

Bandits, heroes and villains: A view from a settler colony

Meg Foster 

University of Technology, Sydney,
New South Wales, Australia

Correspondence

Meg Foster.

Email: Meg.Foster@uts.edu.au

Funding information

Newnham College, University of Cambridge

Abstract

'Bushrangers' were late 18th to early 20th-century bandits who lived in the Australian bush through the proceeds of crime, but today, they are national legends. A particular constellation of factors led to the white male bushranger's status as a national hero in Australia. By charting the development of bushranging historiography alongside bushranging in practice and the bushranging myth, this article will demonstrate the distinctive Australian and settler colonial dimensions of this bandit tradition. In describing how white bushranging men came to national prominence, the piece will also draw attention to those excluded from this legend—women and people of colour, with particular reference to Aboriginal people. The Australian bushranging myth, as it exists today, was not an organic or natural development. It was actively constructed by white settlers, including white settler historians. Australasia & Pacific

1 | INTRODUCTION

On February 15, 1803, 15 convicts escaped from their master in Castle Hill, a town in the British colony of New South Wales (NSW), and went on the run. Although absconding was a misdemeanour under the convict system established in 1788, these men also committed a slew of serious crimes, robbery being chief among them. These 'banditti'—as they were labelled by the *Sydney Gazette*—were eventually caught, but this was by no means the first

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or the last instance of banditry in Australia ('Fugitives', 1803, March 5). Known locally as 'bushranging', the activity of living in the bush through the proceeds of crime would become a national institution. The *practice* of banditry was as old as the penal colony itself and continued into the early 20th century, arousing fear and awe, condemnation and support among different groups of the population. The heroic, mythic status of Australian bushrangers has its roots in the real lives and criminal careers of colonial bandits, but like all legends, it relies on strategic forgetting and invention too. The national, Australian bushranging *myth* is a 20th-century phenomenon. As the Australian colonies federated and the practice of bushranging receded into memory, white bushranging men increasingly became symbols of the incipient nation. The bushranging legend has had a longer legacy than the criminal practice it celebrates. Australian bushrangers' status as national heroes continues to the present day.

For a country that celebrates white male bandits as national icons, there is remarkably little academic research featuring Australian bushrangers. The most influential and enduring theory of banditry—Eric Hobsbawn's (1959, 1969) idea of 'social banditry'—is a familiar framework applied to the Australian case. The idea that bandits who have the support of the local population represent a 'primitive form of social protest' and that these bandits' fight against authorities and 'class enemies' makes them 'champions of the people' is a certainly applicable to some instances in the Australian colonies, but it does not show the whole picture. Similarly, international comparisons to British highwaymen or American cowboys provide important cultural touchpoints for scholars unfamiliar with the Australian landscape, but they can also obscure the uniqueness of the Australian case. While many of these Anglophone bandits are well known characters—what folklorist Graham Seal (1996, 2011) terms 'outlaw heroes'—British highwaymen and American cowboys are not symbols of their respective nations.

A particular constellation of factors led to the white male bushranger's status as a national hero in Australia. By charting the development of bushranging historiography alongside bushranging in practice and the bushranging myth, this article will demonstrate the distinctive Australian and settler colonial dimensions of this bandit tradition. Settler colonialism refers to colonisation where 'settlers come to stay'. To take the land as their own, colonists must remove its Indigenous inhabitants and eradicate any competing claims to sovereignty. Settler colonialism relies on the 'elimination of the native' (Wolfe, 2006). European Australia was founded as and remains a settler colonial project, and this context has actively shaped bushranging history and lore. In describing how white bushranging men came to national prominence, the piece will also draw attention to those excluded from this legend—women and people of colour, with particular reference to Aboriginal people. The Australian bushranging myth is not an organic or natural development. It was actively constructed by white settlers—including white settler historians.

1.1 | Mythic bushranging heroes

Today, bushrangers occupy a special place in the Australian cultural landscape and national psyche. They are virtually omnipresent, despite the lapse of over a hundred years since real bushrangers roamed rural Australia. Bushranging appears in art, monuments, local history museums, car bumper stickers, eclectic souvenirs, video-games, podcasts, books and films. The physical landscape is inscribed with bushranging placenames, while Australians bear bushrangers' faces, names and words on their bodies in the form of tattoos. There have been sociological studies of bushrangers. A recent article reported that men with tattoos of the infamous Irish-Australian bushranger Ned Kelly were more likely to die by suicide or suffer a violent death than those without this bushranger etched onto their skin (Byard, 2011; Byard & Maxwell-Stewart, 2023). In 2008, a national survey found that 82.8% of Australians could name at least one bushranger (Tranter & Donoghue, 2008, p. 379). Ironically, bushrangers who are celebrated as anti-authoritarian underdogs are now recognised as Australian symbols by federal and state governments. The Sydney 2000 Olympic Games Opening Ceremony featured hordes of 'bushrangers' with blazing guns and dressed in Ned Kelly's distinctive armour, representing the nation to the world (Marsh, 2002).

The current popular interest in bushranging means that there are myriad books on these figures—yet few are written by professional historians. Amateur history buffs, family historians, self-described sleuths and popular

journalists are by far the most prolific authors of bushranging books, and (with some notable exceptions) they are largely concerned with 'ripping yarns' rather than social and cultural history. Amateur and popular history characterised early bushranging historiography too. Some of the first histories of the Australian colonies recorded white male bushrangers' actions and crimes as part of the colonial experience, while settlers' reminiscences are laden with these controversial figures (Melville, 2012, c1835; West, 2011, c1852; Bonwick, 1967, c1856; Therry, 1863, p. 126; Ryan, 1894, pp. 124–128; Hassall, 1902, pp. 28, 107–108). Despite this early interest, the first comprehensive studies on bushrangers were not published until the turn of the 20th century. Before this time, bushranging stories were almost exclusively part of more popular forms of commemoration such as folklore, bush ballads, local reminiscences and plays (Seal, 1996, pp. 119–164; Wannan, 1964, pp. 13–22; Beatty, 1960, pp. 122–145, 265–272; Davey & Seal, 1993, pp. 58–61; Waterhouse, 2005, pp. 172–173, 185–186; Seal, 1989, pp. 25–31; Couzens, 2019). But even when books specialising in bushrangers were eventually written, many bore striking similarities to these pre-existing colonial depictions.

George E. Boxall published *The Story of the Australian Bushrangers* in 1899, while Charles White's *History of Australian Bushrangers* came into print the following year. These works did not openly champion bushrangers, but they privileged white male characters and colonial tropes. To name just one example, interviews with white rural communities were a key source of information for Charles White's (1900) tales and in this way, white settlers' ideas about bushranging filled the first professional bushranging histories (Barker, 2006). But bushranging was not solely the pursuit of white men. As Meg Foster's (2022a) recent work demonstrates, people of colour and women were also bushrangers. They operated at the same time and committed many of the same crimes as white bushranging men. While they were never as numerous as the white men who would become Australian legends, they were infamous in their own times. Their stories faded from the popular imaginary over time, but they were never a part of the Australian bushranging mythos.

Bushrangers of colour were not always excluded from early colonial bushranging histories. For instance, the Chinese bushranger Sam Poo made a brief appearance in Charles White's (1909, pp. 57–64) writing. However, when these 'other' bushrangers were discussed, their stories were intimately bound with colonial ideas of racial and gendered difference. In White's rendition, Sam Poo was a greedy Chinese miner who came to the Australian colonies in the goldrush. He found mining too arduous, and so copied white men in the easier and more profitable activity of bushranging. He is meant to have assaulted a white woman and her young child. He apparently shot a police officer in cold blood when he was called upon to surrender. As Foster (2022a, pp. 64–91) demonstrates, this depiction is not supported by historical evidence. White's narrative of Sam Poo is the dual product of colonial evidence and the 20th-century notion that Australia should be a 'white man's country'.

Racial exclusion was one of the factors that led to the Federation of Australia in 1901, and the *Immigration Restriction Act* was passed that same year to make White Australia a reality. It is no coincidence that this period also saw the rise of the bushranger as an Australian national hero. By Federation, bushrangers' physical strength and masculine endurance aligned with the values of the burgeoning nation. The bushranging emergency had ended in 1880 with the execution of Ned Kelly, and by the 1900s the danger these criminals posed fell from public consciousness. This allowed white, bushranging men to represent Australians' egalitarianism, anti-authoritarianism and pioneering spirit. Although bushrangers were threats to the colonial project in their own times, by the 20th century, they became romantic examples of it. Their success in the bush typified colonists' ability to be at home on the land and use it for their own ends.

This was not a benign tradition. As well as excluding women and people of colour, the national bushranging legend worked to naturalise white male colonists' possession of the lands they invaded. The narrative of white men at one with the bush overshadowed the sovereignty of First Nations people who had lived on their Country for tens of thousands of years before the British arrived in 1788. Although some colonists supported white bushrangers in their own times, this was far from universal. Alongside Aboriginal resistance fighters, bushrangers were often decried as lowlifes and terrorists who threatened the colonial enterprise in Australia (Boyce, 2008; Dunn, 2020; Gapps, 2018). But such historical origins were replaced by the increasingly powerful myth of bushrangers righting

wrongs, challenging tyrannical authorities and representing a rough and noble form of justice. White bushranging men created a useful, usable history for the new nation as it demonstrated national distinction at the same time as situating Australia in a wider, male-dominated, Anglo world (Foster, 2022a, 2022b).

1.2 | Bushranging historiography

Bushrangers essentially remained the topic of popular culture rather than serious historical study until after the second world war. Prior to this time, academic history departments largely concerned themselves with British or European history, rather than the history of their own nation. A common refrain was that the country was so young that it 'had no history'. Again, this logic obscured the deep time history of Aboriginal Australia—the history of the oldest living culture in the world (Mawson, 2021; Veracini, 2007). Aboriginal history was not 'discovered' in the academy until the 1970s (Veracini, 2006). But in the post-war era, historians increasingly turned their gaze inwards—to the origins of European Australia (Hearn, 2007, pp. 111–115). In this period, bushrangers featured most famously in Russel Ward's (1958) monograph, *The Australian Legend*.

In this book, Ward attempted to show that the traits and characteristics of the 'typical' Australian had been forged by Australia's unique past. Moving progressively through the history of European Australia from convict origins to the early 20th century, Ward located the typical Australian in the bush and on the pastoral frontier. Bushrangers had a chapter dedicated to them and were firmly situated as antecedents of the typical Australian and harbingers of a distinct national character. People of colour were mentioned; for instance, Ward correctly identified a First Fleet convict of African descent named John Caesar (aka 'Black Caesar') as the first bushranger, and the book does mention Aboriginal people. But it is important to note that the 'typical' Australian was a white man. Although Ward would later be challenged on central elements of his thesis, not least, his romantic depiction of bushranging in Australia, he was not the only one to bring the heroic bushranger to public prominence at this time. Outside of the academy, 'the most popular Australian historian of the first half of the 20th century' (Griffen-Foley, 2011, p. 127), Frank Clune, published a series of highly successful bushranging books. Beginning in 1945, Clune wrote tales of bushrangers designed to engross and titillate a popular audience (Clune, 1945a, 1945b, 1947, 1948a, 1948b, 1955, 1956). Although he conducted some research, Clune was renowned for his exaggeration and embellishment of the 'facts' to paint exciting portraits of past lives. Like Ward, Clune predominately concerned himself with white bushranging men. If mentioned at all, bushrangers of colour were 'odd footnotes' to the main attraction of bold Anglo bandits.

Less well known but historiographically significant is the work of Robin Berwick Walker. Commencing in the 1960s, Walker, a colleague of Ward at the University of New England, wrote pieces for *Australian Literary Studies* highlighting the real history behind literary depictions of bushranging (Walker, 1965, 1967, 1983). Walker (1964) was also the first historian to explicitly separate fact from fiction in Australian bushranging lore, with the appropriately named 'Bushranging in Fact and Legend' published in *Australian Historical Studies*. Although these were certainly advances in critically analysing Australian bushranging, they were still concerned with white male bushrangers as Australian national icons. Bushranging was not significant in and of itself but for its connection to national character. In this way, the contemporary popular fascination with bushranging was directing the course of professional research. This affected the research questions these studies asked (or failed to ask) as well as their findings.

The 1970s was a turning point in Australian politics and in Australians' approach to history. Progressive change in education and social welfare, protest movements seeking rights for marginalised communities and demands to reexamine the nation's past led to an outpouring of new histories, including a school of historiography now referred to as the 'New Left' (Hearn, 2007, pp. 115–118). Again, bushranging was a lens through which historians sought to understand their own historical moment and this can be seen nowhere more clearly than bushranging's connection to the Republican movement. Australia is a constitutional monarchy. While it is its own nation, it still has ties to the

Britain. In 1975, the Queen's representative in Australia, the Governor-General, dismissed the democratically elected Whitlam government. Before this time, the Australian public largely viewed ties to the UK as symbolic and many were shocked to find that a bureaucrat appointed by a foreign monarch could dissolve a government elected by the Australian people. The Whitlam dismissal gave weight and power to calls for Australia to become a republic, completely severed from the British Crown (Hocking, 2017).

The 19th-century Irish-Australian bushranger Ned Kelly was used to anchor and legitimise these calls for complete independence from the UK. There is a pervasive myth that Ned Kelly aimed to cede from the colony of Victoria and create his own republic. Although this fiction was not born in the 1970s (Brown, 1948), there was renewed interest in this take on the Ned Kelly story in the aftermath of the Whitlam dismissal, even by academic historians. History professors John McQuilton (1979) and John Molony (1980) treated this claim seriously in their Ned Kelly books, and successive historians explicitly aligned their work with the Australian Republican movement (Dawson, 2018). As Stuart E. Dawson (2018, p. 6) writes, the myth of a lost document showing Ned Kelly's intention to establish a Republic of North-Eastern Victoria was so pervasive by 1995 that the Labor government demanded the Britain return this (non-existent) document. This was a strategic move on Labor's part. The Party supported the Republican movement at this time and although its 1999 referendum on the issue ultimately failed, the fiction that Ned Kelly was one of the first Australian republicans lives on.

Histories of convict bushranging also saw a resurgence in the late 20th century. Prior to this time, it had been shameful for many Australians to admit they had convict ancestry and generations of white settler families had tried to obscure their criminal antecedents. By the 1970s, the narrative around convicts and convictism began to shift (Evans, 2011, p. 52). Historian George Arnold Wood's (1922) claim that convicts were 'more sinned against than sinning' began to reflect how Australian families saw their own ancestors' stories, and the 1988 bicentenary of Australian colonisation added political and popular will (and funding) to revisit the country's convict origins (Roberts, 2008). This public shift was prompted by, and added to, new research on convicts in the academy, including convict bushrangers. A pioneering Master's thesis by Jennifer McKinnon (1979) meticulously recorded the lives and characteristics of convict bushrangers in NSW between 1824 and 1834, while a PhD thesis by Hamish Maxwell-Stewart (1990) examined 'The Bushrangers and Convict System of Van Diemen's Land [now Tasmania] 1803–1846'. Paula J. Byrne's (1993) monograph *Criminal Law and Colonial Subject*, published by Cambridge University Press, similarly contained essential information on early convict bushrangers and their engagement with the criminal justice system in colonial NSW. This research was critical in examining the 'past's own present' of Australian bushranging (Denning, 1997, p. 423). Bushrangers were examined in context and connected to wider social and cultural structures and trends. There was also a concerted effort to research a range of bushranging practices and recognise that most bandits were not folk heroes or mythic icons in their own times. Susan West (2006, 2009, 2015) took the same approach when researching the later period of bushranging in 1860s NSW.

1.3 | Bushranging villains

Much has been written about bushranging using Eric Hobsbawm's concept of social banditry (Couzens, 2019; Maxwell-Stewart, 1990; McQuilton, 1979; Mondal, 2011; O'Malley, 1979; Tranter & Donoghue, 2010; West, 2009). The idea that certain bandits were supported and celebrated by the common people because they had mutual enemies has informed generations of academic studies from the 1960s to the present day. Social banditry privileges the 'peasant imaginary'; it aims to uncover the opinions and ideas of lower-class folk, making it a prime lens through which to recover 'history from below' (Hobsbawm, 1959, 1969). However, this schema has its blind spots. One of the key criticisms of social banditry is that isolated cases of folklore and popular culture are often used to make grand claims about the worldviews of the lower classes. This is particularly problematic considering that many sources of popular and folk culture were created long after real bushrangers robbed and roamed the bush. Another criticism of this framework is that historians find evidence of popular support for bushrangers because they are

actively searching for it. Due to this bias, they mistakenly treat this material as though it was a reflection of historical events *on the ground*, rather than a cultural *imaginary*. When using 'social banditry', myth is often cut adrift from reality (Blok, 1972). Bushrangers were never wholly celebrated by lower class white colonists in their own times. Nor have they been universally praised by ordinary Australians or historians since.

Although sociological studies show that over 80% of Australians know about bushrangers, they are not always described in terms of praise (Tranter & Donoghue, 2008, p. 379). In 2010, Bruce Tranter and Jed Donoghue investigated what Australians thought about their most infamous and celebrated bushranger, Ned Kelly, and their quantitative study was surprisingly divisive. When asked to choose characteristics that best described Kelly, 23.6% of respondents chose either 'A Thief', 'Murderer', or 'Traacherous' as their first characteristic. More ambiguously, 19.6% chose 'Anti-Authority'—which could be a negative or positive trait, depending on the respondent's perspective (Tranter & Donoghue, 2010, p. 196).

Ambivalence towards bushrangers, or even outright revulsion, is not unheard of in the academy. One of the earliest professional Australian historians, Ernest Scott (1916), described Van Demonian (Tasmanian) bushrangers as lawless criminals, while in the same text he praised the exploits of Ned Kelly. Humphrey McQueen's (2004, c1970, p. 136) radical intervention, *A New Britannia*, contained no such ambiguity and condemned bushrangers in the most damning terms:

Overwhelmingly, bushrangers were no more, and often a good deal less, than louts of the contemporary bikie variety. They roamed the countryside terrorising small farmers and stealing their poultry. As such, they were thoroughly detested by ordinary people who had more immediate tasks to perform than writing ballads in praise of the hoodlums who appreciably added to the difficulties they experienced in a harsh environment.

Contemporary historians tend to agree that we should question the extent of popular support bushrangers received in their own times. Some colonists 'supported' bushrangers by keeping their mouths shut. Some were driven to provide bushrangers with information, safehouses or supplies out of fear. Others, grossly under protected by the colonial police, thought they had a better chance assisting bushrangers or even negotiating with them, rather than making a stand (Foster, 2022a, p. 69; Walker, 1964, p. 206). Recent research on Ned Kelly provides a helpful case in point. Despite Kelly's status as the quintessential Australian bushranging hero, historian Doug Morrissey (1995) has demonstrated that Ned Kelly and his family terrorised their communities as cattle duffers before they became bushrangers. It is likely that many small selectors were forced to assist them and the gang's family was the majority of their 'genuine' supporters in the bush. Russ Scott and Ian McFarlane (2014) have used current psychiatric tools to posthumously label Ned Kelly a psychopath. A 2017 documentary series used new archaeological evidence to show that Kelly had murdered a police officer in cold blood at Stringybark Creek (rather than in self-defence and then a mercy killing as Kelly himself had claimed) (Davie & Westh, 2017). In the family histories of Kelly's police victims, he has always been remembered as a villain. What began as a local, intimate tradition, however, has become a recent trend, as several new books flip the narrative from the Kelly gang to the volunteers and police officers who hunted them down (Dufty, 2022; Kennedy & Looby, 2018; Kieza, 2022; Strahan, 2022). The goal of these books is to humanise the police and understand the officers and volunteers who have long been cast as corrupt, unjust and bigoted characters in the bushranging myth.

1.4 | Bushranging and people of colour

These attempts to cast white bushranging men as villains and police as heroes remain the minority. This is not the same for bushrangers of colour, who have always appeared as either villainous scoundrels or sidekicks—that is, if they are mentioned at all. Aboriginal people played critical roles in the hunt for bushrangers (Bennett, 2020;

Fels, 1988) and often appear in the stories of famous bushrangers as trackers working with police to hunt the valiant robbers down. Ned Kelly was meant to have been more fearful of Aboriginal trackers than white policemen, and reputedly referred to them as 'little black devils' (McGrath, 2012, p. 28). Unlike the skills of the white bushman, those of Aboriginal people were rarely deemed worthy of colonists' praise. They were commonly explained as the natural consequence of Aboriginal people being 'primordial' and at 'one with nature', or else described as innate characteristics; inherited traits of their race. The double standard was stark. Bush skills naturalised a white settler presence by showing that colonists had mastery over the environment. Bush skills made it appear that colonists had earned their place on the land. Meanwhile, Aboriginal people with these same skills were denigrated as antiquated remnants of a bygone age (Foster, 2022a, p. 70).

In colonial times, bushrangers of colour were more likely than their white counterparts to be depicted as cold-blooded murderers—even when there was no concrete evidence that they committed this crime. These fictive murders have been uncritically repeated in stories told about them since. We can see this clearly in the lives of African American bushranger William Douglas (aka 'Black Douglas'), and Chinese bushranger Sam Poo. On the goldfields of Victoria in the 1850s, Black Douglas was renowned as the murderer of a white woman in the town of Avoca. In 1860s New South Wales, Sam Poo was executed for the murder of Senior Constable John Ward. There is no solid evidence that either man committed the crimes of which they were accused. In the case of Black Douglas, five intimately described white assailants were the culprits of this murder, and in the following decade, Sam Poo did not match any descriptor of Ward's murderer—apart from the fact that both were Chinese. Colonial ideas about race meant that settlers could readily believe that each man was a cold-blooded killer who operated without reason or remorse (Foster, 2022a, pp. 11–34, 64–91).

More allowances were made for white bushranging men. White colonists and white bushrangers often came up with stories of how these bushrangers' hands were tied—how a series of injustices compelled them to become bandits and they were forced to use violence, despite abhorring both. Whether these stories were true or not was another matter, but they allowed white bushrangers to become heroic legends (Foster, 2022a). According to folklorist Graham Seal (1996), an outlaw hero must refrain from violence unless it is absolutely necessary. As mentioned above, Ned Kelly claimed to have shot a police officer first in self-defence and then as a mercy killing when the officer was fatally wounded. Despite evidence to the contrary, Ned Kelly's murders are widely framed as justifiable homicide.

Twenty years after Kelly was executed in 1880, the Aboriginal bushranger Jimmy Governor also committed a series of murders. Although he made repeated claims to be a bushranger, Governor was (and remains) renowned as a mass murderer. He killed women, children and the elderly. He also told colonists about the injustices that led him to crime—which ranged from racial discrimination to labour exploitation, and disrespect shown to him and his family—but these rationalisations were overlooked, minimised and discounted. In their place, colonists crafted a narrative that these crimes were the result of Governor's inherently savage nature and that his Aboriginality led to an incomprehensible display of violence (Foster, 2017, 2019a, 2022a, pp. 123–189; Impact Studios, 2021). This interpretation even made its way into the courtroom. Governor's lawyer argued that he was provoked into committing murder and that as an Aboriginal man with savage passions, less was needed to push him over the edge (Foster, 2019b, p. 323).

This depiction of Aboriginal people as incomprehensible and unstable permeated fictive representations of bushranging too. In arguably the most recognisable literary portrayal of bushranging, Aboriginal people are represented by a degenerate, weaselly character who is prone to treachery and betrayal. *Robbery Under Arms*, written by Thomas Alexander Browne (aka Rolf Boldrewood) (1888), is a celebrated 19th-century text that remains an 'Australian classic' to this day. In this book, Warrigal, a 'half-caste' Aboriginal man, accompanies the white bushranging protagonists on their run from the law. Although he rescues the gang countless times, playing the subservient 'side-kick' to the chief bushranger Starlight, his 'treachery' ultimately leads to either the death or capture of all the main characters. In the story, Warrigal's presence is felt through these actions, but he is never given any narrative depth or interiority. He remains on the periphery of the narration, despite his centrality to its plot.

Warrigal's betrayal of the noble robbers aligned with white colonists' beliefs that Aboriginal people were inherently 'backwards' and 'barbaric', without reason, motivations or genuine grievances. While they might seem to know their place (beneath white colonists), they could never truly be trusted.

The idea that an Aboriginal person must be a white bushranger's sidekick, dupe or 'helpmate'—rather than a central protagonist—existed well before *Robbery Under Arms*. In the 1810s, 'Black Mary', the Aboriginal partner (turned tracker) of the Van Demonian bushranger Michael Howe, was similarly considered a peripheral character in Howe's story ('Hobart Town', 1819, July 3). Even today, there is no entry for Mary in the Australian Dictionary of Biography. Instead, she is referred to briefly in Howe's extensive entry as his 'devoted Aboriginal companion' (Von Stieglitz, 2006). The same goes for Worimi Aboriginal bushranger Mary Ann Bugg. In the 1860s, Bugg accompanied the famous white bushranger Frederick Ward (alias 'Captain Thunderbolt') throughout rural NSW. Although she was the active partner of Ward in life and crime, she has since been portrayed as his 'loyal gin' (Foster, 2022a, p. 94). Several recent studies overturned this narrative. Carol Baxter and David Andrew Roberts (2013) separate fact from fiction in narratives about Mary Ann, while Foster (2022a, pp. 92–121) has examined Mary Ann's life on its own terms, rather than viewing her as an extension of Thunderbolt. These studies show a smart, determined, savvy woman who fought against societal constraints. Mary Ann Bugg was well and truly the architect of her own life story. However significant, these interventions are relatively recent and yet to reshape popular consciousness. If they recognise her at all, many Australians still only know of Mary Ann Bugg as the companion of the illustrious Thunderbolt.

2 | CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Real, white, bushranging men received support from the lower classes during the late 18th to early 20th centuries, but this was far from universal and needs to be distinguished from the Australian bushranging myth. The bushranging legend is a 20th-century phenomenon and is inextricably tied to the rise in white nationalism after the Australian Federation in 1901. Studies of banditry in Australia have been shaped by this colonial inheritance. Bushranging historiography, historical reality and symbolic myth have been entangled for decades, if not centuries.

We can see this most clearly in the fact that bushrangers who were women and/or people of colour never entered the national imaginary. They were never commemorated or celebrated in the same manner as white bushranging men. Studies of 'other' bushrangers in the academy are also few and far between. Historian Henry Reynolds (1979, p. 18; 1987, pp. 78–80) first mentioned Aboriginal bushrangers in his pioneering work on frontier history that was released in the 1970s and 1980s and since then, there has been sporadic interest in a handful of select non-white figures (Biber, 2008; Duffield, 1987; Harman, 2012; Kociumbas, 2001; Noonan, 2000; Parry, 2007; Prentis, 1991; Pybus, 2006; Wood, 1997). Foster's (2022a) book, *Boundary Crossers*, is both recent and an outlier. This is the first study to comprehensively examine women and people of colour alongside bushranging and to demonstrate the settler colonial roots of white male bushrangers as Australian national heroes. Since there has been such little attention given to these 'other' bushrangers, the first step seems to be remedial: to recover this forgotten history so that these figures can be restored to their rightful place, alongside famous white male heroes. Foster (2022a, pp. 170–175) counters this assumption. Recovery is important, but these figures should not be uncritically added to the pantheon of white bushranging heroes. It is debatable whether these figures should even be called bushrangers at all.

In the first 50 years of colonisation, Aboriginal bushranging and Aboriginal resistance were remarkably similar. Aboriginal people often stopped travellers on the road, threatened them with guns or traditional weapons and demanded colonists relinquish their goods. To outward observers this may look like a bushranging hold up but stopping transports, divesting colonists of their provisions and disrupting their travel were ways to push the colonisers off Aboriginal Country (Foster, 2022a, pp. 111–112). Recognising these strategies as modes of guerilla warfare and resistance fighting is still important. In the 2000s, Keith Windschuttle—a self-declared

historian and apologist for colonisation—used the term bushranger to refute the origins of frontier conflict in Van Diemen's Land (Windschuttle, 2002). What the majority of historians view as a concerted campaign of frontier warfare in the colony, Windschuttle repositioned as the result of “detrified” or “Europeanised” Aborigines, who were “simply outlaws,” engaged in a “minor crime wave.” Although Naomi Parry has compellingly rebuked Windschuttle's ‘analysis’ in the case of one such ‘outlaw’, Musquito, this academic exchange demonstrates the dangers in mistaking Aboriginal resistance fighting for bushranging (Parry, 2003, pp. 207–208). The former highlights active resistance to colonisation. The latter can be dismissed as petty, senseless crime, cut adrift from sovereign opposition to invasion.

Windschuttle's use of bushranging to obscure or minimise Aboriginal resistance was not unique but was a tried and tested colonial strategy. When there were coordinated attacks by Aboriginal warriors, some colonists manufactured white bushrangers to explain the assaults. In 1835, for instance, a series of deadly raids by Aboriginal warriors were attributed to a white bushranger who supposedly used Aboriginal people as minions to do his bidding. Although there is no evidence that such a man existed, the story took hold because it served the dual purpose of depicting Aboriginal people as an inferior race and obscuring their fight for their Country (Foster, 2022b, pp. 662–666). Great care needs to be taken when using the term bushranger in relation to Aboriginal people in the frontier period.

Even after frontier warfare ended, there are issues with using the term bushranger to describe people of colour. As Foster (2022a, p. 175) writes:

If we uncritically add [these figures]...to the bushranging legend, then we risk erasing their own worldviews and co-opting their stories for our own ends. This would be particularly damaging considering that each of these people was stripped of their personhood and used as some kind of vessel, myth or symbol to serve colonists' interests in their own times. We cannot let history repeat itself. We should not impose a settler framework onto other bushrangers' lives and flatten out the differences that defined their experience. In rushing to make them heroes, we can easily erase what made them human.

Even when people of colour had explicit connections to white bushranging, this should be an entry point rather than the end of historical interest. People of colour were more likely to be criminalised than celebrated for their banditry. Colonists had no interest in extenuating circumstances or the motivations behind their actions, let alone learning about their lives before their ‘turn to crime’. This skewed colonial perspective has determined most stories told about them since. Bandit heroes reveal important insights into their supporters' cultural identity and worldviews. But the ones who have been excluded from this heroic tradition can tell us just as much, if not even more.

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ORCID

Meg Foster  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6741-0704>

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Meg Foster is an award-winning historian of banditry, settler-colonial and public history. She is currently a Chancellor's Research Fellow at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), and prior to this, she was the Mary Bateson Research Fellow at Newnham College, University of Cambridge.

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