

Ned's Irish Accent

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In 1879 the illiterate Ned Kelly dictated a letter to his friend, Joe Byrne before the gang held up a bank in the town of Jerilderie. Kelly expected the letter to be published and it was dictated to Byrne so that the record of the Kelly gang (and Ned's in particular) could be put straight. 'The Jerilderie Letter', as it was letter called, provides details of the episodes that led to Kelly's his boyhood run-ins with the law and the circumstances that led to the Kelly gang later becoming notorious bank robbers. As such, 'The Jerilderie Letter' is a valuable historical document of a turbulent aspect of nineteenth century Victoria and of the lives of poor rural Irish Australians in particular. The letter has been available publicly for only a short time. Previous to that it was in private hand and restricted to 'bona fide Kelly researchers'.¹ Naturally the letter has been of interest to historians. But there is much reward in examining 'The Jerilderie Letter' from a linguistic point of view because the voice that provides the historical detail is that of a natural storyteller. Throughout the narrative we can detect an unmistakable Irish voice although Ned Kelly was Australian born.

'The Jerilderie Letter' begins with a declaration of a tale to come:

I wish to acquaint you with some of the occurrences of the present past

¹ See the fascinating history of the discovery of the letter in: John Barnes, Sandra Nurt, 'Ned Kelly's Jerilderie Letter' in *The La Trobe Journal*, Melbourne: State Library of Victoria Foundation, Spring 66. 2000. pp. 33-37

and future (p. 1).²

This semblance of formality soon gives way to a rambling narrative in a colloquial voice:

In or about the spring of 1870 the ground was very soft a hawker named Mr Gould got his wagon bogged between Greta and my mother's house on the eleven mile creek, the ground was that rotten it would bog a duck in places so Mr. Gould had abandon his wagon for fear of loosing his horses in the spewy ground. He was stopping at my Mother's awaiting finer or dryer weather Mr. McCormack and his wife. Hawkers also were camped in Greta the mosquitoes were very bad...(p. 1)

Some things strike the reader immediately here. Firstly the lack of punctuation and some spelling errors make the passage difficult to comprehend. The writer, Joe Byrne, either was unsure of where to put punctuation marks or was obliged to write so fast that he chose to dispense with punctuation rules. Whatever the reason, the effect is striking to a present day reader. Significant also is Kelly's use of language. The phrase 'in or about the spring of 1870' could be the start of a fiction story or a history piece using a colloquial narrative. What follows is a detailed description of the setting in which the boyhood incident that changed his life takes place. Clear and detailed accounts of the various incidents that have become the Ned Kelly legend hold a linguistic fascination. For example Ned tells what happened when his mother objected to the trooper coming to arrest her son Dan and the trooper threatened her:

² Treasures of the State Library of Victoria online:
<http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/slv.exhibitions/treasures/jerilderee/jerilderee3.html>

Dan looked out and said Ned is coming now, the trooper being off his guard looked out and then Dan got his attention drawn he dropped the knife and fork which showed he had no murderous intent and slapped heenans hug on him took his revolver and kept him there...(p. 23)

Despite the lack of punctuation the details of who did what and with what intention are clear. Dan tackling the trooper is described with a reference that we are not familiar with today 'heenans hug' but which is nevertheless clear. What keeps us returning to 'The Jerilderie Letter' are those dramatic contrasts, heightened passages and words that lift the document to somewhat literary heights in the narrative detail and the intriguing dialect that is Ned Kelly's storytelling voice.

Ned Kelly may have been somewhat of a hero to some folk but he was often loudly denounced by the press of the day in terms of abuse such as:

Devil incarnate of the Antipodes. The Vulture of the Wombat Ranges, beast of prey, outback monster, rural sadist, flash young ghoul, savage yokel, bog-Irish fiend.³

Kelly's account of his outlaw life as it appears in 'The Jerilderie Letter' is peppered with terms of abuse designed to denigrate, in particular members of the Victorian constabulary. 'The Jerilderie Letter' is not only of historical interest to Australia as a document that clearly states the motivation of Ned Kelly and his gang for choosing a life of crime, it is also a reminder how words of war can be almost as effective as warlike actions. In this, Ned

Kelly's Irish ancestry is a possible source for his ability and apparent tendency to pour forth vitriol on his enemies.

The Irish oral tradition held great store in the ability to speak fluently and with flair. It may be from this that the Irish have acquired a reputation for having the 'gift of the gab', exemplified in the legend of Blarney Castle, of course, but also obvious in the works of Ireland's four Nobel prize winners for literature: W B Yeats, George Bernard Shaw, Samuel Beckett and Seamus Heaney: Ned Kelly's letters, however, resonates with turns of phrase and semantic structure that are the hallmark of James Joyce, in particular (who would have been another Nobel prize winner, no doubt, but for the distraction of the two world wars). While Ned Kelly is not in this literary league by any means, we can nevertheless detect in 'The Jerilderie Letter' a poetic and literary flair that belies a straightforward testimony.

The Irish tradition of storytelling exhibits a number of features:⁴ hyperbole; nicknaming; complicated terms of abuse; old sayings or *seanfhocail*; 'the love of polysyllabic' words leading to puns and malapropisms; to this we can add repetition, similes, metaphors and imagery, all designed to aid in the oral acquisition of local and national myth and history and family lore. Many of these aspects can be seen in Kelly's account of the circumstances surrounding

³ Robert Drewe, *Our Sunshine*, Sydney: Picador, 1991, p. 5

⁴ Loreto Todd, *The Language of Irish Literature*, London: Macmillan Education, 1989, .53-63

and leading to his outlawed state.

In the beginning of 'The Jerilderie Letter' Kelly tells the story of a straying horse and the subsequent dispute between the McCormicks, who owned the horse, and a Mr Gould, who had sent his boy back with the horse when he found it on his property, Mrs McCormick accused Gould of working the horse. Kelly was aware of the dispute as Gould was camped on the Kelly land. He comments:

I could not help laughing to hear Mrs. McCormack accusing him of using the horse after him being so kind as to send his boy to take him from the Ruta Cruta and take him back to them.

Here we catch a glimpse of Irish English dialect in the speech of the Australian born Kelly. The construction *after him being so kind* is not Standard English but it is Irish English and follows an Irish language construct. In English the past perfect performs this function and the phrase would be written 'when he had been so kind...' Irish, however, does not have a past perfect form of the verb. It uses the adverbial phrases *tar éis* or *i ndiaidh* plus the verbal noun to indicate the past perfect. When the Irish learned English they simply translated from one language to another and so the phrase 'when he had been so kind...' in Irish English is 'after him being so kind'. Today you will still hear this construction, for example, 'I'm after having my dinner' in place of 'I've had my dinner', among Irish people, although most educated people would not use it except in jest.

At first glance Kelly's phrase 'after him being so kind...' also appears to contain a grammatical error: the use of *him* instead of *he*. Standard English would use 'when he had been so kind with the pronoun 'he' is in the nominative case. The phrase, however, is correct in Irish where the third person pronoun in the objective case follows the *tar éis* plus verbal noun construction. For example, the phrase *tar éis é a bheith comh cineálta...* is literally translated 'after *him* being so kind'. English would have to say, however, 'when *he* had been so kind'.

Irish differs from English also in having two forms of the present tense, one of which indicates a habitual state. For example *tá mé* 'I am' and *bím* 'I am (continuously)', also *bhí mé* 'I was' and *bhíos* = 'I used to be' indicating something ongoing. On page 9 of 'The Jerilderie Letter', Kelly, in describing a fight with a constable Hall, says:

I dare not strike him or my sureties would loose the bond money I used to trip him and let him take a mouth ful of dust now and again....

Here the phrase 'I used to trip him' is used by Kelly to convey a repeated action. It is not Standard English. Standard English could only say something like 'I continued to trip him'. Kelly is using an Irish English form of a continuous past tense that is directly taken from the Irish language. Even today, some Irish born people, who speak Standard English as a rule, may use these continuous present and past forms in a humorous way.

Kelly's use, however, is that of Irish English in its base representation of language transfer. Poor and uneducated Irish people in the nineteenth century heard no other form of speech than that of their immediate environment. Poverty and isolation in Australia for the Kelly family and their Irish neighbours would ensure the retention of Irish English speech patterns, patterns that the Australian born offspring would have adopted quite naturally.

Another Irish language feature that is often found in Irish English is the variety available for the use of the word *agus* which translates as 'and'. In Irish *agus* 'and' is more than a simple conjunction. It can be used to signify caution, consequence, amplification, and to introduce subordinate clauses that may be attributive, amplified, temporal, concessive, conditional etc!⁵ Two separates instances of this can be seen in 'The Jerilderie Letter'. In the first, Kelly is giving an account of police incompetency: 'they could not arrest one eight stone larrikin and them armed with battens and neddies without some civilians assistance and some of them going to the hospital...'. (p. 48) Here the word 'and' is used to amplify the sense as *agus* would be in the Irish language and once again the objective case *iad* is used instead of the subjective *siad* and this translates as 'them' instead of 'they'. Another use of the amplified sense of 'and' in Irish English occurs in Kelly's comment on the greed of 'Whitty

⁵ Niall Ó Dónaill, *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla*, Baile Átha Cliath: Oifig an tSoláthair, 1966

and Burns' who had:

all the picked land on the Boggy Creek and King River and the run of their stock on the certificate group free and no one interfering with them paid heavy rent to the banks for all the open space...(p. 16)

Here the final 'and' occurs where Standard English might use 'moreover'.

In this account of Whitty and Burns, Kelly explains their wealth as being the result of having paid 'heavy rent' to the banks. The term 'heavy rent' seems unusual but its parallel can be seen in the Irish language where the word *trom* means 'heavy' but can also mean 'burdensome'. Indeed Ó Dónaill provides the very term 'heavy rent' as a translation of *cíos trom*, demonstrating that Kelly's term is still standard Irish English.

Because the Irish travelled extensively in the nineteenth century with their native language and English that was influenced Irish, terms that may be found in Ireland may also be found in English, American and Australian Englishes. Because of this it is not always certain whether a word's origin is in the Irish or the English language. Examples of this are the use of the word *road* to mean 'way' and *right* to mean 'duty'. In 'The Jerilderie Letter' Kelly recounts how there was an understanding between him and Sergeant Fitzpatrick that one of them would have to die in any encounter between them. He says: '...this he knew well therefore he had a right to keep out of my road'. (p. 34) In the Irish language the word *bealach* 'road' also means 'way' and the word *ceart* means 'right' but also 'duty'. Kelly's use of the

words 'right' and 'road' is not Standard English. Is this another case of mistranslation by the Irish in their acquisition of English that has spread into English dialects through the movement of the population in the nineteenth century

As striking as these odd words and phrases are in 'The Jerilderie Letter', it is the sustained use of particular linguistic features that, arguably, mark Kelly's narrative as somewhat literary. His multiple adjectival phrases, in particular, are reminders of an oral Irish culture that had an appreciation of not only the story being told but the verbal dexterity of the storyteller. It is perhaps no coincidence that the Irish word for 'taste, flavour' is *blas* and that this is also in *blasta* the word for 'correct speech'. Indeed Ó Dónaill provides *caint gan bhlas* for 'poorly articulated, insipid speech', in other words speech without taste or flavour. Ned Kelly's numerous terms of abuse are strongly articulated in 'The Jerilderie Letter'. Examples are:

I would like to know who put that article that reminds me of a poodle dog half clipped in the lion fashion, called Brooke E. Smith Superintendent of Police he knows as much about commanding Police as Captain Standish does about mustering mosquitoes and boiling them down for their fat on the back blocks of the Lachlan for he has a head like a turnip a stiff neck as big as his shoulders narrow hipped and pointed towards the feet like a vine stake. (p. 51)

a parcel of big fat-necked wombat headed big bellied magpie legged narrow hipped splaw-footed sons of Irish Bailiffs or English landlords...(p. 43)

The rhythm, alliteration, imagery and lack of punctuation in the last

description, in particular, aptly convey Kelly's outrage at the treatment received by his mother. Compare this line of Ned Kelly's in 1879 with James Joyce's description of The Citizen in the novel *Ulysses*:

A broadshouldered deepchested stronglimbed frankeyed redhaired freely freckled shaggybearded widemouthed largenosed longheaded deepvoicedbarekneedbrawnyhandedhairyleggedruddyfacedsinewyarmed hero.⁶

The similarities are remarkable. Another comparison is that between Kelly's '...the puny cabbage hearted looking face...' (p. 26) and Molly Bloom's '...Fanny McCoys husband white head of cabbage skinny thing with a turn in her eye...'.⁷ To extend the literary echoes we might hear an O'Casey character in Kelly's lines: 'persecuted destroyed massacred and murdered their fore-fathers worse than the promised hell itself...' (p. 45) or one of Brendan Behan's Dublin wits in 'big fat-necked Unicorns', Kelly's description of the Victorian police. Finally Kelly's phrase 'a strapping big lump of an Irishman shepherding sheep' (p. 45) is nothing if not quintessentially Irish.

The speed in which the Irish transferred from speaking Irish to English is astounding when viewed from today's vantage point. This speed may have influenced the retention of Irish words of emotion, especially terms of abuse, in Irish English. It has also been suggested that the Irish retained their emotive words because they had a greater need of them. James Clark noted this in his comparison of language transfer in Ireland and Scotland:

In Ireland alone were terms of endearment, ejaculations of lament, etc. retained...it is due to the more demonstrative and passionate temperament of the Irish, as opposed to the more reticent nature of the Shetlanders.⁸

The suggestion that Irish words of an emotional nature were retained in the English of Ireland because of the emotional nature of the Irish is plausible. Some of the Irish who came to Australia apparently exhibited emotion to a greater extent than other migrant or transported groups. For example in 1822 it was noted that the Irish transportees had a greater emotional response to 'the separation from their native country' than others.⁹ In addition, Patrick O'Farrell comments on the 'shrieks, prayers, blessings and lamentations' from Irish families on Cork wharf in 1840 as a group of emigrants was leaving for Australia.¹⁰

Ned Kelly has become such an Australian icon that his Irish origins and influences are sometimes downplayed or overlooked. The recent movie *Ned Kelly* depicted Kelly and his family and friends speaking with Irish accents. This, I believe, is a correct interpretation of the linguistic state of this group in rural Victoria in the late nineteenth century. With those Irish accents came a rich language legacy that travelled from the Old World to the New and became transformed in an Australian environment. 'The Jerilderie Letter'

⁶ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, London: Penguin Books, 1968. 294

⁷ *ibid.* 695

⁸ James M Clark, *The Vocabulary of Anglo-Irish*, St. Gall: Folcroft Library Editions, 1974. 31-32.

⁹ Con Costello, *Botany Bay*. 98.

¹⁰ Patrick Farrell, *The Irish in Australia* (1987). 55-56.

speaks of all of this.