

1. Growing up Koorie — in Wollongong

This book will focus on the movements in which Kevin has been involved, not on Kevin's life story. But – to understand those movements it is important to understand where Kevin was coming from. The communities in which Kevin grew up shaped the networks into which he was welcomed and the approaches he took in all of them.

A central foundation for Cookie was the fact that he had grown up Koorie¹ – his Wandandian family had their roots in the country of the South Coast of New South Wales (NSW). All Aboriginal communities are embedded within a context – a landscape and a web of social and political relationships. For Kevin's family and community that context in the 1940s was Wollongong, a coastal city which had grown from a fishing town into a coal mining port, but was by Kevin's time dominated by the heavy manufacturing of the steel making industry as well as by the local and deep sea fishing.

This chapter will introduce Kevin and his family, as well as what it meant to grow up Koorie in a big, working class city like Wollongong. So it will show the way Kevin's background meant that he could feel at home in so many different movements. The stories and the photos have come from Kevin and his family, in particular his sister Joy and his cousin, Kathy, who has spent a lot of time researching family history.

Kevin was born in 1939 and grew up at Cringila, near Wollongong on the South Coast of New South Wales. His family is from the Wandandian people, who had close relations with the Yuin language groups from the south and the Dharawal groups, whose country is broadly related to the coastal lands and waterways from the Georges River, in southern Sydney, right down to the Shoalhaven River.

Kevin's mother was Grace Speechley, the daughter of Josephine Kate Speechley, known as Granny Kate.² She was in turn the daughter of the celebrated Wandandian man, James Golding, a widely recognised senior man (1815–1905) and his wife,

1 'Koorie' is the term used by Aboriginal people of many languages in coastal and southern New South Wales and in Victoria to mean 'Aboriginal person'. Kevin spells it this way, but it can be spelt variously, sometimes as 'Koori', sometimes with the Anglicised 'oo' written to more accurately indicate its pronunciation as a short vowel, 'u' (Kuri) and sometimes, most in line with Aboriginal accents on the North Coast of NSW, with the first letter as a hard, voiced 'G', rather than a 'K'.

2 Née Golding – or Golden – 1871–1955.

Mary Carpenter, a Dharawal woman born around 1823 in Kiama and who died in 1928.³ Kate married William Speechley, an English ship builder, and they lived at Billong, near Huskisson. William himself was also well known and had been the guide for the Prince of Wales when he visited Australia and travelled to the South Coast for a tour of the Naval College at Jervis Bay in June 1920.

Grace had been born to Kate and William at Huskisson in 1911, the eighth of their ten children. Kevin was close to all Grace's sisters and brothers. Her two sisters were important to him: Mary, born in 1903, was eight years older than Grace, while Kitty, born in 1913, was two years younger. Kevin spent a lot of time with his uncle Stan, the youngest among Grace's brothers, born in 1916, who became a fisherman, on the lakes of the area and offshore, along its coastline. Another of Grace's brothers, Albert, came to Sydney to train in engineering, while a third, Ern, worked in heavy industry including the steel works and maritime trades along the coast in the port cities of Port Kembla and Nowra.



Figure 1.1: Mary Carpenter, Grace's grandmother and Cookie's great grandmother, as an elderly woman.

Courtesy Kathy Kennedy (cousin of Kevin Cook) family collection.

3 Family history research conducted by Kathy Kennedy, Kevin's cousin, daughter of Grace's sister Kit.



Figure 1.2: William Speechley, Granny Kate's husband and Grace's father, as an elderly man.

Courtesy Kathy Kennedy (cousin of Kevin Cook) family collection.



Figure 1.3: Kevin's Uncle Stan, Grace's youngest brother, a fisherman to whom Kevin was close all his life.

Courtesy Kathy Kennedy (cousin of Kevin Cook) family collection.

Around the campfires of holiday camps and on fishing trips, Kevin grew up listening as his older Aboriginal relations retold stories from their own early lives or the stories they had heard from their elders. The stories handed down were about conflicts as early white settlers encroached on the coastal Aboriginal land, forcing communities away from their sacred places like Gulaga Mountain and pushing them off their traditional camping grounds in some of the most beautiful places of the coast, like Wallaga Lake and the Five Islands. These iconic landscapes were taken over for farming or tourism. Kevin's aunties and uncles could tell him about their own experiences, as they grew up on the coast.

The area had a troubled history, particularly in relation to education. In the 1920s and 1930s, Aboriginal children had often been pushed out of the public schools they had been enrolled in all up and down the coast. But they did not go without a struggle! The Batemans Bay community was just one of those who fought back, with furious Aboriginal parents and grandparents, like Jane Duren, writing to the Premier, Prime Minister and even to the King to demand entry to the school system which was supposed to be 'public'. At the same time, they called for – and often received – support from local trade unions and the Labor Party to demand their children be allowed to take their rightful places in the public schools. While they did not always win these battles, the history of staunch Aboriginal resistance to this denial of civil rights and the

backing, at least sometimes, of the local labour union movement, meant there was a long tradition of Aboriginal people and unions working together. This was much less common in other parts of Australia at the time, except in the similar industrialised area of Newcastle, to the north of Sydney, where again fishing, coal and steel manufacturing had created a strong line of communication between Aboriginal people and unionised workers.⁴

There had been rising pressure on Aboriginal people from the early twentieth century, because land use had changed to cropping and dairying and Aboriginal people had less and less access to their land. Then the NSW Aborigines Protection Board began removing Aboriginal children if they did not attend school, so their parents moved to live where the schools were. So increasingly, Aboriginal people in rural areas had been forced to move closer together, into what became overcrowded settlements, on reserve land set at a distance from the nearest townships in places like Roseby Park and, closer to Wollongong, at the Aboriginal reserve at Coomaditji. In the city of Wollongong itself, where Kevin's family lived in an outer suburb at Cringila, there were quite a number of Aboriginal people who all knew each other, but their homes were scattered and so they did not form an identifiable consolidated community like those in rural settlements.

But Kevin got to know his people's country well because he grew up with his mother's family. They would spend weekends and holidays out of Wollongong, particularly at places down the coast like Grace's birthplace, Huskisson, where Kevin remembers as a child being with Grace and her sisters as they gathered pippis, oysters and crabs along the shores just like they had done in their own childhoods.

Other times Kevin would pass the weekends on the boat with his uncle Stan, learning the fish, the birds and the vegetation of the lakes as well as the rocks and shoals of the coast. One of the important experiences he remembers from those years was spending time at Roseby Park, on the coast about 20 miles from Nowra. In later years, Kevin got to know well one of the Roseby Park community, Jacko Campbell. Jacko was a Dhan-gadi man originally from the Kempsey area, who lived most of his adult life on the South Coast, marrying Nan Wellington and coming to live at Roseby Park, where they raised their family. All the people in these rural settlements had strong commitments to their Aboriginal responsibilities to look after the surrounding land and waters.

4 Jane Duren's letter can be found in Heather Goodall 1996, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal politics in New South Wales, 1770-1972*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW. The Aboriginal and working class history of Newcastle is discussed in works of John Maynard, including his 2007: *Fight for Liberty and Freedom: The Origins of Australian Aboriginal Activism*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra.

Jacko had taken this responsibility very seriously, defending Aboriginal rights vigorously not only in his childhood home of Kempsey but all along the South Coast.⁵

Communities such as Huskisson and Roseby Park, like Batemans Bay further south, also had a history in seafaring, whether in coastal fishing or as crewmen joining the early whaling industries set up along the South Coast. They had welcomed the Maori seafarers and whalers who were visiting from the early years of the colony. Some stayed, marrying South Coast Aboriginal women, and their stories and traditions were woven into those that Kevin was hearing about. At the same time, he was hearing stories from his uncles about the work on the local farms, picking beans and other crops as well as the long days in the heavy iron and steel works of the towns, and about the work in coal mining in the surrounding escarpments. That meant he was hearing from an early age about the unions on the South Coast, where working people, black or white, had often been able to work together across colour lines to gain better conditions.

This tradition of working class life and organising was something Kevin learned about also from his father, as well as from the working men his mother's sisters had married. Like many Aboriginal women on the coast, including her mother, Grace married a man from outside the Aboriginal community, Carl Cook. Carl was a railway fettler, and in the early years of his marriage to Grace, he had to travel upcountry with the fettling gangs who maintained the tracks, so he was away from home quite a bit.

For a time, the whole family moved. When Kevin was young the family lived at Bowning near Yass, for three or four years while Carl 'ran the line' there. Eventually, Grace became so lonely for her sister Kit that the family moved back to Cringila and Carl worked on the railway in Wollongong.

Carl enjoyed being part of Grace's extended family, and he brought his own proud working class history into the mix. Carl's father, known widely as a good cricketer, had been a railway signalman, holding the safety of the many freight and passenger trains in his hands as he mounted the signals to direct the train drivers in all weathers and all year round.

Originally from Wollongong, Carl's father had moved to Sydney for the railway work, and Carl's two brothers, Vic and Cyril, continued to live in the inner city when Kevin was young, at Tempe and Glebe. Kevin can remember spending holidays at Carl's father's place at Rozelle, overlooking the water there, where

5 See later chapters. Jacko's role and commentary on 1940s to 1970s politics both north and south coasts of NSW in Goodall 1996. His work in the NSW land rights campaign is documented in the *Report on Wilcannia trip 27.11.80 – 6.12.80* / by Ted Thomas, Jack Campbell, Max Harrison and Terry Fox, representatives of the N.S.W. Land Council, AIATSIS Library, PMS 3322.

timber yards and wool stores kept the water a busy, working harbour. His uncles Vic and Cyril would come down frequently to stay with Kevin's family at Cringila, fishing and sharing the family's weekends, and Kevin would often come up to visit them, with particularly fond memories of Glebe. Cyril lived close to Harold Park Paceway, and Kevin remembers ducking off for hours to watch the trotters being trained up for the Friday night races. Grace's younger sister Kitty had married Dave Kennedy, a rigger in the steelworks at Port Kembla, a solid and careful worker, whose job was to work above the machinery where the steel was being rolled. He had always been concerned about safety in this dangerous job, and had altered his clothing, cutting out the sleeves to make sure they did not catch on anything. But Dave died tragically young when he was splashed with manufacturing acid while he was high above the rolling steel, lost his footing and fell to his death.



Figure 1.4: Kevin's parents, Grace and Carl, with his older brother, George.

Courtesy Joy Steep (sister of Kevin Cook) family collection.



Figure 1.5: Kevin and his younger brother Ron.

Courtesy Joy Steep (sister of Kevin Cook) family collection.



Figure 1.6: Kevin's class in Cringila in 1946. Kevin is on the right hand end of the back row.

Courtesy Joy Steep (sister of Kevin Cook) family collection.



Figure 1.7: Kevin (third from left) at the steel works as a gardener.

Courtesy Joy Steep (sister of Kevin Cook) family collection.

Kevin was the second of Grace and Carl's children. His big brother George was only a couple of years older than Kevin, and was his fishing and prawning partner, while Ronnie was only a few years younger, so the three boys grew up together for many years before their baby sister arrived when Kevin was 15.

The rare surviving photos from those days show Kevin and Ronnie tagging along after each other coming back from school, from Boy Scouts or from Sunday School. But these clubs and organised pastimes did not leave many memories for Kevin. Instead, it is the times fishing and digging worms for bait, the days out on the boats or watching the horses being trained which are the ones Kevin remembers. It was those times with his family and with his mates – rather than the formal schooling – that offered the real learning in Kevin's younger life.

But his Aboriginal family were not the only ones Kevin was mixing with in Cringila.

Cookie: Living in Cringila, there's every nationality on earth, plus a couple. In fact, Italians, Greeks, they were the majority of people in Cringila, it's right next to the steel works, and they all worked at the steel works. So we taught a lot of the kids to speak English. Their mother's and father's couldn't speak English. So we taught them to swear first, of course, everybody does it!

As he moved into a working life, Kevin followed the same pathways his family – and in fact all his neighbours – had followed into the heavy industry of the area. He worked in and around the steel works at Port Kembla, for example, where he was a gardener for a while.

But this was all interrupted in 1957, when Kevin was 18. Like all young men in Australia at that time, he had to register for National Service and take a medical test to see if he would be called up. The scheme operating over these years (1951–1959) involved three months full time training and then regular weekend service in the Reserve of the Commonwealth Military Force over two years.⁶ Kevin was based at Holsworthy in south-western Sydney near Liverpool, but like school he was not too interested in the rules and army traditions. The one photo of him in these years shows what a good time he was having in the Army – but it was because he was sharing time with good mates, not because he enjoyed military culture.

He was AWOL a few times, heading off with mates and so he served a few stints in the military lock up during his three months training. But as he remembers it, he had a good time in the jail, because the prisoners had to serve in the Officers' Mess 'and they were having parties all the time! All with good food and drink!'

At the end of the three months' training period, Kevin returned to the workforce although he was expected to come back to the army camp regularly for weekend duties. He didn't. When the army caught up with him again, he was forced to serve another three months straight full time, in default of his missed weekends. More parties in the Officers' Mess! And once he had done that second three months, he was free of the whole thing.

Out of the army and back at work, Kevin began to think about travelling. New Zealand was a place he had been hearing about for many years from the people of the coast who had come from there or travelled there. In the early 1960s, he and a close friend, Brian Curtis, decided they would travel to New Zealand 'to have a look', so they headed over for what they thought would be a few weeks. Instead, they ended up staying 18 months, and wrote back such glowing accounts that soon Ronnie and other mates from Wollongong came over to join them. The friends travelled all over the North Island, working in places that ranged from the meat works and a wool store to apple picking. Kevin met many Maori in the North Island – both as workmates and among people he met along the road, so he came away with good memories and a real interest in going back.

⁶ *National Service, 1951–59 – Fact Sheet 163*, National Archives of Australia, <<http://www.naa.gov.au/collection/fact-sheets/fs163.aspx>> accessed 10 January 2013.



Figure 1.8: Kevin in New Zealand.

Courtesy Joy Steep (sister of Kevin Cook) family collection.

After coming back to Sydney, Kevin worked again in a range of jobs and shared a house with mates at Manly, a surf beach on the northern side of the harbour. Then Kevin and Carl Brisbane, one of his Manly flatmates, decided to go back to New Zealand. This time they started off again in the North Island but then travelled across the strait to Nelson on the South Island and then headed up the coast to Motueka. This time Kevin stayed a full year travelling and working, till he finally came back to Australia with even more lifelong friendships to keep him in touch.

Still living in Sydney, Kevin found jobs in a few places at once, including a long period at a paper mill where he had a job as an iron worker, and another job at a garage owned by the father of a friend. This friend was going out with a girl who in turn had a friend whom Kevin began to take out. This was Margaret Keys with whom Kevin found a relationship which brought together many of the political issues he had grown up with together with a working class lifestyle where he felt at home.



Figure 1.9: Kevin and Margaret.

Courtesy Margaret Munday family collection.

He met Margaret's family and liked them too. In particular, he formed a lifelong friendship with Margaret's father, Harry Keys, who was passionate about his politics. A hire car driver, he supported the Labor Party and in the turbulent late 1960s, there was a lot to talk over and worry about. Kevin remembers sitting up with him late into the night, 'talking politics for hours'.

Just as enthusiastic was Margaret's uncle, Bill Knott, an electrician who was a friend of many in the unions and on the Left, including a radical Anglican priest called Alf Clint. Although known in the family as 'the uncle who swore a lot', Bill took his politics very seriously. He went on to run for State Parliament in 1978, winning what had been the conservative seat of Wollondilly for Labor and holding it, through a boundary change in which it became Kiama, until he retired in 1986. Bill was another person who became Kevin's lifelong friend.



Figure 1.10: By 1969, Kevin and Margaret had married and were starting a family in Tempe, where Suzie, their first child, was born in 1970.

Courtesy Margaret Munday family collection.



Figure 1.11: Kevin's sister Joy with his daughter, Suzie.

Courtesy Margaret Munday family collection.



Figure 1.12: Mereki, Kevin and Margaret's son, was born in 1974.

Courtesy Margaret Munday family collection.

Even though Kevin and Margaret lived in Sydney, they were in constant touch with Grace and Carl and the rest of the family. Most weekends, Kevin and Margaret would head down to Berkeley, the area in Wollongong to which the family had moved, enjoying catching up with the big family, watching Joy grow up into a teenager and especially enjoying Grace's cooking – Kevin remembers they would 'eat them out of house and home!'



Figure 1.13: Grace and Carl at Berkeley.

Courtesy Joy Steep (sister of Kevin Cook) family collection.

Ronnie was often away now – he had caught the travel bug in New Zealand and travelled to the United Kingdom where he worked on oil rigs, then came back to Darwin for more oil rig work and, after the cyclone, to Western Australia. There he became a seaman and joined the Australian Seamen's Union. He would send Grace exotic postcards from wherever he was all over the world, first on the oil rigs then on the ships.



Figure 1.14: Joy's 17th birthday dinner, 1971. From left side of table: Dave (a family friend), Grace, Margaret, Kevin. On the right side, from the rear, were Judy (a friend of Joy's), Joy, Kathy Kennedy (Kevin's cousin) and another family friend.

Courtesy Joy Steep (sister of Kevin Cook) family collection.

In Sydney, Kevin and Margaret were being drawn more and more into the busy politics of the late 1960s. Margaret was active in the early women's movement, including a protest at Maroubra beach where women went topless to protest the opposition to women's presence on the beach. A tiny woman, Margaret was arrested there and charged with assault by a burly lifesaver who insisted she had manhandled him – until it was thrown out of court. Kevin remembers Margaret becoming involved in the early stages of the anti-Vietnam anti-war movement, and marching in the first Moratorium early in 1970. Kevin supported her causes, but at this time, he was trying to keep in work to support his new family too. So he was travelling a lot to find jobs, just like his father had had to do. He was in Tumut working as a rigger, putting up and removing scaffolding and machinery from building sites, when his mate Roy Bishop called him and told him there was a great job for him in Sydney...