

KIMBERLEY CONNECTIONS (BETWEEN KEVIN AND HOWARD COATE)

On 1 May 2013, Kevin Coate, who is a foundation member of the Kimberley Society, treated his fellow members to a PowerPoint presentation containing more than 80 photographs. Kevin's cousin Howard Coate, an itinerant missionary and linguist, took many of the photographs. Kevin, who has more than 50 years of experience in the Kimberley, took some of the others. He worked on the construction of the Gibb River Road and other beef roads in the 1960s and was a pioneer in nature-based tourism, from 1975 onward, specializing in remote areas.

The talk covered the years 1934 to 1983. Some of Kevin's early involvement in the Kimberley saw him spend time with his cousin.

Howard came to WA from the UK in 1927. Then, while studying at Perth Bible Institute, he became friendly with Tom Street, a missionary with the United Aborigines Mission on Sunday Island. The Kimberley beckoned, and Howard headed north to work with Aboriginal people in 1934.

In the 1930s and '40s, most stations along the Fitzroy River were running sheep. Donkeys were used widely for pulling wagons. Mounted police patrols and mailmen with pack-mules were still operating over the range. Horses and mules provided the main means of personal transport, and it was not until the 1950s and '60s that the roads over the range from Derby came into existence.

Aboriginal people had worked on the stations for decades but still observed and practised their traditional culture. The photos showed their ceremonial activities, which included the use of decorated boards and bullroarers.

Working with the United Aborigines Mission, Howard learned to converse with Ngarinyin and Worora people and began to record words from their language. The Rev. Love at Kunmunya Presbyterian Mission helped him, providing insight into the complicated verbal system when Howard visited Port George IV on the Kimberley coast. This work made Howard a valuable ally for linguists and anthropologists. A long association with Sydney University Professor A P Elkin and Dr Arthur Capell, begun before Howard married Hazel Duncan in 1940, saw him go on Kimberley trips and undertake research on their behalf.



Hazel and Howard Coate with the Mt House Station wagon.

After his marriage, Howard used the wagon and donkey team from Mt House Station to shift his belongings over the Phillips Range to Mt Barnett Station.

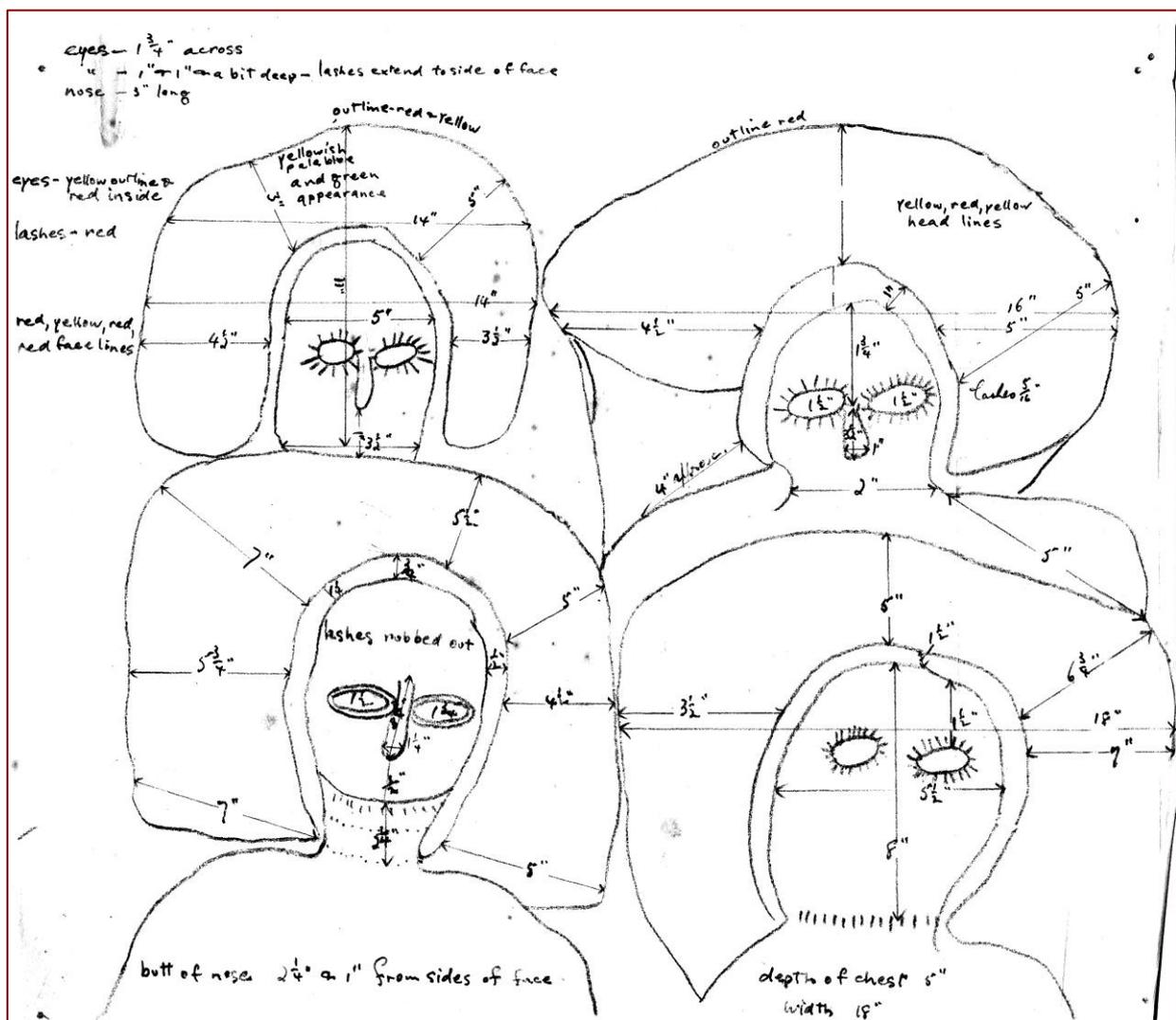
In the early 1940s, he had the Derby to Mt House mail run. Each round trip took about a month and, in his photos, we saw various parts of the route.

Howard's stint as the leaseholder on Mt Barnett Station lasted until 1948. Photos showed the original homestead, the replacement that he and another missionary built, and some of the work they did with cattle.

The extent to which Howard moved about the central and west Kimberley was evident in the photos. Some showed the mission house, lugger, and Aboriginal quarters at Sunday Island Mission, where he was the superintendent for a while. Another one showed the original homestead built at Mount Elizabeth Station in 1946-1947. It had a thatched roof of grass, which was later replaced by corrugated iron. Mrs Frank Lacy was in that photo with her children Peter and Ann. Other people in other photos included Mrs Eva Watt, who operated a taxi service out of Derby, standing with Darcy Ryder (known as the bush poet) at Udialla Station. And there was Scotty Sadler, an early settler who had a small lease over the range near Imintji on the Gibb River Road. Sadler also owned Tableland Station for several decades, and Howard built stockyards for him one wet season.

But it was Howard's connection with Aboriginal people, language and art for which he was best known. In 1946 Professor Elkin asked if he would search in the Glenelg River region for two caves containing Aboriginal art described by Lt George Grey in 1838. The paintings had baffled everyone for years as they indicated that another race of people might have inhabited Northern Australia – or, as Erich Von Daniken later suggested, that extra terrestrial beings might have dropped by.

Using pack-donkeys, and accompanied by his friend Albert Barunga and a second Aboriginal guide in 1947, Howard eventually located the caves, photographed them, and meticulously sketched and measured the paintings. In later years he took several other people to the site from Kunmunya. They included the Government Botanist, Charles Gardner. Howard visited the site for the last time at the age of 73 in 1983, backpacking there and back (from the abandoned Pantijan Station) with Kevin.



Howard Coate's sketch of the Wandjina figures described by Lt George Grey.

Howard's association with Elkin saw him measure and sketch many figures at other art sites. Some of those were at a cave near Bachsten Creek, recorded by Fred Brockman in 1901, some 40 years or more before Howard visited it.



The Bachsten Creek art site, situated in a beautiful spot beside a large pool.

Howard also collected and recorded Aboriginal mythology connected to Wandjina art. That work took him to remote locations in the Kimberley, accompanied by Aboriginal people. One photo, taken in the early sixties, showed Sam Woolagoodja and Watty Ngerdu at Iladi Creek in the Doubtful Bay region. Another photo showed several Aboriginal men with a dugout canoe in the Prince Regent River. The canoe was probably of Macassan origin.

One of Howard's most trusted informants was Mickey Bungani, who was shown in one photo standing next to a stone marker in the Hunter River area. Bungani was a boy living near Mt Waterloo when Joseph Bradshaw settled at Marigui in the early 1890s, and Howard recorded Bungani's memories of that time. That material was reproduced on pages 163 to 165 of the Kimberley Society's book *Kimberley History : People, Exploration and Development*, with a photo of Bungani on page 156.

Reaching the last of Howard's photos, Kevin alluded to a period when his cousin left the Kimberley. That period included five months as the Liaison Officer between the Northern Territory Branch of Aboriginal Affairs and the 1948 "American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land" led by the anthropologist Charles P Mountford. After that, Howard trained as a nurse and midwife, and served as acting matron at the Derby Aboriginal hospital. He still found time for the bush, however, and in the early 1980s, while relieving Thiess Brothers caretakers at Silent Grove, he took Kevin through Gardiners Gap on a stock route through the range between Silent Grove and Bell Creek.

Kevin first went to the Kimberley in the early 1960s, working as a machine operator on bulldozers and scrapers that helped to put in beef roads. One of those was the Gibb River Road.



This bogged Bulldozer, and the fate of the two graders that came to its rescue, show why, in days gone by, teamsters and other folk seldom moved around the Kimberley until the ground dried out.



The workers stayed in Main Roads campsites, in tents. Kevin's work also took in the road between Wyndham and Halls Creek, exposing him to more of the Kimberley, and to plenty of dust. Sunday mornings offered a change of pace—maintenance!

In 1975, Kevin and his wife Yvonne decided to go into tourism. One of his first jobs was to convey and provide for participants on pre-congress excursions to the Devonian Reef complexes of the Canning Basin (in the Kimberley). That was for the 25th International Geological Congress, the first time in Australia for the congress.

In 1980, Kevin, Yvonne and their children accompanied Howard on a trip along the Gibb River Road. At Gibb River Station they met Roly Mimiduwin, an old friend of Howard's who took them to an unusual art site for which he was the custodian. The Wandjina paintings, maintained by their guide, were under a large mushroom-shaped sandstone rock.

It was three years later that Kevin and Howard trekked to the cave described by Lt George Grey in 1838. That trip took them across the Elizabeth and Catherine Range and, in taking that direct route, they went close to perishing in a bushfire and from lack of water.

Our trek with Kevin was far more relaxed. We simply sat back and enjoyed the superb selection of photos and his anecdotes about the Kimberley connections.

Cathie Clement