

The jerilderie letter



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The Jerilderie Letter written by Ned Kelly, as a source illuminates many issues that were relevant in Kelly's time. However, with all sources there are challenges that the historians who are interpreting them face when trying to illuminate the circumstances surrounding them. The Jerilderie Letter is a primary source, a letter dictated to Joe Byrne by the famous outlaw Ned Kelly in 1879. It was the second letter from the Kelly Gang, its predecessor the Cameron Letter being written in 1878. 1 The letter is named after the town of Jerilderie in New South Wales, where the Kelly Gang was, at the time of the letter's writing, in the middle of a hold-up of the town. The author Edward 'Ned' Kelly, was born in 1855 to Ellen and John Kelly, both being from poor Irish backgrounds and having arrived in Australia in 1842. 2 Ned's upbringing was one of hardship, his father dying in 1866 after years of struggling to eke an existence as a farmer and rural labourer, his widowed mother then moving the family to Greta in north-eastern Victoria. 3 It was these experiences that coloured Kelly's life and especially highlighted the battle between squatters and selectors that forced Ned into his famous life of banditry. The content of the Jerilderie Letter contains a chronicle of all the events of Ned's banditry, from Ned's first charge of being in possession of a stolen horse to the shootout at Stringybark Creek, and offers explanations for all of these events. His letter dwells on what he feels to be the ill-treatment of his mother, of whom he affords great reverence, by the authorities and contains many threats to the police and anyone aiding them. He also promises reward for any persons who will assist him in the capture of any police and their supporters. Throughout Ned portrays himself as a somewhat grandiose figure, as by all reports he believed himself 'untouchable', evident by his parting sentence, referring to himself as 'a widow's son outlawed

whose orders must be obeyed.'⁴ However to truly understand the content and purpose of the Jerilderie Letter it is necessary to look at the contemporary issues of the time. It is impossible to divorce the Kelly uprising from the Christie Blake Page 2 battles between squatters and selectors over land allocation and settlement in the second half of the nineteenth century. ⁵ Closely related were the tensions between the Irish and the English, problems from the 'Old World' overflowing due to the fact the squatters were predominantly richer English Protestants, whereas the selectors were mostly working-class or very poor Irish Catholics. ⁶ The tactics used by the squatters to gain their land illegally aroused copious amounts of anger and inspired hatred against police and governments that seemed to do nothing about the situation. Ned's 8300 word letter was a statement of his personal grievances but also served as a political testament illustrating these three issues through his anger, bitterness and threats against the authorities. There are challenges in relying on Kelly's views and versions of events, including that he was of Irish descent, an extremely dangerous outlaw who had killed and terrorized, and his gang all consisted of sons of struggling or unsuccessful selectors, however his document is extremely important in reconstructing and illuminating the agrarian debates of the time. The tension between squatters and selectors had gradually been building to boiling point in Kelly's day since the late 1840's. Before calls to open up the land for closer settlement squatters had simply moved onto any land they pleased without any authority to do so often in defiance of colonial authorities. In 1847 squatters were granted some recognition in the form of 14 year leases for land however campaigns by selectors to gain access to these lands for closer rural settlement were successful with the passing of Selection Acts in Victoria

in 1860 and New South Wales in 1861. 7 The motivation for these acts were varied, reasons including to break the power of the squatters, to absorb and award land to the numbers of gold diggers who had stayed on, to use the land more efficiently and to realize the popular 'yeoman' ideal. The land league of New South Wales put forward the idea that the progress of agriculture had been repressed and the purpose of colonization had been ignored and denounced the squatting system as