

An introduction to Cookie's book

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Cookie was still an organiser in the NSW Builders Labourers when I met him first in the early 1970s. I had just started at university then, a young and inexperienced student taking history but learning far more in the demonstrations against the Vietnam War and disrupting the visits of all-white sporting teams from South Africa. Meredith Burgmann, a fellow student and experienced activist, introduced me to Kevin when she took me to the Criterion, a city pub where her political and her union mates drank.

Cookie stood out – but not because he was the centre of attention – in fact far from it. He was short and chunky, with big, twinkling eyes, a mop of unruly, curly hair, a beer in his hand and a ready laugh. What stood out was his warmth and his welcome for tentative newcomers like me. I came to realise he was always like this – part of the conversation but never running it. More often he was stirring it along – starting a story and then encouraging someone else to take it up and deliver the punchline. You'd find him passing around the beers or the smokes, drawing people into the joke from the outer edges of the crowd.

Then I seemed to bump into him in all the places I was going too – not just the political pubs but the community events around the new Aboriginal housing company which had taken over the squats in Redfern, and at plays at the new Black Theatre. Then I really got to know him better in the meetings starting up in 1972, where anti-Apartheid activists like me were being confronted with the realities of racism in Australia as Aboriginal people like Cookie and others would talk to us about what they had faced all their lives fighting work, job, housing and education discrimination. No matter how gruelling some of these conversations were – and there was lots of shouting at times – Cookie was always the same, warm and patient with people like me who didn't know much. And he seemed to enjoy what we did know, smiling, listening, keeping an eye out for someone he could introduce to someone else there, quietly putting people in touch with each other.

By 1975, Kevin had started work at Tranby, around the time I was starting a PhD. He – like others – had encouraged me to try to record the memories they knew were so powerful among rural Aboriginal communities. I'd already met some senior Aboriginal people, like Jacko Campbell from the South Coast from where Cookie also came and Isabel Flick in the north-west, who were dropping into Tranby a lot. Kevin had fostered all of this, welcoming people into the old Tranby house in Glebe, just like he used to welcome people into the building

sites and the pubs. But now he was ushering them further into the classrooms of Tranby to talk to the Aboriginal students coming from all over NSW and Queensland to learn about community development. I saw him organising the teaching sessions for some of the people who were already legendary as Builders Labourers like Joe Owens and Bobby Pringle. At the same time, he was bringing into the classes these senior Aboriginal people like Jacko, Isabel and Guboo Ted Thomas. Of course when Cookie wasn't at Tranby, he could be found playing darts with students and old union mates down the road at the Toxteth pub.

Cookie didn't miss opportunities to try out what people could offer – and to encourage them to offer a bit more than they expected! He began asking me what I could do to share all these things I was learning. There was plenty to do at Tranby on all levels – not just teaching, but licking envelopes for mailouts and showing up for the demos to support the Gurindji Aboriginal workers in the Northern Territory against Lord Vesty and the other big squatters. Sometimes he had me talking to classes. And every now and again I got to pick up the oysters he loved from the nearby Pyrmont Fishmarkets. But the best times for me were the many chances to share a cup of tea with all the people he was drawing through the doors, especially his old mates, Aboriginal or white, some of them Australian and others, increasingly, from all over the rest of the world.

Cookie had me doing all sorts of things but he tried me out at teaching – I was pretty inexperienced despite the PhD. He worked out I was better at listening to memories and recording stories – he kept on asking me to sit down in the dining room with those old people over more cups of tea... and when the Rona family approached Tranby looking for a partner to build a foundation to use the family's bequest to fund Aboriginal oral history work, Cookie encouraged Isabel Flick to apply and me to help.

The Rona-Tranby fund had started from a bequest from Thomas Rona who had lost family in the Holocaust and valued the role of memories in raising awareness of how the past shaped lives in the present. The family saw parallels between the memory work done by Jewish survivors with that of Aboriginal people remembering trauma and exploring the ways it had shaped today. But they recognised that it was crucial that Aboriginal people themselves were in control. So they approached Tranby in 1990 to become a partner and Kevin welcomed them – he appreciated the best in those who came offering help, even when their politics did not necessarily match his own. So he worked with Roland Gridiger to set the fund up and organise its ground rules and accounting. The fundamental principle was that Tranby would oversee a selection committee in which Aboriginal people took the leading role looking for innovative approaches to recording and presenting Aboriginal people's many memories.

The expectation initially – from all sides – was that the stories would follow a person's life in a similar way to a conventional autobiography. But there are many stories and just as many ways of telling them among Aboriginal people – some lives are followed but they might more often be retold in the context of families and places than in conventional written biographies. Isabel Flick, for example, was comfortable with the way her life could form the backbone of a story which drew in the people in her wide family and community as well as showing how they related to the contested places of Collarenebri and the Barwon River. But as time went by, people applying for the funds from the Rona Tranby Trust began to propose different stories to tell and different ways to do it. So now the Trust has supported a range of projects, from the collections of many life stories like *Steppin' Out and Speakin' Up*, the stories of 15 women gathered by the Older Women's Network, to the stories of whole communities and places like *Yamakarra: Liza Kennedy and the Keewong Mob* from the Western Heritage Group in far west NSW and most recently the rich story of a marching band from Yarrabah in Queensland which has been made as a film.

Inevitably, people on the Tranby and the Rona sides of the Oral History trust began to see Kevin's life story as a subject for a history project. He was well-known as a unionist, as an advocate of innovative, Aboriginal-controlled adult education, highly respected as a nation-wide land rights organiser, a key player in transnational links with liberation movements and a man of exceptional integrity and dynamism. So he seemed an obvious candidate. Cookie asked me to be involved because he'd seen me work at Tranby and with many of his old friends. For the Rona-Tranby Trust – and sometimes for myself – my job was to turn Kevin's story into a life story book like Isabel's.

But Cookie was not interested in searching for the meaning of his own life. Instead, he has always focussed on what he grew up calling 'sticking fats' – sticking together with fellow activists, sharing the good and the bad in everything he was involved in – sharing not just the hopes but the hard work to reach goals and the scarce resources you had to live on to get there. Later I came to realise that many of the origins for those commitments could be found in the story of Cookie's life. But instead of telling his own story, Cookie wanted to tell the stories of the movements he had been able to play a part in and the people he has shared his life with. It was to be the story of the movements – not as abstract ideals but through the people in them and the *ways* that together those people made decisions and carried out work together.

So while Kevin didn't want to knock back the offer of funding from the Rona Trust, he wanted to use it to tell *those* sorts of story – through memories, photos and the voices of those people he had worked with. What he didn't want – and continued very strongly to refuse to be a part of – was the story of his own life as an individual – as if he had been central to the story, had caused the

movements or could take credit in the end for their achievements. He wanted it to be a book about the way the people he had shared his life with had found ways – and in fact how they had *made* ways – to work together, often across obstacles and for goals that weren't well understood. But who had – together – made change happen.

So Kevin and I talked this over and we worked on ways to make that sort of book happen. Cookie was becoming sick by that stage – his energy and his movements increasingly drained by emphysema, the disease that cuts down the amount of lung space you can use to process the air you breathe into your lungs. What wasn't being affected was his commitment to his comrades and their causes – and so during the 1990s, he could still be found at work a lot at Tranby despite the fact that it was getting harder and harder. He found he was increasingly needing to work from home, helped in a million ways by his partner Judy Chester, who had been with him since the early 1980s, sharing many political campaigns as well as keeping up her own union and land rights work. Cookie was assisted too by his Tranby PA, Chrissy Kerr. At home he was just as constantly on the phone as if he was in the front office at Tranby, talking to people from all over the country, catching up on what was happening, going over ideas with the stream of people who came to visit.

We set out to record the conversations Cookie had *with* those visiting friends and comrades. We organised lunches, Judy made fabulous salads and cakes and we had lots of prawns and seafood. People came from all over the country – from Broome and Darwin and Melbourne and Cairns – and from just around Sydney – to share those meals, talk, laugh and show how much they had learned in those shared times together when they had all 'stuck fats'. Cookie brought people together, and then he, Judy and a few old friends asked some of the questions. I recorded and chipped in every now and again. There is a list of people who contributed at the end of this book. We could not record all of the many people who had stories to tell about the movements Cookie had worked in. So this book reflects the perspectives of some of those people who were close friends or who happened to be able to come to the house for lunch.

The conversations ranged far more widely than any of us had expected – in fact across all the big issues of the 1970s and 1980s and many of the undercurrents that were not so well known. Over food, a lot of tea and the occasional beer, people talked about land rights, racism, education, multiculturalism, international liberation struggles, union justice, feminism, cooperatives and the Bicentennial Long March in 1988. But what they talked over too were personal anxieties, rivalries and passions and about the funny memories – as well as why they so often turned to laughter to get over tragedy. And they talked too about the puzzle of what real leadership means and the even harder question about how to really bring very different people together to make change happen.

So this is *not* a life story. It is *not* a conventional biography with one person at the centre of the story, because that is not what Cookie has wanted it to be.

Instead, through those recordings, we have tried to make this the story of the movements of which Kevin was a part and which he fostered and sometimes created. It is not a 'complete' history – it does not try to cover the past from everyone's point of view. Rather this book records the perspectives of the people *inside* the movements with which Kevin was involved.

I have edited and spliced and cut down the long recordings, trying to keep the sense of what was said but to make the transcript work when it is read from the page. Cookie has read and reread the drafts, marking up and commenting and send them all back for changes. It has turned out to be a complex task to bring this diverse set of intersecting networks into an order which allows them to become visible in their own right as well as showing the connections between them. In each chapter we explain which people contributed to it.

The first three chapters show something about where Kevin's ideas came from about communities, networks, solidarity and 'sticking fats'. Then each of the following chapters tells the story of a phase in one of the movements through the memories of those who played key roles in them – four chapters on Tranby, three on land rights and three on the links across state and national boundaries. Then a final chapter on how it all came together in the 1988 Long March, to challenge the idea of the Bicentennial and put something much more positive and hopeful in its place.

My own story is a small part of this rich record – it is there because I was one of many non-Aboriginal people who were offered friendships and challenges – in that order! – from Kevin over many years. But it is only a small part because Cookie's networks of people are so wide and so diverse that we have struggled to bring them together in a single volume and still could not do them justice.

But, in the end, in being about these movements and the ways in which they formed and were nurtured, it has shown something of Kevin's life during these years. And it turned out that none of us knew the whole story...