



The Art of Healing

a holistic approach to health and healing

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Story

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Known as something of a beauty in the district, Kate had also inherited the feisty family temperament. She did not tolerate the unwanted advance. The ensuing fight, including an alleged gunshot wound to the constable's hand, set in train a series of events that would lead to her family becoming emblematic in Australian folklore.

the kate kelly story

as told by Ralph Hobbs and painted by Gria Shead





The core motif of Australian history is its patriot sons' conquests of country and adversity. Celebrated in words and art, myths were created by men, about men - and white men at that. But what of the marginalised peoples in our early history - and the women? The mythologies of early-Australian song and text occlude multiple realities, almost exclusively being paeans to the exploits of menfolk. Gria Shead however, is one female artist who looks beyond the veil of conventional story-telling and hero worship.

Using the visual vernacular to flesh out a different Australian story, Shead re-contextualises icons and artefacts of Australian history - as with Kate Kelly, sister of Ned, who gazes unflinchingly from a headpiece forged for her brother, armour she might have symbolically donned.

As despondency turns to outright anger, Kate holds her Colt 1851 Navy pistol (favoured by the bushrangers) ready, a goldfields siren. Taking her cue from the vaudeville posters of the day, the 'hustler' declares her will to survive, whatever the odds stacked against her!

Kate's Story

Kate Kelly was one of the younger sisters of Australia's most notorious outlaw/hero Ned Kelly. Born into an impoverished rural family headed by an ex-convict, Kate's life was tough from the beginning. Then on 15 April 1878, a most unwelcome visitor, Constable Alexander Fitzpatrick of the Victorian Police, came to the Kelly house at Eleven Mile Creek, Glenrowan, to arrest her brother Dan on a vague charge of horse stealing. While there has been debate ever since on what actually happened that evening, there is little doubt that the known drunk and reprobate Fitzpatrick (he was

later dismissed from the force for misconduct in an unrelated matter) made some form of sexual advance to 14-year-old Kate.

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Ned's determination to defend his family's honour and, indeed Kate's chastity, knew no bounds - except those imposed by the gallows a little over two years later.

But what of sister Kate? Her own story of high drama, passion and loss came to a tragic end when she was 36. Many believe she took her own life, while others are convinced she suffered a more violent end at the hands of her abusive husband.





Kate was her brother's sister, a brilliant horse and bush woman. (After the demise of the Kelly Gang, Kate used her skills to ride in the Wild West shows that had sprung up in the colonies). In fact there have been many suggestions that she was involved in delivering food and messages to the gang, narrowly avoiding capture and/or wounding at the hands of the police. Some say she was in fact the fifth member of the gang. A campaigner for the abolition of the death sentence and a vocal supporter of Ned during his trial, it is a mistake to view Kate as solely a victim, let alone self-serving or ambitious, focused on bragging rights or celebrity.

Kate overlanded to Forbes, in the Central West of New South Wales in 1885, when she was 22 years old, ostensibly to disappear. She found work as a domestic servant and married a blacksmith and horse-breaker, William 'Bricky' Foster three years later. From then on she was known locally as Ada Foster.

In May 1898 Foster was charged and convicted for using indecent language to his wife (in those times, an uncommon charge) and it was not long after that her decomposing body was found in Lake Forbes, close to the cottage where she resided with her children.

Shead's Story

Gria Shead has dedicated her career to investigating and painting the women of early Australia. Having spent five years living and working in the gold-rush town of Hill End, New South Wales, the lot of the colonial women - who were not so much written out of history as never actually perceived as substantially figuring in it - intrigues her.

As Shead delved into the life of Kate Kelly, she became acquainted with Merrill Findlay, an author and historian living in Forbes, the final resting place of Kate Kelly. Findlay's research has contributed enormously to the Kelly archives, and Shead internalised the facts about

the second half of Kate Kelly's life to produce *Flash Kate - The Forgotten Kelly*, at a different place on the cultural continuum from that marked by say, Sidney Nolan's treatment of the Kelly family's story in his 1940s series.

In Nolan's *Constable Fitzpatrick and Kate Kelly* painted in 1946, he is clear about who was at fault. However Shead explores the ground of a life, not simply the ground of a dispute.

Incorporating occasional references to Nolan's naïve surrealism, Shead explores sequences in Kate Kelly's life, from Kate as the young girl exposed to institutionalised lasciviousness, to advocacy for the upholding of human and civil rights, to hopeful flight, to maternity and finally defeat experienced in the form of a watery grave.

Shead is ever cognisant of the debt our society owes its women, past and present. For two of the five years that she resided in Hill End - classically associated with Australia's late-nineteenth-century Gold Fever days - she worked underground in the twenty-first-century mine that reopened the search for the gold that had been inaccessible to the earlier diggers, unassisted by computers and state-of-the-art machinery.

Shead's most recent series of paintings, *Gold Dust*, invokes and reconstitutes the history that must be spoken of if we are truly to understand this continent and to move forward better informed and more attuned to the cultural richness we share.