It goes without saying that I was happy to write this epilogue for this well-deserved festschrift. I was quite honoured by Peter Toner’s request. After all, Ian Keen is not only one of the most prominent scholars of my generation in Australian anthropology—and I am sure for generations to come—but also has many other qualities, not the least being pleasant, humorous, and modest.

Also, his and Libby’s hospitality is well known by his colleagues, students and friends. Staying at their lovely home is both intellectually stimulating and, as we like to say in Dutch, ‘cosy’—the feeling of being comfortable at one’s place because of the company present, a nice glass of wine at the fireplace and good conversation about almost any topic.

This was the easy part. Now that I have to provide my professional opinion I struggle to find the right words. Why so? Well, to prepare properly for this task I had to read the whole manuscript, and there exactly lies the problem. ‘What value’, I worried after I finished reading, ‘could I possibly add to what already has been written?’

The book demonstrates how much of an inspiration Ian has been and still is for a great number of scholars. All 13 chapters reflect Ian’s many intellectual skills and interests: Aboriginal religion, economics, linguistics, kinship, urban studies and, not least, applied anthropology as a number of pioneering land claims reveal. Inspired by Keen’s work, my fellow authors present a great variety of rich ethnographic material—‘thick description’ as Clifford Geertz calls it—based on solid fieldwork coupled with stimulating theoretical discussions.
As Peter Toner explains in his introductory chapter, the present volume represents the full span of Ian’s distinguished career and the diversity of his scholarly interests. There are chapters on language and meaning; the incommensurability of knowledge systems; problematic intercultural communication in court, based on fundamental insights contained in Being Black; and changes and succession in land claims with Ian’s early emphasis on ‘stories’. Others discuss the conceptual dynamism and dialogical features in Aboriginal religion, based on Ian’s analyses of these phenomena; the relationship between Aboriginal people (women in particular) and Christianity; the central place of material culture in the engagement between Yolngu and Europeans at Milingimbi; the utility of Ian’s framework developed in his Aboriginal Economy and Society; and the diffusion of kin terminology.

So again: what remains to be said without repeating what’s already there? I decided to leave all that I had read behind me, and instead went for a jog for an hour or so. Physical exercise often helps one to make room in one’s head for new thoughts and ideas. Fortunately, this time it had the desired effect. Towards the end of my favourite track, when the body starts protesting and begs for rest, one thought emerged. First it was vague, but slowly it became more persistent and clear. The bottom line, my brain kept suggesting, is this: Ian has the capacity to let you see phenomena from a different angle and, as a result, changes your perception of them.

Before moving on to more serious scientific business, let me first give you a somewhat simplified example of what I mean by this. When, many years ago, Ian was staying with me and my family in Nijmegen, we drove past the central station, and like almost any railway station, this one was full of graffiti. I didn’t particularly like any of the drawings, but above all failed to understand why people would go through so much trouble to tag walls which in many cases were difficult to access. After a brief silence, Ian said something along the lines of ‘Well, perhaps you should see them as modern-day variations on rock paintings’. This had never crossed my mind, but I have not been able to look at graffiti tags in any other way since then.

A rather trivial example, but perhaps illustrative of the point I made earlier about my assessment of Ian’s scientific influence. His thorough re-examination of key concepts—property, rights, tribes, clans, cultural continuity, and knowledge and secrecy—has challenged orthodox positions on Aboriginal anthropology. It has changed current perceptions by looking at these phenomena from a different angle. As Craig Elliott writes in his contribution (Chapter 5), ‘Keen has thoroughly critiqued the inadequacy of simplistic, taxonomical anthropological constructs such as “clan”, “phratry”, “dialect” and “tribe” to explain Arnhem Land local organisation’.
My emphasis on these aspects of Ian’s work has much to do with my own experience in Arnhem Land. I did my initial fieldwork between 1972 and 1974 with Djinang people in the township of Maningrida. There was little reason to question the idea of bounded identities or of groups that could be named, counted and related to more or less fixed stretches of land. None of this was questioned by the literature I was taught as a student, nor by the administration or the hospital at the settlement. We all accepted and worked with fixed categories such as Djinang, Burarra, Gunabidji, and so on. And, not least, the Aboriginal people themselves used the same social and linguistic categories when identifying themselves. In retrospect, I suppose that they had become used to a colonial administrative system in which groups and group membership were fixed and bounded, and they accepted that this was the way the social world of the settlement was organised.

But soon things changed fast, very fast. There were winds of change from Canberra—Whitlam, under pressure from Aboriginal activists, replaced assimilation with self-determination. This led to an exodus from townships like Maningrida to newly established homeland centres on the clan estates of the various Aboriginal groups. When I returned in 1980 to continue my fieldwork, I spent a lot of time in the bush, commuting between the various Djinang outstations and the townships of Maningrida and Ramingining.

But where were the Djinang, that well-defined group of people from Maningrida that acted as a corporate entity? Some lived at Gattji, the most western outpost of Yolngu territory, with close ties to people from the Blyth River; others stayed in Ramingining or outstations nearby re-establishing relationships with people further east. Several appeared to have close links with families from Millingimbi in the northwest or with Rembarngga to the south.

Slowly I realised that the ever-so-solid name ‘Djinang’ had become ambiguous, contested and blurred. What’s more, this conclusion not only applied to a language name but equally to other labels of social organisation. What is a bapurru (clan), mala (group), mata (language/dialect), lineage or phratry? What constitutes a group?

Long story short, I left the field in 1981 much more confused than in 1974 when I was convinced that I had proper understanding of the Djinang social world: a language group consisting of three well-defined Dhuwa-moiety clans and four Yirritja-moiety clans, each clan having bounded territories between Gattji lagoon, Ramingining and Nangalala.

Adding to my confusion were Dr Thomson’s field notes, which I was able to study before I left for the Netherlands. Nicolas Peterson had encouraged me to visit Museum Victoria in Melbourne and read through Thomson’s Arnhem Land
field notes. Thomson had done extensive fieldwork in the Gattji-Ramingining area before World War II. But to my surprise he hardly mentioned the name ‘Djinang’ in his notes. Why? Well, he concluded that language (*mata*) did not constitute a very important basis for distinction between close groups. Instead, allegiances based on the same *rangga* (sacred objects) criss-crossed through language groups.

The main concept in Thomson’s notes to understand these allegiances was *bapurruru*. However, this Indigenous concept was not the solution to a better understanding of Indigenous group formations, but quite the opposite. It confused Donald Thomson more than it clarified. When asked what *bapurruru* meant, one of his Aboriginal friends simply said that it could be a clan, an aggregation of clans or any group (*mala*). And he continued his explanation with a puzzling ‘might be wangar time something he bin go and puttim something *rangga* and blackfella there, another place *rangga* and blackfella there’.

In short, Donald Thomson remained confused on the subject, as many entries in his field notes demonstrate. He constantly asked himself the same questions I struggled with some 50 years later: ‘What is it that constitutes a *bapurruru*, what factors join together or separate groups?’, ‘What makes this group one *bapurruru*?’ Elsewhere he concludes in some despair: ‘I have spent days, even weeks, off and on, in investigations that lead, largely, nowhere’. In a strange way that last remark gave me some comfort when I left Australia for the second time.

Neither the heavy teaching load, nor the managerial functions at the University of Nijmegen in the years that followed made the problem go away. Here I was, stuck with a number of traditional conceptual tools that appeared inadequate to understand Indigenous social reality—tools that made it impossible to mould and fit the Indigenous perceptions in the anthropological (mainly structural-functionalist) theoretical framework of the day.

I expressed my own doubts in a chapter published in a Dutch festschrift; its title translated as ‘The Djinang, Do They Exist?’ My point of departure there was that although I knew what Djinang was, namely a language of the Pama-Nyungan family, I no longer knew with any certainty who the Djinang were. In that essay I was, in retrospect, on the right track when—also inspired by Thomson’s field notes—I spoke of totemic affiliations, using phrases like ‘loosely structured’, ‘flexible alliance’ and ‘totemic affiliations’ as the main factors underlying various social formations. But I did not go far enough. The concept of the clan as a constant, fixed social reality remained, ultimately, unchallenged.

And then along came Ian’s *Knowledge and Secrecy in an Aboriginal Religion*. 
Family circumstances had prevented me from carrying out another year of fieldwork, so to get a better understanding of Indigenous social reality I relied mainly on the work of my distinguished colleagues. Ian Keen’s work served that goal very well. As I write this, scanning through the pages of *Knowledge and Secrecy* I see again the many underlinings, exclamation marks and comments I made in the margins. In this landmark study Keen demonstrated that Yolngu social organisation is not a unified homogenous system; that sociality is based on open and flexible networks defined by discourse and action rather than clearly defined groups like ‘clans’; and that rights over country are often contested instead of agreed upon.

Especially, Keen’s original argument that Aboriginal society has long been depicted as a primitive form of English society makes sense to me. He convincingly argues that imposing these western concepts (e.g. clan, property, phratry) on Aboriginal societies is a far cry from Indigenous discourses. Although these concepts are rather fixed and well-defined in Western thought, quite the opposite—namely fluidity, ambiguity and flexibility—are at the heart of Indigenous perceptions about these phenomena. It was this approach that helped me to look at my own findings from a different perspective. As with all new ideas, they seem self-evident for the next generation, but were nowhere to be seen in the first two decades of my anthropological career.

Ian Keen did not work in an anthropological void of course. Flexibility and fluidity of group composition have been important subjects in the works of Nicolas Peterson and Peter Sutton. Howard Morphy’s analysis of concepts like secrecy and likan (‘elbow’, ‘fork’, i.e. in an abstract sense the connection with a wangarr ancestor) also inspired Ian’s landmark book *Knowledge and Secrecy*.

But as Peter Toner points out in his introduction and in Chapter 8, Ian developed a wide-ranging and systematic critique of the vestiges of anthropological orthodoxy and developed a coherent analysis of his own ethnographic data, extending important insights for work across the region—‘Keen encourages us to shed the orthodoxies of established analytical frameworks … in favour of greater attention to heterogeneity and contingency’.

Well, having said what I wanted to say brings me to the end of this contribution. I am just looking for some famous last words to wrap up my appreciation for Ian’s career. This time I do not have to go out running to find them because the words just come spontaneously:

‘Good on ya, mate!’