Shortly after Derek Freeman took up the position of head of the Department of Anthropology in the Research School of Pacific Studies in 1972, following the departure of Bill Epstein, he approached me as a recently appointed research fellow to say it was about time I was supervising a graduate student. He asked me to draft an advertisement for a person to work on the kind of project that I thought was important. Instead of one advertisement I provided him with two drafts on 18 March 1973, two because the two areas I felt needed urgent attention were affected by the gender of the researcher:

Applications are invited for a post-graduate research scholarship from persons interested in carrying out research on aspects of men’s religious life in Aboriginal Australia. It is envisaged that the successful applicant will work in north Australia, in an area where some substantial work has already been completed on social organisation devoting much of his attention to the analysis of the symbolism in the large but neglected song vocabulary. Preference will be given to applicants whose interest in ritual and symbolism extends beyond a purely structural approach.

Applications are invited for a post-graduate research scholarship from persons interested in carrying out research on aspects of women’s life in Aboriginal Australia. Women’s life remains the most neglected aspect of Aboriginal studies with only one recent major publication in this field. Preferences will be given to applicants with either an interest in child socialisation and development or women’s ritual life.
At the very same time, the latest list of applicants for PhD scholarships arrived, Ian Keen among them. He indicated that he wanted to work in Oceania or Indonesia, but Derek suggested that I get in direct contact with him to see if he would be interested in working in Arnhem Land. One problem was Ian’s age. At that time the University was reluctant to give a scholarship to anybody over 30 and Ian was approaching 35. Nevertheless, Derek thought Ian was deserving of special attention and suggested that we press ahead with encouraging him. Things were humming in the anthropology field in 1973, with Roger Keesing and Anthony Forge both being offered chairs of anthropology, the one in the Research School and the other in the School of General Studies, later to be called the Faculties. Derek’s enormous energy was also making a lot of things happen with visitors and conferences: Ken Burridge was visiting, Aram Yengoyan was passing through, ethology was having its profile raised, and there were plans for new research fellowships in a range of areas.

I had a chance to be in England in late 1973 and caught up with Ian at a pub near the LSE where we had a long talk and I spruiked the virtues of ANU and research in Arnhem Land at Milingimbi, where nobody had worked since Lloyd Warner in 1927–29 and Ronald and Catherine Berndt shortly after the war.

Ian had excellent references from Bob Layton, Peter Ucko and Mary Douglas. Mary Douglas commented that he was a very committed student ‘achieving five times as much reading and writing as expected in a very heavy programme of course work’, and Bob Layton sang his praises as a fieldworker on the basis of a summer project in the French Jura. With these references, and Derek at the full height of his influence, nobody raised the age issue at the Faculty Board.

Persuading the missionaries at Milingimbi to accept Ian and family was another hurdle that required assuring them there would be none of the challenges that the missionaries at Elcho had recently experienced with a graduate student. I envisaged the family living in a large caravan with a tent annex. However, on 1 May 1974 Ian received a memo from Derek: ‘You would be good enough to draw up a plan together with specifications and notional costing of the habitat in which you and your family would, if possible, like to live at Milingimbi’.

And so Ian began his preparations for fieldwork by drawing up a very professional-looking specification for a modest ‘Timber Frame House 18 feet by 15 feet’ to house himself, Libby, John and Imogen, which he costed at $1,515.62. Shortly afterwards we received a message that there was a contractor’s camp facility available for $950 made up of a tin shed that slept six men and another tin shed that served as a day and meal room with an electric stove, a large table, two benches and a sink, as well as an outside shower and a pit latrine. Because fieldwork funds were scarce, the AIAS agreed to pay for the buildings.
On 3 July Ian presented his pre-fieldwork seminar, ‘Forthcoming research in northeast Arnhem Land ceremony and song’, which, thankfully, Derek was unable to attend. At the end of August Ian and family left for Milingimbi, missing the booked plane from Darwin to Milingimbi and instead taking a charter for $80, which even with inflation seems remarkably cheap for a two-hour flight. They were met by Matthew, one of the sons of the senior man at the mission, Djäwa, who was to become Ian’s firm friend and teacher. Ian was lucky he was not going to Yirrkala where there were six anthropologists, including Howard and Frances Morphy, Jan Reid, and a film crew of four, with the result that Nancy Williams was turned back.

To improve his language skills Ian worked with the all-Aboriginal house-building crew for three days a week for two months, which stood him in excellent stead. He was also the beneficiary of a tobacco shortage, which allowed him to get a lot of work done as neither of his chief instructors, Binyinyiwuy or Djäwa, wanted money; but after a while somebody commented to him ‘I think your work will be very slow. Everyone knows you haven’t got much money’. Ian was hampered by his necessary parsimony: unlike Howard and Frances, who were spending the equivalent of an award wage a month (around $400), Ian only had $830 for 12 months, which was made even worse as only two months into the field he was talking about staying for two years. However, a visit to Howard, Frances and Nancy at Yirrkala in March 1975 led him to realise that he would have to obtain greater funds, as Aboriginal life was becoming increasingly commoditised.

Fieldwork was very busy with Djäwa reprimanding him for not attending a small mortuary ceremony, which Ian explained he didn’t know about. Djäwa declared this a ‘mistake’. Indeed there was a great deal of ceremonial activity going on, but even so six months into his fieldwork Ian commented: ‘The complete bafflement a ceremony induces is depressing, but with patience some of the fog may lift … I can’t really say anything about the thesis yet. The problem is not really interpretation and analysis but finding out the “facts”.’

As we all know now, the fieldwork was a huge success, and the six months put into learning Gupapuyngu was richly worthwhile. He brought back with him over 100 hours of recordings of mortuary song cycles, many transcribed and translated.

In 1974 I applied for and got a lectureship in the newly formed anthropology section of the Department of Prehistory and Anthropology under Anthony Forge, so we considered Ian transferring to this department. It did not make much sense, however, as we were very much the poor relation relative to the department in the Research School of Pacific Studies: lower status, smaller, and with fewer resources of all kinds. At this point, Jim Fox, who had newly arrived in RSPacS, became involved in Ian’s project. This was an important lesson for me
as I realised that we would remain the Cinderella location for graduate students for some time. I approached newly arrived Roger Keesing about the issue and he agreed that since there were no anthropologists on staff working in the Aboriginal field he would leave Australian Aboriginal anthropology to us. This was generous of him and it has played an important role in the growth and profile of our school ever since. Indeed, Di Bell was the first student to come under that agreement after briefly flirting with the idea of going to RSPcS—I think our underdog status appealed to her at the time.

Just before Ian left the field he spent one month working with George Chaloupka for the newly established Northern Land Council, mapping in the Oenpelli region in response to the Ranger Uranium Environmental Inquiry (Fox Inquiry). This was to be the beginning of a major body of land claim research in the region, totalling eight months in connection with the Alligator Rivers land claim, in which he helped lift the quality of land claim reports enormously. Later he extended his claim research down to Central Australia at McLaren Creek Station. The Fox Inquiry brought Ian, Basil Sansom and myself together to present evidence to the inquiry including our jointly written paper on succession (Peterson, Keen, and Sansom 1977). Who said nothing significant comes out of applied anthropology?

From ANU Ian ended up at the University of Queensland and a friendly competition started between us for graduate students, but by 1987 he was back at ANU, this time in the Department of Prehistory and Anthropology as a senior lecturer. Shortly after arriving his still-to-be-surpassed edited collection of papers on Aboriginal cultures in settled Australia, Being Black (1988), appeared. When Anthony retired from the department in 1991, Ian and Libby were on study leave in Oxford, where Ian completed his outstanding ethnography on Yolngu religion, Knowledge and Secrecy in an Aboriginal Religion (1994), which at one stage he had light-heartedly thought he might call ‘On the sunny side of the creek: the Djang’kawu in eastern Arnhem Land’. Imogen, who had stayed behind at the Art School, helped us make and bind a splendid scrapbook for Anthony, celebrating events in the history of his reign as a retirement gift from the department.

Throughout the 1990s, Ian carried a heavy teaching load and provided inspired supervision for a raft of graduate students. At the same time he found time to prepare a major native title report for the Gippsland region and to work on his hugely informative comparative study of seven regions of Aboriginal Australia, Aboriginal Economy and Society: Australia at the Threshold of Colonisation (2004). In November 2002, Ian decided it was time to retire—it wasn’t really necessary to ask him why. As an ex-art school student he summed it up brilliantly in a diagram he drew of yet another bout of university restructuring in order to create a more ‘unified structure’ (Figure 1.1). Since his retirement there have been
further elaborations! Retirement has not meant Ian's withdrawal from research but involvement as a chief investigator in two ARC grants, one on Aboriginal involvement in the colonial economy, resulting in two edited volumes, and the other a grant that is playing a substantial part in the revival of interest in kinship studies.

Figure 1.1 Ian's attempt to represent the proposed restructuring of the University.
Source: Ian Keen.
Not all that long after retirement, Libby and Ian moved into the bush at Harold’s Cross. Since then Rosalind and I, and many colleagues and friends, have had wonderful Sunday lunches in the utter tranquillity of the haven they have built out there. The scholarly craftsmanship and attention to detail that he has lavished on his field research and the many publications that have come out of it, are now partially directed towards maintaining life in the bush, but Ian is still an active member of the emeritus faculty, publishing, presenting seminars and participating in the academic life.

References


