From St Kilda lad to artist

Sidney Nolan was born to fourth generation Australian parents of Irish descent in Melbourne in 1917. The eldest of four children, shortly after his birth his parents moved to the bayside suburb of St Kilda and he lived in the various family homes in the suburb for the next twenty years, down the road from the bright lights of Luna Park, the thrills of the rollercoaster and the gaiety of the roundabout.

His father, Sid senior, was a tramway employee and keen competitive cyclist and his stalwart mother Dora was always warmly supportive of her eldest son. Later they became publicans and against this backdrop, Nolan grew up to be streetwise and alert to seeking opportunity. He left school at 14 and attended Prahran Technical College learning the trade skills of design and commercial arts. Tall and athletic, he was a competitive swimmer and avid cyclist and in the summer of 1936 at the age of 18, he cycled to Sydney on his own, averaging 200 km a day, camping by the side of the road with a light swag.

In 1933, he began six years working in the art department of Fayrefield Hats – a busy local manufacturer in the era when everyone wore a hat. His daily routine involved cycling over the Yarra to the factory at Abbotsford, designing layouts for graphic print advertising and spray-painting large display hoardings, all the time absorbing the latest in European and American design from the fashion magazines that came regularly.

Evenings were spent voraciously reading at the State Library, including the great Romantic Blake, Baudelaire the observer of city life in Paris, the intriguing young poet Rimbaud, and Modernists James Joyce and D.H. Lawrence.

Although he attended very occasional evening classes at the National Gallery School, he did not perceive that going to art school was an essential part of his education in becoming an artist.

Fellow art student and friend John Sinclair observed **‘*Sidney Nolan arrived at the gallery (school) but not, I am sure, with any intention of allowing himself to be taught how to draw or paint. Even at this stage he knew where he was going clearly enough to reject everything that was irrelevant or potentially dangerous to his own identity. Anyway, he did not even pretend to study in the approved manner ... and his real reason for going there was to meet and talk to artists and students and to discover in his own way what art and what he himself, was about*.’**

John Sinclair in *Art and Australia*, Sidney Nolan Special Issue September 1967, p 436

The turning point in becoming a professional artist was his introduction to John and Sunday Reed in 1938 at the age of 21. Their rigorous intellectual engagement with the young artist, combined with emotional support and financial patronage over the next eight years, secured the climate for the creation of Nolan’s first major bodies of work – *St Kilda*, the *Wimmera* and then the *Ned Kelly* series.

This was achieved against the maelstrom of the outbreak of war, his army service in the wide wheat fields of northern Victoria followed by his discreet desertion, divorce from his first wife, a passionate relationship with Sunday Reed, the literary scandal of the Ern Malley Affair and the mysterious death of his much-loved younger brother while on war service in Queensland.

The Reed’s home and garden of ‘Heide’, in semi-rural Bullen on the outskirts of Melbourne, provided both the sanctuary and the creative milieu for Sidney Nolan to realise his artistic ambition.

The Ned Kelly series

'Really the Kelly paintings are secretly about myself. You would be surprised if I told you. From 1945 to 1947 there were emotional and complicated events in my own life. It's an inner history of my own emotions but I am not going to tell you about them…'

Sidney Nolan to Elwyn Lynn, National Gallery of Australia, 1985

Between March 1945 and July 1947, Sidney Nolan worked intensely to produce just over 50 paintings and additional works on paper that comprise what is now known as the first *Ned Kelly* series.

Of these, 24 were gifted to the National Gallery of Australia by Sunday Reed in 1977 and the group of 15 works displayed here represent the only other substantial holding from the series. They feature early smaller experimental works done on heavy strawboard in 1945 and reveal the first use of the iconic square mask with a slit for eyes. They evolve to the larger works painted on Masonite board at Heide from March 1946 which are distinguished by their bolder landscape forms, and the final work is *Police Trooper* from April 1947.

Dates were obviously important to the artist and Nolan generally inscribed the date of completion on the back of most of the works, although some such as *Return to Glenrowan* and *Kelly and Horse* show evidence of considerable reworking.

Nolan's purpose in making the series was built upon multiple threads.

Firstly, there was the sense that he wanted to find a contemporary way to express the Australian landscape and break with the dominant vision of the likes of impressionist Arthur Streeton. ***'I wanted to do something that was the complete opposite of the sunset bush'.*** His time out in the Wimmera during his army service was the catalyst for seeing the landscape in a new way.

Sidney Nolan Interview, Lois Hunter, National Library of Australia, 1980

But the bush alone was not enough. ***'I saw how (Kelly and the black square) would be exactly the sort of thing I needed to illuminate the Australian landscape and the other way around – how the Australian landscape would illuminate something to do with why a man like Kelly would arise.'***

Sidney Nolan Interview, Lois Hunter, National Library of Australia, 1980

'I realised that Ned Kelly was the vehicle I needed – the tough life, the violence, goldmining, beating the drought…'

Sidney Nolan interview, C J McKenzie, 1964

When Nolan embarked on this series, the escapades of the Kelly Gang, Ned's capture, trial and hanging in 1880 were just within living memory rather than a story from a distant colonial past. Public mythmaking had started early with breathless coverage and visual renderings in the newspapers of the day. As technology evolved, the real events were recreated photographically in magic lantern presentations and in 1906 the story was the subject of the world's first full length motion picture 'The Story of the Kelly Gang' directed by Charles Tait. Nolan was intrigued by how these stories came to be part of everyday parlance and folklore.

He also had personal connections from his childhood. Some may have been expanded in his imagination, but that too is significant.

'The actual armour that Kelly wore was one of the objects in the aquarium which as kids we were taken to see. So it is really one of my earliest memories – like the sea, or the smell of the eucalyptus tree. A thing which gets into your consciousness before you are aware that it's in'.

Interview, George Bruce, *The Listener* ,1964

'…it happens to be true that my grandfather did chase the Kellys. So I heard all about it from him. He was a policeman and he was sent up to Beechworth to chase them. And as the saying is, it was "double pay and country

girls"– and they didn't chase the Kellys too hard… so it was said.'

Sidney Nolan Interview, 'Nolan at Sixty', 1977

Nolan also had a personal connection to the feeling, like Kelly, of being on the run. Late in the war, he worked in virtual hiding from a small studio in Parkville under an assumed name after attempting to obtain a medical discharge and then, when that was refused, he went AWOL. His father viewed his actions with great disdain and these feelings were compounded by the shock news of his brother's drowning on war service. Nolan found resonance in Kelly's highly articulate statement expressed in the 'Jerilderie Letter' against the injustices of the police and harsh government policies.

'Kelly was not half rebel, half criminal, he was a rebel reformer. That is why he got into the language – he did something about the world'.

Letter to John Reed, 22 August 1947

As conflict ended in August 1945 there also came a new urgency to find fresh expression. ***'There was also a sense to everybody – we had been through the war – there was a feeling that the world was going to begin again.'***

Sidney Nolan Interview, Lois Hunter, 1980

Part of that expression was also referencing abstract art, in particular, the work of the Russian Constructivist Kazimir Malevich.

'I was conscious of the fact that the black square was haunting Modern Art since the first war, since Malevich, and it was tilted on one side and used by various people, by Max Ernst, by other people, but basically the black square was around in Modern Art and all I did was to put a pair of eyes into this black square to see if I could animate a formal shape.'

Sidney Nolan Interview, Lois Hunter, 1980

But there are also more ambiguous personal reasons for the mask. ***'The fact that there's supposed to be a man underneath the mask, and he's supposed to be Ned Kelly and he's supposed to be a hero or a non-hero, or a criminal, in one sense is secondary to my general pursuit of some formal things which are inside my soul'.***

Sidney Nolan Interview, Lois Hunter, 1980

Making the paintings

'I like the immediate feeling of Ripolin (and the aroma!) When you can see every brush stroke if you like. Some people want all surfaces to be crumbly like Stilton cheese'.

Sidney Nolan To Elwyn Lynn, *Sidney Nolan's Ned Kelly*, National Gallery of Australia, 1985

Sidney Nolan's time working as a commercial artist in a factory had given him the confidence and experience to use painting materials that were not conventionally used by artists who were then principally trained in watercolour or oils.

'Perhaps because I was in the factory and had to do large stands, I used spray guns – I was technically quite accomplished because I'd had the time in the factory. So unwittingly, I trained as a painter by working in the factory at a young age. The technical aspects of the Kelly paintings appear naive but are done on proper principals and actually quite complicated bits of work.'

Sidney Nolan Interview, Lois Hunter, 1980

In a letter written to Sunday Reed from Dimboola in 1942 he outlined specifically the basic primary colours that he wanted her to buy and send to him.

'Dulux is probably the most durable lacquer or enamel on the market so really it's the best angle to concentrate on. Their three best colours, strongest, brightest, are lemon yellow, cobalt blue and the red. I've forgotten but you can tell it easily enough on the colour card. Those three colours and black and white and thinner give a pretty complete range.'

Sidney Nolan to Sunday Reed, Dimboola, late 1942

The primary type of enamel used in this series was Ripolin, which was invented in the Netherlands as the first commercially available enamel paint in 1897 and was keenly used by iconic artists and architects of the modern period.

'Picasso had said that Ripolin was healthy paint – and when he said that I believed him and I ordered as much as I could – Ripolin was a high quality enamel paint that was used on yachts and Rolls Royces.

Sidney Nolan interview, Lois Hunter, 1980

Ripolin is thin and highly viscous and to avoid unwanted dripping, Nolan needed to work with the painting surface laid flat. As the series progressed, he became more confident in overpainting, at times only letting the fragment of a base colour remain exposed.

His youthful enjoyment of speed as a cyclist and swimmer seemed to correspond to the quick way that he could apply the paint, but he was often frustrated at the care required to allow it to dry. As he worked further with it, he seemed to find further alchemical mysteries that took his appreciation well beyond its conventional use as commercial house paint.

'Ripolin is like quicksilver … I can see us cooking it over a fire or leaving it out under the rosemary all night to see what secrets can be found in it.'

Sidney Nolan letter to Sunday Reed, late 1943

The 16 year old poet Barrie Reid came down from Brisbane to visit the Reeds in August 1947 and vividly described the sight of seeing the *Ned Kelly* series in process.

'That first morning when I walked in, the hall was full of paintings. The dining room was a studio with tins of Ripolin, bottles of oil, a scrubbed long table and on the walls many charcoal drawings of bearded heads. I saw real painting, free and authentic for the first time. I had arrived just as the Kellys were nearing completion; the large hardboard panels, the cardboard studies, the many drawings and watercolours captured and controlled my eyes.'

Barrie Reid in *Art in Australia*, Sidney Nolan Special Issue, September 1967, p447

North to Queensland

With the *Ned Kelly* series completed in July 1947, Nolan was keen to escape the hot house emotional intensity of life in Heide. The invitation from the young poet Barrie Reid, to visit him in Brisbane, gave him an immediate route out. There was also a consideration to try to find some closure for his younger brother's accidental death while serving in the Navy during WWII in Cooktown and to visit his grave in Townsville.

This was also Nolan's first experience of air travel, and flying was to become Nolan's preferred form of travel for its speed and to experience the view from above.

'The really solid impact however was flying over the MacPherson Ranges. Mt Warning is such a superb mountain and the plane seemed to hover around it (bumping slightly for the first time) making it accessible and familiar in a way that even climbing it could not do. Hard strong country with a power almost tangible beating out of it…'

Sidney Nolan to John Reed, July 1947

In Brisbane, Reid introduced Nolan to the Oxley Library where the journals, original photographs, and published accounts of the nineteenth century explorers of Queensland were held. One that particularly caught his attention was the story of Mrs Fraser as told in John Curtis' *The wreck of the Stirling Castle* (1883). Nolan had already heard stories of Fraser Island – now known in the traditional name of the Butchulla peoples as K'gari – through another recent visitor to Heide, and he quickly decided to go there with Barrie, writing to John Reed about his plans.

'Also, it will cover the ground, or sea, or the wreck of the* Sterling Castle (sic) *near Fraser Island which led to the strange story I have mentioned of a convict and the captain's wife making their way down to Brisbane past the glasshouses (mountains). Possibly these things have no direct relation to painting but they have something to do with tradition that someone has to expose and clarify sooner or later.'

Sidney Nolan to John Reed, July 1947

K'gari was a remote place and not the tourist destination it is today, but Nolan was entranced and stayed for six weeks at a timber workers camp.

Nolan described the landscape: **'*The country, almost all of it is densely timbered Aussie bush in its original state with patches of rainforest and palms … Some of its (stories) are myth, some fantasy, some truth so as it goes it all makes up the identity of the island … It is probably a unique place in many ways, for a start it is an island which does things to you … The psyche of the place has bitten into me deeply and I feel unresolved with it in a way that I cannot explain easily.'***

Sidney Nolan to John Reed, August 1947

He went onto Cairns and travelled back through Carnarvon Gorge. In Brisbane, he prepared a series of twelve paintings based on the story of Mrs Fraser for exhibition at the Moreton Galleries in February 1948. Nolan did not wait to see the exhibition installed but flew down to Sydney in the last weeks of 1947 and reconnected with his artist friend from Melbourne Joy Hester and her new husband Grey Smith. He also looked up John Reed's sister Cynthia who was now living in a cottage on the northern fringe of the city with her young daughter Jinx. They married three months later in March 1948, and Nolan set up a productive working routine in a studio in that house. However, the intense and entwined personal histories and rivalries that this union signified, caused Nolan to permanently break off his friendship with John and Sunday Reed. The painting *Death of Captain Fraser* comes from this time.

This new family life and Cynthia's intelligent and purposeful support brokered a new phase of practice for Nolan. After a sell-out exhibition at the David Jones Gallery, Nolan invested all those funds in a research trip through central Australia in 1949 that became the source of a major series of paintings for him and a novel, 'Outback' for Cynthia.