

And the Clock Struck Thirteen

The life and thoughts of
Kaurna Elder Uncle Lewis
Yerloburka O'Brien

as told to Mary-Anne Gale



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Foreword

This book is a collaborative effort which grew out of the many requests Uncle Lewis O'Brien had to write a book about his thoughts and philosophies of life. Late in 2001 both Uncle Lewis and I became adjunct research fellows at the University of South Australia. On being given a computer and a desk, Uncle Lewis was told, 'Now you can write your book!' Months later I asked Uncle Lewis how he was going with his book, only to be told that it wasn't going so well; in fact it wasn't really happening at all. Having recovered from the long, yet enjoyable, haul of working with Auntie Veronica Brodie on her life story, *My Side of the Bridge*, I tentatively asked Uncle Lewis 'Do you want some help?' . . . So four years later, after much enriching toil, here is Uncle Lewis' book. No, it is not just a book of his thoughts and philosophies of life, nor is it just a life story . . . it is really a combination of both. After much discussion, debate and trial and error, together we decided the best approach was to weave Uncle Lewis' philosophies of life within the narrative of his and his family's life story, beginning with his great, great grandmother Kudnarto.

Anyone who has listened to Uncle Lewis speak in public will know that he is what one might call a 'talker' who entertains, often with the visual aid of a loop of string. He is also someone who doesn't like to stick to one topic for too long—preferring to digress at regular intervals with little anecdotes from different times and events in his life. So trying to transform the oral recordings of a 'talker' into the written narrative

of a 'story-teller' has been quite a challenge. But the words in the text are those of Uncle Lewis, and he has read and re-read the way they have been arranged over and over again, to ensure that any editorial intervention meets with his approval. In the process I have come to respect and admire this 'old man of the sea', Yerloburka, and I sincerely hope he will have a similar impact on you as readers. So I can only trust that our collaborative efforts do justice to Uncle Lewis and his family, and to the wisdom he is so keen to share with us all.

Mary-Anne Gale
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Mary-Anne Gale is a research fellow at the University of Adelaide and University of South Australia, and has a strong passion for helping Indigenous people tell their stories. She collaborated with Auntie Veronica Brodie in the writing of her well-received autobiography *My Side of the Bridge*, also published by Wakefield Press. Her PhD, 'Poor Bugger Whitefella got no Dreaming', focused on the writings of the remarkable Ngarrindjeri man David Unaipon. As a linguist and a teacher, Mary-Anne is working with the Ngarrindjeri community to help revive their unique and well-documented language.

Preface

When I was a young teenage boy, living at Kumanka¹ Boys' Hostel in North Adelaide, I quickly learnt that my life was no longer my own and I had to do what I was told – or at least appear to do what I was told. The matron, Mrs Lyndon, soon noticed that I wasn't like the other boys. If any of them didn't want to do what they were told, they would rebel and run amok. One day Mrs Lyndon said to me, 'Lewis, I notice you listen to what people say, but you often do just what you want to do.' And she was right. I did listen to what others had to say, and outwardly I always did what I was told, but then I'd go off and work out for myself what the best thing to do was and then do that. I was lucky because Mrs Lyndon understood me and she often allowed me to choose my own way in that boys' home. Kumanka was actually a home for working boys who had left school but I was allowed to live there even though I was still at school. I was a ward of the state and I had nowhere else to go.

So from an early age I tried to make my own way and consequently I've been out of step with others. In fact I've often felt out of sync with both my own Aboriginal people and the white world and wonder whether this character trait is a throwback to the Irish in me. My Aboriginal grandparents told me that at the age of three I corrected the church minister on

1 *Kumanka* is a word taken from the Kaurna language meaning 'together'. It is spelt today as *Kumangka*.

Point Pearce mission. He said to me, 'Here sonny, have a picture card of an Indian.' And I replied, 'No, that's a picture of a Red Indian.' The minister immediately told me, 'You'll go far, sonny.' In those days no one questioned the minister on the mission.

My name is Uncle Lewis Yerloburka O'Brien and I am of Kaurna and Ngadjuri descent. Some people call me Kauwanu, which means 'Uncle' in the Kaurna language. Sometimes I use the name Warritya, which means 'second born male'. In more recent years I have taken on the name Yerloburka, which means 'old man of the sea'.

When I returned to live at Point Pearce at the age of nine I was given the nickname 'Prof', short for Professor. My Uncle Tim Hughes² gave me that name because he recognised in me an ability to use big words. I used to read a lot and listen to adult programs on the radio and I knew even then that it was important to stay longer at school, which was unusual for Aboriginal people in those days. When I joined the Merchant Navy I used to write letters home to my Auntie Gladys Elphick and cousin Alfie using lots of big words. They would say, 'We got your nice letters, but we don't know what the hell you're talking about!'

Years later I am now an Adjunct Research Fellow at the University of South Australia and have an office down the corridor from Professor Paul Hughes, the son of Tim Hughes, and the nephew of Professor Lowitja O'Donoghue. Paul Hughes still calls me Prof.

So why call my book *And the Clock Struck Thirteen*? The passage my life has taken reminds me of my Auntie Glad's old mantelpiece clock. When I turned eighteen I had to leave Kumanka to make my own way in life. I went to live with my

2 In reciprocation, Tim also earned my respect to be referred to as 'Uncle' even though he was my second cousin. He won a military medal in Buna, New Guinea, and an MBE in 1970 (as the first chairman of the Lands Trust).

Preface

Auntie Glad at Thebarton, in Adelaide. One day, the family, including my brother and I, were in her sitting room all arguing. Auntie Glad was arguing with Uncle Fred, with Granny Gertie chipping in, and my cousin Alfie and I were arguing about the footy or something, with my brother Lawrence chipping in. In the middle of all this chaos the old clock started to wind up and begin striking. It made us all pause while we counted quietly: ziiip, dong, ziiip, dong, ziiip, dong . . . When it reached twelve we were all ready to resume our arguments; but the clock had other ideas. It went on one more time and struck thirteen, ziip dong!

We sat there like stunned mullets, looking at each other in bewilderment. Then Grannie Gertie got up and, pointing to us all, shouted, 'We're all mad. I'm mad, you're mad, and even the bloody clock's gone mad!' And we all burst out laughing.

When I remember that particular incident, it seems like a metaphor for my life – I've always felt as though I was out of step with those around me, just like Auntie Glad's clock. Even now I feel that way. As a small child I accepted the Aboriginal philosophy of life from those around me, from when I lived with my people in short bursts over a long period of time. But I was fostered out during my teenage years so I always felt I couldn't act naturally because I had to do what I was told. I was a ward of the state so my life was in someone else's hands. I coped by thinking about what I wanted to do in life and trying to stick to those goals.

I eventually learnt that if I wanted to be accepted it was best to stay silent, because nobody liked Aborigines in those days and our opinions didn't count, especially if you were a ward of the state. At one stage in my life I even forgot how to talk and communicate. Later, when I joined the Merchant Navy, I was running away from the stigma of being an Aboriginal person, but I eventually realised that you can't run away from who you are.

When I travelled to Japan a customs official asked me what nationality I was. I had a British passport, which all Australians had in the 1950s (because they thought people overseas wouldn't know where Australia was). He read my passport and said, 'British subject, Australian citizen.' Then he said to me in an abrupt way, 'Australian?' Eventually I agreed and replied, 'Australian.' But the ridiculous thing was that I wasn't even eligible to be an Australian citizen at that time because I was an Aboriginal person. My place of birth on the passport was Point Pearce and technically I was a British subject only and not an Australian citizen. I didn't assume Australian citizenship until after the referendum of 1967.³

By agreeing with the customs officer I felt like Peter in the Bible denying Christ just before he was condemned to death. I felt guilty, because I should have replied, 'I'm an Australian Aboriginal.' This happened several more times while I was away and when I came home I was so embarrassed and upset about denying my Aboriginality that I never denied it again.

So there it is – I was an Aboriginal kid born on a mission, with blond hair and fair skin, who looked more Irish than Aboriginal. Even the kids on the mission referred to me as the white kid and used to throw stones at me for fun. And yet I grew up for a time with my Aboriginal grandparents as an Aboriginal kid. I'm not a coconut, I'm not brown on the outside and white inside – I'm white on the outside and brown inside. I often wonder what sort of fruit looks like that. Maybe I'm more like a rum ball – with white coconut on the outside and chocolate brown on the inside.

This book tells the story of my chequered life, with all its trials and tribulations, and how I've managed to endure hardship and become a stronger person. Now I don't run anymore,

3 This referendum gave the Commonwealth government the power to legislate on Aboriginal issues, resulting in Aboriginal people being counted in the census.

Preface

but I still have an affinity with the sea, which is why I refer to myself as *Yerloburka* ('old man of the sea'). I believe that the philosophies of life my Aboriginal grandparents gave me during the few short years I spent with them on the mission have sustained me. So too has the time I've spent with other important Aboriginal Elders during my life, such as Auntie Gladys Elphick. They all taught me to be proud of who I am and not to deny either my Aboriginality or my Irish ancestry.

In writing this book I want to share some of the wise philosophies that my Elders taught me. I also want to share the lessons I have learnt during my own passage through life – especially through the times when I felt out of sync with others. I am in my seventies now and people have been asking me for a number of years to write a book about my life and my philosophies, so here it is. This book is testament to my belief that we can all learn from the Aboriginal Elders and from each other, whether we are black or white, or maybe a bit of both!

Padniadlu wadu: Let's walk together in harmony

Kaurna

Martuityangga, Kaurna meyunna, ngai wanggandi,

Marni naa budni Kaurna yertaanna.

Ngai birko-mankolankola Tarndanya meynnako.

Ngaityo yungandalya, ngaityo yakkanandalya. Padniadlu wadu.

English

On behalf of the Kaurna people I welcome you all to Kaurna country.

I do this as an Ambassador of the Adelaide Plains people.

My brothers, my sisters, let's walk together in harmony.

Our people, the Kaurna people of the Adelaide Plains, have welcomed visitors to our country for thousands of years. We used to hold conferences here on Kaurna land and welcome other Indigenous people to our country, knowing that our visitors would return to their own land at the end of the conference. These gatherings were what you white fellas often call 'corroborees'. So for many years the Kaurna people looked forward to these important social events on the seasonal calendar.

When you non-Indigenous people arrived here on our land we thought you were just visiting, like our other guests. If we welcomed you it was on the understanding that you would eventually go home. But you didn't! We Kaurna failed in our welcome because we forgot to tell you white fellas to eventually go home! So now you are here for good and we

have to learn to live in harmony with each other in this special country of ours.

Smallpox came very early to the Kaurna people. I think it came overland across Australia to our group as early as 1789. This was because we ran conferences. There were very few Aboriginal people in Adelaide when the white colonists arrived here in 1836 on the *Buffalo*. They noticed this and thought something was wrong. The colonist John Adams said he only saw one ten-year-old boy, so he knew things were not right. What I'm saying is that smallpox came before the colonists arrived; it came overland via other Indigenous people.

We, the Kaurna people, were the facilitators and we ran the conferences. I don't think many know that. Other Indigenous groups expected us to address various issues at our assemblies and they'd come here to discuss them. The Ngarrindjeri people of the Lower Murray, Lakes and Coorong regions would take part, as would the Permangk of the Adelaide Hills. We were also very friendly with the Ramindjeri from the Victor Harbor and Cape Jervis region. They'd all be called in, as well as the Narungga people of Yorke Peninsula. People even came from the West Coast, including the Wirangu and Mirning, plus the Nauo and Pangkala from Eyre Peninsula. They'd light fires down there on the southern end of Yorke Peninsula and signal all the groups in. But unfortunately, when all these people came together some of them brought the smallpox with them, particularly the groups from the east, and that knocked our mob rotten.

In recent times we have rediscovered the word *Banba-banbalyarnendi*, in the Kaurna language, which means 'to hold a conference'. So the Kaurna people even had a word to describe these important seasonal events. When you take the '-nendi' suffix off the word *Banba-banbalyarnendi* you get *banba-banbalya*, which means 'a conference'. It was originally recorded back in 1857 by the German missionary Christian Teichelmann

in a word list he made of the Adelaide language.¹ He later gave a copy of the list to Governor Grey, which got lost over in South Africa among all his other ethnographic notes and official papers in the South African Public Library. If you look in the old records it's there. So I've only really found out about this word for conference recently.

The Narungga people also held conferences on their own land on Yorke Peninsula. My Uncle Tim Hughes talked about the neighbouring Indigenous groups who used to come together at Port Arthur, in Narungga country. These groups were the Nukunu², the Ngadjuri, the Narungga as well as the Kaurna. But Uncle Tim didn't call us the Kaurna then. I should use the exact words he used. He referred to us as the Thura. That's the Narungga name for the Kaurna people. The term *Kaurna* was first recorded by the Protector of Aborigines, William Wyatt, in the late 1830s as 'Encounter Bay Bob's tribe' (who was most likely a Ramindjeri man, not Kaurna). The name *Kaurna* was popularised by the anthropologist Norman Tindale who worked with the Ngarrindjeri man Clarence Long (also known as Milerum). The Ngarrindjeri people referred to us as the Kaurna, probably from their word *Ko:rnar* meaning 'men'. Each group would call you different names and so that's probably what the other Aboriginal groups called us.

Our people attended these conferences that were run by the Narungga on the start of the full moon, when the fish were running, so they could feed the multitudes. The people would come together to arrange marriages, settle disputes of land and boundaries, establish rights of passage through each other's country and to discuss many other important issues.

There is a tape recording of Tim Hughes talking about

1 This was a second list made in addition to the original 1840 wordlist of Kaurna terms, which was compiled and published by missionaries Clamor Schürmann and Christian Teichelmann.

2 The Nukunu – they are the keepers of the law.

how the conferences were run. It was made in the 1960s by historian Betty Fisher. Uncle Tim Hughes remembers the different groups coming together for two moons, which made me realise, heavens, they even did it in more recent times. The different Indigenous groups must have been doing this conferencing into the 1930s, all the Nukunu, Narungga, Ngadjuri and the Thura.

Then years later, in the 1980s, a bloke came from Queensland and he expected me to run a meeting. At first I didn't know what he was talking about and then I suddenly realised it was an old expectation. And so you can see it's in the memory of the people that Adelaide was the centre for meeting and information-sharing. It's interesting, when you start analysing it, because Adelaide is in the centre of this country. It's the shortest distance for everyone to come.

In Aboriginal society individual groups managed their own day-to-day affairs but this system became awkward when it came to managing the whole country. When the British arrived, we were probably going to address the problem through conferencing, but were beaten by smallpox. Aboriginal people lived in isolation from the rest of the world for so many years, we didn't have any experience dealing with invaders. They say that germs, guns and steel³ conquer the world and these all worked perfectly well in this country for the British.

There are regions across this vast country that are 'free zones'. These are places that are open to each Aboriginal group to gather for particular purposes. One free zone is Mount Barker – no one really owns it, it was a place where Aboriginal people came together. I once heard a bloke talking about how he's found thousands of stone flints and chips on his property

3 Jared Diamond wrote a book with this title *Guns, Germs and Steel: A short history of everybody for the last 13,000 years* (1997 & 2005), Vintage, London.

at Nuriootpa. He's taken some to the museum. That must have been another gathering place for Aboriginal people, especially if thousands of stone chips accumulated there. This free-zone idea, a place where everyone can gather, is a bit like an embassy – like neutral territory.

The people always ran these conferences in areas where there was plenty of food, such as near some coastal region, or at Mount Barker where there were lots of kangaroos, emus and possums. And the gatherings were held at different times of the year depending on the seasons. It would be too cold in the Adelaide Hills in winter, for example, so they'd gather instead on the warmer flats. Or in summer they'd come together on the coast. And because they all met on someone else's country, or in a free zone, and for peaceful purposes, they avoided any possibility of war.

Visiting someone else's country is an experience. Traditionally when Aboriginal people had to go from their own country to some other place, they had to learn the other's language. Then they'd come back home happy because they'd been somewhere else, and seen other country and extended their knowledge.

In Australia there were nearly a thousand different Indigenous groups and each one had their own Dreaming stories. These Dreamings explain how we know, understand and come to terms with our own country. The belief system was practical and useful and it made each group respect their own country. They all got to know their own land backwards, so they were proud of themselves and where they came from. It was a nice, fulfilling way to live. They were not envious of anyone else, not coveting their neighbour's ground or property, in fact the opposite. Aboriginal people learnt to respect their own ground and not to want anyone else's. When their neighbours visited, the people took pride in showing their visitors over their own ground, explaining what they knew and

how they survived on their land. I reckon it's a lovely idea and way of living.

What I find surprising today – an interesting little twist – is that non-Indigenous people are starting to agree with what we believe. In our own Dreaming stories we say: 'In the beginning the land was flat and featureless. Then the ancestors created the mountains and the rivers and the plants and animals.' Well, I've got a 2001 geology book about the planets, by a professor of geology at Melbourne University, which says: 'When the first surface of the Earth solidified, it was barren. No plants, no animals, no running water.'⁴ And I think, that's interesting, it's similar to what our ancestors taught us.

All my life I have found increasing similarities between Aboriginal ideas and beliefs and Western beliefs. I find that these Dreaming stories connect to contemporary times, our timeless Aboriginal way of thinking connects to modern thinking. I am fascinated by how our people developed all these Dreaming stories, and how they seem to be connecting to other people's beliefs.

It's generally accepted that Aboriginal people have been living in Australia for 60,000 years. This is confirmed by archaeologists like the late Rhys Jones. Most people believe that Aboriginal people were the *only* ones living here before the white invasion (or colonisation), apart from the annual visits that the Macassan traders made to the northern coastal areas of Australia from the 1700s to the early 1900s. The Macassans came from the islands of Indonesia to collect and process *trepang* (sea slugs or sea cucumbers), which they then traded with the Chinese.

I believe that Egyptians may have also visited Australia

⁴ See Ian Plimer, *A Short History of Planet Earth* (2001) ABC Books, Sydney, p. 40.

thousands of years ago, well before the Macassan traders came. It was also long before the Dutch explorers landed on the Western Australian coast and before Captain Cook explored the eastern coast in 1770. I also believe Aboriginal people and Aboriginal cultural beliefs influenced the Egyptians. If the Egyptians came to Australia 5000 years ago (that's 3000 years before the time of Christ) they would have seen that Aboriginal people had no idolatry practices and that the people had very little in the way of material wealth. They would also have seen that the people were happy. Perhaps the Egyptians wondered why they weren't happy like the Aboriginal people and questioned their own belief in multi-Gods (polytheism) and material wealth.⁵

Long before the British came to this country, Australia was a spiritual country of a higher order. Aboriginal people were not materialistic and they lived in harmony with the land. But they didn't worship the land or any other kind of idol. They respected and looked after the land, knowing that the land, and all who lived on it, was what sustained them both physically and spiritually.

When the first European explorers arrived here in Australia they saw that we had no idols. Not even the toas, made by the people in the Eyre Basin region of South Australia, are idols. They may look like idols but the people didn't worship the statues. The Kaurna people of the Adelaide Plains actually had a word for a higher creator – *Pingyallingyalla*. They gave this Kaurna word to the missionaries in 1839 when they were asking for a word for 'God'.

One Adelaide colonist, William Cawthorne, wrote a booklet in 1844 called *Rough Notes on the Manners & Customs of the Natives*, and in it he wrote: 'a remarkable feature in the

5 If you want to read more about my ideas on the Egyptians and how they could have got here, see Appendix 1.

history of the natives – there is no such thing as idolatry. No gods have they to worship, but their belief is vested in a few imaginary spirits whom they do not reverence, but fear'. I don't believe we Kaurna feared Pingyallingyalla, but we did have other fears and suspicions regarding the many dangers facing Aboriginal people, especially in those very difficult early years of colonisation.

In September 2004 I was privileged to hear the Yolngu man Reverend Djiniyini Gondarra speaking here in Adelaide. He was on a national tour called *Mawul Rom*⁶, the title he's given to the 'cross cultural mediation training' that he is undertaking across the country. His plan is to assist the healing between all people from different backgrounds living in Australia and to promote greater understanding between us. What I was most pleased about was how similar his beliefs are to mine, yet he comes from the far north of the country in Arnhem Land, and I am from the very south. In his talk the Reverend explained that Aboriginal people didn't worship idols and weren't pagans before Christians arrived here, that Aboriginal people had sound moral values well before the arrival of Christian missionaries. He believes God was in this country before 1788 and this was in fact 'God's country'.

I also believe Aboriginal people had sound moral values long before white people came. That's not to say, however, that we didn't adopt Christian teachings once the missionaries arrived here as well. Aboriginal culture and philosophy wasn't static, we readily picked up the new ideas the missionaries and colonists brought, including some of their Christian teachings. So whether the values many of us hold now are from before or after the missionaries came, it is hard to say.

6 In the Yolngu Matha language and culture *Mawul Rom* means 'place for healing, holy, restricted'; *Rom* means 'law'.

Many of the values that I live by I learnt from my wise old Auntie May, but there were also other wise Elders who influenced me. When we sat down for meals we were always told to be thankful for what we had to eat and not to be envious of what anyone else had. We were also taught to forgo one species of any plant or animal in addition to the rule of not eating one's totem. We were taught to only catch the big fish and to let the little fish go so they could grow bigger. By doing this we soon understood the wisdom of what we were being told. By our actions we could see there would be fish there for tomorrow.

Another philosophy that Auntie May lived by was not to crave for worldly possessions. When I was a boy living at Point Pearce, there were still Aboriginal people living in the Wadjadin scrub on the outskirts of Point Pearce. They had chosen not to live under the rule of the mission. We used to call them the 'old people' and Auntie May always said that these old Aboriginal people living in the bush were happy. They certainly had nothing in the way of material possessions and she used to say that happiness that results from material things or possessions is only momentary. And I think she was right.

One more lesson that Auntie May taught me as a child was to be satisfied with what you've got. I remember she was always telling me that you should leave the dinner table hungry, which didn't really make much sense to me as a hungry, growing boy. Whenever we would visit someone's house, Grandmother Julia would lecture me before we arrived, saying, 'Don't you dare take the last piece of cake on the plate.' I guess she was teaching me not to be greedy and to be content with what we've been given, not to look for more.

In this book I talk about my life and all I have learnt from people like my Auntie May. I also explain my beliefs and understandings about the land of the Kaurna people – the land of the Adelaide Plains and beyond. I invite you to learn from and to respect this land, just as my ancestors did. I hope you will enjoy hearing about my life and the lives of my family, beginning with my great, great grandmother Kudnarto, who was the first Kaurna woman to officially marry a white man in the state of South Australia.