, however the museum staff solved this dilemma masterfully using thematic rather than chronological or geographical organization of the materials they collected. Beginning with “Foundation Myths,” visitors can immediately start to make cultural connections. Throughout the exhibit, displays are designed to do more than satisfy the curious. The viewer is moved to consider why or how these men and women chose to live outside the law. And although the famous shootouts and criminal deeds are present, the final thematic thread reminds us that the consequences of those choices were at best incarceration. Finally, the exhibit offers popular culture representations of the featured outlaws, ranging from comic books and films to outlaw action figures emphasizing the continuing importance of the legends in our time.

The research and negotiations with museums, private collectors, and film studios around the world, and the planning and installation of this exhibit took over two and a half years to accomplish. The professionalism that went into “Outlawed” shows; this is one of the most impressive exhibits I have ever visited in terms of both presentation and content. My personal thanks to Kirsti Wehner, Daina Harvey, Jo Duke, and Cinnamon van Reyk, as well as all the other National Museum staff who made my visit so pleasant. A special thank you to the media technicians who were so helpful both at the conference and the earlier public lecture. For more information on the museum and this exhibit go to <http://www.nma.gov.au>. The beautifully illustrated one hundred and fifteen-page catalogue of “Outlawed!” is well worth the purchase price, providing well-written commentary on the outlaws included in the exhibition.

As the staff at the National Museum pointed out, many families who contacted them have stories that have been passed down about encounters with the “outlawed.” The museum received numerous tales of grandfathers, or great aunts and uncles who had met the likes of Ned Kelly. Like those Australians who have family folklore, part of my interest in Jesse James (and my presentation) grew from stories my grandfather told about his boyhood encounter with the James Gang.

In doing two radio interviews I discovered that Australian interest in the American West and the films that celebrate that short era of our history continue to fascinate both countries. Interviewers displayed a broad knowledge of our films and history and call-ins to an Australian Broadcasting radio program I participated in demonstrated a love of western characters in both film and literature. The callers posed very specific and informed questions on the likes of Calamity Jane and characters from Zane Grey novels. The American West and its outlaws are alive and well in Australia and the National Museum of Australia. Both the conference and exhibit revealed the cultural connections of outlaw myths from around the globe. The opportunity to visit Australia and to meet so many talented scholars was indeed a remarkable experience.

In addition to my pleasant time spent in Canberra at the conference and the National Museum (and at a charming hotel with colorful parrots perched in the trees), I had the unique experience of a Super Bowl Monday on my arrival in Sydney. There were no expensive American advertisements and, perhaps from jet lag, I also missed the wardrobe malfunction. However, the Australian news media had fun with that *faux pas* or conspiracy for the entire week.



The dramatic architectural design of the National Museum of Australia in Canberra.

Courtesy of the National Museum of Australia.

A trip to the botanical gardens with a charming, volunteer guide who carefully pointed out native fauna started my whirlwind sightseeing blitz. A cool and breezy ferry ride with spectacular views of Harbor Bridge and the opera house brought me to Taronga Zoo where I came face to face with kangaroos (exciting for me but commonplace for

the Aussies). The koalas looked cute and cuddly but probably the highlight of my zoo visit was the chance to hear (and see) the kookaburras. It was impossible not to giggle when I heard them. Although a long and tiring trip across the Pacific (Qantas worked overtime to keep the passengers entertained and comfortable), I’m ready to pack the suitcase and do it all over again. The land down under and the hospitable folks at the National Museum are at the top of my list of favorites.



Deborah Carmichael, Associate Editor of *Film & History*, is a Ph.D. student and teaching assistant at Oklahoma State University, specializing in film studies and nineteenth-century American literature. Her most recent publications on film appear in the *Chronicles of Oklahoma* and *Hollywood’s White House: The American Presidency as Film and History*. She is currently editing an ecocritical anthology on the

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