

Heroes and Hero Worship: Celebrating 'Machismo' in the Early Bush Ballads

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There needs not a great soul to make a hero; there needs a god-created soul which will be true to its origin; that will be a great soul!" ?

— Thomas Carlyle, On Heroes and Hero Worship and the Heroic in History

The title of this paper takes its cue from Carlyle's book on the lives of great men and to begin the paper quoting from the same text is no mere ornamental rhetoric; instead its pertinence in the context of this paper can be understood if a probe is made into the lives of Bushranger heroes- more particularly for this paper Ned Kelly, Ben Hall and Jack Donohue. For the people sitting in this part of the globe they need some introduction since in spite of their popularity in Australia they are lesser known persons here. All three mentioned here are renowned later Bushrangers in Australia, who were originally residents of Ireland. Either their parents or they themselves were deported to the unknown landscape that Australia was to them and had to undergo both physical and mental sufferings before adapting to the place. The reason for selecting them in particular for this paper is that they are not only roughly contemporary; they also share common Irish ancestry and are not in any conventional sense of the term heroes. Rather they are real-life anti heroes whose heroism is justified in their survival against all odds - a feature true to their humble and oppressed origin in poor households. In fact their Irish lineage further strengthens their underdog status since

the Irish people were viewed as inferior cousins by the British power. Therefore, in order to make such an exploration into the lives of convict Bushrangers it becomes extremely important to analyse the social context that facilitated the rise of such persona and popularised the otherwise outlaws as exceedingly important popular Australian cult figures.

The beginning of White Australian history as a settler colony is marked by deliberate violence involved in what Elkin calls the 'depopulation' of the Aborigines from a land which the Whites for their own benefit of colonisation termed as terra nullius or the empty land. However, even when the native Australian population was denied their rightful claim over the land after much initial resistance the remaining job of settling in a colony situated in an antipodean location with almost contrasting weather conditions and unknown flora and fauna was also an equally, if not more, challenging task for the White convict settlers. The continent was vast, with little or no means of communication and the convicts had to start from scratch to make life feasible. Even after settlement in the new found colony was over, a strange dilemma engrossed the people of Australia regarding their loyalty to the 'mother country'. Still officially British subjects, they were torn between their allegiance to the Crown and their desire for a free life in a new location oblivious of the ignominies of their past. It was only much later that the next generation of Australian settlers could free themselves from any psychological bond of loyalty to Britain that another mission of proclaiming the identity of 'uniquely Australian' started. The mission was inspired by a defiance of hopelessness brought about by the fact that most of these deported convicts who belonged to the underprivileged strata of the White European societies were already punished once back in their own country and were almost always re-punished in their new homeland. The hopelessness arising out of repeated punishment gave way to the audacity to disobey of social and legal norms set by Britain and imposed over Australian population, ravaging the wealth meant for the empire and killing British officials. It is this exigent mission that has given rise to the myth of a fighter settler in Australia that has been celebrated in the social context of emergent white Australian national consciousness and cherished as a fond inspiration from the past in the process of building a new nation out of a proclaimed 'nothing'.

The particular and unique image of the Australians, labouring hard to adapt themselves to the various situations they faced in the hostile terra nulla, depicted in the various literary works of the period contributed enormously in shaping the public

imagination of belonging, territory and nationhood. It is clear that Australia as a nation was not defined by its geographical extent; the study of Australian nationhood is the one which involves understanding the general attitude of Australian people towards their lives in relation to their environment. Colonialist attitudes, permeated by the Protestant ethic of hard labour, to settling and taming the land were popularized in the public imagination by the agency of literature. Writings by convict settlers and their supporters in Australia, though they were written at various points space and time, all presented the hardships of the Australian way of life and celebrated the triumph of 'virile manhood' against the unfriendly forces of nature in the harsh land. Literature functioned in Australia to create what Benedict Anderson has described as the 'imagined community,' celebrating the myth of its uniqueness. The uniqueness was expressed in bush myth as well. The notion of the 'Aussie battler' became central to literature and it became a term of respect and endearment intended to empower and recognise those who existed at the bottom of society, or, like the outlaws, lived at its margins.

Quite invariably the conditions entailed in the undertaking of the Bush settlers required immense physical strength and mental steadfastness that are more often than not taken as features associated with 'masculinity'. In fact it is not at all erroneous to comment that the Australian Bushrangers indeed patronised 'hyper-masculinity'- as a contrast to putative 'femininity'- as the only appropriate way of survival in the rugged terrain. Later on, their hardship did not remain confine only to bodily sufferings but there was an additional factor- that of coping up with the ignominy of their convict identity; that increased the hardship in the process of their survival. And when survival is the basic and vital issue it was not at all considered immoral or unscrupulous when the convicts broke laws or violated norms; rather the law-breakers emerged as icons and rebel figures in Bush life. Thus jailbirds like Ned Kelly, Jack Donohue and Ben Hall were, contrary to the convention of their parent country, not seen as social outcasts but were the ultimate image of 'macho' malehood- the image that had been and is still idolised by the Australian people today. The Bush ballads being celebration of the adverse life in an alien land, also sincerely and jubilantly praise white Australian 'machismo' which is embodied in the adventures of the daring Bushrangers.

In fact early Bush poetry were products of the oral tradition of folklore and were composed by poets who were from the same underprivileged strata of the society to which these celebrated rebels belonged. The reader/ audience of this poetry were, again, the common Australians who shared a common fate with the subject and creators

of such ballads. This helped to create a model of 'national literature' clearly distinguished from other contemporary literatures of the world by virtue of its unique identity, free from the disreputable effects of servile imitations, written by people whose intellectual, moral and aesthetic values were shaped specifically by Australian environment and culture. Australian literature endorsed two of the most popular and engaging themes of the settlement era - convict and rebel figures and the ambivalent attitudes of people regarding them - gratifying the aesthetic and intellectual concerns of both the general public and serious readers. In fact texts - both oral and orthographic- demonstrated their utility by focusing on their own era and therefore received critical attention as well as a wide general readership.

A detailed study of the works of the bush balladeers reveal certain exciting facts about the social and cultural functions that the verses performs in shaping up the national spirit and national identity of Australia. In their enthusiastic interpretation of the intricacies of bush life the poets actually contributed in endorsing the concept of masculinity as the shaping spirit of bush cultural and such chauvinistic construction of bush manners was indeed, the call of the day. Men in bush poetry personified heroism and courage for they had to survive against inclement terrain and intolerable living conditions. To quote Peter Myers "Most men were valued and employed, for their muscle power and survival skills. They were forced to live in harsh conditions, just to earn a living" so that it can be easily deduced that Australia is a country largely dependent on the power of the muscles as Myers calls it in his essay 'Australian Bush Poets':

... In Australia muscle ploughed the field, cut the wheat, washed the clothes and pulled the loads...

The lyrical tradition of bush songs was born of settlers and influenced by Aboriginal society in the geographical areas referred to as The Bush. The bush was something that was uniquely Australian and very different to the European landscapes familiar to many new immigrants who were sent from the European countries especially as convicts. Most of the convicts preferred bush ranging to imprisonment and hence the settling of new colonies in Australia took place. Hardships of convict life may probably be accounted for male oriented nature of the bush poetry since there was a shortage of women in rural and 'outback' Australia.

The underdog status of these Bushrangers, was the chief object of admiration in

the Bush ballads. Invariably this tendency to celebrate the underdog is in accordance to the ideology of 'masculinity' itself. Interestingly 'masculinity' in the emergent Australian society was considered normative and as Robert Connell suggests normative masculinity emphasised 'the connecting of masculinity to toughness and competitiveness'. Fighting against odds, therefore, is an ostensibly masculine activity in itself, since men must fight to overcome hindrances. An underdog is one who does not only overpower his enemies, be it in any form or shape, but also surpasses his own limitations, so that the challenge he faces is doubly disturbing. If he succeeds in doing so, he establishes himself as a champion of champions and consequently becomes a subject of legends. Thus, coming from families which almost always bore the burden of disrepute as convicts these outlaws' activities were oriented to defy the system that had resulted in their disreputable present due to (often) trivial faults on their part. While Jack Donohue's deportation to Australia resulted from a charge of felony, which meant, according to contemporary British law, that he was arrested in anticipation of a crime not actually committed, Ben Hall's father and mother were deported from England and Ireland respectively on petty charges and his plight derived from the sorry fate of his parents. It is perhaps Ned Kelly, alone, among the three whose convict lineage helped him grow into the fiercest and most notable of all convict outlaws in Australia. However in the Bush ballads, such humble and infamous bloodline is not seen as an impediment to glory but rather as a factor adding to their fame. In "My Name is Ben Hall" a first- person version introduces the poetic persona while he makes reference to his difficult but still good old childhood days in Murrurundi, New South Wales and the reasons that caused him to be banished:

*Well, my name is Ben Hall, from Murrurundi I came,
And the cause of my turn out youse all know the same.
I was sent to the gaol, my cattle turned to the Crown.
I was forced to the bush my sorrows to drown.*

The reference made in these lines is to the hardship that Ben Hall had to undertake as son of convicts and working with horses and cattle, developing his skills and expertise. Indeed it is a 'manly' endeavour to sink someone's private sorrow of losing out a hard but still respectable life because those in command of the society liked it that way. And the intensity of forbearance required to tackle this requires strength that befits only a man.

Similarly, in one of the several versions of "Bold Jack Donahoe" Jack Donohue's early stay in Ireland has been projected as 'happy' and desirable in spite of, or perhaps because of the poverty associated with it. His notorious profession (of a highwayman) is no longer seen as infamous, it rather fetches the epithet "bold" before his name since this, to the balladeers is a patriotic stance - a valid unwillingness to succumb to the anarchy of the Crown :

*His name it was Jack Donahoe of courage and renown -
He'd scorn to live in slavery or humble to the Crown.*

*This bold undaunted highwayman, as you may understand,
Was banished for his natural life from Erin's happy land.
In Dublin City of renown, where his first breath he drew,
It's there they titled him the brave and bold Jack Donahoe*

Upbringing, thus, plays an influential role in asserting the superiority of the lawbreakers as rebel figures. Humble origin makes their desperation to establish an identity all the more credible since in the existing social structure they belonged to the lowest level - the step from which ascension to the corpus of the main society is indeed a commendable one.

In fact in most of the cases the lawbreakers are seen as 'more sinned against than sinning', again a feature of the very 'male' Australians since bearing the pain involved in living life in a rugged, inhospitable terrain under extremely humiliating social conditions and striking back at the oppressors rather than submitting to their power requires strength and courage that only a man is thought to possess. Again, it is this which prepared a ground for their illegitimate actions to be justified on the basis of sympathy and approbation. In a poem titled "The Ballad of Ben Hall's Gang" thus, the offender appears as a Robin-Hood figure whose defiance is the consequence of a terrible wrong done to him:

*Ben Hall he was a squatter bloke Who owned a thousand head;
A peaceful man he was until Arrested by Sir Fred.
His home burned down, his wife cleared out, His cattle perished all;
"They'll not take me a second time, 'Says valiant Ben Hall.*

Placing the outlaw-heroes among the eminent and strict lawmakers from the 'mother country' as unarmed or lesser armed figures whose very competence is a matter of doubt among experts the Bush balladeers seek to heighten the dilemma among readers whether to consider their ambitious act as one of courage or ambitious foolhardiness. But at the same time one does not fail to notice that their upbringing under trying conditions has made them experience tougher challenges every day. The dilemma heightens the readers' anxieties and when ultimately they achieve some kind of success against the more powerful lawmakers from their 'parent country' -even a partial one - it becomes a collective achievement for all Australians who bravely face such impossible challenges everyday. Their success thus signifies the triumph of adventures and struggles that the Australian Bushmen undertake day after day, once again making a point to make implicit references to the necessity of a 'masculine' nation which can handle insurmountable odds.

Projection of lawbreakers as rebellious and anti-establishment figures is rooted in the masculine culture that is conspicuous in the growth of Australia as a nation. Their acts of going against the law of the 'mother country' are, in the changed context of post-industrialised Australia, no longer viewed as acts of unlawful defiance but have come to be projected as acts of bravery. In Edward Harrington's(1895-1965) poem "The Bush rangers" for example Ned Kelly's cry against the 'troopers' is presented in the light of sympathy for the lawbreakers:

*Ned Kelly drew rein and he shaded his eyes -
The town's at our mercy! See yonder it lies!
To hell with the troopers!' - he shook his clenched fist -
'We will shoot them like dogs if they dare to resist!'*

What is notable in these lines is that deliberate uses of slangs render a robust masculine flavour as they simultaneously display the arrogance of an outlaw as an attitude reflecting his courage and nonchalance. Therefore, although the poet acknowledges the illegal nature of their activities he finds reason to admire it as well:

*They stuck-up the station and raided the town;
They opened the safe and they looted the bank;
They laughed and were merry, they ate and they drank.*

*Then off to the ranges they went with their gold -
Oh! never were bandits more reckless and bold.*

In this poem the poet substitutes illegality with a note of bravery since the outlaws are called 'bandits' on the one hand, but at the same time the pejorative sense embedded in this word is redeemed by the epithet 'bold' on the other.

In another poem by Kelly's contemporary and comrade Bushranger Joe Byrne, written in the first-person, Ned Kelly the defiant outlaw is introduced in unambiguous terms:

*My name is Ned Kelly
I'm known adversely well.
My ranks are free,
my name is law,
Wherever I do dwell.*

In these few lines marked by their brevity, vigour and arrogance - recognized features of a characteristically masculine language- there is a clear indication that in spite of acknowledging the stigma associated with his name he feels no prick of conscience; rather he happily asserts his insubordination to the law. This is also a known feature of the masculinist agenda since submission to overpowering forces means to lose hope and courage in face of adversity and 'masculinist propaganda' never allows fatalism.

Masculinity does not only mean celebrating the triumph of putative 'malehood' but according to Connell it also implies 'the subordination of women" . This was essential since in the nascent civilisation the skewed sex ratio lead to an almost womanless version of a society in which male camaraderie was most favoured. The myth of the 'battler woman' emerged later as is evident in the ballad "Ye Sons of Australia" by an anonymous poet:

*The daring Kate Kelly how noble her mein
As she sat on her horse like an Amazon queen.
She rode through the forest, revolver at hand,
Regardless of danger -who dare bid her stand?*

*May the angels protect this young heroine bold
 And her name be recorded in letters of gold,
 Though her brothers were outlaws, she loved them most dear
 And hastened to tell them when danger was near.*

These lines talk about Kate Kelly, the famous outlaw Ned Kelly's sister whose valour is justified in terms of her effort to defend and help the male outlaws. Thus women's contributions were always measured in terms of their efficiency to aid the 'machismo'. Otherwise they were considered hostile agencies, fighting against whom was a part of the general male behaviour. This is evident in the ballad "Ben Hall" where Hall's plight is the result of his wife's treason:

*An outcast from society, he was forced to take the road,
 All through his false and treacherous wife, who sold off his abode*

At the same time this act of treachery provides the opportunity for a full display of Ben Hall's 'manliness'.

There is another general trope which roughly parallels female hostility in the Bush ballads i.e. Nature. Bush poetry is also about adventures and struggles against forces and agents of nature, both external and internal- external nature referring to the surrounding environment and internal nature corresponding the mental make-up that is influenced by a stigmatized pedigree - and it further advances the notion of masculinity since 'bravery', 'courage', 'strength' are terms customarily related to 'men'. 'Bravery' is a term that has been continuously linked with 'masculinity' and it is adequately manifested only in a trying situation. Such trying situations are contrived by the hostile forces of nature and it is against this projected image of nature as an adversary that 'malehood' of the Bushrangers find further strength. In Will Ogilvie's "The Death of Ben Hall" Ben Hall's bravery and machoism are measured in such terms:

*They had followed his track from the
 Weddin Heights And north by the Weelong yards;
 Through dazzling days and moonlit nights
 They had sought him over their rifle-sights,
 With their hands on their trigger guards.*

*The outlaw stole like a hunted fox
Through the scrub and stunted heath,
And peered like a hawk from his eyrie rocks
Through the waving boughs of the sapling box
On the troopers riding beneath.*

*His clothes were rent by the clutching thorn
And his blistered feet were bare;
Ragged and torn, with his beard unshorn,
He hid like a beast forlorn,
With a padded path to his lair.*

*But every night when the white stars rose
He crossed by the Gunning Plain
To a stockman's hut where the Gunning flows,
And struck on the door three swift light blows,
And a hand unhooked the chain -*

*And the outlaw followed the lone path back
With food for another day;
And the kindly darkness covered his trac
And the shadows swallowed him deep and black
Where the starlight melted away.*

Fighting against the troopers from a rugged land with little or no food, the only mercy that an outlaw could receive was darkness to conceal them in their exiles. However, this justified the Bushmen's machismo once again as it meant fulfilling both the conditions of 'masculinity'- displaying courage and toughness and subjugating feminine forces.

Thus, there were various ways that the Bush balladeers utilised to elevate the convict outlaws as heroes. The argument behind it was that in a civilisation that was in

its formative years people badly needed heroes who would serve as models in their struggle against inhospitable landscape, unbearable climatic conditions and the stigma associated with their root in Europe. They needed heroes who could surmount such physical and psychological challenges, even at the expense of conventional morality. Ned Kelly, Ben Hall and Jack Donahoe were, therefore, celebrated in such poetry as embodiments of bodily strength and will power that are still considered hallmarks of Australianism. Eric Hobsbawm describes such rural outlaw heroes as social bandits. They were champions of the peasantry and common people and enjoyed a symbiotic relationship according to Hobsbawm. They relied upon the support of local people to evade capture and in turn were seen as the champions of peasant based social movements, protests and rebellions. For Hobsbawm, the social bandit:

reflects the moral values and ideology of the community...his predatory activities are consistent with this ideology-his victims are those defined as enemies by the community...he is supported in word and deed by the community.

Taking a look at the presentation of such social bandits in the Bush ballads from the modern perspective it can be easily deduced that the laudatory tone of the Bush ballads written about the adventures of the outlaws was desirable and normative since they sought to establish the otherwise hated figures as a trope for modern Australia and to create a unique identity which is distinct from its colonial overlord..

References

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