

Counterfactual history is necessary to gain a greater understanding of an event.

How do Ned Kelly's murderous intentions at the Siege of Glenrowan support this statement?

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Synopsis

This essay examines counterfactual history as a necessary tool of historical examination. This analytical technique is the concept of speculating upon the 'what if' questions of history, and, whilst acknowledging that all conjectures will inevitably remain unprovable, my project explores the ways in which this ideology is nevertheless useful.

Counterfactual history opposes the propensity of many to rely on the benefit of hindsight that creates a sense of inevitability of the past. Additionally, it restores contingency to history, reminding us of how uncertain everything seemed before the outcome was exposed. Furthermore, counterfactual history reinstates the significance of the human actor in determining the events of the past, analogously countering any preordained belief and diminishing the importance of external forces.

To illustrate my argument, I have used the case study of Ned Kelly, Australia's most notorious bushranger. The outlaw has been glorified into an Australian legend due to his compelling characteristics that have captured the attention of numerous historians, as well as the population at large. The following essay analyses the criminal's murderous intent at the Siege of Glenrowan, where he had the documented plan to massacre twenty-six policemen – something that an orthodox treatment of history tends to disregard, due to its failed implementation owing to one of the Kelly Gang's hostages escaping and forewarning the police.

I argue that for a true understanding of Kelly, his actual

intentions cannot be ignored. Through a counterfactual lens, my essay argues that had Kelly's murderous plan been fulfilled, the outlaw's legendary status would be non-existent as it would be hard to convince a nation that a man responsible for mass murder could be a folk hero. Thus, by examining alternative plausible outcomes of the bushranger's life, and how interpretations of his life would consequently be different today, counterfactual history serves a valuable role.

Essay

Counterfactual history is an analytical technique that examines plausible alternative outcomes of the past to those that actually occurred. The very root of the idea is to speculate upon what *could* have happened, in an attempt to understand the past as contemporaries saw it, and hence gain a greater understanding of the context in which historical events occurred. Commonly posed questions used in the counterfactual genre include: 'What if America never entered World War One in 1917?' or 'What if Adolf Hitler died in the assassination attempt in 1944?' Such conjecture remind us that where the world is today is not the "only possible end point of any historical narrative"¹ and hence counters the common contemporary mindset of the inevitability of the past. Analogous to all historiographical philosophies, counterfactual history, also known as virtual history, is subject to great debate. Scottish historian Niall Ferguson deemed virtual history as a necessity for the understanding of the past², which was countered by British academic Richard J. Evans who maintained that *because* it is unprovable, it is futile³. By examining the Australian bushranger Ned Kelly, the role of counterfactual history is clearly illustrated.

Ned Kelly, Australia's most celebrated bushranger, has been glorified into a national legend. The iconic bushranger, found guilty of murder and sentenced to death in 1880, is nevertheless hailed as a skilled bushman, a loyal brother and a victim of the injustices and inequities of colonial Victoria who rose against his oppressors. Those in support of this legendary status include Australian historian Ian Jones, who has studied Kelly for more than seventy years, and insists the bushranger is "the only real Robin Hood who has ever lived."⁴ On the other hand, anonymous blogger 'Jack the Ripper' summed up the opposing argument, contending, "social inequity is no justification for murder."⁵ It is important to note, that whilst Ned Kelly was only ever convicted for the murder of one person (policeman, Constable Thomas Lonigan), he *intended* to commit mass murder.

At the Siege of Glenrowan, June 28th, 1880, Ned Kelly had a carefully calibrated plan to massacre twenty-six policemen and possibly civilians as well⁶. The plan only failed because Thomas Curnow, a local schoolteacher and a hostage of the Kelly Gang at Glenrowan, convinced his captors to let him go, and then successfully got on to the train line and waved a lantern to warn the driver he must stop the locomotive. This singular act, not only saved the trainload of people, but also forewarned the police on board that the Kelly Gang were in the Glenrowan inn, allowing police to take action. As a result, three of the five fatalities that occurred during the Siege came from the Kelly Gang bushrangers themselves – deaths that provided further evidence for historians like Jones to avow that the Gang were victims of an oppressive and cruel system.

By eliminating Thomas Curnow's warning from Kelly's timeline, the bushranger's status as a beloved Australian hero can be seriously challenged, and possibly revoked. Yes, mass murder did not occur, but as pointed out by Australian journalist Paul Terry, what truly counts is the outlaw's evil intent at Glenrowan. Terry counterfactually speculates that if Kelly's murderous intent had been satisfied, "we might now regard Ned in a very different way"⁷ as it "would have been a shocking act that would have had to be interpreted either as a declaration or an act of terrorism."⁸ In a similar manner, Melbourne journalist and teacher Christopher Bantick claims, "how he [Kelly] has been excused from planning mass murder at Glenrowan is an interesting example of distorted historical revisionism,"⁹ asserting Ned's intention was "by any measure a calculated

bloodbath of Port Arthur proportions."¹⁰ Terry and Bantick evidently insist that Kelly's intent is as, if not more, important than the Kelly Gang fatalities. Thus, Kelly's worthiness for his Australian legend title is dubious at best, as a counterfactual analysis challenges the accepted history. Ultimately it is argued that in trying to determine Kelly's true character, his plan to commit a massacre is arguably more telling than the fact that he failed in its execution.

To make counterfactuals plausible, it is necessary to distinguish between what could have happened and what could *not* have happened. Niall Ferguson claims that by considering only "those alternatives, which we can show on the basis of contemporary evidence that contemporaries actually considered"¹¹, the dilemma of choosing between a single deterministic past and an infinite number of possible pasts, is solved. Ferguson points out that no historical insights can be gained by speculating "what would have happened in 1948 if the entire population of Paris had suddenly sprouted wings"¹², as this is not a realistic conjecture. Thus, it is deduced that the basis for any counterfactual 'what if' question is provable plausibility. By removing this infinite number of possibilities, the uses of virtual history are more patently seen.

Due to contemporary evidence, it is therefore credible to speculate upon the outcome had Ned Kelly's plans for mass murder been successfully executed. Thomas Curnow's statement, July 20th, 1880, to the police, outlining in detail the lead-up to the siege, explicitly states the Gang's intention. To support Curnow's claim, the *Argus*, a major Melbourne newspaper, reported that on the day Kelly was taken prisoner, he was asked by a reporter "You wanted, then, to kill the people in the train?" to which he gave a definitive response: "Yes, of course I did; God help them, but they would have got shot all the same."¹³ Hence, this evidence demonstrates, beyond doubt, that the possibility of the Kelly Gang fulfilling their intentions was a plausible alternative outcome.

Part of virtual history's purpose is to view the past as contemporaries saw it, "full of open and undetermined possible futures."¹⁴ Just as we can never be sure of what will happen tomorrow, all those involved in the Glenrowan saga were equally ignorant as to what their immediate future held. It is a propensity of many, however, to forget that the "reality of history...is that the end is unknown at the beginning of the journey"¹⁵,

and instead rely too heavily on the benefit of hindsight. Thus, whilst it is necessary for the historian to analyse what did happen, no historical event should be seen as fated or predetermined. In terms of Ned Kelly, it is crucial to recognise that it was simply by chance that Thomas Curnow prevented a massacre from occurring, and *because* it was by chance, exploring the plausible alternative outcomes is not only credible, but also critical in gaining a holistic understanding. Thus, counterfactual history examines the uncertainty of times passed, giving a more thorough understanding of an event.

In addition, counterfactuals aim to restore the importance of the individual actor to a history that is too often studied in terms of external and impersonal forces. British historian and journalist Andrew Roberts says, “of course this line of thought infuriates the Whigs, Marxists and Determinists and anyone who believes that some kind of pre-ordained Destiny or Fate or Providence determines human existence”¹⁶. German Philosopher Karl Marx denies the prevalence of contingency in the past, instead highlighting “the constraining influence on human affairs of factors beyond human control.”¹⁷ Marx saw history as leading up to the creation of a socialist society and hence placed great emphasis on external forces such as economic, political and social influences. The philosopher posed the question, “Are men free to choose this or that form of society for themselves?”¹⁸ answering “By no means”¹⁹. Virtual history directly opposes this deterministic outlook, instead underlining the significance of human in history. In terms of Ned Kelly’s life, it was undeniably a human’s conscious decision that prevented the planned massacre from occurring, with limited influence of any external forces.

However, those opposed to counterfactual history, such as Richard J. Evans, faults virtual history on its claim to restore chance to history. Evans, in fact, deems that counterfactual history places too much importance on the individual actor, treating them “as completely unfettered by these larger forces, able to make decisions without regard to them in any way”²⁰, and by doing so, counterfactuals “imprisons the past in an even tighter web”²¹. Evans opines it is not realistic to believe that “one tiny change in the timeline”²² will inevitably lead “to a whole series of much larger changes, sometimes stretching over decades”²³ as it simply ignores “an infinite number of chances that might have deflected the predicted course of events along the way.”²⁴ Thus, Evans would argue that it is not intellectually productive

to speculate upon the aftermath *had* the massacre occurred because...it *didn't*. And even if something had happened to divert the course of history from the outcome we know, it is possible that something else might have happened to divert it to that same outcome. Hence, what is the point in continually speculating? Although, this argument proposed by Evans, ignores the fact that sometimes, chance really is a significant factor in historical outcomes.

To understand the full extent to which Ned Kelly’s legacy would be different today, had his intentions been fulfilled, one must comprehend why instead he has been glorified. Ned Kelly’s dogged defiance to cruel British authority has proven to have a timeless appeal to many Australians, particularly those of rebellious disposition, through the ages. The often-echoed approach of Australian historian Clive Turnbull, who declared Kelly as “the best known Australian, our only folk hero”²⁵ illustrates why Ned Kelly has become synonymous with our nations identity. Turnbull asserted:

This man, with all that he was, and for all that he did, belongs to the true Australia – not the Australia of the shams and the money-jugglers, but the Australia that sweats and suffers and fights, the Australia that, however bewildered, however betrayed, is, we like to think, still ‘game as Ned Kelly’.²⁶

In addition, Turnbull claims that our nation has “seen in Kelly those qualities which are deemed the most desirable in the Australian conception of manhood – the courage, resolution, independence, loyalty, chivalry, sympathy with the poor and the ill-used.”²⁷ Hence, Turnbull exemplifies the kind of historian that has used Kelly’s story as a patriotic exercise. As English historian Margaret Macmillan says, “history provides much of the fuel for nationalism.”²⁸ Ned Kelly illustrates how a past Australian personality has been glorified into a national legend to epitomize the ideal characteristics of the typical Australian soul. It is inarguable, however, that had Kelly’s murderous intent been realized, the outlaw’s irrefutably violent disposition would have failed to be considered a characteristic favoured by our nation or a quality *deemed the most desirable in the Australian conception of manhood*.

The answer as to why the Ned Kelly story has been romanticised is also due to the interpretative element undeniably evident in historiography. Historians are

constantly interpreting and re-interpreting the facts of an event according to their innate biases, contexts and arguments. This interpretational element is particularly evident in Kelly's legacy – hence the 'villain or hero' debate that has arisen from historians construing the facts of Kelly's life in opposing ways.

Postmodernist theorist Keith Jenkins describes the past as a truth that is made un-obtainable mainly due to this interpretive element. Jenkins explains, in his book *Re-thinking History*, that "no historian's account ever corresponds precisely with the past,"²⁹ as "history remains inevitably a personal construct, a manifestation of the historian's perspective as a 'narrator'."³⁰ Jenkins epistemology philosophy aids in one's understanding of why and how Ned Kelly has been glorified. Any number of historians have studied, analysed and presented their conclusions, and arguments, about Ned Kelly. Whilst each historian deals with the same facts of his life, their interpretations of these facts differ.

Relativist historian E. H. Carr similarly affirms that the facts, or sources, only become evidence once used by a historian. Carr maintains "the facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context"³¹. Hence, in accordance with Ned Kelly's legacy, historians have chosen which facts they will *give the floor*. For example, historians claiming Kelly was a good man inevitably will choose to include in their argument that he was only convicted for the murder of one person, and this was an act of self-defence. On the other hand, those attempting to argue that his "Australian Legend" image is crudely simplistic, as there was a much deeper side to him, would choose to present the fact that he had the proven intention of mass murdering twenty-six policemen. Both facts are true, thus demonstrating how the interpretive element of historical study has played such a significant role in the 'villain or hero' debate surrounding Ned Kelly.

The answer to "What if Ned Kelly's murderous intention towards the twenty-six policemen was fulfilled?" is quite simple. The 'villain or hero debate' would be non-existent – it is inconceivable to make a champion out of a man responsible for mass murder. Kelly would have been remembered as one of Australia's most viciously violent criminals, with a similar level of public vilification to Port Arthur mass-murderer, Martin Bryant. The outlaw's lawbreaker past, unlike it has been, would have been used to support the interpretation

that Ned Kelly was a remorseless, inhuman and cruel character. And hence, the uses of counterfactual history is clearly relevant. As proven, virtual history restores contingency in history – there was only a small chance that Thomas Curnow could save the train, but it was that chance taken that changed the entire interpretation of Ned Kelly's life.

In conclusion, to understand the past as it actually *was*, it is critical to understand how it *might have been*. As has been illustrated by applying a counterfactual analysis to Ned Kelly's life, by only focusing on the known outcomes of the bushranger's story, significant limitations in gaining a holistic understanding of the past, and its context, becomes apparent. By ignoring the possibility of alternative results, the outlaw has been mythologised to such an extent that he has become a beloved icon of the Australian identity - with a saintly image, one suspects, far removed from the dangerously violent criminal he truly was. When examining his life through a 'what if' lens, the outlaw's worthiness for adulation of any kind comes into serious question. Thus ultimately, counterfactual history gives us a stronger and more honest understanding for the man and his times. Furthermore, without counterfactual analysis, one is left only with an examination of the extraordinarily narrow band of what *happened* to happen.

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