

BOOK REVIEW: First Edition.

<https://aguidetoaustralianbushranging.wordpress.com/2018/09/26/the-clarke-bushrangers-a-clash-of-cultures-review/>

It always astounds that so few books have been published about the Clarkes. Of course, this likely has to do with the fact that for the longest time it was a taboo and much of the story has been lost as subsequent generations disappeared, a phenomena not suffered by Ned Kelly or Ben Hall. So it is with much excitement that one approaches a tome that tries to shed new light in the dark corners of this complex and intriguing story.

Judy Lawson's book, may appear slim and a quick and breezy read but it is quite deceptive in this regard. In reality it is a heavily immersive and detailed exploration of the Clarkes and the various murders attributed to them that warrants careful reading. Lawson has clearly done her homework and conveys in easy to follow language and structure her impressive research that combines the recorded history with the socio-political climate of 1860s Australia. The book contains several useful diagrams and lists to allow readers to keep track of people and places but if you're expecting a wealth of pretty pictures you will be disappointed – though the writing more than makes up for it. It is clear from the outset that Lawson's angle is quite different than what has gone before, stating her mission statement clearly on the cover: "Innocent Until Proven Guilty".

Without going into too much detail (that's what the book is for) Lawson breaks down the Jinden murders as well as the deaths of Miles O'Grady, Billy Noonang, Pat O'Connell, Jim Dornan and Bill Scott – all deaths that were attributed to Thomas Clarke and his gang in some respect. Each incident is presented without judgement and with all available information from witness accounts and testimony from various trials and commissions pertaining to the events to allow the reader to draw their own conclusions that may indeed be counter to the accepted narrative. Previous works have been written with the author's judgement firmly in place, usually declaring that the Clarkes were guilty as sin. What Lawson achieves is providing a potent counter to this assessment. Many questions still hang over the deaths of the special constables: was it the bushrangers or their harbourers that pulled the triggers? Were the local police involved? None of the questions have simple answers but this book brings us closer than perhaps ever before to seeing a miscarriage of justice in the case of the Clarke brothers being hanged. By presenting each potential scenario and breaking it down to discuss what is and isn't feasible it allows readers, especially those unfamiliar with the stories, to really understand the complexities of each case.

Lawson also discusses the Irish culture, including the roles of men and women, and emphasises the way that tension between English Protestants and Irish Catholics formed a key aspect of the Clarke outbreak. By describing historical conflict and ideological differences that contributed to the treatment of families like the Clarkes we see a dimension of the story that is not often factored into most retellings. The way that these conflicts as well as the division between upper and lower class people manifested in laws and the prevailing culture in New South Wales during the 19th century are incredibly important in understanding what may have pushed the Clarkes and their ilk into a lawless lifestyle. By looking at the larger context of this infamous outbreak of bushranging we get a feel for how situations like this resulted in similar stories in other colonies such as the Kellys in Victoria and the Kenniffs in Queensland. Lawson also highlights the unfortunate reality that the charge that sent Tommy and Johnny Clarke to the gallows was not the one that they were tried for, that there was a bigger motivation behind it and that the execution was a foregone conclusion as in the cases of Ned Kelly and Paddy Kenniff. A big part of the taboo of the Clarke story seems to stem from the concerted effort local police made to demonise their enemies. Without a means of recourse to the various accusations the bushrangers were not able to explain their own situation (and there was certainly more to it than simple disregard for law and order as evidenced by their wide syndicate of supporters and harbourers).

Lawson herself possesses a Bachelor of Arts, having studied geography and history for three years before becoming a science teacher in various states, territories and abroad. Her passion for the Clarke story has led to her researching and documenting it for almost four decades in the pursuit of truth and removing the stigma of the story on descendants and the broader community. Lawson discovered that she is in fact a descendant of the O'Connells in her thirties due in large part to her father refusing to talk about it, such was the potency of the taboo. This motivation and passion is evident in every drop of ink in this book and is a must-read for anyone who is interested in the Clarke story, a tale with so many twists, turns and mysteries it easily rivals that of the Kellys. Her aim is not to hold the bushrangers up as heroes or deny any wrongdoing, but merely to ask the questions that need to be answered and find whatever information possible to answer them.

FOREWORD: Second Edition

These days whenever people think about bushrangers they inevitably go straight to Ned Kelly. The iconic helmet distinguishes him and creates an easy symbol to refer to. The story of his life is considered powerful and quintessentially Australian. The themes of family, loyalty, police corruption and rebellion work together to manifest something spectacular. Yet, Kelly's was far from the only story in the history of bushranging to contain these themes, nor was it the most incredible example.

A decade before the Kelly Gang became infamous at Stringybark Creek the Clarke bushrangers were making headlines in New South Wales. Theirs is a tale full of complexity and shocking revelations. Yet, despite being one of the most fascinating tales from Australian history, it is often overlooked. There has been barely a handful of works written that focus on the Clarkes, and most that mention them do so merely for the sake of completionism. Needless to say, this makes the story far less accessible and allows many misconceptions to flourish.

Likely it is all of the unknowns and ambiguity that makes the story so daunting for most historians and casual readers alike. For a long time it was taboo to speak of those dreadful times and the terrible events that occurred in the mid to late 1860s. Certainly, pinning down exactly what can reasonably be attributed to the Clarkes becomes difficult due to the unreliable nature of news and reporting at the time. It is perhaps impossible now to understand the sheer scale of the bushranging problem in New South Wales in the 1860s and its impact on the population, but suffice it to say that it was considered the greatest blight in the colony, and much press coverage was devoted to scrutinising the police efforts to end the outbreak of lawlessness that had exploded during the gold rush. Previous texts about the Clarkes have relied very heavily on the official version of events, rarely stopping to question the accepted narrative. That's where Judy Lawson comes in.

Judy is part of a newer breed of bushranger historian that challenges long held assumptions and tries to determine the facts once and for all. It is no mean feat. To do so requires a level of understanding of so many facets of culture and history that most people simply lack -- even with several degrees under their belt. In this aspect Lawson proves to be absolutely formidable. As you will see, her knowledge of long-standing socio-political factors that impacted on the families of the bushrangers and her empathy for the family allows an interpretation of the Clarke story that is fresh and compelling. The presumptions about the story that have held sway for over a century are drawn into question and many are found wanting.

While authors such as Peter Smith and John O'Sullivan have done incredible work in their research on the subject of the Clarke bushrangers, often their conclusions rely on a belief that the media was capable of being objective and that there was justification for the reputation of the gang. I myself have been guilty of this in the past in my work on *A Guide to Australian Bushranging*. Collecting bushranger stories from the entirety of Australian history is an unenviable task to even the most seasoned researchers and, to my mind, the Clarke story has always been the one I found most daunting due to the sheer scope of it. Technology gives people greater access than ever before to information, yet without some knowledge of the context of the information it is fairly useless, as I have experienced first-hand. When I read the previous edition of this book it completely broke the story down and caused me to reconsider my views. This new edition goes to even greater lengths in setting the record straight and I have no doubt that it is one that will define the way that the story is viewed in years to come.

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