

**HISTORIC FILMS AND DESTINATION IMAGE IN AUSTRALIA  
AND THE AMERICAN WEST: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF  
*NED KELLY* AND *HIGH NOON***

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**Abstract**

This paper examines how historic films may create attractive destination images for rural areas. It compares the impacts of two films: *High Noon* and *Ned Kelly*. The first is a western which attracts tourists to the town of Jamestown in California. Promoted as a western town, Jamestown has been the film location of over 200 films, television shows and commercials. *Ned Kelly* is the eighth feature film based on the Australian bushranger, who has also been celebrated in books, art and plays. A number of towns have developed their destination image around associations with Kelly and the recent film has the potential to extend these connections to other towns.

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# HISTORIC FILMS AND DESTINATION IMAGE IN AUSTRALIA AND THE AMERICAN WEST: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF *NED KELLY* AND *HIGH NOON*

## INTRODUCTION

In my paper '*Braveheart-ed Ned Kelly: historic film and destination image*', I argued that historic films create a special type of destination image in four ways. First, the interest generated is *story-based* rather than *visually-based*. While there may be attractive scenery, this is not the prime motivator for the audience to become tourists. Rather, their desire is to visit and experience places associated with the historic story they have viewed. Second, there may be issues of authenticity with the film and the image it creates. Third, the destination image may also be shaped by other sources of information, such as books and earlier films dealing with the same historic story. Fourth, historic films have the ability to project local stories (and images) to an international audience (Frost 2003).

In this paper, it is my intention to extend this examination through a comparison of two historic films – *High Noon* (1952) and *Ned Kelly* (2003). I have chosen the former as a representative of a *Western*. It is surprising that, while Western films have probably been one of the most significant and successful creators of destination image, there has been almost no consideration of them in the literature. *High Noon* is a particularly valuable case study, as not only does it create a generic image of the West, but it is specifically used by Jamestown, California, the town where it was filmed, to attract tourists. The first half of this paper commences by briefly examining the tradition of Western films and then proceeds to considering how *High Noon* is used to promote Jamestown.

The Australian film *Ned Kelly* belongs to a long tradition of celebrating and examining the story of the Australian bushranger. The story has been the subject of seven previous feature films, including *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (1906), often claimed as the world's first feature film; shorts and a television series. It has also been widely examined in paintings, plays, music and literature (Holland and Williamson 2003). Such activity has created a strong destination image and tourist industry for a number of towns associated with Ned Kelly in north-eastern Victoria. With the release of the film in 2003, there were a number of industry predictions that further tourism would be generated. The second half of this paper examines how successful the film was in increasing tourism.

## THE WESTERN TRADITION

The Western genre developed in the media in the second half of the nineteenth century. Some idea of its complexity and scale may be gained by considering the case of William 'Buffalo Bill' Cody (1845-1917). By his early twenties Cody had developed a reputation as a peerless Buffalo hunter and army scout, though that reputation was confined to regional and army circles. In 1869 Cody met Ned Buntline, a prolific author of cheap adventure stories (often known as *dime novels*). Buntline began to use Buffalo Bill as the hero of his novels and in turn in stage plays. When Cody attended a performance in New York and was cheered by the audience, the idea was hatched of having him play himself. For just on a decade Cody toured the United States with a succession of plays which were vehicles for his sharp-shooting and frontier anecdotes. Eventually frustrated with the limitations of the stage, Cody developed *Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show* an outdoor extravaganza featuring riding and shooting exhibitions and recreations of Western incidents, such as Indians attacking a stagecoach and Custer's Last Stand. Apart from Cody, the two great stars were Sitting Bull and sharpshooter Annie Oakley. From 1887 this show regularly toured Europe as well as the USA. In turn, it was filmed by Edison in 1898 and Cody starred in a number of Western films (Carter 2000).

The nineteenth century West could not only be experienced through various forms of the media, it could also be visited. In the 1860s and 1870s Cody guided a number of tours of wealthy American

businessmen and European aristocrats. Following the 1876 Centennial Exhibition, Thomas Cook and Sons began organising tours of the West and from the 1880s they faced competition from the US operator Raymond and Whitcomb (Withey 1998: 306). Individual railway companies sought to promote attractions along their lines, for example from the 1890s the Santa Fe Railroad promoted tourism to the Grand Canyon (Withey 1998: 321).

In creating a destination image, Western films have three particular characteristics (indeed, these may be traced back to other nineteenth century media representations). First, Westerns are typically morality plays, featuring a battle between good and evil (epitomised until recently by white-hatted heroes and black-hatted villains). Such universal stories make Westerns both transferable and appealing to a wide range of cultures. This is well-illustrated by how Westerns influenced the Japanese *Seven Samurai* (1954) which was then remade as *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) (see Fenin and Everson 1977: 320-9 and 341-355 for an examination of the international appeal of Westerns, particularly in Germany, Italy and Japan).

Second, most Westerns are costume dramas, using the West as a location and background, but with little intention to depict an authentic historical story (see Fraser 1988: 187-215 for the historical content of Westerns). Even films with historical characters, such as George Custer, Jesse James, Buffalo Bill Cody and Wild Bill Hickok, generally place them in fictional stories.<sup>1</sup> Such fictionalisation can be traced back to the early Buffalo Bill serials and novels. Such a tendency sets Westerns apart from other historical films, whereas audiences expect a film of say Ned Kelly to be authentic, they have no such expectations of authenticity for a film on Jesse James (Frost 2004).

Third, there is a body of films which make it clear that it is possible to visit and experience the West, that it exists as a real destination. Such films include those representing the modern West, for example *The Misfits* (1961); experiences of tourists at dude ranches and the like, such as in a wide range of Gene Autry films, *National Lampoon's Vacation* (1983) and *City Slickers*; and those where easterners are catapulted into the West, such as *Ruggles of Red Gap* (1935), *Go West* (1940) and *The Paleface* (1948).<sup>2</sup>

## **JAMESTOWN AND HIGH NOON**

Jamestown is an old Californian gold town in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, 170 kilometres east of San Francisco. Its destination image is primarily built on its use for location work of over 200 Western films, television shows and commercials (CSRMF 2004).<sup>3</sup> Most of these productions are centered on the Sierra Railway, which is now operated by California State Parks and the California State Railroad Museum Foundation. Officially the Railtown 1897 State Historic Park, it is also branded as "The Movie Railroad". Jamestown was first used in the 1919 silent serial *The Red Glove*. Other major productions include the films *High Noon*, *The Wild Wild West*, *Unforgiven* and *Back to the Future III* and television series *Casey Jones*, *Petticoat Junction*, *The Virginian* and *Little House on the Prairie* (CSRMF 2004 and Yosemite Gold 2004). From such a range, the greatest prominence in the marketing of Jamestown is its connection with the classic *High Noon*.

This extensive use of Jamestown for films is due to four factors. The first is location, just off a major highway and relatively close to San Francisco and Los Angeles. The second is its functioning railway. Third, the main street of Jamestown is a relatively intact late nineteenth century landscape, similar to say Maldon in Australia. Fourth, the surrounding countryside of

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<sup>1</sup> A notable variation is John Ford's *Fort Apache* (1948) which tells the story of Custer's Last Stand, but moves the action to Monument Valley, substitutes Apaches for the Sioux and changes Custer's name to Owen Thursday, see Hutton 1992.

<sup>2</sup> On a more fantastic level, the West is visited as a robotic theme park in *Westworld* (1973).

<sup>3</sup> This raises the question – has any other non-metropolitan location been more used often in films?

sparsely treed, undulating hills is not distinguished by any special features and can be used to generically represent large areas of the USA.

*High Noon* is the story of a gunfight. Cain (Gary Cooper) has just been married and has retired as Marshall when he is told that a gunfighter who has sworn to kill him has been released from gaol. The gunfighter is arriving in just over an hour on the noon train. The story then unfolds in 'real-time' as Cain unsuccessfully attempts to get the townspeople to help him, and is finally forced to fight the gunfighter's gang alone.

The film was highly successful and won four Academy Awards. Made at a time when television was making massive inroads into film revenue, it spearheaded a new type of "adult Western" (Ferin and Everson 1977: 335). Indeed, to the modern viewer its theme of the Marshall rapidly deserted by his friends and wife is very black and both reactionary and subversive, which makes its success surprising.<sup>4</sup> Apart from a strong cast and the 'real-time' gimmick, it was one of the first Westerns to invest in an appealing theme song sung by country and western star Tex Ritter.

A real town was used instead of a set to add complexity to the film, especially in the climatic gunfight which runs through various streets and buildings. Jamestown's picture-postcard small-town American ambience, particularly its white-washed wooden church, white picket fences and cottage gardens are used as contrasting backgrounds to the alien gunfighters.<sup>5</sup> Such use of a small-town setting is reminiscent of the film noir *Out of the Past* (1947) where the idyllic and peaceful small Californian town of Bridgeport is used as a counterpoint to the corruption and sleaze of San Francisco.<sup>6</sup>

In *High Noon* the townspeople are finally convinced not to help by the businessman (Thomas Mitchell). He argues that they need to, 'keep it [the town] decent, keep it growing', investors are interested in the town, 'but if they're going to read about shooting and killing in the streets, what'll they gonna think then?' Ironically, this is now the image which Jamestown has developed and which draws tourists and investors. As there has been little twentieth-century development in the main street, visitors can easily imagine that they are in the historic West, and of course, their imagined West is based on *High Noon* and other films. The image of shootouts in the streets is further reinforced by Jamestown's annual festival, entitled "The Gunfighters' Rendezvous", which features a "Cowboy Gathering" and recreations of train robberies.

This emphasis on the West and gunfighting raises issues of authenticity. Jamestown is in California. In contrast, its image as portrayed through movies is of the West, particularly the Mid-West. For example, references to trains to St. Louis in *High Noon*, place the action in Kansas or Missouri, approximately 2,000 kilometres away. Furthermore, Jamestown is an historic gold mining town, with no history of cowboys, gunfights or train robberies. This is an interesting parallel to nearby Bodie, another gold mining town which visitors, influenced by film, erroneously see as an archetypal cowboy town (De Lyser 1999).

What is authentic in Jamestown is the railway. When *High Noon* was made in 1952 it still operated with steam trains. It was only in 1955 that a shift was made to diesel. Even then, such was the demand, some steam trains were kept in operation. In 1971 the line was converted to an outdoor museum (Yosemite Gold 2004). In this way, the Sierra Railway is similar to Melbourne's Puffing Billy, first becoming a *de facto* tourism operation while still functioning as a commercial railway line and second being preserved for tourism when it became no longer viable as a transport medium.

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<sup>4</sup> It was made during the Cold War and shares much of the paranoia of other films of the time. The writer of the screenplay for *High Noon* had been blacklisted in the McCarthy era (Ryan 2004).

<sup>5</sup> One interpretation is that the town is the villain. It has made its inhabitants cowardly and over concerned with material possessions. Only Cain retains the old pioneer values. Ryan (2004) argues that the theme of civilisation eroding the culture of the West is common to many films.

<sup>6</sup> Bridgeport is 100 kilometres east of Jamestown and is a popular small tourist town in the Sierra Nevada. A further 20 kilometres east is the 'ghost town' of Bodie which has also featured in Westerns.

## NED KELLY

The release of *Ned Kelly* sparked claims that there would be a resultant increase in tourism. Not only was it predicted that tourists would visit small-town destinations with established tourism operations built around the bushranger, such as Glenrowan and Beechworth; it was also claimed they would visit towns with little Kelly related development, such as Benalla, Greta, Avenel and Mansfield and towns which were used as locations in the film, but had no connection to Kelly, such as Ballarat and Clunes (Moreley 2003; Shrimpton 2003; Tourism Victoria 2003). While these predictions were not quantified, they indicated the belief that the film would have a significant impact on tourism. Tourism Victoria (2003) hoped that there would be 'a Ned-led tourism revival' in Victoria's north-east and could 'do what the *Lord of the Rings* films have done for New Zealand – draw thousands more tourists' (Shrimpton 2003).

Whether or not these predictions have come true is difficult to tell. As Riley *et al* (1998) warned, there is a tendency to be vague in estimating (and over-estimating) the impact of films on tourism. In the Australian context, three factors limit any attempt to quantify visitor numbers. First, numbers at attractions are often overstated by operators, who may wish to give the impression they are more successful than they actually are.<sup>7</sup> Second, visitor numbers for any region as collected by the Bureau of Tourism Research are imperfect, for example they exclude visitors under 15 and allocate tourists to the place they stayed overnight rather than where they visited. Third, other factors may affect numbers, for example the release of *Ned Kelly* occurred just after devastating bushfires in north-eastern Victoria.

Bearing these limitations in mind, it is my contention that while *Ned Kelly* did have an impact on destination image and tourism, the impact was not in the form predicted. In particular, three mitigating factors need to be considered.

The first is that tourism marketing efforts were not fully co-ordinated. For example, an article in the travel section of the *Melbourne Age* on the weekend of the film's release reported on a Tourism Victoria publicity campaign which promoted that 'visitors to Victoria can follow a Ned Kelly trail' (Shrimpton 2003). However, this article gave no details of how the trail could be accessed. On the day the story was published I enquired at the Beechworth Visitor Information Centre for details of the trail. The staff were unaware of the trail and of the newspaper article and suggested that details might only be available in Melbourne, 270 kilometres away. Another curious example was the prediction that Sovereign Hill would gain increased visitation arising from its use as a location in the film (Tourism Victoria 2003). However, Sovereign Hill was not used as a location and portrays a different time period to that shown in the film.

The second factor is that events and exhibitions linked to the release of *Ned Kelly* were focussed in Melbourne, rather than in those rural areas linked to Kelly. As shown in Table 1, there were six events, of which five occurred in Melbourne. Furthermore, the five Melbourne events were on a large scale, whereas the Beechworth weekend was a small festival. Clearly the organisers of these Melbourne events were concerned about their commercial viability. Their strategy was bringing Ned Kelly to the main centre of population, rather than bringing tourists to regional areas. This is a similar situation to the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversaries of the Gold Rushes in California (1998) and Victoria (2001). In these instances there was a tendency to place the major exhibitions in San Francisco and Melbourne rather than the Goldfields (Frost 2001).

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<sup>7</sup> For this reason Tourism Victoria discontinued its publication of visitor numbers by attraction in the late 1990s.

**Table 1: Events and Exhibitions associated with the release of *Ned Kelly***

Event or Exhibition	Organiser	Location
<i>Kelly Culture: reconstructing Ned Kelly</i> exhibition	State Library of Victoria	Central Melbourne
<i>The Legend of Ned Kelly</i> exhibition	Private operator	Central Melbourne
Exhibition of Ned Kelly paintings by modern artists	National Trust	Central Melbourne
Sidney Nolan retrospective, featuring his Ned Kelly series	National Gallery of Victoria	Central Melbourne
<i>Iron helmets, smoking guns</i> , retrospective of Australian bushranger films	Australian Centre for the Moving Image	Central Melbourne
Ned Kelly Weekend	Community group	Beechworth

Sources: Hawker 2003; Hawley 2003; Holland and Williamson 2003; Webb 2003.

A third factor is the structure of existing tourism operations. Kelly-related tourism already exists in Glenrowan and Beechworth. It is likely that publicity about the film reinforced that existing tourism flow and provided a marginal increase. However, the tourism promotion associated with the release of the film encouraged tourists to visit towns and sites which had little previous Kelly-related development. These included Greta, Mansfield, Stringbark Creek, Beveridge and Avenel (Morley 2003; Shrimpton 2003; Tourism Victoria 2003). Such destinations are limited in two ways. First, they are not geared for large numbers of tourists, having little infrastructure or interpretation. Stringybark Creek, for example, is only accessible along an unmade road. Second, there is often not sufficient to see at these places, it is likely that tourists would only stay a few minutes. It is significant that when a Ned Kelly Trail brochure was finally released, a number of these undeveloped locations were excluded.

## CONCLUSION

*High Noon* and *Ned Kelly* are two examples of historic films which have generated strong destination images and resultant visitation by tourists. They provide an instructive contrast to some of the general perceptions about film and tourism. Neither film features attractive landscapes, nor nostalgic and quirky traditional societies. Both provide particularly black visions of the world, in one the hero and his friends are doomed to die, in the other the hero survives, but his world is shattered. What these two films do provide are strong historically-based stories and it is these which attract tourists.

A further consideration is that these films alone did not create the destination images. Past studies of tourism and films have often featured particular films which have by themselves created the attraction, in short, the films are the revolutionary force in attracting tourists to places which were previously rarely visited. Examples include films such as *Field of Dreams* and *Thelma and Louise* and television series such as *Seachange* and *Heartbeat* (Beeton 2001; Croy and Walker 2004; Riley *et al* 1998). In contrast, these historic films are part of (and reinforce) a wider media which attracts tourists. In the case of *High Noon*, it is one of over 200 productions at Jamestown and part of the thousands of films and books which have been written romanticising the West. *Ned Kelly* is

the eighth film of the bushranger and there are more than a 1,000 'publications in which the Kellys feature prominently' (Kelson and McQuilton 2001: 153).

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