

Black Snake

by Carole Wilkinson · Language: EN

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Overview

Carole Wilkinson's "Black Snake" offers a compelling and meticulously researched biography of Australia's most infamous bushranger, Ned Kelly. The book delves into the life of Kelly, from his impoverished childhood in colonial Victoria to his transformation into an outlaw and his eventual capture and execution. Wilkinson navigates the complex and often mythologized narrative surrounding Kelly, presenting a balanced perspective that acknowledges both his criminal acts and the socio-economic injustices that contributed to his rebellion against authority. The title itself, "Black Snake," alludes to the perception of Kelly by the police as a dangerous, elusive threat, and by some of the public as a symbol of resistance.

The book meticulously reconstructs the events of Kelly's life, drawing on historical documents, police reports, and personal accounts to provide a vivid picture of 19th-century Australia. Wilkinson explores the Stringybark Creek murders, the daring bank robberies at Euroa and Jerilderie, and the dramatic final siege at Glenrowan. Beyond recounting the facts, "Black Snake" examines the motivations behind Kelly's actions, the deep-seated grievances of the Irish Catholic selectors against the perceived corruption and bias of the police and landowning class, and the enduring legacy of the Kelly gang in Australian folklore. It challenges readers to look beyond the simple labels of 'hero' or 'villain' and understand the historical context that shaped Ned Kelly's controversial life.

Key Takeaways

- Ned Kelly's life as an outlaw was deeply influenced by the social and economic conditions faced by Irish Catholic selectors in colonial Victoria.
- The conflict between the Kelly family and the police was a long-standing feud rooted in perceived injustices and class divisions.
- The Stringybark Creek incident, where police officers were killed, was a pivotal moment that escalated Ned Kelly's status from petty criminal to declared outlaw.
- Ned Kelly's 'Jerilderie Letter' serves as a crucial primary source, articulating his grievances and justifying his actions from his own perspective.
- The legend of Ned Kelly is complex, reflecting both his criminal acts and his role as a symbol of resistance against an oppressive system.
- Carole Wilkinson's work encourages a critical examination of historical figures, moving beyond simplistic hero-villain narratives.

- The book highlights the lasting impact of the Kelly gang on Australian identity and the ongoing debate surrounding their legacy.
- Understanding the historical context of the 1870s in Victoria is essential to comprehending the motivations and actions of the Kelly gang.

Chapter Summaries

A Hard Start

This chapter introduces Ned Kelly's early life, detailing his family's struggles as Irish Catholic selectors in rural Victoria. It covers the poverty, discrimination, and constant conflict with the police that shaped his childhood. The chapter establishes the socio-economic backdrop and the seeds of resentment that would later fuel Ned's defiance, highlighting the harsh realities faced by many immigrant families in the colony and the early brushes with the law that marked the Kelly family.

Trouble Brewing

Focusing on Ned's adolescence, this section describes his increasing involvement in minor crimes and his growing reputation as a defiant young man. It details the various arrests and incarcerations, often for horse stealing or assault, which solidified his antagonism towards the police. The chapter illustrates how a cycle of perceived harassment by authorities and retaliatory actions by the Kellys began to escalate, setting the stage for more serious confrontations and Ned's eventual outlaw status.

Stringybark Creek

This pivotal chapter recounts the infamous Stringybark Creek incident, where Ned Kelly and his gang ambushed a police party, resulting in the deaths of three constables. Wilkinson meticulously details the events leading up to the confrontation and its immediate aftermath, which irrevocably transformed Ned Kelly from a local troublemaker into a declared outlaw with a bounty on his head. This event marked a point of no return for the gang, cementing their status as enemies of the state.

The Outlaws' Run

Following Stringybark Creek, this chapter covers the Kelly gang's period on the run, including their audacious bank robberies at Euroa and Jerilderie. It highlights their strategic planning, their interactions with the public (often seen as a mix of intimidation and generosity), and Ned's attempt to articulate his grievances in the 'Jerilderie Letter.' The chapter portrays the gang's growing notoriety and the public's divided opinion of them, oscillating between fear and admiration.

Glenrowan

This chapter describes the dramatic final stand of the Kelly gang at Glenrowan. It details their plan to derail a police train, the siege of the Glenrowan Inn, and the gang's distinctive homemade armour. The narrative culminates in the intense shootout, the deaths of most of the gang members, and Ned Kelly's capture after a fierce gunfight. This section vividly portrays the chaos and desperation of the final confrontation, marking the end of the Kelly gang's reign.

Trial and Legacy

The concluding chapter focuses on Ned Kelly's trial, his defiant speech from the dock, and his execution. It explores the legal proceedings, the public outcry, and the lasting impact of his story on Australian culture. Wilkinson examines how Kelly's life and death contributed to his enduring legend, prompting ongoing debates about justice, rebellion, and national identity. The chapter reflects on how history remembers Ned Kelly, not just as a criminal, but as a complex figure.

Themes

- Justice and injustice
- Colonial oppression
- Rebellion and resistance
- Myth and history
- Family loyalty

Notable Quotes

- "Such is life." — Ned Kelly's purported last words before his execution, though their exact wording and context are debated by historians.
- "I am a widow's son, outlawed and my orders must be obeyed." — A line from Ned Kelly's Jerilderie Letter, asserting his authority and justifying his actions.
- "If my lips teach the public that a poor man is not to be trampled upon, then I have not lived in vain." — A quote attributed to Ned Kelly during his trial, reflecting his belief in fighting for the rights of the poor.
- "I have been a prey to the police for years." — From the Jerilderie Letter, expressing Ned Kelly's long-standing grievance against police harassment.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Black Snake about?

"Black Snake" by Carole Wilkinson is a non-fiction biography of Ned Kelly, Australia's most famous bushranger. It explores his life from a challenging childhood in colonial Victoria to his transformation into an outlaw, detailing his conflicts with the police, the Stringybark Creek

murders, bank robberies, and his final stand at Glenrowan, offering a balanced historical perspective.

Is Black Snake worth reading?

Yes, "Black Snake" is highly recommended for anyone interested in Australian history, particularly the Ned Kelly legend. Wilkinson provides a well-researched and engaging account that moves beyond simple hero-villain narratives, offering valuable insights into the social and political climate of 19th-century colonial Victoria. It's particularly praised for its accessibility and balanced viewpoint.

How does Black Snake end?

Spoiler: "Black Snake" ends with the dramatic capture of Ned Kelly after the Glenrowan siege, where most of his gang members were killed. It then details his subsequent trial in Melbourne, his defiant speech from the dock, and his execution by hanging at the Melbourne Gaol. The book concludes by reflecting on his enduring legacy and the complex historical debates surrounding his life.

Who should read Black Snake?

"Black Snake" is ideal for young adults and general readers interested in Australian history, biography, or true crime. It's often used in schools due to its clear, engaging narrative and its ability to present complex historical events and figures in an accessible manner. Readers looking for a nuanced understanding of Ned Kelly will find it particularly rewarding.

How long does it take to read Black Snake?

On average, "Black Snake" takes approximately 3 to 4 hours to read. This estimate is based on an average reading speed of 250 words per minute and the book's typical length for a young adult non-fiction title, which is usually around 45,000 to 60,000 words.