

THE FIGHT THAT NEVER HAPPENED...

PART 1 – THE WRITTEN WORD

The “Boxer Ned” photo from 1874 is by far and away the best and most compelling portrait of the Ned photos (both verified and unverified) we have. The story behind the portrait is also now very well-known and is itself also now an integral part of the Kelly story. But how much do we actually know about the photo and the story? Why is Ned’s face not covered in bruises? And does the story as we know it ‘stack up’?

Let’s work through the actual evidence we have of the event and see where we end up.

Contemporary Accounts

Putting the actual photograph to one side (we’ll come back to that in Part 2), what is the earliest written account we have of the story?

A search on **Trove** of newspapers from 1874 using various key words turns up nothing about the boxing match, though this is probably not surprising given the likely spontaneous nature of the bout. A more general search of Trove in relation to Wild Wright and Ned also turned up nothing.

The next logical place to look is the **Jerilderie Letter** from February 1879. Between pages 6 and 12, Ned gives an account of leaving prison on 29 March 1874 and then running into Wild Wright:

“Wild Wright came to the eleven mile to see Mr Gunn, stopped all night and lost his mare. Both him and me looked all day for her and could not get her. Wright who was a stranger to me was in a hurry to get back to Mansfield and I gave him another mare and he told me if I found his mare to keep her until he brought mine back. I was going to Wangaratta”.

Ned goes on to describe finding the mare, *“I was going to Wangaratta and seen the mare I caught her and took her with me”...* the mare being, *“the property of a Telegraph master in Mansfield, he lost her on the 6th, gazetted her on the 12th of March and I was a prisoner in Beechworth Goal until the 29th March. Therefore I could not have stole the mare”.*

Ned describes his violent arrest by Constable Hall, *“when Wild Wright and my Mother came they could trace us across the street by the blood in the dust and which spoiled the lustre of the paint on the gate post of the Barrack”...* and of the next day being found *“guilty of receiving and got 3 years experience in Beechworth Pentridges dungeons. This is the only charge ever proved against me. Therefore I can say I never was convicted of horse or cattle stealing”.*

Finally, Ned describes his release in 1874 and then going to working as a saw-miller for Saunders and Rules and Heach and Dochendorf. Interestingly, Ned does not mention any boxing match with Wild Wright to settle the score. Given Ned’s general braggadocio, self-flattery, and his tendency to bring up all manner of personal grievances, is it not slightly odd that Ned didn’t take the opportunity to brag about his boxing prowess in the JL?

The next logical spot to go for a contemporary account of boxing match is GW Hall’s **“The Kelly Gang, or, the Outlaws of the Wombat Ranges”**. Again, no account of the boxing match.

So, in sum, apart from the portrait itself, I have so far been unable to find any contemporary account of the famed boxing match. Let’s turn then to the works of the various historians.

Modern Historical Accounts

I started where modern Kelly history all begins, JJ Kenneally's, "**The Complete Inner History of the Kelly Gang and their Pursuers**", first published in 1929 (I looked through Edition 5 from 1946). It includes another account of Wild's stray mare, the Constable Hall arrest, and the 3-year sentence in 1871, but nothing about a boxing match to settle the score after Ned's release in 1874 nor any mention of the portrait.

Next stop, Max Brown's "**Ned Kelly: Australian Son**" (1948) and Frank Clune's "**The Kelly Hunters**" (1954). Again, no account of the boxing match.

Hitting the early 60s, I arrive at the work of Ian Jones (something is happening here, but you don't know what it is...), and hey presto! found the first mention of the incident and first public of the portrait, in a **June 1962 Walkabout Magazine** article titled "The Years Ned Kelly Went Straight". The article reads:

Soon after leaving prison, Ned Kelly went to work as a faller for a timber mill owned by two partners Saunders and Rule. Later, he worked at another mill owned by Heach and Dockendorf.

That year, 1974, perhaps at one of the mills, Ned ran into Wild Wright, whose horse-stealing escapade had sent him to prison. Perhaps to settle the score, perhaps just to see who was the better man, they staged a boxing match.

Wild Wright was a noted district fighter who, in his later years, became a professional boxer. He stood six-feet-one, and topped thirteen stone. An old district identity described him to me as "a man with a great bony face; a black moustache, and the fiercest pair of eyes you'd ever seen". Ned Kelly was more than an inch shorter and a stone lighter, but three years hard labour and several months in the timber country had taught him how to take care of himself.

The fight took place in Beechworth, probably in the yard of the Imperial Hotel. It was apparently a well-staged affair. Ned fought in a pair of silk-trunks worn over long underpaid and undershirt. No detailed account of the battle has yet been discovered. We only know that Ned Kelly won and became, in his twentieth year, a sort of unofficial heavy-weight boxing champion of Victoria's north-eastern district.

A copy of the boxing is also included in the article, and is captioned as follows:

This previously unpublished picture of Ned Kelly was taken to commemorate his victory over Wild Wright in 1874. It was recently discovered by the author [Ian Jones] at Copeland Antiques, St Kilda.

What a revelation! The boxing match and the related boxer portrait apparently disappeared for 88 years, only being rediscovered by chance (by Ian Jones of all people!), in the early 60s.

Building on the Walkabout Article, in 1968, in Jones' "**A New View of Ned Kelly**" from 1968's "Ned Kelly: Man and Myth", Jones writes:

Physically, Ned Kelly was almost superhuman. This sounds like an extravagant statement in everyway, but the man was physically remarkable. He was an outstanding boxer, who in his twentieth year became regarded as an unofficial heavy-weight boxing champion of the north-east. He gained this recognition by defeating 'Wild' Wright in a fantastic twenty-round

bare-knuckle fight. Wright was six foot two and thirteen stone and fought like a threshing machine. One old man described him to me as a 'great bony man with a great bony face, a black moustache, and the fiercest pair of eyes you would ever see'. Another said, 'mad as a tiger snake that had been run over by a mob of sheep'. Ned Kelly's boxing prowess was symptomatic of strength and endurance which he displayed to spectacular degree in his Last Stand.

Again, a copy of the Boxer Ned portrait was included, this time with the caption:

In many ways, the best photograph of Ned. This colourful photograph was taken to commemorate his epic 20-round, bare knuckle victory over 'Wild' Wright in 1874.

McQuilton, in "The Kelly Outbreak 1878 - 1880" (1979), relying on the portrait published in *Man & Myth*, gives the following rather restrained account of the event:

Released from Pentridge in February 1874 where his conduct had been described as unremarkable beyond 'a desire to let people know he was Power's mate', Ned Kelly came home to find his sister married to Skillion and his mother about to re-marry the American George King. They were married in Benalla on 19 February 1874 according to the rites of the Primitive Methodists.¹

Ned Kelly settled down, taking a job lumber-milling in the Mansfield district and earning top wages. He also settled an old score by beating Wild Wright in an epic twenty-round bare-knuckle fight in 1874.

Including the Boxer Ned portrait in his fantastic "Ned Kelly: The Authentic Illustrated Story" (1984), **Keith McMenomy** describes it as follows:

Possibly the most characteristic photograph ever of Edward Kelly. As the inscription shows. It was taken in August 1874, but does not carry a studio imprint to show exactly where. The occasion was evidently an important and seriously conducted one. Kelly wears silk trunks over his long underwear and special light boxing-pumps. There were not gloves in those days; the 1870s were in the era of bare-knuckle bouts, the days of long hard matches, incredible endurance and brutal punishment, Kelly always showed confident in his boxing ability boasted once that while I had a pair of arms and bunch of fives at the end of them they never failed to peg out anything they came into contact with. In 1879, when world heavyweight champion Jem Mace visited Melbourne, Kelly publicly challenged him to a match but it did not eventuate.²

McMenomy gives his account of the event as follows:

One of the mills which employed Kelly was said to have been on Red Camp station, near the Quinn former Glenmore run north of Mansfield, and if this was correct, it was probably while there that he caught up with 'Wild' Isaiah Wright of Mansfield. Either to settle the score for his three year sentence, or simply as a sporting challenge, Ned competed with Wild in a bare-knuckled boxing match in August 1874. The only record of the event is preserved on a photograph taken to commemorate the victory: 'Ned Kelly August 8/1874 Fought Wild

¹ McQuilton, AIS, p. 82

² McMenomy, AIS, p. 56

Wright 20 and won'. It has been suggested that the fight took place at Beechworth but as yet there is nothing to substantiate this.³

Finally, turning to Jones' more comprehensive account from **"Ned Kelly: A Short Life" (1995)** ('ASL'), Jones gives, perhaps the definitive account of the incident:

On a visit to Beechworth one Saturday early in August, Ned had a drink at the Imperial Hotel in High Street – A Protestant Pub with a bust of Queen Victoria mounted on its sign. Perhaps this had attracted the Protestant Wild Wright to the place. It would have been an uncomfortable meeting, probably their first encounter outside prison since the affair with the Mansfield postmaster's horse. Words flew, but before any punches were thrown, publican Edward Rogers would have stepped in. He didn't like ugly brawls in his pub but a boxing match was very much his in his line – along with wrestling bouts and cricket matches, as well as 'quoits, skittles. And other good old classic or English games'. He was well known as a 'caterer for the public' and had established a small sports ground below the hillside fruit and hop garden of the Imperial on the grassy banks of Spring Creek.

Rogers probably outfitted the combatants. A photo of Ned taken to commemorate the occasion shows him wearing silk shorts over long underpants and undershirt with lightweight shoes. His beard had been growing for eight months – dark reddish brown with a lighter moustache – bringing maturity and unexpected strength to the strong line of his brows above the fierce but calm eyes. Long, almost-black hair hid the scars of the beating from Hall's revolver. Wild's failure to tell him that postmaster's horse was stolen had brought Ned that beating and two-and-a-half years of hard labour. This fight aimed to settle the score.

They fought bare-knuckle to the old London Prize Ring rules already illegal for professional fights. Ignoring the niceties of the gentlemanly Marquis of Queensberry code, they simply came up to 'the scratch' – a line drawn on the ground – and hammered at each other until a man was felled or blood was drawn or, in the jargon, 'claret was tapped'. This marked the end of the round and each man's 'picker up' had thirty seconds to revive him for the next, with an additional eight seconds for him to reach the scratch without help (motivation aimed at preventing over-zealous supporters from carrying a semi-conscious man to the scratch where he could be beaten to death).

Wild was a notorious and experienced fighter. The following month it would be reported that, 'He is rather given to commit assaults [and] is quite indifferent whether it is police or a civilian he lets dive at.' At 25 he was perhaps an inch taller and a stone heavier than his lean, 19-year-old opponent. But Ned brought to the fight his legacy of stone breaking and tree felling, his balance refined by winging an axe on a springy plank, his eye sharpened by the hair's-breadth judgement that placed every axe blow to maximum effect. He was driven by a fierce anger but he was containing it, using his head and conserving his strength – another hard-learned lesson.

Four years later Wild said, 'Ned is mad' – a strange comment from a man who was by then totally dedicated to Ned. After another two years the world saw Ned wage a battle against impossible odds, crippled by serious wounds, weakened by loss of blood to the point of death, but still fighting. Ned simply didn't know when he had had enough. Perhaps Wild was right and it was a sort of madness, but it made him almost unbeatable.

³ McMenemy, AIS, p. 48

The fight lasted for twenty rounds, perhaps for hours, until at last Wild conceded defeat. Many years later, as a boxer in a travelling tent show, he admitted to legendary spruiker Charlie Fredricksen, 'He gave me the hiding of my life'.

In the early, midwinter dusk of this highland gully, steaming with feral sweat, Ned Kelly tasted his first real victory, won the allegiance of Wild Wright and with it the respect, fear and envy of other men. 'The notorious young Kelly', as Beechworth's Advertiser had described him when he faced trial for horse stealing, was now a man, and unofficial boxing champion of the district.⁴

Jones also gives his most detailed references in ASL, providing the following notes:

The date of the fight at Beechworth is established by an inscription on the photograph of Ned as a boxer, 'Ned Kelley [sic] August 8/1974'. The photograph was drawn to my attention by a friend and colleague, Johanna Parsons-Nicholls, in 1962, weeks after 'legendary spruiker' and showman Charlie Fredricksen had told me that Wild Wright had spoke of being 'given the hiding of his life' in a fight with Ned Kelly at Beechworth.

Edward Rogers states sports at the Imperial, O&M, 26.12.1876; as 'caterer for the public', O&M, 21.12.1878; hop and fruit garden, O&M. 6.3.1877; London Prize Ring Rules, J.J. Farnol. Epics of the Fancy, London 1928, with additional detail in 1979 from Merv Williams, former editor of the Sporting Glove; Wild Wright 'rather given to... assaults' W.D, 23.9.1874; fight lasts 20 rounds, later inscription on the 'boxer' photo in same hand, 'Fought Wild Wright 20 and Won'; Ned Kelly 'mad', typescript MS by Constable McIntyre, MS6342, La Trobe Library (hereafter McIntyre Typescript).

So, in summary, so far the only actual evidence we have for the boxing match having taken place is the photo itself (Ned in boxing togs), the photo's inscription ("Ned Kelley" and "Fought Wild Wright 20 and Won"), a photo which seemingly disappeared and only resurfaced in 1962, a second-hand story told by showman Charlie Fredricksen (b. 1873, d. 1966), then 89 years-old, to Ian Jones in 1962 that Ned had given Wild "the hiding of his life" in a fight in Beechworth (note – Jones does not appear to claim Charlie actually referred to the hiding being in the context of a boxing match), and a vague comment by Wild to McIntyre that Ned was 'mad'. The upshot of all this is that the rest of the story as we know it, is pure, classic, Jones speculation.

Just to really ram this point home, despite the vivid details in Jones' various accounts, there is no evidence that Ned ran into Wild at one of the sawmills, no evidence that the fight took place at the Imperial Hotel in Beechworth, no evidence that 'words flew', no evidence that publican Edward Rogers intervened, no evidence what rules were followed, no evidence about the fight's motivation (at least Jones initially accepted the fight could have instead been driven by pure machismo).

There is also no evidence that Ned became known as the unofficial heavyweight boxing champion of the North East (I'd actually say the lack of contemporary accounts and lack of Ned's bragging about said title leaves this part of the story dead in the water).

Notice too that Wild Wright has grown an inch between the 1962 Walkabout version and 1968 Man and Myth version. For the record (no pun intended), Wild's prison record sheet states his weight as 13 stone (82.5 kg) and his height as 5 foot, 11 inches (180cm) (not six foot, 1 or 2 inches or 185 or 187cm as claimed by Jones).⁵ Ned's record sheet, by comparison, records Ned's height as 5 foot, 10

⁴ Jones, ASL, pp. 76 – 77.

⁵ McMenemy, AIS, p. 115.

inches (178 cm) and his weight as 11.4 stone (72 kg), though Ned would likely have had gained some weight during his prison term. So, while Wild was indeed bigger and taller, he did not tower over Ned in the manner Jones states.⁶ As is becoming a bit of a trend, have a proper look through Jones' notations and all that is solid melts into air.

PART 2 – THE PORTRAIT AND ITS CREATOR

In Part 1 we went through the existing documentary material which exists in relation to the famous boxing match between Ned and Wild. In Part 2 we consider the portrait and its inscription.

The Portrait

As we have established, the photo turned up by total chance in an antiques shop in St Kilda in 1962 after being spotted by Jones' colleague, Johanna Parsons-Nicholls. Whether Parsons-Nicholls or Jones bought it, I have no idea, but Jones was able to obtain at least a copy of it to have it published for the first time in Walkabout.

The original portrait photo was then sold at auction for \$19,800 in November 1987, with the Canberra Times reporting as follows:

Rare Ned Kelly picture sold for \$19,800

MELBOURNE: A rare photograph of bushranger Ned Kelly taken in 1874

sold at auction for \$19,800 on Thursday.

The 9 by 6-centimetre black and white photograph is believed to have been taken after Kelly went to Melbourne to have his picture taken to celebrate his win after a fight with "Wild" Wright.

The photo dated August 8, 1874, shows Kelly in a boxing stance.⁷

It's interesting to note that in 1987, the story is not that the photo was taken in Beechworth in the immediate aftermath of the bout, but sometime later in Melbourne.

The photo was then sold again at auction in 2018, this time being bought by Kelly family descendants (notably Joanne Griffiths), for \$55,000.⁸ This itself is interesting and it appears to be established no copy of the portrait survived within the Kelly family.

But who took it and where? Despite what McMenemy writes, (that the photo does not bear a studio inscription), this is apparently incorrect. When the photo was put up for auction by Leonard Joel in October 2018, the lot was described as follows:

⁶ McMenemy, AIS, p. 46.

⁷ <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/122115235?searchTerm=ned%20kelly%20boxer>

⁸ <https://www.bordermail.com.au/story/5315673/family-delivers-ko-bid-in-costly-ned-pic-sale/>

*The Famous Ned Kelly Boxing match photo, taken after his 1874 match Against Isaiah 'Wild' Wright, albumen paper photograph dated August 8, 1874 bears stamp of Melbourne Portrait Rooms and photographer J. J. Chidley on verso.*⁹

So JJ Chidley is our man! So, what do we know about Chidley? Well, his adopted son, William James Chidley, became a bit of a 20th century sensation, described as an “*Australian philosopher with unconventional theories on sex, diet and clothing*”, who got became a well-known public figure in Sydney, getting about in Grecian-style tunic and sandals, promoting nudity and vegetarianism, and arguing modern sex was unnatural (he argued sex with an erect penis was unnatural and that sex should only occur in Spring and then only with a flaccid penis. I know¹⁰). William became a cause célèbre in 1912 after being charged with offence behaviour, was then controversially deemed insane, and contained in an asylum. William later set himself on fire (though survived with terrible burns) and died as an inmate at the Callan Park Hospital for the Insane in 1916.

William’s entry in the Australian Dictionary of Biography provides the following information on his adoptive father, John James Chidley:

*William James Chidley (1860?-1916), sex reformer and eccentric, was a foundling, probably born in Victoria, and adopted as an infant by John James Chidley (d.1891), toyshop-owner, and his first wife Maria, née Lancelott. The Chidleys also adopted three girls and another boy and returned to England for several years in the early 1860s. On their return to Melbourne his adopted father became an impecunious itinerant photographer with a horse-drawn studio.*¹¹

John James Chidley was also, apparently, “involved in a “free love” sect devoted to the teachings of the Swedish philosopher and seer Emanuel Swedenborg”.¹²

Trove gives us some very interesting information on JJ Chidley and his business, the Melbourne Travelling Portrait Rooms. The Hamilton Spectator, on 15 April 1874, in its section on the town of Parupa (a small rural town now named Lake Bolac, 75 km east of Hamilton, in Central-Western Victoria) reported as follows:

*The Melbourne Travelling Portrait Rooms, under the direction of Mr. J. J. Chidley, the proprietor, arrived here this morning. It is an excellent contrivance for travelling about from place to place, consisting of two rooms, built of weatherboard, each on four small wheels. When the apartments are fixed up, one at right angles to the other, the result is a photographer's perfect studio.*¹³

We also know that by September 1874, Chidley had moved from Parupa / Lake Bolac to Dunkeld (another small rural town in Central Western-Victoria, nor far from the Grampians), with the Hamilton Spectator reporting on 26 September 1874:

*Mr. Chidley, photographer, is now on a visit here, some very fine portraits being executed by him for those who would "see themselves as others see them."*¹⁴

⁹ <https://www.carters.com.au/index.cfm/index/8986-ned-kelly-kelly-gang-memorabilia/>

¹⁰ <https://insidestory.org.au/william-chidleys-answer-to-the-sex-problem/>

¹¹ <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/chidley-william-james-5579>

¹² <https://insidestory.org.au/william-chidleys-answer-to-the-sex-problem/>

¹³ <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/226073996?searchTerm=Chidley%2C%20Melbourne%20travelling%20portrait>

¹⁴ <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/226073920?searchTerm=Chidley%2C%20portrait>

The Hamilton Spectator, also carried the following advertisement on 1 Sep 1875:

PORTRAITS, PORTRAITS.

The Melbourne Travelling Portrait Rooms,

CORNER OF GRAY AND THOMSON STREETS, HAMILTON.

CARTES DES-VISITE, 15s per doz.

LIBRARY PORTRAITS, 8£ by 6 inches

(framed), 17s 6d first copy.

Inspection of specimens respectfully solidited.

L. J. CHIDLEY,

Photographer.¹⁵

The Avoca Mail, on 22 Jan 1878, carried this amusing little story:

It is not often that bullocks indulge in a "bolt," but on Friday last a couple of these animals caused some consternation in the town by striving to run away with a photographer's saloon. Mr Chidley, of the Travelling Portrait Booms, having decided to continue his travels, had four bullocks attached to each of his rooms, and, just at starting, the two leaders of one team became unmanageable, and endeavored to get away with their load. Before going far, however, they brought the house with such force against a post at the corner of High and Cambridge streets that the post was uprooted and the chain by which the animals were attached to the room broke. Thus freed they ran together for nearly a mile before they were captured. Fortunately the room, which is valued at nearly £200, was not injured.¹⁶

So now we have a bit of a sense of JJ Chidley, the facilities in which the portrait may have been taken, the price likely paid.

We also know that in 1874 and 1875 Chidley was operating around Central-Western Victoria, and not North-Eastern Victoria, with his office being based in Hamilton, some 500 km from Beechworth. I have looked but not found any advertisements which place Chidley in Beechworth in 1874, August or otherwise. Ned did write of becoming a rambling gambler after his release from prison, so maybe he spent some time near Hamilton in 1874 and had the photo taken there?

One also wonders whether teenage William Chidley (aged about 14 at the time) might have even met Ned. What a good edition of the Monthly's "Australian Encounters" section that would make!

We also know that it seems likely that more than one copy would have been produced and sold (it seems quite likely a dozen would have been made). Strange then that only one survived. Maybe Ned had the photo taken but never came back to pick up his 12 copies? (Kudos to David MacFarlane for that idea).

¹⁵<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/226072518?searchTerm=Chidley%2C%20Melbourne%20travelling%20portrait>

¹⁶<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/201450029?searchTerm=Chidley%2C%20Melbourne%20travelling%20portrait>

Is it also not extremely strange that despite perhaps a dozen copies of the photo having been made, no copy of the image was provided to police after the Gang were outlawed? Remember, after Stringybark Creek, the Police were desperate for contemporary photos and made call out for contemporary photographs of each gang member, and when none of Ned was provided, had to resort to drawing a beard on Ned's 1873 prison photo to create something akin to a contemporary likeness.¹⁷ Contrast this with Wangaratta photographer WS Barnes who answered the call and came forward with a negative he had of a carte de vista of Steve Hart.¹⁸ Why didn't Chidley come forward? Not a big newsreader? Did he not keep his negatives?

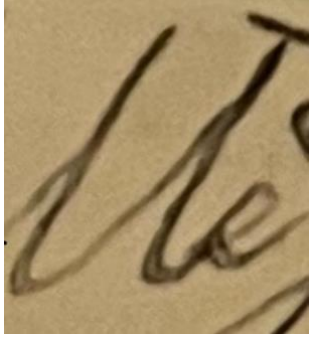
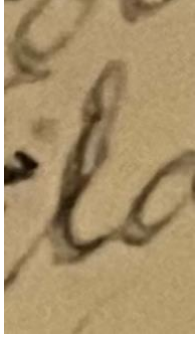
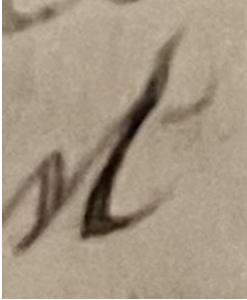

It would also be fascinating to know who had possession of the photograph between 1874 and 1962 and how it came to end up in an Antiques Shop in St Kilda. McMemory's notes give us this small tantalizing piece of information:

Photograph illustrated in this chapter. Courtesy of Copeland Antiques, St Kilda and Ian Jones. Supposed to have been given by Wild Wright to a friend in a travelling circus, when he was earning his living as a boxer.¹⁹

Where does this information come from? Jones? Copeland Antiques?

The Inscriptions

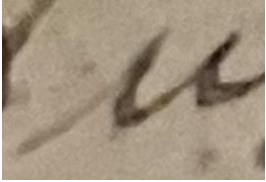
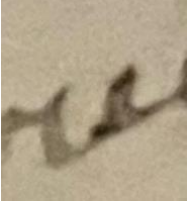
Let's turn now to the handwritten inscription, "Ned Kelley" written in cursive on the bottom and "Fought Wild Wright 20 and Won" written diagonally in the right-hand corner. Jones writes the two captions are by the same hand. I'm not convinced, let's take a closer look.

Horizontal Inscription	Diagonal Inscription	Observations
		<p>Loops on the ls not the same.</p> <p>One l also more slanted.</p>
		<p>Very different shapes.</p> <p>t on left has sharper curve – t on right more angular and square.</p>

¹⁷ McMemory, AIS, p. 92.

¹⁸ McMemory, AIS, p. 81.

¹⁹ McMemory, AIS, p. 251.

		Left hand u has more disconnection between the u and tail but much closer to each other than the l or t.
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I may be wrong. But if I am correct, this means the inscription “Fought Wild Wright 20 and Won” may have been added later, by an unknown person, at an unknown date.

Perhaps this second inscription was actually added years later during Wild’s travelling circus days?

Does anything turn on this? Maybe, maybe not.

What does “Fought Wild Wright 20 and Won” Mean?

The other aspect of the inscription, to my mind likely added later by another hand, is that it does not necessarily mean Ned Kelly fought a boxing match which went twenty rounds and came out the winner (though I agree that seems most likely the intended meaning).

Nonetheless, it’s worth considering the alternative meanings. For example, in 1874, Ned was likely 19 years old, but given Ned’s birthdate is not totally confirmed, and is often given as being in 1854, it could be that Ned was thought to be 20 years old at the time. Another meaning could be that the boxing match only lasted 20 minutes, rather less impressive and rather more consistent with an amateur boxing match (credit to David MacFarlane for this potential alternative meaning).

Even on its accepted meaning, maybe it’s not meant to be taken literally and could instead be tongue in cheek comment. Wild Wright was well known brawler and 20 rounds bare knuckle is a massive length for a fight. Perhaps Ned simply put on some boxing togs for a photo (maybe on a trip to Melbourne or Western Victoria) and then someone added “Fought Wild Wright 20 and Won” as a kind of in-joke, the claim being so outlandish to be taken seriously.

What do we know about Wild as Fighter?

Perhaps this is good time to talk about Isaiah “Wild” Wright. Wild was born in Ireland in 1846 and came to Australia in 1859, eventually settling in the Mansfield Area, first crossing paths with Ned in April 1871, and marrying Bridget Lloyd (Tom Lloyd’s sister) in 1873

Wild was a typical larrikin. A street-fighting laborer and shearer known for drinking, brawling, obscene language, lifting of horses, and violently resisting arrest whenever such an act was attempted by the local Police (if you are interested, one such account of resistance is detailed in length in an article in the Age titled “An Exciting Chase” from 26 February 1873²⁰ while there is another newspaper article from 1888 showing Wild still up to his old tricks 15 years later²¹).

²⁰ <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/70773378?searchTerm=wild%20wright>

²¹ <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/270131620?searchTerm=At%20the%20local%20police%20court%20on%20Tuesday%2C%20before%20Mr%20J.%20Fell%2C%20J.P.%2C%20Isaiah%20Wright%2C>

Wild was arrested on countless occasions between 1873 and 1887, and received sentences of 18-months' hard labour for "illegally using a horse" on 2 August 1871 (the Mansfield Postmaster's mare), three-years' hard labour for "receiving a stolen horse knowing it to be stolen" on 13 October 1874, and six-years' hard labour for horse stealing on 16 February 1883 (along with Jim Kelly, after both were arrested in August 1881). Wild was also famously remanded in Beechworth Gaol with a number of other Kelly sympathizers between January and April 1879.

McMenomy writes that Wild was remembered as someone who "possessed a thorough knowledge of the noble art". Wild's mute brother, Robert "Dummy" Wright, was also apparently took after his brother and was described in his 1925 obituary as follows "In his younger days, too, he was a game and skilful boxer. Indeed, he is said to have knocked out many a crack bush fighter".

The Bulletin from 3 September 1881 carries this wonderful account of Wild's brawling abilities:

Isaiah or "Wild" Wright, the most noted associate of the Kellys, is upon his trial for horse-stealing, and the Victorian police will not be sorry to see him put in some safe place. Probably no single man ever gave the force so many and such severe pummellings. Before any hair grew on his face he was the bite noir of the Mansfield constables. Whenever they had to arrest him, they generally received a considerable amount of rough treatment, and sometimes he would stack three or four of them in a heap before they secured him—to the great delight of his admiring sympathisers. He was a great reaper, and could fairly claim to be an "acre-a-day man." As a wrestler few could tackle him. He went into Riverina for the shearing for several years, and soon became known both for his quaint expressions and irrepressible rowdiness. Though not a scientific fighter, his bony strength and endurance made him an awkward opponent. He frequently walked into a hut full of total strangers, and asked whether "any flash man would care about a round or two" —but he was very seldom accommodated. As most men have a favourite exclamation when excited, Isaiah had his; generally it was "Hi for Hogan 1" or "Hogan's ghost!" In fact, the mythical Hogan seemed to be his patron saint on all critical occasions, and to that personage his poean of victory was always addressed. Wright would fight any man for pure love; it was quite immaterial to him whether there was any point at issue. As an indication of his endurance, on one occasion when the frost lay thick on the ground, he swam a mile in the Murrumbidgee before breakfast, for a ridiculously small wager.

After Wild's release from prison on 26 October 1887, he did some droving and also apparently worked as a tent boxer with travelling circuses.

It is through his tent boxing that he apparently met Charlie Fredricksen (1873–1966), a well-known showman, circus performer, actor, singer, sharpshooter, and spruiker, who eventually became known as 'The Man Outside Hoyts'.²² More research into Wild's tent boxing days is required, but it is supposedly here that the boxing Ned portrait turned up.

In about 1910, Wild eventually ended up in the Northern Territory, where he died in 1911 of malarial fever at Newcastle Waters aged 65 years old.²³

After Wild's death in 1911, on 24 August 1911, the Bulletin carried the following account:

²² <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/fredricksen-carl-theodore-charles-10248>

²³ <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-598658744/view?sectionId=nla.obj-605914512&partId=nla.obj-598672636&fbclid=IwAR320ZvnNZmdC3lejowcw8cgz2YbSLoRSiOHsgaJnLuh7qQLh2eovnhvuL0#page/n22/mod/e/1up>

Re death of "Wild Wright", just a little recollection of that notorious man in his prime. He gloried then in the name of Isaiah, and weighed 12 stone, mostly bone. He made a meteoric appearance at Yanko station just before shearing started in August, '69. There were about 50 men in the hut as he stalked in, and announced himself: "Hogan's ghost 1 Is there any flash man here?" No response. "I'm Isaiah, the prophet, and I'll ride, reap, or rastle him for a quid!" Modest silence. "I'll fight him for a bellyful." There were no takers; and when he tweaked Big Mick by the nose, Mick responded with a weakly smile, as if having his beak tweaked in public was one of the most humorous things. However, Isaiah's prowess did not go untested. There was a black "rig" in the paddock that no one had tackled successfully, and next morning he was yarded by Scotty Turnbull, the head groom. Not a seat was vacant on the stockyard rails as Wild Wright, in moleskins and heavy-nailed boots. Most expected to see him half killed, and Scotty smiled appreciatively, but withheld judgment. For a few seconds there was a wild whirl; the "rig" plunged, bucked, and bit all he knew; and then, solid as a rock, Wild Wright started a series of yells, bashed the animal over the head with his hat, kicked him in 50 places, and finally handed him back to the admiring Scotty, an exhausted, broken and humble animal. There was no more fight in him than there had been in the 50 shearers the day before. That night Bob Wilson arrived. Now, Robert was a flash man, if you like —cabbage-tree hat, Bedford cord pants fitting like a glove, and red silk sash; and, besides having a considerable reputation as a rider, "Flash Bob" had appeared in the ring a few times. He would take that bumptious young man down a peg! "Pooh! He may be strong," he said; "but he's got no science." So, at Sunday breakfast, as Wright reached out for the brownie, Wilson snatched it from his hand across the table.

"After your betters," he said, insultingly. There was no explanation on either side. Rising slowly and calmly, Wright said "Come on," and on the level plain, where you could see the horizon half-way round, with the creek gums for a background, they faced one another. Flash Bob stripped to the buff, a well-made, muscular man, in the pink of condition; Wright, in shirt, moleskins and bluchers, as he had ridden the "rig" the day before, made no preparation, but stood with one arm awkwardly in front of him like a semaphore. There were only two blows struck, worth , mentioning; and Bob got both of them. It took water from the creek to bring him to after the second, and he was not comforted for weeks. Shearers and rouseabouts went back to the hut and played euchre till dinner-time, satisfied that an edifying Sunday morning had been spent. Wild Wright did not shear at Yanko that year (nor, indeed, any other year), as the super thought him a bit too strenuous to have about the place.

Ned's Face

Many have commented that Boxer Ned does not look like someone who has just gone through a 20-round bare-knuckle boxing match because there are no cuts or bruises.

For example, on the facebook group, "The Lost History of Melbourne / Victoria & Its Pioneers", I saw the following exchange recently occur in relation to the 'Boxing Ned' photo:

Roy Maloy – True Crime History Author:

Calling shenanigans. As an ex-boxer, who used gloves, there's absolutely no way this is a photo of a man who fought even one round without gloves a day after a fight. A month and a half after the fight... maybe.

I'll also say that a 20 round pikey fight is often a death sentence to one of them by the fourth or fifth round. A single blow can kill. I feel Urban legend has taken the truth out of this story.

Ian Ainsworth:

Not a mark on his face, Or knuckles. Maybe [the] picture taken before the fight. As bruises will last weeks on face. Think people exaggerate over the years to spice it up.

For what it's worth, my father, a General-Practitioner (and huge Muhammed Ali fan) concurred with the above. Any kind of boxing match – gloves or not – would result in bruising to the face and likely cuts to the eyebrows, all of which would take at least a month to heal.

Having said all the above, a possible explanation for Ned's lack of facial bruising is that bare knuckle boxing actually didn't involve the focus on the face which we now associate with boxing.

Encyclopedia Britannica provides the following information:

.. Jack Broughton, is credited with taking the first steps toward boxing's acceptance as a respectable athletic endeavour. One of the greatest bare-knuckle prizefighters in history, Broughton devised the modern sport's first set of rules in 1743, and those rules, with only minor changes, governed boxing until they were replaced by the more detailed London Prize Ring rules in 1838. It is said that Broughton sought such regulations after one of his opponents died as a result of his fight-related injuries.

Broughton discarded the barroom techniques that his predecessors favoured and relied primarily on his fists. While wrestling holds were still permitted, a boxer could not grab an opponent below the waist. Under Broughton's rules, a round continued until a man went down; after 30 seconds he had to face his opponent (square off), standing no more than a yard (about a metre) away, or be declared beaten. Hitting a downed opponent was also forbidden. Recognized as the "Father of Boxing," Broughton attracted pupils to the sport by introducing "mufflers," the forerunners of modern gloves, to protect the fighter's hands and the opponent's face. (Ironically, these protective devices would prove in some ways to be more dangerous than bare fists. When boxers wear gloves, they are more likely to aim for their opponent's head, whereas, when fighters used their bare hands, they tended to aim for softer targets to avoid injuring the hand. Thus, the brain damage associated with boxing can be traced in part to the introduction of the padded boxing glove.)

So perhaps the above provides some sort of explanation as why Ned's face is not battered and bruised? Further, Wild was better known as a wrestler than a scientific boxer. So if there is a fight, its probable it was more or a wrestle than has usually been suggested (and depicted in various movies). Still, even in light of the above, I am far from convinced Ned would come out a fight with Wild Wright with his face entirely unscathed.

Moving beyond Ned's unbruised face, Ned's white boxing togs look far too clean to me. Assuming the he fight did indeed take place on 8 August, that means the fight occurred mid-Winter. North Eastern Victoria is notoriously cold and rainy. Add in the unpaved streets of Beechworth and it would likely have been a mud fest. So why isn't Ned covered in dirt and mud?

So where does this leave us? Assuming the fight happened, by reason of Ned's untouched face and clean togs, it seems to me very unlikely the photo was taken in the immediate aftermath of the fight.

This in turns suggests to me that it was either taken beforehand or some months later (possibly in Melbourne, as the 1987 account has it, or else in Hamilton or thereabouts).

This in turn means that the date 8 August 1874 could either be the date of the fight or the date the photo was taken, potentially moving the date of the fight forward.

The Motivation

Another angle worth examining is whether the proposed motivations – that Ned felt duded by Wild Wright after Wild either didn't tell him the horse was nabbed, or that Wild got a lighter sentence – actually holds up.

Here, the work of Doug Morrissey in “Ned Kelly: A Lawful life” (2015) is very helpful. Morrissey writes:

The 'potting' of Ned was achieved by Hall charging him with receiving a mare known to be stolen. In the first instance the mare was not stolen but 'borrowed' from the Mansfield postmaster by Wild Wright a new acquaintance of Ned's. Wright had borrowed the Mansfield postmaster's horse on previous occasions and returned it, knocked up and worse for wear. The postmaster, knowing Wright's character, did not report it, but after a few weeks without a horse he did report the latest 'borrowing' to the police. The story goes that Wright rode the horse when he visited the Kelly Shanty, but when he came to return home the horse had wandered off. Ned gave Wright another horse and Wright said he could keep his until his returned. According to Ned, he did not mention that the horse was not his. Wright was as notorious for horse stealing as Ned – this was the larrikin bond between them – so the thought must have crossed his mind.

Wright was sentenced to 18 months gaol for borrowing the mare and Ned was given three years for receiving it. To Ned's defenders this smacks of conspiracy to have the book thrown at Ned. The crucial distinction to me made here is between borrowing without permission and receiving, which legally implied theft. It's the difference in modern terms between joy riding for fun and car stealing for profit.²⁴

So, assuming Morrissey is correct and Ned did appreciate Wild's mare was stolen, and that Ned also appreciated the difference between the crimes of "feloniously receiving a horse (knowing it to be stolen)" and "illegal use of a horse", would Ned even have had an "axe to grind" with Wild? It seems unlikely to me. Which is not stay a fight didn't happen, but perhaps not for the reasons stated.

Another angle, again assuming the fight did happen, is that it was instead motivated by Wild, who was seeking to settle the score after Ned's actions in trying to sell the borrowed mare ended up getting him lagged for what would have otherwise been a fairly consequences free crime. Remember horse borrowing was seen as a pain but not unusual and the Mansfield Postmaster actually waited a few days before reporting the horse missing / taken. Again, kudos to David MacFarlane for this very interesting idea.

My two cents. If there was a fight, I think we're overthinking it. It was probably for a small bet or the sheer love of it.

²⁴ Morrissey, ALL, p. 38.

Conclusions

So where does all this leave us?

1. The only hard evidence that the boxing match occurred is the photo itself and its two handwritten inscriptions.
2. There is no evidence that the boxing match took place in Beechworth nor is there any evidence of what motivated the fight (assuming it happened at all).
3. The story of the boxing match did not make it into any of Ned's letters or public statements nor did it make it into contemporary oral, family, or written history and only re-emerged by total chance in 1962.
4. The closest we have to an account of the fight is a second-hand story told to Ian Jones in 1962 by Charlie Fredricksen, though the story refers instead to Ned giving Wild a "hiding" in Beechworth (i.e. this could just be a run of the mill brawl).
5. Wild loved fighting – usually for a small bet or the sheer love of it – though it was said more than one that he was not a scientific boxer and instead was more of a brawler / wrestler.
6. Photographer JJ Chidley took the photo, but was most likely based in Hamilton at the time, some 500km from Beechworth.
7. The date of 8 August 1874 may not be the date of the boxing match (if it occurred at all) and may instead be the date the photo was taken.
8. Nobody (Chidley included) came forward with a copy of the photo after Ned was outlawed after Stringybark Creek, despite police calling out for copies of the outlaws' images.
9. The diagonal inscription "Ned Kelley August 8 / 1874" may not be contemporaneous with the bottom inscription "Fought Wild Wright 20 and Won" (they are quite likely not written in the same hand). Further, the diagonal inscription is capable of having other rational meanings.
10. Ned's clean togs and lack of facial bruising suggest the photo was probably not taken on the day of the actual boxing match (if one occurred at all), though could have been taken beforehand, or more likely, many weeks or months later

Put all of the above together and it becomes possible that there was no fight after all. The other way to put it together is there was an impromptu wrestling match of no real significance.

Either way, to my mind this leaves the "Boxer Ned" portrait as less of an portrait of the local champ and more of a quickly forgotten novelty photograph.

So, in the words of the great Bob Dylan, "Nothing is revealed"...

By Thomas Whiteside

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