

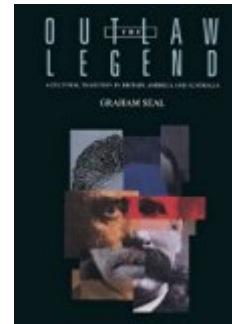
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Graham Seal. *The Outlaw Legend: A Cultural Tradition in Britain, America and Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. xvi + 246 pp. \$33.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-55740-5; \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-55317-9.

Reviewed by Frank Oglesbee (Eastern Illinois University)  
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Carrying out the plan his title implies, Seal looks—mainly via ballads and folktales—at the history of the outlaw/hero, including actual agents (Dick Turpin, Billy the Kid, Ned Kelly), fictional ones (the Wild Colonial Boy), and such mythic blends as Robin Hood, who apparently has some historical precedent, but whose elevation to the aristocracy is a seventeenth-century adornment. Seal notes the underlying motif of such stories is that the outlaw/hero robs the rich to help the poor; further, he is courteous to women, even the rich ones he robs, avoids gratuitous killing, and is usually conscious of his status as righter of social wrongs. (Ned Kelly had a standard speech about the reason he and his companions had become road agents and bank robbers).

Seal is careful to note that few of the highwaymen, etc., achieved the rough nobility won by Jesse James, and that even those who did were not always the gentlemen rovers in practice that they were in song. However, the outlaw *legend* transcends the practice, for legend and tradition have social value beyond the actions done or not done by individuals. Moreover, the heroic outlaw is contrasted with the more despicable people who use the power of the law to abuse the common folk. Today's outlaw/hero may be the computer hacker or environmental activist who fights the power of (my speculation) Microsoft or “international logging conspiracies” who seek to make everyone use X software, or to destroy the last

blade of grass to enrich a handful of wealthy shareholders. The actual benefits to society of the outlawry seem dubious to me, but the idea of the outsider who fights corruption and tyranny is of long-standing.

Seal's book offers a sizeable number of ballads and excerpts, which I found, in a way, the least satisfactory part of the book. They're important examples, but most of the ballad writers were no Cole Porter. With the exception of Billy Gashade's (I've also seen the name as Gashee and Geshay) song about Jesse James, and the ballad of the Wild Colonial Boy, most of the songs strike me as minor aesthetic crimes. However, Seal's own writing is clear and thoughtful, his annotation (many studies in folk and popular culture included) is comprehensive and helpful to anyone wishing to pursue this topic further, and the illustrations enrich the text. I was particularly taken with his discourses on Jesse James and Ned Kelly. (I love the picture of Mick Jagger as Ned Kelly, from a 1970 film). The closest I can come here to the outlaw tradition is to note that the book is available in paperback, which should run less than \$54.95.

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