

Book Review:

Making Change Happen

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Kevin Cook and Heather Goodall

Making Change Happen: Black and White

Activists talk to Kevin Cook about Aboriginal,

Union and Liberations Politics

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Heather Goodall, Anti-Apartheid activist and historian has written an account of the life of Kevin Cook, not so much a biography as a portrait of a man whose involvement in Aboriginal Affairs since the 1970s defines the term 'mover and shaker'. Originally begun as a history project for the Rona Tranby Oral History Trust, this collaborative work tells a story about the

politics and people of that time and the ground-breaking achievements that occurred with 'Cookie', as he was known, as a central player. The themes raised encompass racism, employment discrimination, feminism, the politics of liberation and in particular the long struggle of Aboriginal activism through the civil rights movement of the 1960s, to the present day.

Goodall's involvement in Aboriginal activism stems from her early association with anti-apartheid protest rallies in Sydney while she was a student at Sydney University. Her ongoing commitment to the cause positioned her as a keen observer of a man who played a pivotal role in an era when everything seemed possible. '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'.

Kevin Cook, born on the south coast of New South Wales to an Aboriginal mother and a white father, worked as a labourer as a young man, forging links with the Builders' Labourers Federation, which later played a crucial role in supporting Aboriginal Rights campaigns. As a young man working on building sites in Sydney, he was directly involved with the building boom that forced working class people out of their homes to make way for larger developments. In Redfern, where Aboriginal people had congregated since the 1950s fleeing racism and poor employment in country areas, the problem was critical. Union and Aboriginal politics combined to demand better working conditions for building workers and to halt the wholesale demolition of Aboriginal houses. Leading unionists like Jack Munday, Bob Pringle and Joe Owens 'believed the union had a responsibility to express their members' views about the environments that the building industry changed and about issues that affected all unions and citizens, like the work and conditions of women and the questions of war and peace, like the Vietnam

conflict. Thus Kevin Cook's induction into political activism was given the spur and focus needed to address the long-standing struggles of Aboriginal peoples. The BLF argued that the struggle against the bosses was not isolated from the politics of the society they lived in – at work and at home'. In this fusion of race and work politics, bigger picture issues emerged and combined to create a more powerful tool with which to battle against the bosses and the government. In 1971 the BLF admitted women into the ranks, some Aboriginal, like Windy Stringer and Robyn Williams, twins, who joined in the fight and became close friends with Kevin Cook in their increasingly militant actions for better conditions. As Robyn Williams remembers it, 'It was just a very bloody fun time! We worked hard. We all drank hard!' The book is sprinkled with colourful characters like these.

The Reverend Alf Clint, an Aboriginal Bush preacher, responsible for setting up community co-operatives in New Guinea, India and South Africa to fight racism and job

discrimination, who ran Tranby (Indigenous training) College in Glebe, was responsible for inviting Kevin to be a student there. He saw something in 'Cookie' that made him leave the college in Kevin's hands. Kevin's organising experience in the BLF allowed him to assume the role of coordinator and eventually become 'the man to see' whenever a cause needed attention, and there were many. There seemed to be no protest or action that 'Cookie' was not involved in. During the Land Rights campaigns of the Whitlam and Hawke era, Kevin Cook was the lightning rod for the energy and flow of people coming in from all parts of the continent. He organised for people to attend the United Nations and put their case, even though they may never have been on a plane or left the country before. He made it clear to *all* Aboriginal peoples that they would have a better chance of achieving their goals if they banded together and presented a united front at the UN.

There is humour and wit in this book in abundance, usually at the darkest

moments, such as when our hero inadvertently got himself arrested for shouting the time-honoured suggestion at a policeman and was bundled into a paddy wagon with half the bail funds for arrested protestors in his pocket, Gary Foley having been arrested with the other half. Another story, remembered by Joe Owens, recalls Alf Clint "... 'cause Alf was very keen on the Soviet Union "the Miners' Federation supported Alf no end. Half of the bastards were communists! Singing hymns! And the place was packed!" 'which saved him from losing his job due to poor church attendances.

Goodall was at the centre of protest movements in the 1960s and 70s and she conveys both the euphoria and discontent of the time. She highlights the role one man played in the smoking cauldron of that environment. Kevin Cook was at once a family man, a political activist, worker, educator and vortex for change-makers who came from all over Australia and the world to seek his advice. From his desk at Tranby College in Glebe, he ran operations that reached law

makers and governments everywhere. He met the most famous and the most humble in his drive to 'make change happen'; people such as Bishop Desmond TuTu, apartheid opponent and activist, as well as home--- grown personalities such as Meredith Bergmann, Marcia Langdon, Jack Munday and many others. The book is filled with photos, cracked and worn, that tell of a more innocent time, when solidarity and comradeship meant something.