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## *Road trip to the past: finding a setting through photography*

### *Abstract*

*Writers regularly use photography for their research, but this fact is rarely talked about. They go to locations to take their own pictures, or they find them in books and archives; the use of photography is a visceral form of notetaking. While theorists such as Sontag, Foucault and Rose consider why the picture is worth much more than a thousand words, writers exploit the fact. But what if that picture was taken 130 years ago? The writer may have to take into consideration the distances, both chronological and cultural, that have developed since. As research for a novel that takes place in 1880, I have compiled an archive of historical photographs that help me visualize my story. If I go on a search for the places these pictures were taken 130 years ago, what will I find?*

My first stop on a ten-day research trip of Kelly Country was the Old Melbourne Gaol. I had flown into Melbourne, rented a car, and picked up an RACV map titled 'Kelly Country: 1st Edition'. I was ready for anything. The plan was to follow the little iron Ned masks on the map as they conveniently appeared along the Hume Freeway north into High Country.

I had done my research; I knew the importance and significance of each town, the robbed banks, mothers' houses, lock-ups and landmarks. What I needed was to *see*, to feel these places in order to write about them.

I had gone on a similar research trip earlier in the year while I was in Canada. That story followed the British Columbia section of the Canadian Pacific Railway as it led from Vancouver on the west coast, up the Fraser Canyon into the mountain ranges of interior BC. The culmination of that trip was a town called Yale, a port for the sternwheelers that fed the gold rush and the railway construction. At a few stages of its life it was one of the largest cities in North America; now it is a diminished little town overshadowed by the black cliff faces on both sides of the mighty Fraser River.

Two very different research trips for the same novel, to be set in Canada and Australia in the 1880s. The Yale trip moved me through an imposing and stagnant ghost story of one of the largest construction projects in human history, and the inadvertent killer of hundreds of men, most of them Chinese railway employees. The railway formed the backbone of what is now Canada.

This trip, this Kelly Country tour, took me through far-rolling farmlands and busy little communities, each staking their claim on the Kelly legend. Ned Kelly posters, pens, t-shirts, coffee mugs, foam helmets, key chains, bottle openers, stuffed Neds, welcome mats, number plates, a giant statue - everything that has ever turned a tourist dollar. There are at least 20 replica

suits of armour to be found among the museums, pubs and gift shops. But there is also a wild and open land that is about farms and vineyards, hiking and silence.

I went to feel these places, these two countries with similar and disparate histories, to dig my boots into the dirt and listen to the wind through eucalypts and cedar. I also went to photograph the remains of dead worlds with my own camera, to compare my photos with their 130-year-old counterparts. The research originated in books, archives and libraries where, one after another, beautiful and striking old photographs kept cropping up, demanding attention and hinting at a bounty of untold stories in both countries.



Railway snowshed construction camp, circa 1883.

Image PN-25864 courtesy of Royal BC Museum, BC Archives: permission pending

There emerged a narrative in images running parallel to the textual history. As my own archive (Derrida 1996) of images grew, I realized that I was very quickly filtering images I wanted and images I didn't want, those that seemed important and those that could be ignored for my purposes. The relationship between the photographs' subjects and the camera began to take on significance, as did my relationship to the images. I was looking for photographs that would agree in some way with the ideas I had for my narrative; those pictures that did not support my vision of the settings in my story were discarded.

Taken at face value, the photograph is the purest of archival documents, in that it maintains a special closeness to whatever original it happens to copy ... But there is a corrosive side to archival desire, and photography pictures this for us as well. As Derrida explains, the archive contains the theory of its own institutionalization, essential to which are the rules determining what the archive must contain in order to be complete and what must be kept out in order for it to seem unified. (Armstrong 1999: 16)

In the Victorian era, photography was a new process, developing at different speeds in different countries; the equipment was expensive and private photography wasn't happening yet, at least among the common class. And yet there are many, many pictures to chronicle the Kelly story and the Canadian railway story.

I use these archival images like a screenwriter would use storyboards. I can lay them out on the table in a sequence. When the novel's hero first arrives in Yale

in 1880, I have pictures of Yale taken in 1880 that I can use for visual reference. Chinese workers huddled over a barrel gambling. Men leading pack-mules over a trail hacked into a cliff face. Later in the novel, when another character stands by watching the siege at Glenrowan, there are clear photographs of the police smoking out the Kellys, and a horrifyingly crisp picture of the corpse of either Steve Hart or Dan Kelly, laid out at the feet of the gathered crowd.

Why were these scenes photographed? Why did they appeal to a photographer? Were they spontaneous, or were these images the result of a long set-up and preparation? What did photography mean to the Victorian era? In Queen Victoria's declining years, she:

took a keen interest in the progress of the Boer War, and kept an album of photographs of all the officers killed: an agonizing task for the equerries who had to write to all the widows asking for these pictures. Having compiled it for a year she tired of it, saying it was too sad to look at. (Wilson 2007: 321)

If Victorians saw in photography a new form of cataloguing, then it is important to understand motivation. From its inception, it was the child of a custody battle between science and art, yet for the general public, personal interest in photography might not have gone beyond the photographer's studio with its painted backdrops and borrowed costumes. I remember the early days of that magical thing called the 'internet', which to a young teenager was nothing more than a place to search for pictures of my favourite bands, new video games, or images of bikini babes. The public does not always leap at the cultural importance of new things in the way that the sciences and arts do. To understand the social impact of early photography, I can't take for granted my own presumptions of images as research, an acquisition of views from that era, what they meant, and what they mean.

Photography is acquisition in several forms ... through image-making and image-duplicating machines, we can acquire something as information (rather than experience) ... This is the most inclusive form of photographic acquisition. Through being photographed, something becomes part of a system of information ... Reality as such is redefined - as an item for exhibition, as a record for scrutiny, as a target for surveillance. The photographic exploration and duplication of the world fragments continuities and feeds the pieces into an interminable dossier, thereby providing possibilities of control that could not even be dreamed of under the earlier system of recording information: writing. (Sontag 1978: 155-56)

Reality as a target for surveillance. The invention of the camera's eye introduced the subject to the idea of being viewed by a machine. Before the camera, we could be written about, but if we were illiterate, what did it matter? We could perhaps be painted, but what painter stooped to the level of the poorhouse or the alley for more than a lampoon, and wouldn't caricature work its way into the highly subjective painting? However, with this machine, the camera, we could be shown ourselves, and become newly self-conscious. Conscious of ourselves, as seen through an eye that proposed to show us what we really were, what category we belonged to. 'People came to visualize themselves and others not only in terms of gender, class, race, and nation, but in terms of intelligence, morality, and emotional stability as well' (Armstrong 1999: 17). Like Bentham's Panopticon, as written about by Foucault, the camera forced us to acknowledge how we were being seen.

The panopticon is a system that disciplines through surveillance. A central watch tower is surrounded by multi-storeyed cells, each of which holds an inmate, well-illuminated and completely visible at all times from the tower. The supervisors inside the tower are not visible from the cells. 'Never certain of invisibility, each inmate therefore had to behave "properly" all the time: thus they disciplined themselves and were produced as docile bodies' (Rose 2005: 84).

Could Foucault's 'docile body' not be seen to some extent in most photographs of human subjects, even in the process of photographing? The empty eye of the camera points at a person, and that person positions himself in a manner that he wishes to be seen. There is a fear of being un-photogenic, of having 'bad' pictures taken of oneself. When the camera enters a room, do we not tense inwardly, and try to look normal, knowing that we may be surveyed at any time by the machine?

The power of surveillance is the self-discipline that it inflicts. The eye of the camera, the blank sentinel, even in the hands of the closest people in your life, changes the way you *act*. You see yourself from its eye and want to look *right*, to reiterate and confirm the image of you that (you think) has been established. *He doesn't hold his fork like a shovel. She doesn't watch TV with a slack mouth.*

Visibility is a trap ... [The inmate] is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication ... Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power ... It is an important mechanism, for it automatizes and disindividualizes power. Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up ... Consequently, it does not matter who exercises power. Any individual, taken almost at random, can operate the machine ... The more numerous those anonymous and temporary observers are, the greater the risk for the inmate of being surprised and the greater his anxious awareness of being observed. The Panopticon is a marvellous machine which, whatever use one may wish to put it to, produces homogeneous effects of power. (Foucault 1995: 200-2)

This power is exercised in the Foucauldian manner: it operates from more than one level (Rose 2005: 80). It is arranged by those in control, but also maintained by the subject, the recipient. Power is a constant, in that its presence (surveillance) is assumed to be taking place at all times and is therefore effective in controlling the behaviour of the subject.

Couldn't the flood of photographic images have had a similar control over Victorian subjects? The idea of seeing oneself through the eye of a camera, a machine that proposed to capture one's reality, would awaken a sense of self-consciousness regarding class, identity, self-worth, a place in the fabric of society that could be certified visually. Adding to the self-discipline of self-consciousness was the concept of the archive, and photography's acquisition of people as archival information, to be categorized. This idea of acquisition through photography had a consequence: a further distinction between different levels of society. It reiterated that those capable of acquisition had the advantage over others, again, through this new means:

Photography endowed the image with a capacity to reduce its subject matter to the visible traces of virtually any person, place, or thing, much as if an adjective were replacing a noun. Rather than the image of an object pure and simple, a photograph offers its viewer an image marking a specific position within a larger field of vision, a position the viewer could recognize instantly. (Armstrong 1999: 80)

What photography was giving to the 19th century, or at least to those in a position to receive it, was a new tool for ingrain[ing] the concept of *us* and *them* and being able almost instantaneously to capture and reproduce evidence to support these views, like an unfortunate and irrefutable stereotype. See? Poor people really *are* goofy looking. What Charles Dickens had done in writing to show us how poverty might be vividly imagined, the camera could immediately corroborate in its own visceral terms. Seeing poverty in front of one's face was one thing; a viewer in such circumstances would have to acknowledge the fact that he or she was both viewing and being viewed, producing a certain level of self-consciousness. But seeing poverty in a photograph, privately, as often as one liked, brought an intimacy to the sway held over the lower classes. In a Victorian world, the photograph was a whole new power: a selective and voluntary 'reality'.

I realized the importance of learning the place this new technology would have had; if I am inside the head of my character, what do I think when I look into a camera's eye? At a photograph of myself? How different does my world look in the photograph? Like hating your own voice in a recording, disagreeing with pictures of yourself is an experience we all share to some extent. Thankfully my digital camera can hold about 600 images, so I just keep clicking until the stupid thing gets it right. This was not the case in 1880. Some of the pictures I'm using in the research were done in a studio, but the majority were taken outdoors. Each photo required a long set-up and preparation, and depending on whether it was dry- or wet-plate technology, the photographer might have had to lug around a portable development studio, or store the plate until he returned from the field, finding out much later whether the exercise was futile or not. To the subject, say a railroad employee far from home, working seven days a week in an inhospitable environment, the appearance of a photographer on the scene would be cause for excitement. For many, this would be their first and only picture ever taken. What potential for a warped self-impression. What potential for a researcher, more than a century later, wrongly to sum up the meaning or significance of the image.

For an illustration of some integral methodologies related to visual materials (including, of course, photography) see Gillian Rose's chapter 'Visual Methodologies' in *Research methods for English Studies* (Rose 2005: 67-89). However, what I am interested in here, and what I have not been able to find much of, is self-reflective discussion on the use of photography as research by fiction writers. I think that this is an important area, and I hope to be able, by writing about my own experience, to generate some discussion on photography as fiction research.

Writers use photography whether they write about it or not. They might go somewhere and take their own pictures, or they might find them through research. Writers take notes and photography is a visceral form of note-taking. A picture is worth a thousand words. Save your writing hand or your typing fingers for more important things.

If I can, as part of my writing practice, I'll go somewhere and take pictures to refer to later, or I'll find pictures if I can't go there myself. Like the concept of

the storyboard, visuals to write around, to write to, appeal to me. I have a picture taken circa 1885 of men at a lumber camp. They are lined up to get their hair cut and their beards shaved. The barber chair is a tree-stump and the barber looks like a lumberjack himself. It is obviously a Sunday. The image is immortal, comical and striking, and so I find a way to work a scene like it into the novel. How many novels, poems, movies have sprung from a single photograph?

I knew that with this project, simply collecting archival photographs and reading biographies and histories of the Victorian era wasn't going to be enough. I had to go and physically stand in these spots. The danger in only seeing something as it *was*, black-and-white or sepia, locked in a posed eternity, is that the writer can re-present that time as something unreachable, precious. Stereotyped.

So, there is a stage of research that submerges in libraries and archives, books, photos, newspapers, journals. The author learns what he needs to about the culture surrounding the story, gathers and retains a way of seeing into the setting. This can take days, weeks, years. There will never be 'enough' research done, and at some point we have to leave the library and face the real world. Preferably with a camera in hand.

When I write I want to create visual sensations; I look at something, walk around it, smell it, hear it, leave it. Taking pictures is not the only way to preserve what any of the senses experience, but it is the most feasible, the most immediate. A sound recording? Perhaps of a train whistle, unusual birds. A smell-jar? Any young boy can tell you stories of failure in that field. Pictures. Sight-vision. Show, don't tell.

But before I can show, I have to go look. So I went. Old Melbourne Gaol was the first stop. I expected a dark awe, standing under the gallows where Ned's life ended, walking the iron platforms as he had done for months, listening to the hollow booming creaking and clanking of doors and counting the days until the blackness. But the other tourists irritated me. Why was this couple smiling? Why did that kid force his mother to buy him a foam Kelly helmet in the gift shop as I was buying my entry ticket? Couldn't they see? The death, the suppression and de-humanizing, all around us. Two teenagers were standing at the gallows. One wrapped the rope around his friend's neck while their girlfriends told them to stop being, like, gross. A large, badly-Photoshopped picture of Ned wearing an orange prison jumpsuit was on the wall. The caption above it read 'Was Ned Kelly a Terrorist?'

I knew my irritation was only able to emerge because there was nothing there to overpower it. *I* wasn't feeling anything. The writer, the vacuum of feelings, the sponge that sits at the next table, gleefully taking notes as your relationship ends over a candlelit dessert. Unable to *feel*? Ridiculous. I panicked. Took some pictures. Took a breather, thought of my own arms strapped behind me, the hood lowered, my neck wrenched by 90 kilos at the end of a perfectly calculated rope-length. Nothing. What was going on here?

I had to get out of this funk. I walked over to the replica suit of Kelly armour on a stand. I lifted the helmet and began to put it on.

'Dude,' my research assistant said, 'how many sweaty schoolkids have licked the inside of that helmet?'

I put the helmet back on its stand and tried not to sink to the floor. Was I too late? Had it all become a cartoon?

I wandered into one of the cells. Inside that cell there is a display cabinet. The cabinet has several items in it. One of the items is a mask. A calico hood, rather. It is white, slightly peaked, covering the whole head and hanging down below the face. It looks a lot like something a Ku Klux Klan member would wear. The placard above the hood explains that it was worn by prisoners in solitary confinement whenever they were taken out of their cells. The purpose was to alienate them completely from fellow inmates. The eyeholes are very small. This hood brought Old Melbourne Gaol into perspective for me. It stares blindly into the faces of the tourist horde, their camera flashes. It is a damnation. It would be *humiliating* to have to wear something like that every time you stepped out of your cell, a constant reminder that you would one day soon have the hood with no eye holes lowered over your face. My failure to be *impressed* by the Gaol up until this point was suddenly embarrassing.



Calico hood. Photograph: Christopher Bowman

It takes something out of left field to jar us and open up our receptors. This calico hood was not in anything I had read on Ned Kelly, on the system of incarceration at the time, or any type of memoir I had picked up. It was a shock, the type of shock that a writer sometimes needs to remind himself that he will always have research to do.

At the Victoria State Library, Ned's armour, his rifle and one boot are on display. The lighting is dramatic, shadowed. The artefacts do not seem attached to the realm of mortal man; they almost appear to glow, are as unreal as a display of dragon scales or the weapons of a centaur, something beyond a man's capacity. This is what Ned Kelly has become, in many ways. A juggernaut. Superhuman. Nonhuman.

If, by some quirk of fate or tactics, Ned Kelly had survived to live out a life sentence in prison, he would have wasted away - an increasing pathetic figure. The crippled left arm, right hand and right foot would have accelerated his deterioration ... he had suffered at least 28 gun shot wounds in that final battle. And not all the lead had been removed ...

Over long years of imprisonment, the legend would have survived. But it would have been blighted by the reality of a man old - even decrepit - before his time; withering away in absolutely inevitable and accelerating decline.

The end result of the regrettable campaign to rush Ned Kelly into an unmarked grave was to guarantee that he would be

eternally twenty-five - eternally a man in his remarkable prime.  
He would be an immortal enemy. (Jones 2008: 399)

In Melbourne, the *human* that was Kelly feels truly dead. Melbourne was the end of the line for him. It was a solid and unchallengeable authority. There were not the bumbling detectives camping out overnight for nothing, or the fistfights with police officers easily won by a teenage Ned. Melbourne was the *system*. Incarceration, dehumanisation, execution. No petitions would appease it. No appeals would override. Here was death at the end of a rope.

The next day, gas tank full and coffee in the cup-holder, as I emerged from Melbourne onto the open farmlands, I realized that a dank gaol was a strange starting place. I was working backwards through this history. My story was not about Ned's death, his caged ending. It was about life. He saw much more than a bluestone cell and a three-storey hallway. He was not a city boy.

The first stop out of Melbourne was Avenel, where as a child Ned rescued young Dick Shelton from drowning, and was awarded the silk sash that he wore around his waist on special occasions, such as the siege at Glenrowan fifteen years later. Here was Ned's boyhood, this creek gurgling under a stone bridge, orange with eucalypt leaves and silt.

In the absence of others, alone with an elusive idea of a past, I could imagine properly. I was familiar with this: creeks, farms, bridges, silence and small towns. I was not familiar with Melbourne, and certainly not accustomed to being in a prison. Kelly spent considerable time behind bars, but it was the Kelly at home I wanted to find. On his horse. Splitting wood. At the pub.

It wasn't necessarily Ned himself that I was looking for, but rather his world, as a place for my own characters to appear and to live during those years. Their setting, I suppose.

My first research work for a fiction is always an investigation of settings. I go to places, I live in them for a time, take photographs and write notes. I attempt to allow the invisible story to emerge.

Sometimes, if the story already exists, I find the process to be like that of a filmmaker seeking locations, or a forensic detective looking for clues with which to piece together past action. (Krauth 1999: 33)

For a week I followed the little black iron helmets across the map, spending an hour here, a full day there, collecting pictures and conversations and email addresses, learning the distances between towns that until now had only been a series of words in books connecting to various Kelly Gang activities.

Some of the icons on the map led to signposts next to empty fields or small plaques on banks, hotels, a courthouse, an old boot-maker's shop, a pub, in towns otherwise ordinary. Some led to towns deeply engraved with the Kelly legend; these places embrace the tourist army and want to feed, shelter and clothe them in Kellyana. Burger joints, motels, museums, souvenir shops, named after Ned and bursting with bushranger bargains. Glenrowan, where the attempted derailing of the police train was botched and the final showdown took place in 1880, is home to one of Australia's finest signature landmarks: the big thing. I've driven past the Big Avocado dozens of times, witnessed the Big Joint in Nimbin, seen the Big Bicycle and Big Muffler on the Gold Coast, but here was the real deal: Big Ned Kelly standing six metres high. He guards the entrance to the Ned Kelly Memorial Museum. The owner informed me that it is



the best Kelly museum, according to *Getaway*. I was not going to argue that. It was the off-season, and it was a week day, so I had the town to myself. I wandered Glenrowan from morning to night, collecting every landmark from all angles inside my camera and my body. Most of the photographs from the 1880 siege were in my head, and I knew where to stand to re-take them. It helps also that there are numbered signs to guide the tourist on a walking tour through those final hours. The signs have many of the photos on them, and a description of what the tourist is seeing. In the quiet wanting-to-rain air, watching horses run and listening to dogs bark, it was not hard to imagine the town as it may have been 130 years ago.

Beechworth, to that effect, is largely identical to the Beechworth of the late 19th century. The tour guide assured us that, were Ned to cruise through downtown Beechworth today, he would recognize almost all of it, save the paint jobs, automobiles and business names. This was an affirming and relieving thing to hear for the researching writer. We stood in front of the house where most of the studio photographs from the Kelly saga were taken, and passed by the Ovens & Murray Advertiser offices where a lot of the news on the Kellys was sent to the printers. We blocked the footpath in front of the barrister's office frequented by the Kellys, and stood in front of the police lock-ups, male and female, that Ned and his mother had been held in. We stood under the balcony of the hotel where Ned looked up at Aaron Sheritt's widow and doffed his hat, as he was carted through town by the police.

The Beechworth Gaol sprawls at the end of town, privately owned and empty. The owner is reluctant or unwilling to open it up to the public as the Old Melbourne Gaol has been. There are still bodies there, awaiting a Christian burial.

After my Kelly tour of Beechworth, I purchased the four-part miniseries aired on Channel 7 in 1980, titled *The Last Outlaw*. In terms of sheer research and a devotion to *facts*, this series is light years ahead of all other Kelly-related entertainment. Of course, it was also co-written and created by Ian Jones, author of the definitive biography. Jones' name is hard to escape when one tours Kelly Country. He is quoted and referenced on plaques, signs, pamphlets all over the district, anything asking for an authority.

Probably the biggest surprise of the research trip was the involvement and the investment by the tourist sector, public and private, in maintaining the history of the Kelly gang and their sympathizers, their detractors, their surrounds. There are some people in these towns who have dedicated their whole lives to preserving and presenting Ned Kelly. Few of us can or will ever have to experience what true discrimination feels like. He was very old for his 25 years. At one time or another, the *majority* of his family and friends were imprisoned on dubious charges. If given more time, if given to a greater sense of destiny, if he had not steered his gang directly towards the authorities, the uprising could have had a much stronger, if not as dramatic, impression on the political future of south-east Australia, perhaps the entire country. On a national level, this episode of Australian history is alternately a stain, overrated, a cartoon, a metaphor of struggle against an authoritarian England, a cause for pride, a personification of the larrikin spirit of an entire country summed up in one simple and iconic image: an iron helmet made from the very machinery that tills the land.

Bill Bryson is certainly one of those detractors who see Kelly as overrated. In his book *Down under* (released in North America as *In a sunburnt country*), Bryson not only writes off Kelly completely, he proceeds to verbally bash the entire Kelly history and any real significance that Australians supposedly

mistake it for having, offering comparisons to (presumably more well-known and more important) Americans from that era:

It is an interesting fact, and one that no doubt speaks much about the Australian character, that the nation never produced a law enforcement hero along the lines of Wyatt Earp or Bat Masterson in America. Australian folk heroes are all bad guys of the Billy the Kid type, only here they are known as bushrangers ...

The story of Kelly is easily told. He was a murderous thug who deserved to be hanged and was. He came from a family of rough Irish settlers, who made their living by stealing livestock and waylaying innocent passers-by. Like most bushrangers he was at pains to present himself as a champion of the oppressed, though in fact there wasn't a shred of nobility in his character or his deeds. He killed several people, often in cold blood, sometimes for no very good reason ... [Here follows an excruciatingly faulty description of the Glenrowan siege, wrapped up as a Keystone Kops-style farce.]

Not exactly the stuff of legend, one would have thought, yet in his homeland Kelly is treated with deep regard ... Even serious historians often accord him an importance that seems to the outsider curiously disproportionate. (Bryson 2000: 219-20)

I suppose 'Weary' Dunlop is not a folk hero *per se*, but I took photos of this memorial statue before entering the Benalla Costume and Pioneer Museum, home of Ned's green silk sash and other artefacts: an old bridle, firearms, a witness box that Ned stood in, replica armour, the portable police cell that held Ned. The cell door on which Joe Byrne was strung up for photographs is here. I have seen the photos of Joe's body, crossed with rope to hold him upright, his calm half-smile for the camera as police bristling with rifles hung around waiting for their publicity pictures. Here was the door that a human had hung from, trussed up like a side of beef. Behind me was the glass display case with Ned's sash. I was getting myself ready to examine it. 'The historical people show up at about noon,' said the museum attendant. 'They might let you take a picture of it if you can turn off your flash.' I declined. The sash looks as old as it is; it is faded by sunlight and age. The gold tassels are stiff and brown. There is a lot of blood on the silk.

I am not Australian, yet I am capable of being deeply affected by this story, enough to read the biographies and histories, make the trip, attempt to make connections between the old photographs and my new photographs. There is nothing about this history that invites an off-hand irreverence. There is no reason to say that only a country like Australia could be fascinated by Kelly.

It had been ten days. After photographing my fifteenth replica suit of armour, helping myself to a stack of Ned beer-coasters, throwing an apple core off the cliff at Power's Lookout, filling my backpack with brochures, and boring every museum owner and tourist info centre employee out of their minds with my repeated questions, I was approaching a danger of becoming desensitised, overexposed. I sat my last night in the hotel room, slightly drunk, deleting dozens of pictures I had taken. They were disconnected, repetitive. They did not fit the story. They did not belong in the archive. The fact that I knew they didn't fit was enough indication that my trip was over. I could see this place, in photographs and inside my mind. I had what I had come for.

When I returned home with a few hundred pictures (thanks to 21st century technology) I transferred them to the computer and began categorizing and naming the images. Even after my ritual purification of the other night, there were still too many that now seemed useless. It was with some disappointment and concern about my photographic abilities that I noticed in many pictures, even those taken because I was enthralled and inspired by what was around me, the end result appeared flat and dull. Clouds that had roiled across the sky in an awesome and deep sky-scape now looked boring. Hills rolling away to the horizon, incredible distances, were hardly visible. Photographs are a flawed beauty, a drunken journalist. Half the reason for this trip was to take photos to compare to those taken 130 years ago, in order to compare landscapes and buildings, to bring vibrant colours and random angles to the shadowed and iconic images from the turbulent saga. And here I was, looking at pictures taken only a few days ago, already disagreeing with the way they presented the world I'd been standing in.

This sensation was not new; it had happened on my Canadian research trip. Black wet mountains that roared up into a freezing winter sky, almost vertigo-inducing in their sheer angular height, looked small and tame from the computer screen. Back in Australia a couple of weeks later, sweating in boardshorts and looking at these safe little images on the screen, it struck me how difficult it is to re-live something, to bring it to life on the page when it is a world away, both in time and location. As an example: I was comparing a photo from 1880 and a photo from 2009, taken in exactly the same spot. In the old image, there is a cliff-face that is completely missing from the new one. Okay, it has been dynamited. That's fine. Wait, the railroad ran on the other side of the river. Why is there a railroad on *that* side? It was built by a rival company. What year? Does it have anything to do with my story? No, but it still happened; therefore I have to find out. The two companies eventually agreed that they would share the parallel tracks and one would be for east-bound trains and the other for west-bound. Of course, hours of research taking place over a few days were necessary for me to answer these questions, and get the relevant dates, names and so forth. Will I use the information in my novel? Probably not. And here I was again, comparing the old Kelly photographs with my rambling series of settings taken over ten days, pictures that I had taken myself and was already unsure about. I could feel the oppressive and familiar weight of trying to write with any claim to authenticity coming down upon me.

This is a genuine concern and, as any writer knows, a potential project serial-killer. How can I write about this? I'll have to do so much research that it won't be worth it. Journalists, theorists, novelists, biographers, playwrights, historians, anybody writing anything eventually faces this beast. Handling something that feels untruthful to readers, and the potential backlash mire writers in a bog of time-waste and redundant reading. One could spend years trying to read and learn enough to begin writing about something, and then give up completely and start over on a new project. The fear of misrepresentation is real; it is a shadow-lurking book strangler, and I am somewhat envious of those prolific writers who bang away at the keys, seemingly unconcerned with the details, the cringe-inducing mistakes of truth or content. It would be nice to write recklessly at least once in a while.

Recently, the so-called 'History wars' in Australia have drawn attention to the concept of creative writers being wrong, not being truthful, and consequentially subservient to historians. It is impressive to witness the lambasting that historical fiction writers can receive from prosecuting historians. The charges can range from blasphemy to libel to defamation of character, and as Camilla Nelson points out:

Another interesting feature of the debate ... is the way in which novelists are quick to flee the historical terrain and surrender to the authority of history - *in a way that highlights the pressing need for writers working within the academy to negotiate a critical and theoretical stance in relation to other disciplines in the humanities*. For instance, [Inga] Clendinnen [a key figure in the 'history wars'] approvingly notes how Peter Carey, under attack from Kelly historians, would 'slide further and further down into his chair'. (Nelson 2007; emphasis added)

Yet historians must also admit that any claim to a 'truth' is born of a certain amount of speculation and a level of subjectivity. Clendinnen herself says:

God-historians hovering somewhere up and beyond the texts win no knee-bobs nowadays. We are increasingly ready to admit that a human hand pushes the pen or taps the keys of the word processor, that there is a needle 'I' between the past and the reader through which everything must pass. (Clendinnen 1996)

To simplify the debate might suggest that historians cannot claim an easy authority, yet they can still stand between fiction writers and *their* attempts to grip history. Emily Sutherland creates an excellent formula for explaining the position that writers have in relation to historians and biographers:

There is a difference between historical people portrayed by historians and biographers and those by fiction writers. This difference is the subject of debate and contention between historians, biographers and novelists. Think of a spectrum. On the left are totally fictional characters (TFC). On the right are accounts of people written by historians (HA). Nearer the centre, but still on the right, are the subjects of biographies (B). Historical characters in fiction (HCF) are placed near centre left between biography and fiction.

TFC	HCF	B	HA
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Characters as Fiction

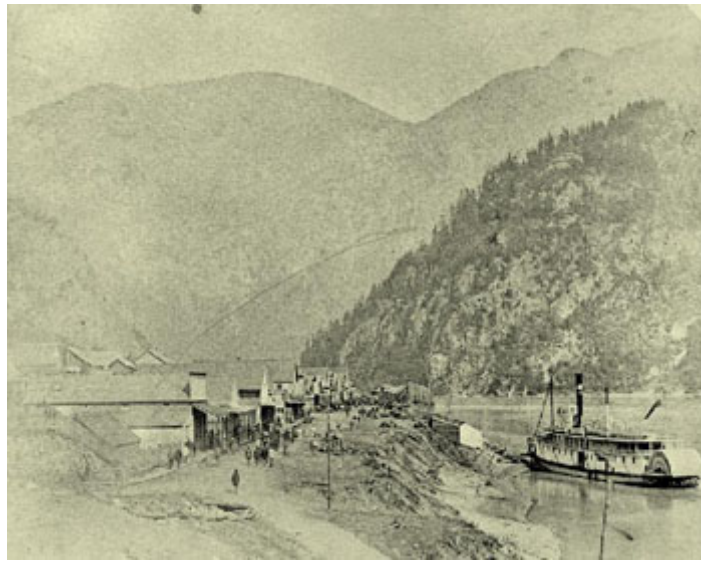
Those writing nonfiction regard fiction as having the potential to be a distortion of the facts, if not a total fabrication. (Sutherland 2007)

So, the historian admits to being human. The writer admits to being subaltern to the historian. Where does this leave the photographer? More to the point, where does this leave the writer who uses photography as note-taking, as research for an historical novel?

In regards to Clendinnen's admitting that a human hand pushes the pen, it is obvious that a human hand, of course, holds the camera as well. And a human eye selects the subject of the camera's focus. It is important to acknowledge that using photography as research - with any kind of truth claim - can be murky. My own photographs can lose the meaning I thought they had, or become relevant for reasons I hadn't expected, so the ideas behind Victorian

photography as a means of acquisition, as a kind of mass-cultural collecting, need to be understood to some extent before I can utilize these random and researched visions from the past. I need to acknowledge the limitations, and also the reasons for inclusion and exclusion from my own archive. All these questions and relationships came out of my simply looking at 19th century photographs of Canada and Australia and being motivated to write a novel that connects a series of significant events for the two countries, which happened to take place at roughly the same time. All I wanted to do was write a book.

What is behind the old photographs? Are they the truth of history, or are they a cataloguing of the world in reference to Victorian ideals, and thus, in themselves, a form of fiction? And what sort of 'truth' do my own photographs capture? What sort of fiction do they comprise because I take them to service a fiction?



Front Street, Yale, circa 1882.

Photograph Public Domain: Commonwealth Copyright expired



Front Street, Yale, January 2009. Photograph: Christopher Bowman

Front Street, Yale, was home to dozens of saloons and brothels in the 1880s. This was a roaring gold rush and railway construction town. Fights every night, fires, shootouts, a wild history. Any remains of that spirit are long gone. Today, Yale looks like any other small town dotted along the highway, and because of this I may have to work even harder to conjure up those wild and violent nights than if I'd never gone there to take pictures.

Perhaps a contemporary writer can use photography from that era to re-envision and re-create, maybe not *that* past, but the idea behind how that past wanted itself to be seen and preserved. The pictures we take are not our lives, they are a glimpse at moments: sometimes completely out of context, other times rehearsed into numbness. A spontaneous and beautiful picture that captures the essence of its subject or scene is rare. A posed studio portrait, a caricature of oneself, is capable of gross misrepresentation. Understanding the motives of photographic subject selection and the desires of audience is necessary to conceptualising the reasons that Victorian photography and its conventions developed the way that they did, and the legacy of the photographic catalogue that we are left with.

I have found, through taking my own pictures of the exact locations in the photographs that make up my research, that there is an essential difference, and it is not just a difference of technology, or of the ravages of time. Of course, buildings now stand where there was forest, or thin trees now stand where there was a thriving railroad community, but the difference goes beyond that. The viewer brings a context to the image. This is a simple, but very important fact, one that is crucial to heed if I am to write around the iconic photographs that attempt to capture and catalogue huge portions of our histories. I am not writing a book of photography; I am writing a novel. The pictures have personal significance in that they trigger specific reactions in me, different to those reactions that anyone else would have. Barthes describes an effect that is incredibly self-specific while looking at pictures of his mother: 'contemplating a photograph in which she is hugging me, a child, against her, I can waken in myself the rumpled softness of her crêpe de Chine and the perfume of her rice powder' (Barthes 1981: 65). It is up to me to take these personal sensations and translate them into my medium: words, words that, hopefully, can pull the reader into that world with me.

We think these photographs speak to us, but we hear with 21st century ears. Would the local newspaper give future researchers an accurate representation of my values, my self-image? I want to get inside the heads of these people, feel the itchy Victorian suit and be annoyed by the photographer's insistence that I hold my chin up more or crook my arm so that I take up more frame. Smell the chemicals and listen to the assistants as they argue over how best to conceal a woman's hairy upper lip in this portrait or re-paint the trees in that portrait.

I want to bring 'real' life to the characters, not superhuman attributes or iconic and simplified poses of indigence. In Ron Hansen's novel *The assassination of Jesse James by the coward Robert Ford*, he gives a vibrant treatment to the American outlaw Jesse James. It is an inspiring work for any writer striving to show respect for his or her very human subjects. They are not the immortal legends that media create (both now and then). Hansen avoids painting with cartoon colours, and he writes about Robert Ford's 'research' of James done with the glassy eyes of a schoolboy, and the consequent distancing and misunderstandings between them. Their moods, fears, awkwardness and weaknesses are Hansen's gift to the reader. What he accomplishes through dogging these historic figures almost to the point of redundancy and tediousness is a thorough humanizing. There are no good guys or bad guys. These are just guys.

A photograph is frozen time. A moment is there, available forever as long as the end result is preserved. What I'm interested in, and what I want to show through my writing, are the moments before the frozen second, and the moments after. These people had lives before they posed for photos, and they went immediately back to these lives once the photographer left with his plates

and his tripod. I want to be there, inside the pose and the detached glare, and I want to stay while the men remove the watch-chains and bowlers, the waistcoats and overcoats. I want to watch while they untie Joe Byrne's body from the door and maybe catch one of the bystanders pausing for a guilty moment to consider the frailty and beauty of human life, and ask him why he was so intrigued by that macabre spectacle.

I sat down to watch the first episode of *The last outlaw*, the miniseries I had purchased in Beechworth. There is a scene in Her Majesty's Prison Pentridge. Ned emerges from his cell for an appointment with the chaplain. He is wearing a white calico hood.

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