

Black Snake: The Real Story of Ned Kelly, Affirm Press 2018.

There is a ground-breaking new book to be launched in Melbourne on Wednesday 17th October. Written by Leo Kennedy, the great grandson of Sergeant Michael Kennedy who was shot dead by Ned at Stringybark Creek, the book focuses attention on the bushranger and policemen in a way not seen before. It is an important work, setting the record straight about Ned's police victims and the suffering he inflicted on them and their families.

I first met Leo Kennedy in 2015. My book *Ned Kelly: A Lawless Life* had just been published and I sent him a copy hoping he would be pleased with the result. He replied promptly with the best accolade a writer and historian could hope to receive. Leo said when reading the chapter on the Stringybark Creek Police Murders, 'it was like my father Frank was telling me the story'.

I invited Leo to speak at a seminar I was giving in Bendigo to launch and promote the book. He delivered an emotional speech describing the generational impact his great-grandfather Michael's murder has had on the Kennedy family. When he finished speaking many people in the audience had tears in their eyes. Leo was speaking for his own family and the 140 years of repression, frustration and emotional rawness they felt. The Kennedys may have been able to move on had it not been for decade after decade of Ned Kelly being feted as a national hero. He speaks now for all the families affected by Ned's crimes and for the families of the victims of violent crime down the generations.

The story Leo told demolished Kelly myth stereotypes of evilly disposed policemen seeking to shoot down rather than arrest the fugitive Kelly brothers. It was a highly personal story recounted through the eyes and lifetime experiences of his great-grandmother Bridget, his grandfather Jimmy, his father Frank and his own life as a Kennedy descendant. A previously untold story framed within a David

and Goliath contest with the public favouring a media driven image of Ned the hero.

Leo painted a picture of his great-grandfather Michael as a decent and respectable family man. A much-admired Mansfield policeman, acknowledged by his superiors as a good thief taker with an exceptional record of arrests and convictions. It was a matter of honesty, integrity and community service for Michael the proud Irish immigrant. Crime and shanty good times for Ned the self-absorbed, native-born larrikin. Choices were made and like the ripples of a stone thrown into a pond, dramatic consequences followed that touched and damaged the lives of countless people.

Michael was a religious man, a devout Catholic. He spoke with Kelly about his wife and children requesting to be allowed to live to see them again. He spoke loving of the young son, he and Bridget had shortly before buried in the Mansfield cemetery. Kelly interrogated the wounded policeman for two hours before taking his life, not as a mercy killing but simply because it was time to leave the scene of three grisly murders. Michael's cloak was placed over his body as a mark of respect some say; but clearly it was a symbol of a guilty conscience at the shooting of a wounded and unarmed policeman. Kelly expressed a self-indulgent remorse over Michael Kennedy's death. He did not however apologise to his victim's families as he waited in his cell or stood on the gallows.

In his book *Black Snake*, Leo goes beyond a simple retelling of Ned's infamous story of horse theft, bank robbery and murder. He vividly records Bridget Kennedy's anguish and days of suffering while awaiting the dreadful news of Michael's fate. Worse still, Bridget and her children were denied the opportunity to view Michael's body, which bore a fatal shotgun wound straight through the chest. She lost her unborn child in the months that followed and life for the Kennedy family changed forever. The Mansfield community rallied behind the grief-stricken widow and her orphaned children. Despite the tragic

loss of her beloved husband, the family's breadwinner, Bridget went on to become a successful and well-respected woman raising her children alone with courage and determination.

The real strength of Leo's remarkable book are the wonderful family anecdotes he tells, providing us with a privileged insight into Kennedy family history. Michael and Bridget's first meeting at mass. Their obvious pleasure in dancing and each other's company. Michael nursing back to health the badly treated police horse 'Ginger Pop'. The tears Michael shed for a missing child during a futile bush search. Michael's young son Jimmy being taught his ABCs at the Mansfield Police Sergeant's desk in the years following his father's death. These intimate stories and many others like them bring Michael, Bridget and the Kennedy family alive as flesh and blood individuals, not merely typecast appendages to Ned Kelly's sorry tale of bushranging and murder.

In writing *Black Snake* with the assistance of Mick Looby, Leo has not only given us the Kennedy family side of the Ned Kelly story. He has by contrasting Ned's lawless life with Michael's admirable life of community service delivered a significant blow to the Kelly myth. Leo's book written from a different perspective questions the relevance of Ned's iconic status as an Australian hero.

My own recently published book *Ned Kelly: Selectors, Squatters and Stock Thieves* the second in a trilogy of historical works dealing with Ned's life and times, concentrates attention on the bushranger's pioneer community. The community Michael dutifully served and Ned and his horse and cattle stealing associates aggressively preyed upon. The book demonstrates why the claims of squatter tyranny, police oppression, selector desperation and boundless local sympathy for Ned are untrue. The theory about the surrogate leadership role Ned is said to have assumed in the community is exploded.

Leo and his cowriter are to be congratulated on producing an exceptional book that is moving, factual and above all a vindication for the Kennedy family. The family express a passionate pride in Michael and Bridget's achievements and deservedly so. Buy the book; read the truth shorn of myth and fantasy and judge for yourself, whether Michael Kennedy or Ned Kelly was the better man.

Doug Morrissey's books *Ned Kelly: A Lawless Life* and *Ned Kelly: Selectors, Squatters and Stock Thieves* are available from Connor Court Publishing.