

The journey to 'Forked Mountain'

Marilyn Wood

In this article I examine the ways in which relationships between people and place constitute the factors that were influential in the historical development of a particular Aboriginal community in rural New South Wales. This case study is based on research undertaken in Coonabarabran¹ and may prove to be useful as a small contribution to the growing literature on change and continuity within Aboriginal relationships to land in the southeastern or 'settled'² regions of Australia.

The Coonabarabran region on the northwestern slopes and plains of New South Wales falls within an area in which the matrilineal transmission of moieties and social totemic clans³ may have significantly affected the nature of social relations amongst kinship groups both before and after contact with European society.⁴ Rights in land have customarily been assigned through patrilineal descent.⁵ However, such traditional practices in this area were particularly affected by the rapid nature of the process of conquest and appropriation of country⁶, the economic uses to which that land was put and the scale of European migration into the district.⁷ In particular the dramatic reduction of the Aboriginal population to that of a marginalised minority, with the emergence amongst that population of a large percentage of people of mixed descent, created the circumstances in which the forms of Aboriginal social organisation through which relationships to land were constituted underwent substantial transformation.⁸

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1. Fieldwork was undertaken from November 1995 to April 1997 and archival research has been carried out intermittently since 1994.
 2. I refer here to those areas first identified by Rowley (1970: vii) as ones where a high proportion of people of mixed descent comprised the Aboriginal population due to their early colonisation in the nation's history. It most commonly refers to the more densely settled regions of the southeastern States.
 3. Refer, for example, to Fison's description of matrilineal descent amongst the Kamilaroi (Fison and Howitt 1991: 68–75).
 4. This is a contentious issue that requires further investigation. Refer to Sutton's comments (1998: 40).
 5. An assertion made by anthropologists such as David Turner who, in his 1980 book *Australian Aboriginal social organisation*, draws on material from all regions in Australia except New South Wales and Tasmania to support his analysis (Turner 1980: ii–iii). Sutton reproduces this argument but does allude to the fact that there is very little evidence concerning patrilineal land rights in New South Wales, for the simple reason that earlier anthropological research failed to address the issue (Sutton 1998: footnotes pp 40, 67). I assume that the reason for this was the perception that Aboriginal people had already been effectively dispossessed of any rights to land by the second half of the nineteenth century.

Most Aboriginal people within Coonabarabran claim to be descendants of the Kamilaroi⁹ speaking people, a language group with several regional variations that before the British invasion occupied a large region of country in northwestern New South Wales and southern Queensland.¹⁰ During my fieldwork period a prominent family group was described by many townsfolk as Wiradjuri¹¹, another major language group whose country extends from south of Coonabarabran towards the Victorian border.¹² The region that is now known as the Coonabarabran shire overlapped the transition zones of several language regions¹³, and there is historical and folklore evidence to suggest that raiding parties from as far off as Cassilis to the southeast and Gunnedah to the northeast fought and raided local hordes.¹⁴ Evidence also exists that the region was incorporated into an extensive Indigenous trade system.¹⁵ After European settlement it became a strategic commercial centre first on colonial stock and trade routes¹⁶ and then for travellers on major highways.¹⁷ What we know of the prehistory of the Coonabarabran district certainly provides support for Goodall's description of a complex model of Indigenous society in the inland regions of New South Wales integrated through relationships based on kinship, ceremony, trade and gift-giving (Goodall 1996: 11–13). The region has therefore historically been characterised by its dynamic human travel and migratory movements providing opportunities for extensive incorporation into pre-contact and contemporary social networks.

I do not mean to imply here, however, that a sharp break necessarily exists between the movements of people before and after the British invasion and settlement of the area. It is possible that Aboriginal people drew on existing social networks, exchange and ceremonial links to negotiate their spatial and social placement within the new social and political milieu. This may have provided one possibility for elements

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6. A comprehensive social history of the Coonabarabran district has not been written, but the local history written by Pickette and Campbell (1983: chs 3, 4) describes the movement of Europeans into the district following the 1818 exploration of the district by John Oxley. Settlement of the area was initially hindered by difficulties in finding an accessible route for stock but by the second half of the 1820s land was being appropriated by squatters. By the late 1840s squatters had taken up large 'runs' of land in the district and a great many of the Aboriginal people had perished. A trading centre was by then emerging where the modern township now stands and 'the Aborigines had ceased to be a threat' (Pickette and Campbell 1983: 48).
 7. Refer to Jeans (1972: ch 9) for an overview of this process.
 8. Compare with Sutton's description of 'transformations in local organisation' (Sutton 1998: 67–9).
 9. Also referred to as Gamilaroi., Kumularoi, Gummilray, Kahmilaharoy and other spellings (Millis 1992: 21).
 10. The pre-conquest boundaries of Kamilaroi country is contentious and the position of Coonabarabran in relationship to Kamilaroi country is debateable. A major revision of Tindale's map has extended Kamilaroi territory into the Hunter region (refer Millis 1994: ch 2).
 11. Peter Read's map of Wiradjuri country demonstrates the ways in which boundaries affiliated with language groups have shifted historically (Read 1988: xvii).
 12. This ascription is of course simplistic and this construction of a 'tribal' identity relies on the privileging of some cognatic (or more rarely affinal) relationships over others. This process is similar to that outlined by Sutton's description of a limited 'choice' usually existing between a few descent groups (Sutton 1998: 64). In the Coonabarabran district people use the two tribal identities to distinguish 'local' from 'outsider', 'sedentary' from 'transitory', and 'friendly' as opposed to 'hostile'. 'Choice' was partly determined therefore by the orientation of the family sub-group towards the general community.

of continuity to underpin some of the more obvious transformations of social organisation.¹⁸ Further research is required into the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal population movements before conclusions can be drawn concerning the exact nature and extent of the ongoing effects of contact patterns between Europeans and Aborigines on this particular community. It is apparent that in the Coonabarabran district British conquest, invasion and settlement resulted in many of the social changes listed by Sutton in his summary of transformative factors affecting local social organisation (Sutton 1998: 67–8). In particular his identification of the emergence of powerful and independent women who became the matriarchal heads of land holding groups¹⁹ is consistent with developments in the Coonabarabran area. To explore this theme of continuity and transformation in social organisation I will draw on documents written by the founding matriarch of this community, Mary Jane Cain, as well as the history of the Forked Mountain reserve²⁰ and the Cain matriarchs, written by Margaret Somerville and Mary Jane's descendants (Cain 1926; Somerville et al. 1994). These works reveal how, from the vision of the first matriarch on 'Forked Mountain', an Aboriginal community grew in strength from shared experience of struggle and extraordinary social change (Somerville et al. 1994).

As Cowlshaw describes in her outline of changing cultural dynamics in New South Wales, the survival of a distinctive Aboriginal culture was achieved in the face of State oppression and public opposition to its survival. There was consequently a high price paid in terms of loss of esoteric knowledge²¹ and language.²² She argues, however, that to focus on the 'loss' is to overlook both the political context of that aspect of change and the positive ways in which Aboriginal people have negotiated changing social conditions whilst retaining their Aboriginal identification (Cowlshaw 1994: 90–3). The work of Somerville et al. (1994) reveals how family and community survival

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13. Millis (1992: 25) places the present-day townships of Coonabarabran and Baradine within Kamilaroi (also known as Gamilaroi and Gamilaraay) country, Gilgandra and Coonamble within Kawambarai country and the Wiradjuri quite distant to the south extending just north of Dubbo. Tindale's map places the townships of Coonabarabran and Gilgandra within Wiradjuri country, Baradine within Kamilaroi country, Coonamble and Gulargambone within Wayilwan country. An analysis of these contradictions lies outside the scope of the article, but they do point to the dynamic nature of large-scale social interactions within this area.
14. Refer, for example, to the stories collected by John Ewing and his sons (Pickette and Campbell 1983: 121–2). Part of this collection became the basis for the book *The red chief* by Ion Idriess (1953). It recounts raids made by the Red Chief on women from the Warrumbungles region.
15. For example, the stone in a small axe found at 'Ukerbarley' originated at Moore Creek, near Tamworth. The sample of andisitic greywacke has been positively identified as coming from the Daruka quarry. Rock from the same quarry has also been found in Gunnedah, Wilcannia and Bourke (pers comm Pat Gaynor, 25 September 1991). Refer also to Wilson (1994).
16. Refer for example to Pickette and Campbell's description of the Morpeth 'wool road' which extended through Coonabarabran from the Barwon and Namoi regions to the Hunter district. In addition, the stock route from Queensland to markets in Sydney and Melbourne passed through Coonabarabran (1983: 49)
17. Coonabarabran lies on the Newell Highway which extends from Victoria, northwards through New South Wales to Queensland. The Oxley Highway/New England Highway extends from just north of the Coonabarabran township to Queensland via the New England district.
18. For example the continuity of links between Coonabarabran, Gunnedah and Tamworth is suggestive.
19. Refer to Sutton 1998: 67.

was often accomplished through the outward adoption of non-Indigenous lifestyles that, however, remained distinctively Aboriginal through the retention of Aboriginal modes of interpretation and practice.²³ Through these dynamic patterns of accommodation, incorporation and continuity,²⁴ those transformations occurred within Aboriginal communities that facilitated first their survival and then their emergence as a distinct Indigenous people within the Australian polity. As the work of Cowlshaw (1994) and Somerville et al. (1994) reveals, the apparent taking up of non-Aboriginal cultural practices in many ways masked the continuance of an Aboriginal value system that underlay outward adaptations.²⁵ The work of Sommerville et al. (1994) demonstrates that the privileging of relationships to place,²⁶ kin relationships, and shared experiences of 'mission' life, have been central factors in the construction and reproduction of a group identity that has enabled Aboriginal people in Coonabarabran to adapt to their changing social conditions without losing vital aspects of Aboriginal cultural practice.

Within the Coonabarabran community there are at least three major family names that people may identify with, that provide affiliates with relationships to other members of that cognatic descent group and to the places (both within and outside Coonabarabran) associated with those names. Some people may have cognatic or affinal links to more than one of these families and many people do not actually have the family name as their personal surname. A detailed analysis of the processes by which a person's primary identification with a particular family is established is outside the scope of this article, but in common with those families identified by Peter Sutton as 'families of polity' descent from a common ancestor is a necessary but not sufficient criterion. Another criterion is the ability to establish that oneself or an ancestor within one's own sub-set had a historical link with the particular place associated with the apical ancestor of the larger surname group. Essential also is that sense of amity that

20. Forked Mountain' is sometimes referred to as 'Fork Mountain' or 'Forky Mountain' reserve — compare Somerville et al. (1994: ch 3) and Cain 1893 reproduced in Sommerville et al. 1994: 74–5.

21. More mundane knowledge concerning 'bush tucker' and the kinds of stories told to children continued to be taught, probably because these were an integrated element of people's daily practices (Sommerville et al. 1994: ch 3).

22. The extent and effects of this loss amongst local people were explored by Margaret Sommerville in her interviews with Mary Jane Cain's descendants (Sommerville et al. 1994: 24–8). However, it is apparent that much knowledge had continued to be passed down from mother to daughter in the Cain family until only a few generations ago. By drawing on regional connections to language speakers and knowledgeable people, the Coonabarabran people are regaining aspects of their Kamilaroi heritage (compare with Creamer 1994).

23. For example through the passing down of oral legends told to the children, which were a mixture of Christianity, 'ghost' stories and Aboriginal legend (Sommerville et al. 1994: 105–8).

24. Compare with Sutton's identification of 'reaction, continuity and re-creation' as the underlying influences on 'post-classical' Aboriginal society (Sutton 1998: 59).

25. May Mead's recollections of her childhood involvement with the sleeper cutters. Instead of going to school, May and other children would often go out into the mountain areas with a woman to hunt for small game and search for caves (Sommerville et al. 1994: 131–2).

26. Although Baradine and Coonabarabran are only 44 kilometres apart, Aboriginal peoples from the two locales retain quite separate identities despite the occurrence of some intermarriage between the two groups. For example, May Mead's family remained largely independent when they moved from Baradine into Coonabarabran (Sommerville et al. 1994: 135–6).

transcends personal disputes to constitute that more enduring sense of corporate solidarity based on a recognition of mutual interests in place and extensive family connections (Sutton 1998: ch 2). In this article I examine the emergence of a woman whose close connection with a particular place created the circumstances in which she would be remembered as a founding ancestor of a community linked by consanguineal and affinal ties. In following articles I will explore how her status was transformed to that of an 'apical' ancestor whose identity became the reference point by which others located themselves in social and spatial relations.

In his work on 'post-classical'²⁷ Aboriginal society, Sutton examines the relationship 'families of polity' have to particular country and their relationship to larger groups such as language groups, characterised by Rigsby (1995) as the 'new tribes'. Sutton approaches this issue from the perspective of an anthropologist required to critically engage with the specificities of land rights and native title legislation, legal precedent and bureaucratic regulations. Some historians have also taken up this issue by seeking to establish a continuity in discursive claims to land that constitute evidence of unbroken links to country. I examine some of the issues facing anthropologists and historians who seek to link historically constructed relationships to land with pre-British contact concepts of territorial rights and responsibilities. I do so by exploring the ways in which Coonabarabran people in the nineteenth century overcame their loss of much 'traditional' knowledge concerning responsibility to country and at the same time maintained a strong Aboriginal identity. This was achieved through the social and historical constructions of new relationships to place that drew on and transformed older concepts of 'belonging to land'. In this article I examine the period from the 1820s until the establishment of the Aboriginal reserve at Forked Mountain. In a future article, 'Journey to Burrabeedee', I will explore the transformation of the Forked Mountain reserve into the mission²⁸ 'Burrabeedee', which marked the emergence of a greatly expanded community. In the last article in this series, 'Journey from Burrabeedee', I will examine those changes in social organisation that occurred as people moved from the mission into the township.

Sometime in the 1890s, Mary Jane Cain moved permanently²⁹ from the locale of Aboriginal settlements on Gunnedah Hill and Honeysuckle Point³⁰ to a parcel of land

27. Defined by Sutton as 'those cultural practices and social institutions that have arisen since colonisation, as distinguished from those that are in large measure in continuity with those prevailing at the time of colonisation' (Sutton 1998: 60). Sutton argues for the adoption of this terminology in preference to the 'traditional: contemporary' opposition, as he claims quite correctly that contemporary Aboriginal cultures also contain elements of the traditional (Sutton 1998: 60). In this article my use of the word 'traditional' is synonymous with Sutton's concept of 'classical' and is not intended to relate exclusively to a pre-colonial period.

28. In common with many other places, people in Coonabarabran refer to 'Burrabeedee' as the 'mission' despite the fact that its associations with Christian organisations have only ever been of an informal nature. Until the State provided the first school teacher/manager in 1908, Forked Mountain was an unsupervised reserve. It then attained the status of a State-managed station.

29. Before this she had been using the land at Forky Mountain to graze her stock (Sommerville et al. 1994: 51-2). The Cains may have been doing so since the early 1880s. Refer to mention by Goodall (1994: 83) of an Aboriginal family on their own selection in 1882 that may be the Cains.

at the base of Forked Mountain, six and a half miles northeast of the township on the 'Gunnedah Road'³¹ (Somerville et al. 1994: 77). Like many other Aboriginal people at that time, Mary Jane believed that this land was a grant made by Queen Victoria to her and her family in perpetuity. In 1892³² the land had been gazetted as an Aboriginal reserve³³ and she and her husband had already begun to construct a hut for themselves and to permanently graze their herd of goats there. She wrote several letters to the Governor in connection with the reserve and Somerville located one in the State archives³⁴ that contains a request for government assistance. In this letter Mary Jane asked for her land to be 'mesured (sic) and fenced', for 'seed of all sorts' to be provided and for rations be given to her and her dependent family. She wanted title to the land given to her so that she could pursue her rights for sole occupancy against trespassers.³⁵ She envisaged that in time her family would become self-supporting from its farming enterprise. Mary Jane's explicitly detailed intention was to pursue the form of propertied existence she had been exposed to and which she plainly valorised.³⁶

At the same time as she intended to live the life of a selector, Mary Jane was also obviously aware that as a 'native' she stood in a different relationship to the State than did her 'white' neighbours.³⁷ Her requests for assistance reveal that she expected the government to 'protect' her rights to live free of harassment³⁸ and to provide her with those welfare measures necessary for her family's survival and future security. It is also apparent that she regarded this as a transitional measure until her family enterprise could become self-supporting. Mary Jane based her claim for rations on her assertion that she was the 'only native belong in [sic] to here' and that she was, because of her own and her husband's recent ill-health, unable to adequately provide for her large dependent family. The letter she wrote to the Governor revealed that she believed the

30. This area would have been seriously affected by the local flood of 1890 (Pickette and Campbell 1983: 129).

31. The 'Gunnedah Road', as it is known, is that part of the Oxley Highway that extends from Coonabarabran to Gunnedah. Locals refer to all main roads by the name of the places they connect up with, for example the 'Baradine Road' and the 'Dubbo Road'.

32. In 1892-3 the area was affected by a depression in the economy which affected wheat prices and led to increased interest rates (Pickette and Campbell 1983: 129). In such difficult times there would have presumably been little work available for itinerant rural labourers and domestics. The difficulties faced by the farmers who had hitherto provided many local Aboriginal people with campsites, rations and employment would probably have been a factor in Mary Jane's decision to seek a more independent base for her family.

33. The 'Burra Bee Dee Aboriginal Reserve (no. 47521) was gazetted on 21 February 1912. It consolidated three existing reserves: 400 acres gazetted in 1892, 73 acres granted to Mary Jane Cain and her family and 100 acres gazetted in 1911 (Coonabarabran High School 1987: 8).

34. Cain, M. J. 1893, letter held in Letters to the Colonial Secretary, location number CSIL 5/6137, State Archives of New South Wales, Sydney. A copy is reproduced in Somerville et al. 1994: 74-5.

35. She claims to have already complained to the local sergeant but, lacking any title deeds, he took no action.

36. Cain (c1926) describes with nostalgia her participation in the rural world of pastoral work and settler family life.

37. The terminology of 'native', 'white' and 'halfcaste' is that used by Mary Jane Cain in her letter of 1893 and her collection of written reminiscences produced in the 1920s.

38. 'Whites' were coming onto her property and shooting (presumably hunting) and were allowing their stock to graze there.

State had a duty to provide both for her family's immediate survival and the means by which they could achieve long-term self-sufficiency (Somerville et al. 1994: 73–6; compare Goodall 1996: 75–84 and Morris 1989: 92–6).

Morris's work with the Dhan-gadi people of New South Wales explores the context within which such letters were written. They were framed to fit the criteria for assistance set out within the policies of the Aborigines Protection Board. Morris points out that during this era protectionist and welfare measures were designed to 'protect' Aboriginal people from the destructive aspects of European society and to alleviate the conditions of their final demise by encouraging an ethos of sedentary self-sufficiency. This was to be achieved through farming activities undertaken on reserves located within the peoples' own districts. By doing so Aboriginal people would simultaneously be removed from the growing urban centres (Morris 1989: 92).

Goodall has documented just how common initiatives by Indigenous peoples to secure farming land for economic security became in the second half of the nineteenth century (Goodall 1996: ch 6). She claims that an analysis of correspondence regarding such petitions reveals that they reflect a desire by Aboriginal people not only to secure a future economic base but to secure one that was located within their 'traditional' country. Goodall states that '[a]lthough the concept was not expounded in detail, it is clear that Aborigines were arguing that their ownership of land was sanctioned by tradition and religion' (Goodall 1996: 84). Goodall explores the different ways in which Aboriginal people approached the State to apply for land. In all these approaches the desire to own land for farming and an acknowledgement of the Crown's power to alienate land in the form of land grants is explicit — even where the injustice of their dispossession is pointedly referred to.³⁹ However, in the absence of other supporting evidence, the meanings associated with language concerning 'country' can only be conjectured.

An example that illustrates the interpretative difficulties associated with such material is the demand made by William Cooper, where he asks for a 'small portion of a vast territory which is ours by Divine Right'. Without further clarification it is unclear whether he was referring to country in which he had custodial rights through clan membership or wider 'tribal' interests. In his reference to 'a vast territory' he may also have been making a pan-Aboriginal claim for recognition of prior ownership of the whole of the Australian continent. Petitions such as Cooper's are problematic for the historian in so far as it is difficult to interpret the particular basis upon which he was making a claim for an Indigenous right to land. Goodall characterises Cooper's request for a land grant as 'a testimony to the continued responsibility its Aboriginal owners felt towards the largest expanse of their lands' (Goodall 1996: 79). Exactly what constitutes such a 'responsibility' and what 'the largest expanse of their lands' refers to is not clear from Goodall's text. She may be referring to the emergence of language groups as the broadest land-holding group in areas where the particular estates of localised clans have merged into more regional rights in land⁴⁰ or where different groups covering

³⁹. Reay's work explores how deeply felt was this sense of resentment and awareness of injustice throughout the western districts of New South Wales in the 1940s (Reay 1949: 98–9).

⁴⁰. Sutton identifies this trend as due to changes in social organisation resulting from depopulation and lack of Aboriginal genitors (Sutton 1998).

large areas of land are linked through their shared cosmology associated with an extensive network of Dreaming sites.

Goodall's claim that 'it was clear that Aborigines were arguing that their ownership of land was sanctioned by tradition and religion' is tantalising, but the issue of exactly what constituted those traditions and religion⁴¹ needs to be clarified. I am arguing here therefore for the need to contextualise references to land within both pre-contact and post-contact social worlds and to tease out the changes and the continuities. With respect to the Coonabarabran district, until all the available evidence — historical and archaeological — is comprehensively assessed, it is impossible to state with any certainty what the cultural beliefs and practices were that structured relationships to land before the pastoralists' invasion. The area is rich in archaeological evidence of the long-term occupation of the region by Aboriginal bands, and bora sites indicate its use as a ceremonial meeting place for large groups of people.⁴² To date there has not been a definitive interpretation of rock carvings in the area that may be associated with increase sites or perhaps have been created as part of the shamanic practices of the area's 'clever men'. When interpreting references to land therefore it is important to approach the material with both a critical and an open mind.

Given Mary Jane Cain's emphasis in her letter on the need to measure, fence and provide feed for stock on her land, it is apparent that she views her interest in the Forked Mountain property as an economic base and home site similar to those properties she and her family have worked on in the past. Her emphasis on measuring and fencing indicates a keen understanding of concepts relating to private property. In Mary Jane Cain's case there is evidence to suggest, therefore, that her relationship to country had been transformed from one which in earlier times would have invested her with territorial rights based on local band membership, to one based on a sense of 'belonging' to place within the cultural domain of local pastoral stations. I am not claiming however that Mary Jane Cain did not at the same time retain important elements of Aboriginal knowledge concerning the land and social organisation — only that evidence for this is more fragmentary. A brief overview of Mary Jane's family history indicates the complex ways in which relationship to people and place were constituted in the period from the 1820s to her movement onto Forked Mountain some time in the 1880s.

The story of Mary Jane Cain's family reveals the ways in which some people from the central west, the Hunter region and northwestern New South Wales underwent significant relocations before finding a place where they could settle and be integrated into the local Aboriginal community. Some people from the east of the Great Dividing Range were incorporated into the world of those whites who explored the lands of cen-

41. Goodall's claim that whilst 'Cooper was using the language of ... Christianity ... the concept [of land rights] was not Christian' is problematic. Cooper did not necessarily need to operate in an either/or religious paradigm. Reay's examination of the compatibility of Christian concepts of deity with Aboriginal concepts of creationary heroes such as Baiami demonstrates the extent to which apparently orthodox Christian beliefs were reinterpretations of traditional spiritual beliefs (Reay 1949: 108–10).

42. Refer to Sommerville et al. (1994: ch 1) for an overview of both the richness of the archaeological evidence and difficulties associated with its interpretation.

tral and northwestern New South Wales with the entrepreneurial intention of squatting on the best lands for themselves ahead of the State's own timetable for the orderly and controlled settlement of the remoter regions. Whilst the Kamilaroi and the Wiradjuri warriors were feared for their armed resistance to European settlement, some of these people also acted as guides for explorers, boundary riders, shepherds and general hands on the runs established by the squatter-explorers. In doing so they became part of the movement of Aboriginal peoples from the coastal areas around Sydney, through the Hawkesbury area, up into the Hunter district and then into the central and north-west regions of New South Wales.⁴³

This following account of Mary Jane Cain's family history is pieced together from her own written account of the family and local history (Cain c1926), the memories of her descendants (Somerville et al. 1994), the historical account of the Pilliga region (Rolls 1981), the local published history (Pickette and Campbell 1983), census, and birth, death and marriage records. It demonstrates the ways in which relationships between people and place in much of the nineteenth century were organised around the affiliations forged by powerful land-holding families with their 'servants', their peers, and the land that they occupied. By 'power' I refer to the political, economic and social influence that ruthless and entrepreneurial dynasties were able to wield in a fledgling colony whose executive government was weakened by its distance from its administrative centre overseas, its lack of infrastructure and the extent of the territories it was attempting to control.⁴⁴ This comparative freedom from state surveillance provided such people with opportunities to deal arbitrarily and harshly with Aboriginal people who resisted their encroachment.⁴⁵ This article, however, explores the ways in which the same lack of social and political control provided opportunities away from the gaze of 'respectable' society for a variety of relationships to form between people that class and caste divisions would otherwise have kept apart.

It is unclear where Mary Jane Cain's mother was born or when. As she died an elderly woman in 1882 it is likely, however, that she was born either just before or after the time that Europeans first crossed the Great Dividing Range and began the settlement of the Bathurst district. According to Mary Jane Cain, her mother Jenny (usually referred to as 'Jinnie'), a 'full-blooded' Aboriginal was 'brought up' by the Coxes (or more probably by someone who worked for them) in the Mudgee district. William Cox was first based at Windsor but was then granted land at Bathurst in recognition for his role in constructing the first stock road over the Blue Mountains. From their Bathurst base the Cox family moved into the Mudgee area during the early 1820s. It was a time of fierce fighting between Europeans and the Wiradjuri. If Jinnie was 'brought up' by the Coxes around the Mudgee district during this time the circumstances of her incorporation into their world would undoubtedly have been violent. In 1824 the Wiradjuri of the Mudgee district had taken part in a major uprising that had been suppressed

⁴³. Refer to Millis (1992, chs 3, 4) and Rolls (1981: chs 2, 3) for broad overviews of this era.

⁴⁴. Pickette and Campbell (1983) both directly address and indirectly allude to this issue in the first few chapters of their local history.

⁴⁵. Millis (1992) provides detailed accounts of the 'bushwacks' that resulted in the deaths of many Aboriginal people. He also addresses the issue of the extent to which social and geographic distance from state-regulated society affected the nature of frontier conflict.

only by military force. This led William Cox to make his infamous demand to the government 'Shoot them all and manure the ground with them!'⁴⁶

By 1826 William Cox's sons George and Henry had extended their cattle even further north, staking a claim to land at Binnea, south of Coonabarabran, providing the nexus for Jinnie's move between Mudgee and Coonabarabran. William Cox Jnr meanwhile had established a family base in the Hunter region. By 1829 George and Henry Cox had moved on from 'Binnea' and had established a run at 'Nomeby' ('Nombi') further northeast into Kamilaroi lands. Another of the Cox brothers, Edward, decided to take up land in the same general direction and established the stations of 'Ulamambri' and 'Urabrible'. By 1836 George and Henry were sufficiently impressed by Edward's success to establish their own run (adjacent to his) which they named 'Cooleburbarun', part of which was the site for the present-day town of Coonabarabran. Edward himself extended his holdings to include the run of 'Cuttabaloo' near Binnaway.

According to Mary Jane Cain, Jinnie moved to the district not with the Coxes themselves but with 'people by the name of Rogers'. This may refer to Roger Heenan who knew the Cox family in Bathurst and became the superintendent of the Cox runs in the Coonabarabran district from about the time they moved from 'Binnea' to 'Nombi' around 1829. He became notorious for his penchant for black women. In 1839 Commissioner Hunter caused the sacking of Heenan when he reported that he had found Heenan 'living with an aboriginal black woman' and had warned him of the consequences. Hunter removed the woman from Heenan's control and returned her to her Aboriginal husband. When Hunter returned to the district again, however, he found that Heenan and another man, Hugh Griffis, 'had come after the black with a pistol and taken the woman from him'.⁴⁷ It is impossible to say what relationship this woman had to Jinnie, or if Hunter was referring to Jinnie herself. What is apparent however is that during this time, women like Jinnie occupied a position at the interface of racial and cultural contestation over rights to land and its human occupants.

Jinnie's future husband, Eugene Griffin (the Hugh Griffis above?), was an Irishman who came to Australia on the same boat that brought out a Roberts family member. Roberts took up land in the Mudgee district adjacent to his father-in-law, William Hayes. Eugene had been assigned to William Hayes and when Hayes took up the 'Belar' run south of Coonabarabran Eugene presumably moved into the district as one of Hayes's men. William Cox's one-time overseer, James Hale, also applied for his own grant of land in the 1830s. After spending time in the Hunter on Cox family business, he took up the 'Tarawinda' run as well as 'Uliman', 'Bomera' and 'Bundalla'. A tightly knit group of squatters from the Mudgee district (most with secondary ties to the Hunter) had therefore quickly taken up extensive tracts of land in the Coonabarabran district by the 1840s. Eugene and Jinny Griffin worked for Hale for several years before Mary Jane was born, Jinny no doubt knowing Hale also through his close association with the Coxes. Through their incorporation into the network of intertwined 'pioneer' families from the Windsor, Mudgee and Hunter regions, Eugene and Jinnie Griffin were perfectly positioned to obtain work within the Coonabarabran area on the runs that these

⁴⁶. Millis (1996: 54).

⁴⁷. Refer to Pickette and Campbell (1983: 23).

affiliated family groups had claimed. Indeed at one time or another they worked on all the large and many of the small properties in the district.

Jinnie and Eugene also spent a period of time dealing in goods they bought at Maitland and sold along their trade route from the Hunter to Coonabarabran. It may perhaps have been at this time that they married at Muswellbrook and had their daughter christened. After a scare with bushrangers they settled back to pastoral work at James Hale's 'Bomera' station. By 1841 Hale had 21 men working for him on land that covered 80 000 acres, but he retained his close links with the Coxes in the Windsor district. Joseph Stafford, who had been partners with Eugene Griffith in the trading business, also worked at 'Bomera' and married a Miss Budsworth (also written as Budworth). Stafford had originally been assigned to a property in the Scone district and so would have had connections in the Hunter that might have influenced his decision to go into partnership with Griffin trading from the Hunter through to Coonabarabran.

Like Stafford, Mary Jane also married into the Budsworth family before her marriage to George Cain. Interestingly she married Joseph Budsworth at Mudgee, in 1859, indicating that the Griffin family continued to move between the Mudgee and Coonabarabran districts over the years — no doubt in response to the flexible labour needs of the pastoral enterprises they worked for. Joseph Budsworth himself had been born on the 'Binnea' run around 1832. Mary Jane and Joseph Budsworth returned to the Coonabarabran district before the birth of their second child, James, in 1860. Joseph died soon after and Mary Jane worked on a number of different properties such as 'Kianbri' and 'Mount Tennandra' before going to work for the McGregor family near 'Weetaliba'. The McGregors were related to the McMasters who came to live nearby and 'Yellow' George Cain moved to the Coonabarabran district with the McMasters who took up the runs of 'Weetaliba', 'Mobbla' and 'Pine Ridge'. George Cain was born in Singleton and Mrs McMaster, the mistress of these runs, was a Cox from the Maitland district. Mary Jane and George Cain were married in the McGregor's 'best parlour' by the Reverend Alexander McEwen. After their marriage Mary Jane and George continued to work on the various properties owned by their network of affiliates until they eventually moved to Forked Mountain.

This brief overview of Mary Jane's family history demonstrates the deep enmeshment of Aboriginal and European lives during this era of colonial history. Some Aboriginal people managed to maintain their social and cultural distance from the pastoralists, retaining their membership of the local tribal bands as their primary social position. However people like Mary Jane and George Cain who were born into this world, and her mother who was incorporated into it from an early age, found the large squatting runs with their own community of superintendents, stockmen, shepherds, labourers, women and children provided a means by which they could forge new forms of relationships to people and place. Yet life on the pastoral runs did not exclude the more traditional Aboriginal domain. Local historical records reveal the presence of Aboriginal people living in camps either on or adjacent to these runs and these people provided people like Jinnie Griffin and the Cains with a continued exposure to Aboriginal language and custom as well as a sense of 'belonging to' place that predated the squatters. The ability of Aboriginal people to move between these social spaces is demonstrated by the way in which Jinny Griffin became the partner of King Cuttabush in later life. After his death she became the acknowledged leader of his local band.

In view of her complex relationship to people and place it is therefore impossible to comprehensively understand the meaning/s Mary Jane Cain intended to convey through her claim to be the only 'native belong in [sic] to here'. This claim is made in the second half of her letter after she has addressed the other issues relating to European uses of land. This claim is however suggestive that Aboriginal concepts of country informed her sense of identity and associated rights. We know that when Mary Jane wrote her letter in 1893 other Aboriginal people lived in the district. As mentioned above, her husband, Yellow George Cain was, like herself, of mixed descent but born elsewhere. In her collection of notes written in the 1920s, but referring largely to people and events of the nineteenth century, Mary Jane refers to two 'halfcaste' men, George and Harry Slater, living at Baradine in the 1920s but raised from small children by the Cooper family at 'Wittenbri'. She also mentions Mrs Murchison, 'a Windsor native' who may have still been living in the district in the 1890s after the death of her Scottish husband, Kenneth Murchison. According to an 1891 report written by Maurice Hennessy, the schoolteacher at Coonabarabran, there were somewhere between forty and fifty 'halfcaste' people living in the district.⁴⁸ Birth, death and marriage records from the district make a few oblique references to Aboriginal people but with little information given concerning their origins.⁴⁹ Local histories provide several references to Aboriginal people being befriended or raised by whites⁵⁰ and working for them on properties. Further research is therefore needed to establish how Aboriginal people born in a variety of locations and circumstances constructed their sense of identity and relationships to each other during this era.⁵¹

However, by the 1890s the generation who had been born and/or lived in the area before the European invasion and occupation had either died or were very old people. Of the people mentioned by Mary Jane in her memoirs, apart from her children, she was the only one who was born before 1893⁵² in the Coonabarabran district, and

⁴⁸. Refer to *Report from Teacher, Public School, Coonabarabran to the Chief Inspector. Re, necessity for establishing a separate school for Aboriginal Children in the vicinity of Coonabarabran* (Department of Public Instruction 1891).

⁴⁹. Refer to Wood (1998) for an examination of the role played by civil registration practices associated with births, deaths and marriages in positioning Aboriginal people vis-a-vis non-Aboriginal colonial society.

⁵⁰. For example Quaker Tommy continued to live on his land in friendship with its white owners and two Aboriginal girls raised by the Carlows on 'Dandry' (Pickette and Campbell 1983: 45). Whilst it appears that the first generation to encounter white people tended to stay in their own district if possible it is difficult to assess from these accounts to what extent the following generations stayed on their land or moved away for work or marriage reasons. By the 1840s the Crown Lands Commissioner Graham Hunter notes that whilst most Aborigines would never leave their own territory, some were by then prepared to travel away from their lands in the company of whites (Historical Records of Australia, xxii: 174). Refer also to Rolls (1981) which mentions numerous cases of Aboriginal people in the district living and travelling with whites.

⁵¹. Refer however to Wood (1997) for an analysis of the difficulties faced by Aboriginal people such as Jimmy Governor during the second half of the nineteenth century in their attempts to accommodate the often conflicting social dynamics affecting identity formation and social place. Also refer to Wood (1998) for an examination of the bureaucratic practices associated with constructions of Aboriginal identity in the nineteenth century and their potentials for either the social marginalisation or incorporation of Aboriginal people into colonial society.

⁵². Mary Jane Griffin was born at 'Toorawandi' on 26 February 1844.

despite some moving around the wider region as a younger person, remained there to marry and raise her children. On a straightforward reading of her words she therefore certainly 'belonged' to the district, although it is highly likely that there were descendants of the original inhabitants of the area still living there too. Undoubtedly they formed a core group of the 'half caste' people mentioned by Hennessy above, but not mentioned in Mary Jane Cain's memoirs.⁵³ Once again the issue became one of interpretation, how she defined their relationship to her and to place. Another reading of the words is that she was the only 'native' living on the reserve at the time and therefore entitled to rations as a resident of that reserve. Given the explicit reference to her family she is obviously positioning herself in a matriarchal role where George and her children are represented as her dependants. This could be due to George's ill-health but, more speculatively, it could also reflect the matrilineal ordering of Kamilaroi social organisation.

It is possible, however, that she also referred to an Aboriginal sense of 'belonging' to the country as a result of her birth in the district imbuing her with certain rights to country. Marie Reay claims that birth place was still recognised as a privileged criteria for acceptance into the local social group by the generation that came after Mary Cain in some areas of New South Wales. According to Reay, up until 1914 it was customary for a person born locally to be accepted for initiation into the local group regardless of his parents' place of origin (Reay 1949: 106). If the same group recruitment processes operated in the Coonabarabran district as did in the other northwestern districts researched by Reay, the fact that her mother was probably born elsewhere, and had certainly spent some of her youth in the Mudgee district, would have been of less relevance than Mary Jane Cain's own natal connections to the district. It is possible that the local privileging of birthplace that continues today amongst those born even two or three generations after Mary Jane Cain represents a continuity of this orientation.⁵⁴

Significantly, Mary Jane Cain's granddaughter, Violet Robinson, refers to this birth connection as a critical factor in the construction of her rights to speak about people and place. She was born in 1917 'right there under the [Forked] mountain' (Somerville et al. 1994: 81). According to Goodall (1996: 16), in Kamilaroi ceremonies people would sit 'on the part of the ceremonial ground which was closest to their own lands, their *tauri* ... And the initiates were instructed to sit in the ceremonial circles in such a way that they each faced their own *tauri*'. When Sommerville visited Violet Robinson at Gunnedah, Violet's explanation of why she was not entitled to speak about Gunnedah matters, even after living there for 52 years, is suggestive of a continuity of these concepts of rights and responsibilities to country, with identity based on people's birthplace and salient distinguishing features of land:

When I [Somerville] went to talk to her about Burrabeedee she looked into the distance from where she habitually sits at her table and said, 'It's a funny thing, I sit here and I could just write everything about Burrabeedee looking away to the

⁵³. It is obvious from a straightforward reading of her manuscripts that Mary Jane Cain was intending to write a pastoral history of the district.

⁵⁴. Refer for example to comments made by Violet Robinson and Laura Cain where they speak of the central aspect of their Aboriginal identities being their birthplace at Coonabarabran, specifically for its relationship to the mountains (Somerville et al. 1994: 82-3).

mountain'. She always sits looking west towards Forky Mountain. Violet explained to me that many people come and ask her to speak about the history of Gunnedah:

Yeah well, I tell 'em I can't talk their language, I can only talk me own. I'm not from Gunnedah ... How can I talk about my 'ome and theirs too. I can talk about Coonabarabran, that's me 'ome town (Somerville et al. 1994: 82-3).

Evidence presented in this article therefore suggests that the apparent Europeanisation of Aboriginal people in the Coonabarabran district of New South Wales conceals deeper connections with 'classical' forms of social organisation, cultural beliefs and practices than is readily apparent by focusing simply on the changes they have undergone or the losses that they have suffered. I have argued therefore that it is important to understand the dynamic processes that contributed to the transformations in their society in order to understand how that which was severely disrupted and altered was nevertheless able to survive and renew. I would argue that for this to have occurred fundamental aspects of Aboriginal social organisation and cultural beliefs were preserved as the foundation of the transformed relationships they developed in response to the challenges encountered after the British invasion.

By using the family history of Mary Jane Cain's family as a case study, I have explored some of the factors that contributed to her family's survival, and Mary Jane's own transformation from the child of a dispossessed 'native' to a woman who, at the close of the nineteenth century, was poised to become the apical ancestor of a new community. Important factors included the ability of Aboriginal people to use the networks that opened up to them through European patronage at the same time as they related to other Aboriginal people who remained on their own country. I have presented evidence to suggest that the patterns of human movement precipitated by the drive to claim pastoral lands in many ways followed Indigenous pathways between place that had been used by people for trade or raids or warfare in the past. New movements did not therefore always represent radical reorientations towards relationships with other people's country. By 1893 Mary Jane Cain had reasserted her birth connections to place as the basis for her own identity and she was at the beginning of an era that would see other people journey to Forked Mountain to establish (or re-establish) their association with the area. In a future article I will explore how, within the first two decades of the twentieth century, the 'Burrabeedee' people would emerge as a recognised community as a result of her generosity and the scope of her vision.

At the same time as I have explored these new, historically constructed connections to place, and their relationship to concepts of 'belonging' to land that pre-dated the British invasion, I have attempted to bring a critical approach to the issue of how these connections have been preserved and reproduced and the ways in which they have been transformed. In particular I have pointed to the conceptual problems that can arise where models of social organisation or custodial rights and responsibilities are applied that may not be appropriate for certain areas in New South Wales, or which may be appropriate but for which there is little evidence. Many of the problems concerning interpretation that arise in this area have been shown to result from this lack of available evidence concerning 'classical' social organisation in this region. It is tempting to draw, therefore, on pan-Aboriginal models that rely heavily on material from outside the area, but care must be taken when doing so. By examining the material presented

here, I hope therefore to probe for weaknesses in the historical record that require further research and to demonstrate the usefulness of employing a framework that focuses on European and Aboriginal connections. By doing so it is possible to trace an outline of those changes associated with the emergence of renewed forms of Aboriginal community identity.

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