Gang Unmasked is the exception to the rule. Author Ian Macfarlane uses original source material to present the facts of the matter. In doing so he brings into question the entire myth of poor Ned, a country lad forced into a life of crime and bloodshed because of harassment by thuggish and corrupt police. Macfarlane builds his case methodically and harasses the Kelly Gang apologists as justification for the things he did. Many aspects of the Kelly story mirror the behaviour of criminals of our own time. A group of police was ambushed and mercilessly slaughtered because they dared to search for a man accused of shooting at a policeman. The murderers then plundered the policemen’s bodies before taking to the bush. The Police formed what we would describe as a “Task Force” to track down the offenders. One of the Kelly gang (Byrne) was a drug addict, a known opium user. Ned’s mother was a “cougar” who, following the death of her first husband and the subsequent breakup of a short term relationship, married a much younger man. Her new spouse subsequently disappeared under mysterious circumstances, after claims he ill treated his wife. The gang later murdered a suspected police informer.

Nor is Ned the “Robin Hood” of Australian legend. He stole from rich and poor alike, and the gang’s lack of concern for human life can be seen at the final showdown at Glenrowan. Ned and his accomplices engineered a confrontation with police, thereby deliberately placing at risk a large number of civilian hostages they appear to have used as a “human shield”. In the ensuing gun battle two civilians were killed in the cross-fire and one was injured and died some time later.

Yet another was wounded when fumble fingers Ned accidentally discharged a revolver he was playing with, shooting one of the civilians in the eye. This person died later the same year.

After Ned’s capture Macfarlane demonstrates how Ned’s legal team leaked confidential information to the press and sought to manipulate the legal process in order to gain advantage at the trial. Macfarlane also reveals how the Royal Commission into the police handling of the Kelly outbreak was “stacked” with a number of commissioners who had an anti-police bias. Little wonder then that the Royal Commission’s findings savaged the Force.

The creation of the Kelly myth dates from the time the Kellys were on the run in north-east Victoria. Even then it was characterised by people who spread false information, totally at odds with the truth, apparently because of their own anti police bias. The reasons for the later elevation of Ned Kelly to the status of an Australian icon remains a mystery to me – all the more so now that I have read Ian Macfarlane’s book. Sadly, given the level of uncritical support Ned enjoys in the community, I doubt the evidence presented by Macfarlane will change the minds of those who believe in “Saint Ned”.

For the rest of us this work provides a fascinating insight into one of the great Australian sagas and sets many aspects of the story to rights. I found it to be a compelling read and I highly recommend it.