**Finding Kyanga**

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Kevin Pearson, In The Beginning

I

Archie Roach’s autobiography *Tell Me Why* begins “Sometimes you can go years without changing as a person… Sometimes though it can all change in a day, In the morning you have one life ahead of you and in the afternoon another. That happened to me once when I was a boy”. (Roach, 2019, p. 1). And so begins the most engaging saga that is now not just one story but many. These are stories of First Nations people finding their way home, to family and to land. There is not one Australian community that does not have such a past, there is not one community that does not have an obligation to support, listen and understand this past and these stories.

The land and its people come back to life when first nations children come home. It is not only their ancestors that rejoice, something new and alive comes to everyone. As the Yorta Yorta leader Paul Briggs frequently reiterates: 'We welcome those who come with an open heart and want to reconcile with us, particularly the grand children and great children of those who committed crimes against our ancestors.” As those with the greatest hurt are enlightened by a knowledge of what happened and feel renewed ownership of their country, their culture and history, terrible things are acknowledged and justice finally flows. Peace comes, our history and our destiny become nuanced and meaningful. The relationships between the colonists and first nations people and communities are not one dimensional, they are full of twists and turns, interconnected; and through it all the power of the first peoples is ever present. Everyone and everything becomes stronger.

II

When Kevin Pearson came over Cambewarra mountain to Kangaroo Valley in April 2022 he heard voices: “He’s here”.”He’s home”. “He’s back”. Kevin had come back home after four lifetimes.

Kevin’s great great great grandmother was Kyanga (1835-1849). Her father, Billy Kian, was an Aboriginal guide who helped early South Coast settlers. He was described as ‘the great grandfather of the South Coast Aboriginal community’ ("A Dying Race.," 1908) and Billy Kian’s father was Coorall who fearfully watched George Bass and his crew land at Tuross Lake in 1797.(Barlow, 26 January 1888)

Kevin’s great, great grandmother Jane (1849-1936) was born at Terara to Kyanga (1835-1849) aged 14. His great great great grandfather was Patrick Ryder (1809-1864) an Irish convict working on the Berry Estate. Patrick was pardoned in 1849, ("No title," 1849) signed a letter to the Sydney Morning Herald in 1859 supporting Alexander Berry, ("Advertising," 1859) and appeared as a witness in a trial ("THE Sydney Morning Herald.," 1853)

There are no records of Kyanga’s life beyond the age of 14. She married Patrick Ryder in the year of her death and the birth of her daughter Jane. What happened at this point in time? Kyanga may have died in child birth and with her death, Jane’s aboriginal culture was ruptured. But that certainly was not the end of the story. For what played out over the next hundred years was a remarkable return to Kyanga.

Jane’s sponsors at her baptism were Arthur and Ellen Smith (nee Tighe). Arthur was English and Ellen was Irish. They arrived as free settlers in 1849, married in 1850 and had 8 children between 1851 and 1871. Arthur worked at the creamery in Jindyandy. Jane was nearly two and a half in June 1852 when she was baptised and living with them. What had life been like for her? Jane gave one of her son’s the full name of her foster father – he was called Arthur Smith Sinclair.

Without a mother and without any contact with her grandfather, Jane Ryder followed a path into mainstream society and life. Jane Ryder married James Sinclair (1842-1909), who had the noble profession of shoe and bootmaker, at Shoalhaven in 1867. The Sinclairs ("Local & General News," 1870) survived the flood of 1870 at Terara when the Shoalhaven River rose 6.5 metres and swept away the town including five hotels, a bank, several general stores, two doctors, a chemist, several churches and various sporting facilities.[[1]](#footnote-1) After this, Terara was abandoned in favour of the town on Nowra hill and the Sinclairs, along with many others moved to Nowra and then Kangaroo Valley.

This was a high point in Kangaroo Valley’s history when over 1400 people lived at Barrengarry, Bellawongarah and Beaumont. Kangaroo Valley Public School was first constructed at this time and there were schools in the Upper River, Beaumont, School Creek and Wattamolla.

The Sinclairs had fourteen children and seven were born in Kangaroo Valley: Samuel Patrick Terara, (1868-1943), Peter John, Bingara, (1870-1946), Joe Dunbar, Terara, (1871-1930), Frank Leighton, Terara, (1873-1934), James Leslie, Broughton Creek, (1876-1934), Harrie William, Shoalhaven, (1879-1907), George Albert, Kangaroo Valley, (1881-1934), Arthur Smith, Barrengarry, (1884-1946), Kevin’s great grandfather Charles, Barrengarry, (1886-1963), Victor John, Barrengarry, (1888-1919), Margaret, Barrengarry, (1890-1940), Blanche Rebecca June, Barrengarry,(1890-1979) and Catherine Booth, Barrengarry, (1894-1960). Seven of the Sinclair children were baptised at Kangaroo Valley’s Church of Good Shepherd.

James was one of the original petitioners for the Municipality of Shoalhaven to be formed in 1871. He had a boot and shoe shop in the Valley. [Kangaroo Valley, 1895} He successfully pushed for the creation of the Kangaroo Valley Post Office. [1884 Local Intelligence} He was a member of the Kangaroo Valley Progress Association. ("LOCAL BREVITIES.," 1885), ("KANGAROO VALLEY," 1899) and a prominent Oddfellow ("OBITUARY NOTICES.," 1891) . He was a correspondent to newspapers. ("Mr. Rootes and the Salvation Army.," 1895) He was a beekeeper. ("Beekeepers' Convention.," 1893) ("The Honey Bee.," 1893) He auctioned half an acre of land next to Mr Bailey’s store which included a “snug cottage” in 1886, ("Advertising," 1886) he appeared as a member of the jury at the inquiry into the fire that destroyed Mr Hanlan’s store in 1882 ("Fire at Kangaroo Valley.," 1882) He was appointed pound keeper for the Valley in 1885 ("Government Gazette Appointments and Employment," 1885) and was a local hero in 1892 when, living nearby, he put out a fire that threatened to destroy that critical piece of infrastructure, the Kangaroo Valley bridge.("Kangaroo Valley.," 1892) This was the original timber truss bridge replaced by Hampden Bridge in 1895. He was also an active member of the “School of Arts”.("Kangaroo Valley.," 1895), a keen debater.("No title,") ("KANGAROO VALLEY.," 1901) and cricketer for the Kangaroo Valley cricket team. ("CRICKET.," 1888)

Jane Sinclair nee Ryder had a noble Aboriginal heritage. We can only imagine what it was like to carry this heritage at this point in Australian history but what is clear is that she like James was a valued member of the Kangaroo Valley community. Her beets won first prize at the second Kangaroo Valley Show in 1887. ("Agricultural Shows.," 1887) In 1891 her special display “five ferns indigenous to the district” was noted ("Kangaroo Valley Show.,"), and in 1892 she exhibited flowers and vegetables ("Kangaroo Valley Agricultural Show.," 1892), and in 1896 she won over 10 prizes for Jams and Preserves. ("Kangaroo Valley.," 1892) She remained an avid exhibitor for many years. ("KANGAROO VALLEY SHOW.," 1902). In 1895 she saved the life of her one year old daughter by applying carbonate of soda after she had turned over a bee hive box and was severely stung. ("South Coast [?].", 1895)

As the Sinclairs were taking part in all of the main parts of Kangaroo Valley society, an attempt was made to create an independent Aboriginal settlement, along the lines of Maloga, near the Moira Lakes in Victoria, in the Aboriginal Reserve behind what is now "Pioneer Farm", Kangaroo Valley, adjacent to Hambden Bridge.

Hughy and Ellen Anderson came inspired by Daniel Mathews to try to set up a settlement and were joined by "King" Mickey Johnson and his partner "Queen" Rosie.

How difficult it must have been to set up a~~n~~ sustainable community on that particular tract of land. There was water from the river and it was beautiful stumpy gum, dry country but nothing like the river flats. Meanwhile James and Jane were living very close to this reserve probably as neighbours. They already had four children, born in Terara, when they arrived in Kangaroo Valley around 1871. Their next ten children were all born in Barrengarry between 1873 and 1894.

The Sinclairs set up their sons and daughters well. ("Wedding at [?].", 1904) The Sinclairs moved from Kangaroo Valley to take part in the clearing of the “big scrub” in the early 1900s. James passed away in 1909 and Jane outlived him by 26 years passing away in Bexley in 1935.("WESTERN FARMER'S DEATH,") It was Jane that would have had to bear the pain of losing her son Victor in WWI and later she was buried alongside him

One of the most significant parts of this epic story is war. The cream of Australia’s youth were sacrificed at Gallipoli and in France but this must have been even more tragic and poignant for Jane Sinclair who had lost her family and cultural heritage with the death of her mother Kyanga. Five of Joseph and Jane’s sons, several grandsons and great grand sons fought in WWI and II. The Sinclair children, grand children and great grand children made an enormous sacrifice.

Frank Sinclair, who was an accomplished horseman, stood five foot five tall and fought with *Fifth Battalion Commonwealth Horse* in the Boer War in South Africa in 1902. (Sinclair)

Joe Sinclair volunteered in May 1917 age 46, one of 10 from his family to enlist in the first AIF. By the time Joe enlisted two of his older sons had already volunteered. Joe trained at Rifle Range Camp, Enoggera before embarking for England with the 10th Reinforcements for the 47th Infantry Battalion in early August 1917. He arrived in France just after Christmas, and was transferred to the 42nd Battalion stationed in Belgium, which rotated between the front and rear lines. Joe was with the battalion when it moved to France during the great Spring Offensive and was involved in the First Battle of Morlancourt in late March 1918. Towards the end of April Joe reported ill, suffering from painful gum disease and debilitating rheumatism, he would not return to the front lines, instead he was returned home, no longer fit for active service.

Three of Joe’s sons also served. Arthur Leslie Sinclair (1896-1941) *#1373 15th Infantry Battalion, B Company* enlisted in September 1914 just weeks after war was declared. He served with the 15th Infantry Battalion and was seriously wounded during operations at Pope's Hill, Gallipoli in May 1915. Arthur was evacuated from the Peninsula with a gunshot wound to his head and left eye and returned to Australia in July 1915. Robert 'Francis' Darcy Sinclair (1894-1915) *#2169 13th Infantry Battalion, KIA Gallipoli* was a horse breaker before enlisting in May 1915. He joined the 13th Battalion on Gallipoli and was killed during operations in 'Australia Valley' in August 1915. Francis is buried at Hill 60 Cemetery, north west of Anzac Cove, his grave is inscribed "Duty done". Claude 'Eric' Horace Sinclair (1899-1967**)** *#183 34th Infantry, A Company & 20th Infantry Battalion* was just 17 when he left Australia in May 1916, and joined his unit, the 20th Battalion in France in October. Eric was seriously wounded in action, receiving a gun shot wound to the right thigh for which he was invalided back to England and did not return to active duty. Eric's own son George William Sinclair (1921-1943)died as a prisoner of the Japanese in Burma, during WW2 .

The Shoalhaven News reported the death of J.V. Sinclair from war injuries. Jane was the sole parent at the funeral. “Mrs Sinclair had the proud distinction of being represented by five sons and four grandsons at the war”. ("Late Private J. V. Sinclair.," 1919)

III

Kevin’s direct descendant great grandfather Charles was a member of the 5th Field Company of Engineers and served right through WWI.[[2]](#footnote-2) Charles, a blacksmith, married Margaret Mary Jinkins in Roma, Qld in 1911 and they moved to Brisbane after the war years.

Charles and Mary’s eldest son George William Samuel, “Sammy”, had 3 children with his wife, and as was discovered only recently, he also had a relationship with a Nellie Perina that resulted in a daughter, Lynette, Kevin’s Mum. Lynette married Ron Pearson in 1964 and the following year, Kevin was born in Gayndah, Queensland.

When Kevin was 5 years old, his mother presented at their local police station seeking assistance in finding accommodation for her six children as they were being evicted from their Housing Commission home. This was the first time he and his 5 younger siblings would be admitted to foster care. 10 months later, having returned home, his mother, Lynette, died when she was 25, and her 6 children were aged 1,2,3,4,5, and 6yo – Kevin was the eldest.

Kevin remembers visiting his mother at the hospital and her telling him that she would be the brightest star in the sky; and that her favourite colour was yellow. Their father signed adoption papers for all of the children, and they spent the next 18 months at various orphanages, where they were provided with food and shelter, and expected to “be well behaved,” but were subject to frequent physical punishments and were not provided with any care or counsel to help them adjust to their new life – and the loss of their mother.

When he was 8, Kevin and his next 3 siblings were fostered by a family, who already had 2 adult children; one other foster child; and one other adopted child. The 2 youngest Pearson children were fostered to a separate family and despite assurances that the two families would maintain contact, this never happened. Once again, they were provided with food and shelter, but there was no love in this home. Kevin also lost his family name, as they were enrolled at the local school with the surname of the foster family – another confusing loss of identity for this lost and abandoned young boy. The children were subject to frequent physical punishments, that included kicking and elbows to the head; being held under water to teach them to swim; and they were expected to do all of the household chores, from a very young age – they were bashed and humiliated. At school they were sometimes referred to as black bastards – at home they were told various stories about having either Maori or Aboriginal heritage. When Kevin was 12 years old, he was sexually abused by a neighbour – he went home and told his foster-mother, who told him to stop lying. Only 5 years ago, he discovered that the same person had also sexually abused all 3 of his younger siblings – none of them had ever spoken about it, not even to each other. The perpetrator has since been charged and pleaded guilty to some of the charges – but not all – and escaped jail time.

IV

When Kevin was 17, the family home burned to the ground – he lost everything except the clothes he was wearing that day, so there was more loss and the necessity to start again.

When he was 19, Kevin met Leigh – it was love at first sight for both of them, even though she was only 15. He befriended her brothers and immersed himself in their family – he recalls thinking “this is a family’ the first time he entered their home, and decided that was something that he wanted and needed – and had never before experienced. When he was 23, Leigh and her Mum managed to find the whereabouts of Kevin’s father – who was still alive, and whom Kevin hadn’t seen or heard from since he was 6. Kevin organised to meet him one night – he was drunk when Kevin arrived; and when Kevin asked him why he’d never come to see them, he told him he thought if the kids wanted to see him they would find him. Kevin never bothered to see him again, and didn’t tell his siblings about the meeting – his father died 6 months later. Following his burial, they discovered there was no memorial to Kevin’s mother, Lynette, and so Kevin and Leigh arranged a memorial plaque for her – otherwise it was as though she had never existed. Six months after that, at just 49, Leigh’s father died suddenly from a heart attack – Kevin was devastated as he was like a father to him also. Kevin and Leigh married 6 months later (32 years ago tomorrow) and now have three adult children.

In the years since then, they managed to also meet Kevin’s maternal grandmother, Nellie, who was not at all forthcoming with any stories about their mother Lynette – or their heritage. She had no photos and nothing to share with them. So their heritage remained a mystery, as there was no Maori or Aboriginal heritage on their father’s side.

In 2007, Kevin was diagnosed with Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy, a genetic heart condition, and fitted with an internal defibrillator. One of his brothers developed the same condition shortly after. His condition has progressed to the point that he now has heart failure and needs a heart transplant – he is 57 years old.

A few years ago, Kevin did a DNA test with Ancestry.com which identified his Aboriginal DNA. Then three years ago, he was contacted by someone identified as a “close relative” on the website, who they have since worked out is his Aunty – her father was married at the time that he fathered Kevin’s mother, so nobody ever knew that Lynette (or her children) existed. His aunties had also been raised to believe they had Maori heritage – such was the fear and shame associated with being Aboriginal, or “half caste.” He also has two second-cousins with the same heart condition as him. This newly discovered branch of his family tree have fully embraced him, which has been beautiful to witness. And in researching this family tree, they were lead on their journey back to Kangaroo Valley.

V

In 2019, Leigh and Kevin had already planned a trip including exploring significant WW1 sites on the Western Front – when they discovered that Kevin’s Great Grandfather, Charles, and four of his brothers, had all fought there, and their stories are recorded in the archives as Indigenous Servicemen in WW1. They were able to walk in their footsteps.

Charles’ mother, Jane, is buried in a grave at Woronora Memorial Cemetery that does not bear her name – she is buried in a soldier’s grave with one of her sons, who died aged 31. (I wonder what prejudice they faced when Aboriginal Jane married Scottish James, and they came to settle in Kangaroo Valley?)

Her mother, Kyanga, was a 14 year old Aboriginal girl. pregnant to a 40 year old Irish convict, who died in child birth at Terara. It was as though she had been calling to Kevin to find her for his whole life. She had not been forgotten – he had been looking for her.

Two years ago, one of Kevin’s daughters bought him some paints and some canvas’s and he started painting. When he paints, it is as though some thing is travelling through him to produce the artworks he creates. In homage to Kyanga, he signs every piece with her name. Kevin recently won “People’s Choice” at his local Moreton Bay Region Art Prize competition, with his piece “In the Beginning,” which displays the constellation and the killer whales – Yuin believe that their warrior ancestors are re-incarnated as killer whales, and their women as stars, which is amazing, given that Kevin’s mother said she would be a star – and she didn’t know about her Aboriginal heritage.

Kevin is discovering more and more about his Aboriginal heritage, and his journey to Kangaroo Valley “Gangurang,” and the many other significant areas of Yuin country - a journey of healing – and a welcome back to his country.

VI

What is the meaning of this epic saga? These stories, along with all of the First Nations pathways home, form Australia’s modern day *Mahabharata,*  the struggle for righteousness, our *Odyssey,* our journey home. They are not just sources of healing for the individuals and families concerned. They potentially heal the whole nation. They tell us who we are and how we got here. There are so many things to reflect on. The enduring vision of Kyanga that could not be dimmed by death, trauma, war, injustice and tragedy. It is remarkable that Kevin has channelled imagery and iconography very much like the great Nardaparli (Vida Brown) of Wreck Bay. Then there is the life of Jane Ryder, who lost her young mother and whose boys all fought in wars. What was she like? How was she received in Kangaroo Valley and Nowra society? What of her foster parents whom she clearly loved? And then there is the extraordinary service of the sons, grandsons and great grandsons in times of war. What must this toll have taken on their own humanity? Was all this too much for Lynette, Kevin’s enduring yellow star? But did her strength and that of Kyanga finally prevail? Must we ensure that it does!

In plain conventional terms the nation, what ever that is, owes so much to Kyanga and the family that came after her. In spiritual and ethical dimensions the legacy is unspeakable and unfathomable. All that can be said is our redemption and hope springs from love, recognition and acknowledgement. We must be so grateful for the story to emerge finally. In our new beginning we have to see the pain and suffering of Kevin and his family as our own. Most of all we have to welcome back home those who were swept away by a great torrent, and be grateful for the miracle of their return and trust that other miracles will surely follow.

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1. “...and when the first streak of dawn did appear an awful sight was unfolded...such as sad and mournful picture beheld, and we hope never to look upon the like again.” (Thomson) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See <https://www.slq.qld.gov.au/blog/sinclair-soldiers> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)