Mollies Down Under: Cross-Dressing and Australian Masculinity in Peter Carey’s

*True History of the Kelly Gang*

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It has become almost ubiquitous now to consider that nationalism is gendered and sexualized, especially in contexts where anticolonial nation building is so intimately tied to the legitimizing of newly independent nation-states. George L. Mosse pointed out in his 1985 work *Nationalism and Sexuality* the many interconnections between modern European nationalism and sexual respectability as well as the development of “manliness” as a constitutive component of the bourgeois morality that underpinned Western nationalisms.¹ M. Jacqui Alexander confirms that an imperative of heterosexual masculinity also holds true for decolonizing nations to the extent that their gender norms have been shaped by European imperialism.² Elleke Boehmer further argues that “gender forms the formative dimension for the construction of nationhood.”³ The links between nationalist and gendered discourses range from the role of women as both biological producers and symbolic icons of ethnic groupings and nations to the “deep, horizontal comradeship” or “fraternity,” even homosocial structure of male bonding, constitutive of national identity.⁴

It is within this critical context that celebrated expatriate Australian writer Peter Carey’s novel *True History of the Kelly Gang*, published in 2000, marks an important challenge to the heteromasculinity of Australian settler nationalism through its disruption of the gendered symbolism of one

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of Australia’s most iconic historical figures, bushranger Ned Kelly. Ned Kelly is important to popular Australian nationalism because of the values his legend embodies—antiauthoritarianism, loyalty to family and “mates,” and a fighting spirit—and because his career and death immediately preceded a critical moment in Australian nationalism in the 1880s and 1890s. Carey challenges the masculine symbolism of the Kelly gang through his invention of the Sons of Sieve, a secret society of Irish origin in which the men, including members of the Kelly gang and Ned Kelly’s own father, ritually wear women’s dresses and blacken their faces during demonstrations against police or governmental authority. While some critics have dismissed the sexual subtexts of the cross-dressing in Carey’s novel by linking it to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Irish agrarian protest ritual, the Irish connection in fact strengthens the sexually disruptive force of the Kelly gang’s cross-dressing, for Carey’s novel unburies a host of cultural anxieties about gender and sexuality that circulate around the historical record of Ned Kelly himself and around the nationalist functions he iconically performs.

This article explores several of the functions of the Sons of Sieve in the novel and argues that the cross-dressing plays a central role in the novel’s reimagining of gendered Australian identities and mythologies. The discussion has two parts: the first explores the social functions of cross-dressing in Irish agrarian protest in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and demonstrates the multiple parallels between that context and the milieu of Ned Kelly. This investigation is not to capitulate to Carey’s critics’ suggestions that the Irish story is the real story of the Sons of Sieve but rather has several related purposes: to enrich the understanding of the historical origins of the fictionalized Sons of Sieve; to weigh the imaginative possibilities offered by Carey’s text for reenvisioning the Irish roots of Australia’s early settlers and convicts and through their connection with Irish protest to reimagine the function of communal identity in Australia; and to explore the myriad connections between gender, communal identity, and antiauthoritarian resistance that the Irish example can offer to an understanding of Australian national identity in Kelly’s era and in the present. The second part of the article addresses the cultural anxieties around the sexuality of the Kelly gang and demonstrates how Carey in True History of the Kelly Gang uses the Sons of Sieve to trouble the prevailing versions of Australian national identity and history. The contextual meanings of cross-dressing as a gendered activity cannot simply be transferred from eighteenth-century Ireland to nineteenth- or twentieth-century Australia, and I do not attempt to do so. Rather, I hope to show that ritual cross-dressing can demonstrate the complex ways that public protest and grievance of the kind that builds communal, even national identities can mobilize images of gender.

in transgressive ways: it is this insight that can be transferred from Ireland
to Australia. By invoking Irish ritual cross-dressing, Carey shows that an-
ticolonial nationalism is not exclusively gendered masculine. At the same
time, he capitalizes on the contemporary sexual meanings of cross-dressing
to challenge the heteromasculinity of Australian settler nationalism and its
anxieties about its own homosocial history.

Key to understanding the shape of these anxieties is the relationship be-
tween the concepts “homosocial,” “homosexual,” “heteronormative,” and
“heteromasculine.” “Homosocial,” as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick defines it, is a
term used to describe “social bonds between persons of the same sex”—for
example, male bonding—in which desire is assumed to be absent or at least
not openly acknowledged. “Homosexual” more clearly refers to the erotic
potential of same-sex relationships and desires, but Sedgwick advocates plac-
ing homosociality and homosexuality together on the same continuum of the
structure of men’s relationships to acknowledge the potential for the erotic
that exists within homosociality. The paradox, as she points out, however, is
that “homosocial” activities may “be characterized by intense homophobia,
fear and hatred of homosexuality.” This dynamic between the homosocial
and the homosexual, routed through homophobia, is key to understanding
the place of gender and sexuality in Australian national mythologies, for the
popular forms of Australian nationalism are based in distinctly homosocial
relationships and icons: the almost exclusively male worlds of convict experi-
ence, bush culture, gold mining, and itinerant labor. Throughout this article
I also speak about the ways that Australian nationalism is dominated by im-
ages of male activities that are simultaneously hypermasculine and implicitly
heterosexual. I use the compound term “heteromasculine” to incorporate
both concepts simultaneously. The discourses of gender and sexuality that
pertain here are distinguishable but also often travel in tandem. It is critical
to note that concepts of masculine and feminine as well as the meanings of
gendered behavior and even activities such as cross-dressing (and what articles
of clothing are marked as belonging to men and women) shift over time
and across cultures. Indeed, part of what this article attempts to explore is
the way that the shifting of masculine and feminine identities from the time
period of Ned Kelly to that of Carey’s novelistic treatment of him opens the
doors to an understanding of how constructed and malleable are gendered
nationalisms. “Heteronormative” is a term used to denote a society’s privi-
leging of heterosexuality and heterosexual gender roles for both men and
women and the treatment of these roles as normative and natural. Here I
also use the term to address the intense effort that arises when advocates of
this popular form of Australian nationalism attempt to wrench the homo-
social history of this nationalism—including figures like Ned Kelly—away

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6 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*
from any and all allusions to homosexuality and male same-sex desire. In other words, Australian popular nationalism demonstrates the effort of establishing heteronormativity in its attempt to dislodge homosociality from homosexuality. Carey’s novel and his treatment of cross-dressing expose this effort and challenge the norms of gender and sexuality that mark Australian nationalism.

This national identity has been extensively critiqued by feminist scholars. Kay Schaffer proposes that Australian culture and national identity are profoundly shaped by the image of the bush and the presumed masculine values that predominate in bush culture. She argues that contemporary Australian identity is rooted in the late-nineteenth-century democratic nationalist milieu and its definition of the “real” Australian as living “in the bush, of poor but honest Anglo-Irish stock, . . . unpretentious, shy of women, a good mate and a battler.” The context for the elevation of bushrangers like Ned Kelly to national hero status is clear from this description. The “Australian as bushman” identity is, according to Schaffer, a “masculine construction” that “excludes but also defines the Australian woman.”

This national identity of exclusively male and egalitarian mateship, which differs from the colonial culture of England, is “masculine, White, Anglo-Irish and heterosexual” but was created out of an underlying rejection of women and fear of the “feminine” principle identified with the landscape. Miriam Dixson similarly suggests that Australian national identity “centres around a special style of masculinity . . . that reeks of womanlessness.”

Carey’s text plays havoc with this national identity based on male mateship and exploits the sexual ambiguity of a “womanless” culture. This ambiguity arises because of the homosexual implications of two of the founding images of Australian national settler identity: convict society and male mateship in the bush. Robert French documents the “situational homosexuality of prison life” in the early Australian convict colonies, the
evidence of convict men forming “married” couples, the use of female names by male prisoners, and the sentences of death or imprisonment meted out to convicts or settlers found guilty of sexual relations with men. Witnesses at the 1837–38 Select Committee on Transportation [and] Its Influence on the Moral State of Society in the Penal Colonies, notes French, spoke about the commonality of same-sex activities among men. Catie Gilchrist documents public anxiety and preoccupation with male prisoners' sleeping quarters and sexual activities in Van Diemen’s Land during the 1840s and 1850s: “The convict department and the colonial population could try, but could not escape the sexual fears that male transportation had produced.” Campaigns for increased marriage and reform of the assignment system during this era targeted not just prostitution and the need for increased reproduction and “establishing a genteel, nuclear family life” but also male homosexuality. Robert Hughes attests to the anxiety caused by this feature of convict history when he notes: “Homosexuality was one of the mute, stark, subliminal elements in the ‘convict stain’ whose removal, from 1840 onward, so preoccupied Australian nationalists.”

Bush mateship also clearly shows, as Sedgwick did, how male bonding or homosociality can veer toward the erotic or homosexuality. As Craig Johnston and Robert Johnston argue, “Homoeroticism became one of the pillars of Australian mateship, finding a range of expressions, from the loyalty of the Kelly gang to the writings of the bush bards.” That gang loyalty can project both emotional and sexual attachments is clear from the speculation about a romantic relationship between the historical bushranger known as Captain Moonlite (a pseudonym for George Scott) and his fellow gang member James Nesbit based on Scott’s prison letters. After Nesbit’s shooting death by police Scott apparently wept over him and kissed him “passionately,” wore a ring made from a lock of Nesbit’s hair,


and campaigned to be buried in the same grave as Nesbit with the tombstone inscription “separated by death” and “united” on the date of Scott’s execution.\textsuperscript{16} The all-male society of bush culture generally has prompted speculation about its sexual undertones. Libby Connors in an analysis of male popular culture in 1840s and 1850s Moreton Bay (a convict settlement near modern-day Brisbane) argues that “the seclusion of work and living space, the lack of external checks on private behavior and the norm of male companionship resulted in a homosocial culture, in the sense of affectionate male-bonding, coming to the fore.” Connors also notes that homosociality in rural areas went hand in hand with violent and homophobic male bush culture.\textsuperscript{17} Russel Ward similarly points out the “distinctive ‘bush’ ethos” in Australia and “its value as an expression and symbol of nationalism.” Ward is responsible for the much-circulated portrait of the Democratic Nationalist “typical Australian” as “a practical man, rough and ready” but also for the suggestion that “the typical bushman, blessedly ignorant of psychological theory, appeased [a] spiritual hunger by a sublimated homosexual relationship with a mate, or a number of mates, of his own sex.”\textsuperscript{18} Carey’s portrait of Ned Kelly and the Kelly gang brings to light the partially buried cultural anxieties surrounding the predominantly same-sex social spaces of Australia’s settler and convict foundations.

Dressing the bushrangers in women’s clothes, as Carey does, is particularly disruptive due to the dynamic between history and fiction that prevails in his novel. Ned Kelly is a “real” historical figure, but he and his gang have taken on a larger-than-life symbolic role since his death by hanging in 1880. Even during their evasion of the police they were transformed into art. As Ward puts it, “The deification of Kelly began long before his execution. Songs, ballads and orally transmitted yarns were made about his exploits, real and imaginary, almost as soon as they took place.”\textsuperscript{19} National symbols, even those based on “real” historical figures, can function like stories, for they are flexible and can be persuaded toward myriad ends depending on the purpose to which they are put. Bruce Woodcock points out: “Even inside Australia, the ‘real facts’ [about Kelly] are often subsumed by the myth.”\textsuperscript{20} Ned Kelly serves, therefore, not only as a figure in history but also as a character around whom coalesce discourses of gender, sexuality, and nationhood—in his own era in late-nineteenth-century nation-building Australia; at key moments in twentieth-century Australia, including debates about his legend that took place in the 1960s; and in Carey’s contemporary Australia.

\textsuperscript{16} French, \textit{Camping by a Billabong}, 18–19.
\textsuperscript{17} Libby Connors, “Two Opposed Traditions: Male Popular Culture and the Criminal Justice System in Early Queensland,” in Aldrich, \textit{Gay Perspectives}, 91, 108.
\textsuperscript{18} Russel Ward, \textit{The Australian Legend} (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1958), 12, 1, 93.
\textsuperscript{20} Bruce Woodcock, \textit{Peter Carey} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 140.
Ned Kelly was born in either 1854 or 1855 in Victoria colony, Australia, to an ex-convict father and free settler mother, both impoverished and Irish Australian and both from families with long-standing conflicts with the Victorian police.\textsuperscript{21} His family tried unsuccessfully to make their living as small farmers, called “selectors” under the new land legislations of the 1860s, but found themselves stymied by poor agricultural conditions and the power of the large landholders, or “squatters.” Ned’s father spent time in jail during this period and died when Ned was about twelve years old. Ned’s own arrests and confrontations with the police began early, including an arrest in 1870 for being an accomplice to bushranger Harry Power.\textsuperscript{22} Whether he was targeted by police, driven by poverty to steal, or caught in the class-based “gray areas” of the law, he gained an early reputation as a criminal.\textsuperscript{23} In 1878 the Kelly family had an explosive encounter in their home with a drunken police constable named Alexander Fitzpatrick, after which he accused Ned of shooting at him. The family claimed Ned was not even present at the time, that Fitzpatrick tried to molest one of the Kelly girls, and that no one shot at the constable, but the police set out to arrest Ned, and, when he went into hiding, they arrested his mother instead with the charge of aiding an attempt at murder.\textsuperscript{24} When police tracked down Ned Kelly, his brother Dan, and friends Joe Byrne and Steve Hart at Stringybark Creek several months later, three policemen were killed, and the Kelly gang was formed and took to the bush, pursued by “a full-scale semi-military offensive.”\textsuperscript{25} The most famous of their escapades were bank holdups at Euroa and Jerilderie during which the gang charmed their hostages, gained reputations as folk heroes, and caused long-standing “loss of face” for the Victorian police.\textsuperscript{26} While evading the police, Kelly wrote and attempted to publish two documents explaining his version of events with the hope that their publication would bring the public further to his side, but these documents, called the Cameron and Jerilderie letters, were not made public until long after his death.\textsuperscript{27} The gang finally confronted


\textsuperscript{22} John Meredith, \textit{Ned Kelly: After a Century of Acrimony} (Sydney: Lansdowne, 1980), 12.

\textsuperscript{23} John McQuilton notes that Kelly’s young contemporaries practiced “horse borrowing,” which was understood by others as either boisterous “larrikin” behavior (the horses were returned) or as theft (\textit{The Kelly Outbreak}, 55).

\textsuperscript{24} For an analysis of the different versions of the story see Meredith, \textit{Ned Kelly}, 18–19. See also Ian Jones, \textit{Ned Kelly: A Short Life} (Port Melbourne, Australia: Lothian, 1995), 110–18.

\textsuperscript{25} McQuilton, \textit{The Kelly Outbreak}, 101.


\textsuperscript{27} The premier of the Australian state of Victoria at the time, Graham Berry, suppressed the publication of the Cameron letter, although the press was permitted to paraphrase it, and they published derisive excerpts. The Jerilderie letter disappeared until 1930, when a police copy
the police from their stronghold at Glenrowan pub in June 1880, wearing their now-famous heavy body armor and helmets fashioned from iron plow parts, but they were overcome. Dan, Steve, and Joe were killed by fire and bullets, and Ned was captured. He was hanged in November 1880 at the age of twenty-five, despite a petition for his reprieve signed by 32,000 of his supporters.28

That Ned Kelly was a mythologized figure and a popular culture hero even before his early death makes him an appropriate subject for Carey’s fictionalization. Carey’s work has often explored the ways that lies, mysteries, and stories texture the self-image of a postcolonial nation as it imagines itself through its own history. “In Australia,” he said in an interview, “where the past has been the subject of denial and memory-loss, it’s essential, it seems to me, to go back to the past and try and untangle all the lies we’ve told and been told.”29 His technique of historiographical metafiction brings a postmodern aesthetic to his use of language and form to test the boundaries between history and text. In True History of the Kelly Gang Carey draws our attention to the ways that history attempts and sometimes fails to preserve its myths and to the ways that fiction can contribute to this mythmaking, and he does so in part by faking an authentic, archival materiality for his novel. Chapters in this novel are presented as “parcels,” each prefaced by a physical description of the document and its provenance, as if they really were Kelly’s documents housed in an archive. His character’s voice and events in the story are drawn from existing historical documents on Ned Kelly and Kelly’s own written words in the Jerilderie and Cameron letters. For all these gestures to the “truth” of his account, however, Carey also explores how each generation of Australians revisits the Kelly legend to discover a changing Australian identity. As Woodcock describes it, Carey aims for both “a recovered history” and also an “alternative history.”30 Carey’s other novels have often challenged Australian gender mythologies.31 His alternative history of the Kelly gang uses cross-dressing to unsettle the heteromasculinity of Australia’s national settler identity.

was published in the Melbourne Herald. The original Jerilderie manuscript was finally made public in 2000, when it was donated to the State Library of Victoria. See Alex McDermott, “The Apocalyptic Chant of Edward Kelly,” in Ned Kelly, The Jerilderie Letter (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), xxi–xxvii.


30 Woodcock, Peter Carey, 145.

31 Andreas Gaile, “Toward an Alphabet of Australian Culture: Peter Carey’s Mythistorical Novels,” in Gaile, Fabulating Beauty, 40.
The critical examinations of Carey’s novel have primarily treated the cross-dressing as one more “lie” that disables Ned’s sense of self and his place in the world. In the first chapter of the novel Sergeant O’Neil, one of the many police officers who harass the Kellys, slanders John Kelly in his twelve-year-old son’s eyes when he punishes Ned with a story about his father’s attack in Ireland on a landlord and his family and his subsequent betrayal of his coconspirators in exchange for a commutation of his death sentence to transportation. O’Neil deepens the wound when he casually tells Ned he has seen his father riding his horse “dressed like a woman” and clarifies the accusation of homosexuality by saying John Kelly was likely “off to be serviced by his husband I suppose” (14–15). This revelation estranges Ned from his father and prepares him for the confusion he feels when Steve Hart and his own brother Dan Kelly later appear clumsily cross-dressed on horseback. The revelation later in the novel by Ned’s girlfriend, Mary, about the Irish origins of the secret society Sons of Sieve is taken to be a correction, a truth telling and a way of “clearing up [the] mystery” about the cross-dressing that rescues Ned from this lie about his father. It also offers the novel a pivot between an Irish-oriented sense of colonial identity and a nascent Australian identity: Mary’s correction identifies the generational memory gap between first- and second-generation Irish Australians and resitutes the Sons of Sieve and its rituals as an example of the “ancient poisons” of Ireland that must be left behind in Australia (292).

In other words, it is argued that Mary’s revelation pulls the cross-dressing back to the political and historical, removing its gendered valances. Xavier Pons, for instance, argues that when Ned discovers the “truth” about his father’s cross-dressing—that is, “its non-sexual nature”—“the personal thus becomes the historical, and vice-versa.” Andreas Gaile posits that it is a “minor story” of Irish rebellion that offers Ned’s generation a national mythology. Woodcock argues that “the true meaning of this transvestism” becomes clear with Mary’s explanation, and it is also clear to the Kelly gang members that they must leave behind this “destructive terrorism.” For Frank Molloy, the cross-dressing implies a threat of “sexual deviance,” even though “neither [Ned], nor most readers” would know the “real” historical reference; Ned later rejects this legacy of Irish resistance. Graham Huggan,
notably, argues that the cross-dressing “turns out to be a sign not of his ‘effeminacy’ but, on the contrary, of his membership of a secret society of Irish rebels feared for their excessive use of force.” Implicit in Huggan’s phrasing and perhaps in many of the critical assessments of Carey’s novel is the suggestion that Irish communal protest and armed rebellion can only be gendered masculine or even characterized by a notably heightened masculinity—like the gendering of Australia’s bushranger culture—in contrast to the implicitly feminizing associations of women’s clothing. It also assumes that anticolonial and communal rebellion, including but not limited to groups who costume in women’s clothing, is straightforwardly masculine in its implications.

Few critical treatments of the novel thus far have addressed the cross-dressing as a more fundamental problem in the novel or as an inclusion that complicates the novel’s other themes like national mythology and Australian masculinity. Anne Marsh engages in an interesting argument about how Ned Kelly as a national icon becomes “the (m)other of a nation, a phallic mother to be sure but also a queer (m)other.” She examines Carey’s book in conjunction with Australian artist Sidney Nolan’s paintings of Ned Kelly and the phenomenon of the Ned Kelly costumes at the opening ceremonies of the 2000 Sydney Olympics. She argues that “the issue of transvestism haunts Carey’s True History as a kind of queer punctuation” that deconstructs the “masculine stereotype.” Marsh’s analysis of Carey’s book, however, is brief, does not explore the details of how this queerness “punctuates” the novel, and does not mention the Irish precursors to this cross-dressing. Susan K. Martin’s analysis is more attentive to the significant role played by transvestism in the novel, and she points out that “surely the cross-dressing in the novel is not only a sign of something else.” Martin, however, concludes that Carey’s novel displays “anxiety about [Ned’s] sexuality” as well as “assertions of his heterosexuality.” Carey, she suggests, may be willing to “ironize, question and deconstruct the figure of Ned as national hero in all sorts of ways,” but he stabilizes a normative sexuality for Ned that might otherwise be seen as “shifting and uncertain.” It is true that Carey invents for Ned a girlfriend, Mary Hearn, rather than leaving him an ambiguous bachelor. Yet the challenge that the cross-dressing poses to the legend of the Kelly gang and to Australian identities based on this legend remains throughout the novel.

The cross-dressing does figure quite prominently in the novel, and the historical explanation of Irish rebels does not dispel the sexual disturbance of Carey’s focus on cross-dressing and gender ambiguity generally. The

37 Graham Huggan, Peter Carey (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996), 147, emphasis added.
effects of the transvestism are woven into imagery throughout the novel and persist well past the point when Mary provides the supposed truth of the cross-dressing. A close reading of Carey’s novel demonstrates this point, but first it is important to explore how the context of Irish agrarian protest in fact contributes to the novel’s troubling of the relationship between gender and nation. Indeed, the references to Irish cross-dressing give to Carey’s text a context for a fuller understanding of how poverty, gender, sexuality, and communal identity played out in the nation building of nineteenth-century Australia.

Carey’s Sons of Sieve appears to be based on agrarian secret societies that were active in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Ireland and Wales as in Europe more broadly. Beginning in 1761 and continuing until approximately the 1840s, these groups were organized among the peasants as a response to and protest against changes in land use, rising rents and tithes, and oppression by landlords. Giving themselves such names as Whiteboys, Defenders, Levellers, Hearts of Oak, Hearts of Steel, Peep O’Day Boys, Ribbonmen, and Terry Alts, these protesters used methods that included sending threatening letters, intimidation, assault on landlords and their families, torturing or killing animals, and murder. The rituals of protest included the swearing of oaths and, often, the donning of costumes. Whiteboys, for instance, wore either white sheets or white shirts outside their clothes, and many members of secret societies blackened their faces and wore masks, feathers, twigs and leaves, or ribbons during their retributive activities. The Whiteboys’ white shirts may have been long or dresslike, but several societies such as the Molly Maguires, the Lady Clares, and Rebecca and Her Daughters clearly featured men wearing women’s clothing. Members swore allegiance to a mythical,

40 D. J. Hickey and J. E. Doherty, A New Dictionary of Irish History from 1800 (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2003), 437. There were only two outbreaks specific to the Whiteboys, from 1761 to 1765 and 1769 to 1776, but, as James S. Donnelly, Jr., points out, the term “Whiteboy” was used as a shorthand to describe other agrarian rebel groups (Encyclopedia of Irish History and Culture, 2 vols. [Farmington Hills, Mich.: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004], s.v. “Whiteboy”). I will follow this practice of using the term “Whiteboy” on occasion to refer generically to all these groups despite their local, temporal, and, in some cases, religious differences.


42 Natalie Zemon Davis calls the Irish Whiteboy costumes “long white frocks” and describes peasants in the French 1829–30 War of the Demoiselles wearing “long white shirts, suggesting women’s clothes” (Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1975]), 148–49). Women did take part in agrarian protest, but I have not yet found a discussion of the specific function of women protesters amongst the cross-dressed male protesters. On women in agrarian protest see ibid., 146; see also A. G. L. Shaw, Convicts and Colonies: A Study of Penal Transportation from Great Britain and Ireland to Australia and Other Parts of the British Empire (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), 185.
usually fictitious female figure and named themselves her sons, daughters, or children. While the Molly Maguire name has been attributed to several origins, including a widow, a tavern owner, and a young highwaywoman, the Whiteboys pledged themselves to a mythical woman from Irish folklore named Sieve Oultagh.\(^{43}\) It seems that it is from this historical precedent for political cross-dressing that Carey gets his material for the Sons of Sieve and, most likely, the inspiration for their name.

"Queen Sive," according to James S. Donnelly, Jr., offered the Irish poor a symbol of collectivity. The image of a "radiant maiden" or an "aggrieved old woman" has conventionally personified the collective group, including within the Irish aisling, or visionary poetic tradition.\(^{44}\) The description of Queen Sive given by condemned Whiteboys in 1762 as a one-eyed old woman "who still lives at the foot of a mountain in the neighbourhood" is, according to Michael Beames, "a symbol taken directly from pre-Christian, celtic tradition." He explains: "In celtic lore, the relationship between Irish kings and their realm was portrayed as a marriage: 'the country is a woman, the spouse of the king, and before her marriage she is a hag or a woman whose mind is deranged.' On the consummation of the marriage her countenance changes to one of beauty. This female figure embodied the concept of sovereignty."\(^{45}\) Kevin Kenny, similarly, attests that "allegiance to a mythical woman was a common theme in nineteenth-century Irish culture... In parishes and villages the residents were 'children of the one mother'; in the nation at large, to the extent that a concept of it existed, they were 'children of the Gael.'"\(^{46}\)

Yet it is clear that these rebels represented themselves not only as sons of the mother but as the mother herself through cross-dressing. Cultural authority was also gained for this cross-dressing because of its roots in other mobilizations of female symbolism and dress in rural Ireland and throughout Europe dating as far back as the Middle Ages and Renaissance. In early Ireland, as Natalie Zemon Davis points out, "old stories told of the ritual killing of the king at Samhain by men dressed as animals and as women."\(^{47}\) In the process of accommodating such elements of pre-Christian pagan culture Christian Europe developed popular culture rituals centered around seasonal festivals, including Samhain (All Souls' Day), midwinter (Christmas), Lent and Carnival, and May Day Eve. Social inversion was a mainstay of many of these rituals and the dressing of men in women's clothes practically common. Such cross-dressing is still documented as component parts of many seasonal, celebratory, or commemorative rituals,


\(^{45}\) The Whiteboy comment is quoted in Donnelly, "Whiteboy," 28; and in Beames, *Peasants and Power*, 100.

\(^{46}\) Kenny, *Making Sense*, 20–23.

\(^{47}\) Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture*, 149.
performances of social censure, and the practices of guizing, or mummerly, including Morris dancing, the playing of hooded horse, and Pace Egg and Plough Monday activities. Irish wakes, for instance, were sites for “disguise, transvestism, and overt sexual games,” according to Kenny; Margaret MacDonald says that young Irish men who call themselves Wren Boys dress as girls, blacken their faces, and go door-to-door, begging for money to help bury their dead “wren,” a bush of gorse tied with ribbons. The inclusion and prominence of men dressed as women at these events, perhaps even more than the presence of actual women performers, draw attention to the highly symbolic function of gender during such rituals: the female roles are connected to fertility, renewal, and seasonal or agricultural transformation, and they also invoke the meanings carried over from more female-centered pagan worldviews. The rituals tie the performers’ actions to “the rites of passage that accompanied communal life,” which represent “the survival and continuity of the community.” The face blackening and donning of women’s clothes, ribbons, long white shirts, and straw headpieces or clothes stuffed with straw that characterized these rituals were adopted by the Whiteboys and other agrarian secret societies. The social and economic pressures that prompted agrarian protest also often coincided with these traditional festivals: half-yearly rents were due around the time of Halloween and May Day. Whiteboys gained from these symbols and traditions rich cultural allusions and legitimacy for their cause.

The rituals performed a range of social functions, including offering an outlet for buried aggression and resistance to an unequal social order, the “expression of community solidarity,” and a method of social censure, control, and critique, all of which were “unofficial yet customary.” Although some historians have speculated that such carnivalesque rituals performed a “safety valve” function that ultimately strengthened the social order without reforming it, it is also clear that, as Peter Burke puts it, “rituals of revolt did coexist with serious questioning of the social, political and religious order, and the one sometimes turned into the other. Protest was


50 Beames, Peasants and Power, 100–101.

51 Kenny, Making Sense, 20.

52 Kenny, Making Sense, 20.

53 Burke, Popular Culture, 200–201.
expressed in ritualized forms, but the ritual was not always sufficient to contain the protest." Michael Mullett similarly points out how frequently peasant revolts coincided with seasonal festivals during the late medieval and early modern era in Europe, for these calendar events were "associated in popular culture with the blessedness of new beginnings, renewal, good tidings, and reform—reform, above all, in the social order." The tradition of "derision and inversion" in these popular seasonal rituals provided a structure for such revolts. Irish protest in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, then, grew out of these long-standing rituals. Cross-dressing, according to Kenny, "was characteristic of most communal societies in the Irish countryside," and "the violent societies [like the Molly Maguires] appear to have been an outgrowth of nonviolent ones, representing the transformation of cultural play into social protest." The rituals were at hand to help the protesters articulate their demands, but the familiar rituals also authorized the protests and embedded their contemporary concerns in traditional communal systems of meaning.

Although ritual cross-dressing tends to garner less attention to its sexual meanings than do acts of eccentric, underground, or individual transvestism, it does have important implications for the roles that gender and sexuality have played in communal identity formation and resolution of grievances. As Kenny points out, cross-dressing within such groups was not merely an incidental feature but in fact had many implications for gender and the distribution of power in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ireland: "The impulse behind disguise and cross-dressing was not, of course, some collective confusion over sexual identity. But if sex was not being questioned, gender and other forms of social hierarchy were. In societies where the word 'woman' often signified the passionate, the disorderly, the violent and chaotic side of human nature, temporary assumption of women's identity by men was fraught with significance." Dressing as women, Zemon Davis argues, offered male protesters in folk riots "free[dom] . . . from full responsibility for their deeds." Male rioters gained the symbolic authority and righteousness accorded to mothers and "drew upon the sexual power and energy of the unruly woman and her license (which they had long assumed at carnival and games)—to promote fertility, to defend the community's interests and standards, and to tell the truth about unjust rule." Images of disorderly women and the men who dressed as them, according to Zemon Davis, functioned as "multivalent image[s]" that marked the boundaries of the social order or challenged these same boundaries, permitting broader freedoms for women and "sanction[ing] riot and political disturbance for

54 Ibid., 203.
55 Michael Mullett, Popular Culture and Popular Protest in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe (London: Croom Helm, 1987), 95–99. Zemon Davis agrees that the "carnival right of criticism . . . sometimes tipped over into real rebellion" (Society and Culture, 147).
56 Kenny, Making Sense, 23.
57 Ibid., 24.
both men and women in a society that allowed the lower orders few formal means of protest.\footnote{Zemon Davis, \textit{Society and Culture}, 147–50, 131.}

The figure of the Irish woman during the period of England’s colonization of Ireland in particular signified disorderliness. As Andrea Knox attests, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English colonial documents portray Irish women as “dangerous, barbarous and pestiferous” and as “politically subversive.” Their challenges to the patriarchal order, Knox argues, were taken by colonial authorities as equally threatening to the colonial order.\footnote{Andrea Knox, “Testimonies to History: Reassessing Women’s Involvement in the 1641 Uprising,” in \textit{Irish Women and Nationalism: Soldiers, New Women and Wicked Hags}, ed. Louise Ryan and Margaret Ward (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2004), 26–28. In particular, Knox notes that the English colonizers marked as subversive the egalitarian (sometimes matrilocal) function of the Brehon law system followed in early modern Ireland, the sept or clan structure of kinship that transmitted power through sept chieftains’ wives, and traditional flexibility about primogeniture and the legitimacy of children.}

The power of this historical image of Irish womanhood for social criticism was therefore mobilized on many levels during agrarian protest. When the Whiteboys cross-dressed, argues Luke Gibbons, they participated through a “transgressive” act in the shaping of a nonpaternalistic form of early Irish nationalism, especially through their use of “incendiary images” of the “enigmatic female figures” who played such an important role in the “imagination of the peasantry.”\footnote{Luke Gibbons, “Identity without a Centre: Allegory, History and Irish Nationalism,” in \textit{Transformations in Irish Culture}, ed. Luke Gibbons (Cork, Ireland: Cork University Press/Field Day, 1996), 141.}

The power of these female images could be transferred to other forms of disruption of the social hierarchy. Given that sumptuary legislation from the Middle Ages through the seventeenth century set the rules for appropriate dress not just for men and women but also for different ranks and professions, one might see the violation of gender rules for dress as a refusal to keep to one’s “assigned place” in the hierarchy also in terms of social rank and power.\footnote{Sabrina Petra Ramet, \textit{Gender Reversals and Gender Cultures} (London: Routledge, 1996), 3; Bullough and Bullough, \textit{Cross Dressing}, 78.}

Marjorie Garber concurs that cross-dressing is an “index” of “category crisis” or “dissonance” amongst the dualities that structure societies: “Category crises can and do mark displacements from the axis of \textit{class} as well as from \textit{race} onto the axis of gender.”\footnote{Marjorie Garber, \textit{Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety} (New York: Routledge, 1992), 16–17.}

It is clear, therefore, that the cross-dressing that was performed during Irish agrarian protests in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has many implications for gender. It mobilized images of Irish womanhood that stood for resistance, protective motherhood, and collective identity. The cross-dressing was embedded in long-standing cultural traditions and gained legitimacy from these traditions at the same time as it represented a ritual
reversal of status that heralded challenges to the existing social order on many levels, including gender. Clearly, the meanings of this cross-dressing cannot simply be transferred to the era of Ned Kelly’s 1870s Australia, and we cannot assume they hold for the contemporary Australia that is audience to Carey’s novel. Still, they can help us see the connections between gender and nationalism in Carey’s novel, especially given the historical and socioeconomic points of connection between the Ireland of the Whiteboys and Molly Maguires and Ned Kelly’s Australia, even beyond the simple fact of the Irish origin of much Australian settler immigration. The many parallels suggest that communal “peasant” protest may have similar functions and meanings in the two places and may help to establish the significance of Carey’s addition of the Sons of Sieve to the Ned Kelly story.

There are many parallels between the social contexts of agrarian protest in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ireland and Ned Kelly’s Australia. Kenny points out that the Molly Maguires in Ireland operated according to a code of morality that was often at odds with official or legal culture: “The agrarian agitators displayed a conviction that they were enforcing a just law of their own in opposition to the inequities of landlord law, the police and court system, and the transgressions of land-grabbers; . . . many of the Irish clearly had little stake in the official legal system, which they experienced as an instrument of injustice and oppression.” Ned Kelly and his peers, as the Cameron and Jerilderie letters illustrate and as Carey emphasizes in his fictionalized treatment of Kelly, had no faith in or loyalty to the justice system of the colony of Victoria, for they believed it protected the wealthy, Protestant, and English and victimized the poor, Catholic, and Irish. In Ireland, as in Australia, religious difference was a corollary of wealth by ownership of land. A pivotal issue in many Irish agrarian protests was the enclosure of common land used by poor tenant farmers and laborers and its conversion to pastureland for the wealthy. Tithes were extorted, rents were raised, and livestock that trespassed onto enclosed land were impounded, with steep penalties to be paid by those who could ill afford the cost. Whiteboys, Molly Maguires, and other agrarian protesters tore down fences enclosing common land and drove off or attacked the sheep, cattle, or deer that were pasturing there. These protesters drew attention to the class divisions existing in Ireland, and their suppression through the coercive codes of the Insurrection Act “was an admission that Ireland was in a state of smothered war.”

It must be noted that these challenges may be considered both revolutionary and conservative in the sense that the Whiteboys wished to preserve a socioeconomic system that coincided with their traditional “moral economy” and that yielded some benefits to the peasantry.

Kenny, Making Sense, 20.


The Victoria colony of Australia during Ned Kelly's lifetime was also experiencing a class war and "decades of social antagonism" over land and resources, in this case between squatters and selectors, in a pattern that resembles the enclosure system in Ireland. Those called squatters were sheep and cattle graziers and pastoralists who, beginning in the 1820s, had taken land outside the legally surveyed boundaries of settlement areas. In the 1830s and 1840s these holdings were formalized, and squatters obtained legal rights to the lands either as leaseholders or owners and often became quite powerful. In schemes designed to "settle the small man on the land" and encourage agricultural development a series of land acts from 1860 to 1869 set aside large areas of land that could be selected at one pound per acre. If various conditions were met (including improvement of the land, building fences, cultivation, and residence for a period of time), the land could be purchased or the lease renewed. Similar tensions to those experienced in Ireland arose as the best farming land in the colonies was put to use for grazing, and the squatters monopolized more land and blocked out small landowners by harassment and by illegal or scheming means of obtaining land nicknamed "gridironing," "peacocking," and "dummying." J. M. Powell writes: "The frontier was theirs, and they intended to keep it." The squatters also had social power: as justices of the peace, shire presidents, council members, and friends of the police and surveyors they manipulated the system to their benefit. The land laws themselves, by ignorance or covert design, failed to address either the conditions for farming or the circumstances of the small farmers who came forward for selection. Poor selectors like the Kellys found it extremely difficult to make a living because of the climate and poor quality of the land and the small size of their holdings. As in Ireland, the selectors often had to pay for the release of their impounded livestock caught grazing on squatters' land. These conditions experienced by the Irish poor in Australia echoed closely the conflicts they and their parents had faced in Ireland and suggest a motivation for resistance similar to that practiced in agrarian uprisings in Ireland. Bob Reece notes:

67 McQuilton, The Kelly Outbreak, 23.
68 Ibid., 24.
72 McQuilton, The Kelly Outbreak, 35–39; Powell, Yeomen and Bureaucrats, xvi–xvii.
73 McQuilton, The Kelly Outbreak, 39–47; Powell, Yeomen and Bureaucrats, xv, 117–18.
74 McQuilton, The Kelly Outbreak, 38.
It is tempting to see in the struggle between Irish selectors and squatters in north-eastern Victoria in the 1860s and 1870s a similarity to (or indeed a continuity with) the struggle between peasants and leaseholders and employers in Ireland in the 1820s, 1830s and 1840s. In each case there was a highly centralized police force serving the interests of the propertied establishment, the colonial force being modeled on the Irish one.

Yet the connections between Irish agrarian protest and late-nineteenth-century Australia go well beyond these historical parallels, as Carey's book speculates. Transportation to Australia was a common punishment for Irish Whiteboy activity and other social and political acts of protest. Historians face difficulty in determining what proportion of all convicts transported to the Australian colonies from Ireland were social or political protesters, since some crimes, such as assault, theft, and attacking a dwelling, could have either individual or political motivations, and the context of poverty gives an air of political protest to many minor crimes. A. G. L. Shaw speculates that about five thousand Irish men and women out of a total of about thirty thousand Irish transported—that is, about one-sixth—were political or social prisoners, either distinctly political such as the United Irishmen or more generally involved in agrarian social protest such as the Whiteboys or Ribbonmen.

Carey's invention of the Sons of Sieve both was possible and makes sense in the context of Australia in the 1860s and 1870s in that it draws from the symbolism of the Irish agrarian outrages. Clearly, many convicted Whiteboys and other agrarian and political protesters found their way to Australia. The Castle Hill revolt, which happened in 1804 in New South Wales, for example, was led by “seasoned campaigners in rebellion” from Ireland, and “Ireland's cause helped bind these men together” in Australia. John McQuilton claims that “rural restlessness” emerged in Kelly country during the 1870s and that “the 'agrarian outrages' of Ireland were reported in the region,” including the burning of squatters’ fences and midnight releasing of impounded

77 The task is made especially difficult given that almost all criminal and convict transportation records in Ireland were destroyed by fire in 1922. See George Rudé, “Early Irish Rebels in Australia,” Historical Studies 16, no. 62 (1974): 18.
78 Shaw, Convicts and Colonies, 182-83.
livestock. Jan Kociumbas documents that bushranger “Captain” Michael Howe and his gang “frequently adopted the ritual disguise of the blackened face which had been the hallmark of organized rural resistance to enclosure in England”—an English example yet with the potential to suggest similar Irish-derived practices. Reece points out that the Irish Australian selectors in Victoria “resorted to some of the methods of the Whiteboys and the Ribbon Men” in their grievances with the colonial state and the Victoria Police. Edith Mary Johnston points out that Sergeant Kennedy, who was shot by Ned Kelly, was “found with his ear amputated—a traditional Whiteboy punishment”—although Kelly himself denied cutting off Kennedy’s ear in his Jerilderie letter.

There is, therefore, evidence that some of the Whiteboy practices survived transportation; but at the same time, Kociumbas argues that “the divisiveness and isolation of the [convict] assignment system deprived them of the ideological tools necessary for collective political action.” Could the ideological tools of Irish agrarian protest have also persisted in the convict system? The social and economic circumstances among the Irish selectors in Australia were ripe for at least the motivation for action if not the use of the full symbolic trappings—that is, the cross-dressing and other ritual actions—of the Whiteboys and Molly Maguires. Whether the organization and rituals of agrarian protest survived transportation to take root in Australia is unclear. Shaw proposes that the Whiteboys who rejected the social order in Ireland “showed themselves ready enough to accept the different one which prevailed in Australia.” Johnston, on the other hand, argues that although “the overwhelming majority made a better life in their new home than they could ever have enjoyed” in Ireland, some “brought with them or handed on to their children an inheritance of smouldering grievance.”

Carey has precedent for imagining that Ned Kelly’s father, John “Red” Kelly, in particular may have been a cross-dressing agrarian protestor. The Report of the Royal Commission of Enquiry into the Circumstances of the Kelly Outbreak in Victoria from 1881 claimed that John Kelly had been transported from Tipperary to Australia in 1841 “for an agrarian outrage, stated to have been shooting at a landlord with intent to murder.”

80 McQuilton, The Kelly Outbreak, 51.
81 Kociumbas, Oxford History of Australia, 166.
82 Reece, “Ned Kelly’s Father,” 240.
84 Kociumbas, Oxford History of Australia, 166.
85 Shaw, Convicts and Colonies, 183.
87 Quoted in Frank Clune, The Kelly Hunters: The Authentic, Impartial History of the Life and Times of Edward Kelly, the Ironclad Outlaw (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1954), xi.
belief that Ned Kelly’s father was convicted for political protest has helped to shape Kelly historiography and provided the Kelly legend with a narrative of multigenerational anti-authoritarian resistance, even though it is likely that John Kelly was in fact convicted of pig stealing. Reece argues, however, that the intense climate of political Whiteboy activity in John Kelly’s Tipperary should still shape how we view him: “John Kelly’s offence was clearly not an agrarian one, but it must still be seen in the context of the rural unemployment and deprivation that marked parts of Tipperary in the pre-Famine decade.”

There are further parallels between the practices of the Irish secret societies and Ned Kelly’s story. He certainly drew authority for his cause from the image of his widowed mother and her persecution by the Victoria police—a technique demonstrated by agrarian protesters as they put their struggle in the context of Irish cultural symbolism. The catalyst for the formation of the Kelly gang and their battle with the police was Ellen Kelly’s arrest on the likely exaggerated, if not fabricated, charge of aiding an attempted murder against Constable Fitzpatrick. Ellen was jailed with her infant daughter, Alice, and their persecution provided Ned and his cause with rhetorical power: he peppered his Jerilderie letter with references to his mother and her infant and ended it with the now-famous phrase, “I am a widows son outlawed and my orders must be obeyed.” Carey’s Ned likewise obtains the loyalty of his prisoners at Euroa by referring to his mother and her baby and reminding them that “the historic memory of UNFAIRNESS were in their blood” (312). His fictionalized account accentuates the fact that Ned stayed in Australia out of loyalty to his mother but at the cost of his relationship with Mary and his own life (327)—almost as if he had pledged to her an oath, such as those used by agrarian protesters. Ned’s mother functions in Carey’s story as the iconic widow overlooking and authorizing Irish protest—albeit a tarnished, not ideal, figure.

The two surviving documents from the historical Ned’s hands, the Cameron and Jerilderie letters, also echo the rhetoric used by the Whiteboys and other agrarian protest groups to intimidate both their enemies and the community they wished to bind to themselves. Beames recounts that “threatening letters and notices were the essential methods by which the Whiteboys communicated their objectives, warned their enemies and proclaimed the justice or ‘legality’ of their proceedings.” In the Cameron letter Ned proclaimed: “As I was outlawed without cause, and cannot be no worse, and have but once to die, and if the public do not see justice done I will seek revenge for the name and character which has been given to me and my relations, while God gives me strength to pull a trigger.”

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89 Kelly, Jerilderie Letter, 56.
90 Beames, Peasants and Power, 75.
91 Quoted in J. J. Kenneally, The Complete Inner History of the Kelly Gang and Their Pursuers (1929; Melbourne: H. Hearne, 1934), 104.
In the Jerilderie letter he threatened potential traitors with these words: “I have never interfered with any person unless they deserved it, and yet there are civilians who take firearms against me, for what reason I do not know, unless they want me to turn on them and exterminate them without medicine. I shall be compelled to make an example of some of them if they cannot find no other employment.” He warned the government of Victoria, the police, and the “whole British army”: “[Constable] Fitzpatrick will be the cause of greater slaughter to the Union Jack than Saint Patrick was to the snakes and toads in Ireland.” Indeed, in his letters Kelly frequently alluded to Ireland as a homeland and to loyalty to Ireland as a measure of anticolonial resistance. Of Irish convicts transported to Australia he said: “In those places of tyranny and condemnation many a blooming Irishman rather than subdue to the Saxon yoke Were flogged to death and bravely died in servile chains but true to the shamrock and a credit to Paddys land.” These comments give the historical Kelly’s threats and self-justifications a specifically Irish context and highlight the parallels between his methods and actions and those of Irish agrarian protesters.

The foregoing discussion helps to establish a basis for understanding the background context for Ned Kelly’s generation and for seeing the Sons of Sieve in Carey’s book as imaginatively possible in Australia in the nineteenth century. The shared social and economic conditions between agrarian peasant culture in Ireland and Ned Kelly’s Irish Australian selector culture make comprehensible both the communal loyalty in Kelly’s society and the place that ritual has in it. As I indicated earlier, critical discussion of True History of the Kelly Gang mostly concludes that although the cross-dressing unsettles Ned and Carey’s narrative for a time, the connection between the Sons of Sieve and Irish political protest halts and erases the sexual possibilities of the transvestism and reestablishes the heteromasculinity of the gang members. I return now to the dynamics of gender, sexuality, and nationalism that Irish agrarian cross-dressing reveals and demonstrate how that analysis can help us to understand the construction of Australian national identities. I first address how anxieties about sexuality have shaped Australian responses to the Ned Kelly mythology and then proceed to an examination of how Carey’s evocation of Irish agrarian cross-dressing makes of his novel a profound challenge to Australian heteromasculine national identities.

Postcolonial revisionary work often addresses partly buried cultural and social anxieties. In his novel Carey exploits the gender-bending possibilities of the Kelly legend and of masculine and feminine identities available in Australia in the 1860s and 1870s. He has as his key resource a declaration, contained in official police records, that Steve Hart, a Kelly gang member, was known to wear women’s clothes. As J. J. Kenneally described it in 1934, Steve Hart “appears to have been possessed of considerable courage and

resource, and during the period of his outlawry frequently rode about in feminine attire. So successful was this disguise that he was taken to be one of the Kelly sisters, and the police attributed many of his daring exploits to Kate Kelly. Indeed, an 1878 letter from Constable McIntyre to Sub-Inspector Pentress, contained in the official police records, noted that “Hart’s horsemanship was such that he won the Greta races wearing feminine garb and riding side-saddle.”

This aspect of the Kelly legend provided inspiration not only for Carey but also for one of the best known of Australia’s twentieth-century artists, Sidney Nolan, who painted a dress-clad Steve Hart on horseback in 1945 and 1947 paintings that were part of his modernist Ned Kelly series. Kenneally’s description, quoted above, served as the caption for the catalog in which one of Nolan’s paintings of Hart, entitled Steve Hart Dressed as a Girl, was reproduced. Nolan’s comment for the Australian National Gallery, given at the time these paintings were first exhibited, reads: “All the Kellys may have dressed like this at times to deceive people for fun.” Carey may have been inspired by these paintings to introduce cross-dressing into his novel; at any rate, he takes this historical detail and extrapolates from it not only to speculate on an Irish connection but also to catalyze a range of unsettling effects on both Ned and his legacy.

Carey’s provocative representation of cross-dressing and the Kelly gang, then, joins a long-standing debate. That debate took a new turn in 1966, when the journalist Sidney J. Baker in his book The Australian Language said of Ned and his gang in a parenthetical remark, “After examining all of the relevant evidence, I have little doubt that they were a group of homosexuals.” During the subsequent furor over the issue Baker told the Sydney Morning Herald that he had evidence that “Ned was fond of perfume; that he and other members of the gang sometimes dressed as women; that Steve Hart and Dan Kelly were said to have died in each

93 Kenneally, Complete Inner History, 33.
94 See Elizabeth McMahon, “Australia Crossed-Over: Images of Cross-Dressing in Australian Art and Culture,” Art and Australia 34, no. 3 (1997): 375. Nolan’s title for the 1947 version of this painting, Steve Hart Dressed as a Girl, points up the image’s function as gender inversion rather than simple costuming. This painting also represents a clean-shaven Steve Hart in an arguably more “feminine” and provocative posture and facial expression—what T. G. Rosenthal calls “a touch of glamour”—in comparison with the 1945 plainly titled Steve Hart, in which Steve sports a moustache and less intense facial expression. During an interview Nolan, however, apparently “shrugged off the possibility of any sexual significance” and maintained that the costume was simply a useful disguise for eluding police (Rosenthal, Sidney Nolan [London: Thames and Hudson, 2002], 67–70). In an interview with Carey he remarked: “It was not odd for [Irish rebels] to put on dresses when they went to ‘off’ somebody. It signifies that the normal rules of society were overturned” (Stuart Wavell, “What Kind of Notorious Outlaw Wears a Frock?” Sunday Times, 7 January 2001, 7).
95 Elwyn Lynn, Sidney Nolan’s Ned Kelly (Canberra, Australia: Australian National Gallery, 1989), 22.
96 Baker, The Australian Language, 94.
other’s arms at Glenrowan; and that one of Ned’s early associates, Harry Power, gave as one of his reasons for being a bushranger that he ‘never associated with women.’” He also claimed that schoolteacher Curnow had danced with Dan Kelly at the Glenrowan hotel. Baker had written a lengthy document analyzing the available evidence on Ned’s sexuality, evidence that he suggested was “scattered” because “in those days it wasn’t polite to mention homosexuality, let alone document it.” rejoinders to Baker’s claim also published in the Sydney Morning Herald included one from playwright, poet, and literary editor Douglas Stewart, whose verse play Ned Kelly, performed on radio and stage in 1942 and 1943, “was influential in presenting Kelly as a national hero, a mythical creature, and prompter of questions on what it means to be Australian.” Stewart’s letter to the Herald declared that “the Kelly gang was normally sexed” because they “had girls,” and he argued that men dancing together was “part of the general horseplay that went on throughout that day [at Glenrowan],” that Dan and Steve may have died in each other’s arms only because they were “in terror,” and that the perfume incident could be easily explained: “They did play the goat by spraying each other with the hawker’s scent bottles and dressing up (to what extent has never been stated) in some of the women’s clothes in his stock. Then they went off in his cart and robbed the Euroa bank. It was just ordinary larrikin horseplay and doesn’t prove anything—except, perhaps, that they were interested in women.” Stewart did not explain how this series of events attested to their interest in women. Artist, sculptor, and Sydney Bulletin illustrator Norman Lindsay similarly defended the gang’s heterosexuality, suggesting that their wearing of perfume and flowers, their preoccupation with dandified clothes and footwear, and their same-sex dancing were standard heteromasculine behavior of that era and that Baker was therefore “accusing a very large section of the male population of the Kelly era as homosexuals.” Tellingly for the homosocial implications of bush mateship, he defended the suggestion that men danced together with the statement: “How else could they work off the exhilaration of liquor, lacking women to dance with?” (Baker, Stewart, and Lindsay were all key media personalities involved in the construction of Australian identity in the twentieth century.)

98 Baker’s evidence may include Curnow’s own statement that he danced with Dan and witness Robert Scott’s claim, published in the Argus, that a woman’s hat was found among the burnt remains of the gang’s old clothes at Euroa, “supposed to have been in one of the outlaw’s swags” (Keith McMenomy, Ned Kelly: The Authorized Illustrated Story [South Yarra, Australia: Currey O’Neil Ross, 1984], 160).
Of course, Baker’s “accusation” has no greater relationship to fact than do Lindsay’s or Stewart’s “defenses”; the media incident says much more about the anxieties surrounding sexuality in 1960s Australia and the shifting cultural signification of sexual identity than it does about what Ned Kelly’s sexual orientation really may have been. The latter, in effect, is impossible to determine, and I believe an attempt to determine it would bewrong-headed.\textsuperscript{102} What matters is the profound role such cultural anxieties can play in the establishment of a national identity, especially a popular identity tied so closely to the legacy of an historical figure.

Carey’s literary precursors have dealt with this legacy in a variety of ways that can only be briefly touched upon here. Kenneally’s 1929 historical study of the gang, perhaps not unexpectedly, omitted any reference to the perfume and referred only to the theft of masculine clothing, claiming that the gang “selected new suits from the hawker’s stock, as they desired to be very respectfully dressed when they set out for the bank at Euroa.”\textsuperscript{103} Frank Clune’s \textit{The Kelly Hunters}, published in 1954, has the gang dressing in new men’s clothes and “transforming themselves into regular bush dandies” as they perform for the prisoners’ amusement.\textsuperscript{104} Even more recent discussions have downplayed the importance of these elements, though. McQuilton’s 1979 account quotes Mrs. Scott, a witness at one of the gang’s holdups, who reported that the gang stole new suits of clothes and “white handkerchiefs, highly perfumed, and they looked very respectable and no doubt would have been the admiration of the girls at Greta.”\textsuperscript{105} John Molony’s biography \textit{I Am Ned Kelly}, published in 1980, describes the theft of men’s clothes “to which they added a touch of perfume, as was the way of the young blades of the bush.”\textsuperscript{106} Ian Jones, in his 1995 historical work, \textit{Ned Kelly: A Short Life}, acknowledges the wearing of perfume but then emphasizes the number of women who may have spent Ned’s last evening with him and explains the same-sex dancing thus: “Because the rest of the women were down at Stanistreet’s, Joe danced with the male prisoners [at Glenrowan] who formed buck sets. Later, perhaps while Joe was dancing with Jane or her mother, Dan invited Curnow to join him.”\textsuperscript{107} Robert Drewe, in the novel \textit{Our Sunshine}, published in 1991, pictures Ned at Euroa saying, “We’ve never looked or smelled more spruce . . . now everyone’s flash as a rat with a gold tooth” after their theft of clothes and scent: “We’re the most stylish murdering thieves northeastern Victoria’s ever seen.”\textsuperscript{108} The screenplay for the film version of

\begin{itemize}
  \item\textsuperscript{102} Susan K. Martin mistakenly attributes to Ian Jones the declaration that Ned Kelly was a “sodomite” (“Dead White Male Heroes,” 304).
  \item\textsuperscript{103} Kenneally, \textit{Complete Inner History}, 93.
  \item\textsuperscript{104} Clune, \textit{The Kelly Hunters}, 198.
  \item\textsuperscript{105} McQuilton, \textit{The Kelly Outbreak}, 110.
  \item\textsuperscript{106} John Molony, \textit{I Am Ned Kelly} (Ringwood, Australia: Allen Lane, 1980), 148.
  \item\textsuperscript{107} Jones, \textit{Rebecca’s Children}, 238.
\end{itemize}
Drewe’s book, entitled *Ned Kelly* and released in 2003, quickly establishes Ned’s heterosexual credentials via the stock homophobic banter—Aaron Sherritt queries Ned, just released from prison, with, “You’re walking a bit funny there, Ned. Any of the old lags give you a try?” This dialog is quickly followed by the young men’s ogling a pretty woman—but the film also notes that Dan and Steve died in each other’s arms, holding hands. Interestingly, this film version adds in cross-dressing where it does not otherwise appear in the historical record: Joe dresses as a woman to lure Aaron outside his house before he shoots him for being a traitor. The careful language in all of these accounts demonstrates the effort expended to establish the gang’s heterosexuality and to rescue them from the connotations of homosexuality that attend certain flexible gender practices such as cross-dressing.

Scent wearing and same-sex dancing may well have been common masculine practice at the time, but it is a mark of Carey’s playful project here that he takes advantage of the modern campy meanings for such acts and of the gang’s reputed flamboyance. *True History of the Kelly Gang* abounds with references to high-heeled boots and the gang members’ penchant for new outfits, “flashy” horse riding, and the affectation of wearing their hat straps under their noses. This preoccupation of the gang with fancy clothing may simply illustrate the poor boys’ yearning after the material trappings of the wealthy. For a modern audience, however, this flamboyance yields possibilities for a questioning of the gang’s gender presentation.

With the cross-dressing of the Sons of Sieve Carey unleashes the cultural anxieties about sexuality and the gendered signification of clothing and behavior that have circulated around the Kelly gang. When Sergeant O’Neil tells the young Ned that he saw John Kelly in a dress riding off to be “serviced by his husband” (15), it functions to estrange Ned from his father at both a psychological and moral level and leads to his persecution by his peers as “a sissy and the son of a sissy” (16). The allusion to repressed sexual anxieties is made obvious when Ned discovers on his family’s land a buried trunk containing “the thing I wish I never saw”: a woman’s dress exactly like the one described by Sergeant O’Neil that “made my stomach knot” (18). His father, later seeing the empty trunk, “saw his broken secret lying in the air,” and he is “lost” to his son, who now “pictured him with his broad red beard his strong arms his freckled skin all his manly features buttoned up inside that cursed dress” (19).

The memory of the dress resurfaces occasionally over the years and is further given psychosexual overtones when Ned meets Steve Hart. In a revealing sequence Ned has a dream in which his father’s face appears, “lacerated with 1,000 cuts” that Ned has inflicted, and he sees “that woman’s dress

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in the dreadful tin trunk” (181). Immediately following this dream, Ned describes seeing a woman in the distance galloping on a horse, and, assuming it is his mother (and describing her provocatively as “thrilling to behold” and “show[ing] her knees”), he gives chase. The two-pronged Oedipal implications of this sequence—his guilt toward his father, his sexualization of his mother—take a new turn when he discovers that the “woman” is Steve Hart “clad in a dress” (182). The disguise is certainly incomplete: Steve’s shirt and pants are showing, and “he had made no effort to make himself a female indeed he were doing his best to grow a beard” (182), a distinction that “queers” the scene even further. Ned then tells him: “If ever I saw him in a dress again he would be rendered into sausage meat” (182). The threat clearly has sexual overtones, given a previous association made in the novel between sausages and the male member (121–23).

Not content to let this cross-dressing alone challenge the heteromascuinity of Kelly and his gang, Carey peppers such scenes with coy double entendres. The episode of Ned’s first meeting with Steve is immediately followed by Ned’s fight with Wild Wright, in which he is made to wear green silk boxing trunks that Ned at first thinks are “ladies’ scanties” (185). The man who hands him the trunks “had his damn fingers at my shirt undoing the buttons I pulled away” (185). Wild Wright, who wears orange silk shorts, is pictured “sucking on an orange” (186). References to women’s clothing are almost commonplace throughout the novel as metaphors and reference points: when Mr. Shelton presents young Ned with a silk sash in gratitude for saving his son and setsdes it over his head, Ned, with eyes closed, thinks, “That’s women’s stuff it were a dress to give my mother” (32). He describes the interior of their cabin, draped with curtains to create rooms, as being “like living in a cupboard full of dresses” (10). George King’s Yankee boots have “higher heels than a Cuban more like a fancy woman’s shoe” (177). Dan is “weepy as a girl with a gravy stain on her ballgown” (194–95). This emphasis on the gendering (and cross-gendering) of clothing has the effect of framing and accentuating the sexual possibilities of the cross-dressing in Carey’s novel.

Carey also exploits the homoerotic possibilities of the famously close relationship between Joe Byrne and Aaron Sherritt, described by Kenneally as an “intimate association.” Ned describes how “they was mates since birth at night they slept beside the fire curled up like cattle dogs” and had a “queer and private way of conversing” (203). When Joe races toward Aaron to share the opium he carries, Ned comments: “I saw what I must of known before. He were both slave & lover to the Chinaman” (294)—meaning lover of the opium but by association perhaps of Aaron too. When Dan reports

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110 The reference is to the heifer that Ned stole and “killed . . . badly” with “a sea of lac-eration” (22); in the novel Ned’s father is arrested for his son’s crime and dies not long after his release from prison.

111 Kenneally, Complete Inner History, 34.
that Aaron has betrayed Joe, he remarks, "Aaron says he plans to shoot you and eff you before your body has grown cold" (344).

In one long and significant sequence Carey dramatizes both Ned’s homophobia and the homosocial possibilities of bush mateship. Steve, "the horrid thing who had previously worn a dress," declares to Ned: "You think I'm a sissy but I ain't" (203). In another of Carey’s double entendres Ned subsequently tells the reader that "when he [Steve] announced he would put his horse in my paddock I did not prevent him" (203). Ned then says: "I kept my hands in the pockets," and when Steve announces "I'm a Lady Clare boy," Ned says he “pushed [his] hands deeper in the pockets” (203). Although the gesture suggests youthful social discomfort as well as a way to resist the urge to punch Steve, the sexual connotations of the gesture cannot be avoided. When Steve says, “I’ll tell you what I am,” Ned thinks to himself: “That were a door I ciid not wish to open” (204). Despite or perhaps because of his anxiety about Steve’s dress, Ned has to admit: “I had a fascination about him I suppose,” and “why I tolerated them secretive and fervent eyes staring out at me through the smoke I cannot think” (203-4).

His brother Dan’s appearance in a dress puts Ned through the same process of misrecognition, anxiety, and aggression. As Steve and Dan ride up on horseback Ned states: “At 1 I thought it were Kate and Maggie then the front woman passed into the full sunshine and it were Dan” (205). Dan and Steve, wearing women’s dresses, blackened faces, and palms bleeding from a sworn oath, prompt Ned’s rage in part because they have stolen the dresses but also because of the unsettling effect on Ned of Steve’s “bright and secret” eyes (205). Ned’s repatriation of the stolen dresses to the hawker leads to another double entendre: when Constable Fitzpatrick takes the dresses from Ned, Ned says that he “opened my bundle to poke around with his whip” (206). This is not the only wordplay involving Fitzpatrick. When he jails Ned, Ned claims that “he got my arms behind my back and told me he admired me more than any man he ever met” (224) and adds that “he only gaold me because he loved me” (229).

Ned subsequently meets his future lover, Mary Hearn, at a brothel, and although her appearance in the novel may function to heterosexualize Ned, the homosocial threat still lingers, even if at the level of parapraxis. He notes: “I desired her so very badly I had little time to think of Steve Hart” (212). Although Ned may “mean” that his preoccupation with Mary has distracted him from his anger at Steve, the syntactical allusion to a former desire for Steve cannot be missed.

When Mary sees Steve and Dan in their stolen dresses and ash-blackened faces, she calls them Molly’s children and tells them their costumes belong to “weak and ignorant” Irishmen who “make Ireland such a Hell on earth” (285). Steve protests that “its what is done in Ireland . . . when they wish to scare the bejesus out of the squatters” (285). The Irish-born Mary tells the Australian-born gang how in Ireland a gang of men in dresses with blackened
faces demanded that her blacksmith father give them access to a nobleman’s horse that he was stabling. The men proceeded to dress the horse in top hat and red cloak, put it on trial in its master’s place, and then torture and kill it. Mary tells the story to warn the gang that this vehicle for their grievances will not earn the common people’s loyalty: “You must ease their lives not bring them terror” (290). Although the story eases Ned’s anxiety about his father’s and Steve’s sexuality (and, by implication, his own), it now gives him “horrible visions” of what violent activities his father may have done. The story on one level marks the colonial cultural generation gap: “That is the agony of the Great Transportation that our parents would rather forget what come before so we currency lads is left alone ignorant as tadpoles spawned in puddles on the moon” (290). It is a breaking point for the gang in their adoption of Irish cultural markers and stories as a source of Australian identity: these “ancient poisons” must be drawn out (292).

Mary’s explanation, however, does not halt the novel’s preoccupation with ambiguous gender identity. “Molly’s children” may be the Irish secret society the Molly Maguires, but in Carey’s book the sexual connotations of “Molly” ring just as true: since the eighteenth century in English-speaking countries the term had designated a cross-dressed homosexual. Even after the incident Carey quotes a newspaper’s statement that the gang members steal and use perfume, making “bush dandies of themselves” (305), and the description of one gang member wearing “a grey striped Crimean shirt and new lavender tie” (307). Steve Hart is described by Ned as “nimble & pretty as a pony” when dancing a jig (337). And, most significantly, Ned uses the language of women’s dressmaking to describe his construction of ironclad armor he builds for his gang. He tells Steve: “This is what them Mollys should of worn yes this were the very seamstress he needed for his dresses” (339). For his patterns he “used fresh peeled stringybark just as women use the paper for a dress” and drew them with a lump of charcoal “like a tailor uses chalk” (341). Steve, in fact, paints “black & orange flowers” (349) on his armor, a clear reference to the flowered dress of “black & orange lace” (277) that he had stolen during his escape. At this epic moment in the Kelly story and its apotheosis into national myth, the men’s activities of war preparation are shaped by metaphors of feminine dressmaking and allusions to the cross-dressing of the Molly Maguires.

112 This scene is strikingly similar to an infamous account of Whiteboy activity in which a gathering of five to six hundred Whiteboys attacked a horse belonging to local magistrate James Grove: “At this curious gathering a bay gelding, as if a substitute for its hated owner, was tried, found guilty, tortured and shot” (Donnelly, “The Whiteboy Movement,” 24).

113 Bullough and Bullough, Cross Dressing, 120.

114 Notably, Sidney Nolan’s Ned Kelly series features a painting of Ned’s sister Maggie Skillion sewing a quilted lining for the headpiece of his armor and entitled Quilting the Armour (1947). Obviously, there are significantly different gendered implications in depicting
Much is at stake in this image in Carey’s book: the masculine nationalist identification that finds its popular expression in the image of Ned Kelly, the battler who fights a just and anticolonial war on behalf of his people, here finds its hero wearing women’s clothes. The ironclad armor is the most powerful image of the Kelly legend, and Carey here turns it into a cross-dressing costume. The explanation that the novel’s cross-dressing alludes merely to agrarian protest in Ireland is insufficient to explain the continued presence of gender inversion at the level of description and imagery and Carey’s manipulation of the gender signification of the armor. Through his novel Carey revises the narrative of heteromasculinity that adheres not just to the Kelly legend but also to the prevailing Australian national identity.

I have argued that the cross-dressing in the novel and the web of imagery that it creates have significance for the gendering of Australia’s nationalism both in spite of and because of its links to Irish protest. I say “in spite of” because the more prominent signification of Irish political cross-dressing appears to be strictly (and implicitly heteronormatively) political, as most of Carey’s critics assume. Yet the cross-dressing present in Irish communal protest itself has clear implications for gender, power, and nationalism, and Carey’s text benefits from its incorporation of this residue into itself. The cross-dressing in Carey’s novel, when put in the context of Irish communal protest, borrows from its historical source the association between communal or national antiauthoritarian protest and gender inversion. In both cases cross-dressing illuminates the connections between power hierarchies based on gender and those based on ethnicity and class. Accordingly, Carey implies that the rallying cry of Australian anticolonial nationalism, rather than embracing the people as a whole, has addressed only dominant masculinity. The Irish example lends to Carey’s novel an understanding that protest and rebellion of the kind that feeds national mythologies can have complex gendered valances. What is so striking about this instance of the nation imagined as feminine is that the men are not just defending the iconic woman-as-nation but are performing that womanhood.

One sphere in which the comparison does not fully overlap is in the cross-dressing’s implications for sexual orientation: historians largely concur that ritual cross-dressing, such as that performed by Irish agrarian protesters, does not have a “primary impulse” of “homosexuality or uncertain gender identity,” although it is worth repeating Marjorie Garber’s point that category inversions in one sphere tend to echo in many

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It is also worth emphasizing that the cross-dressing in Carey's novel does gain meaning with reference to an anxiety about homosexuality or sexual ambiguity in Australian culture, and this anxiety is visible in the furor over the historical interpretation of the Kelly gang as homosexual that first surfaced in 1966. The meaning of an act like cross-dressing shifts over time and place, but this is what makes Carey's novel successful: by invoking Irish ritual cross-dressing, he gains an image of revolutionary nationalism routed through powerful images of women, but he also gains the contemporary allusions to queer sexuality. Contrary to what Carey's critics seem to be suggesting, that the Sons of Sieve is either political and nationalist or an upsetting of gender roles, we can see the Sons of Sieve as Carey's intervention into the gendering of Australian nationalism.

115 Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture*, 129. See also Bullough and Bullough, *Cross Dressing*, x.
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