

LOOK AT THE LAND AND SEE WHAT IT WILL TEACH YOU

Father Eugene Stockton Forest Dweller

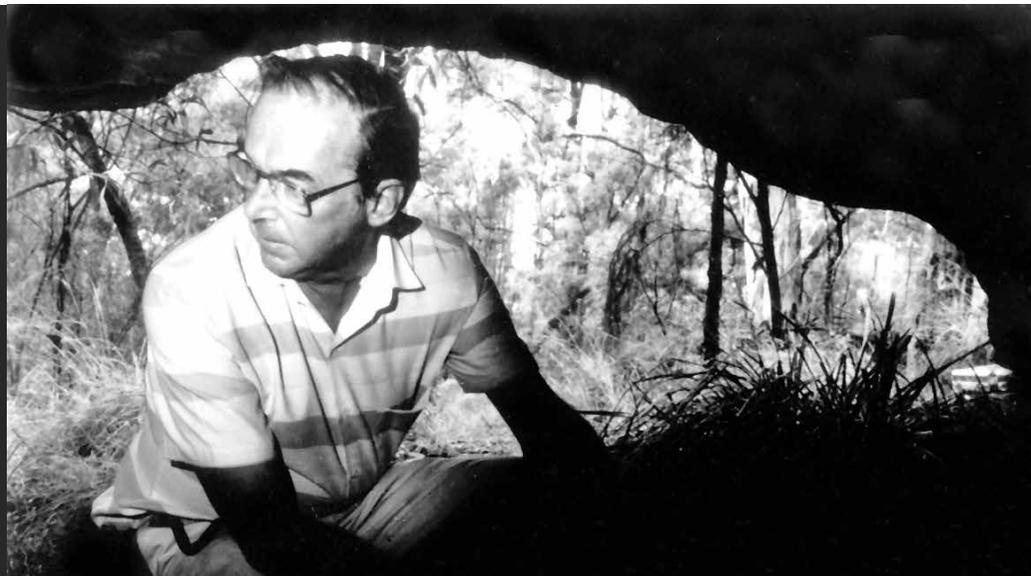
It was when Eugene Stockton picked up some stones beside the driveway at his secondary college at St. Columba's in Springwood that his lifelong fascination with archaeology began. He knew from his study of geology that these stones did not belong in a sandstone environment. They had been brought there from somewhere else. He took them to the Australian Museum to be identified and indeed, they were chert and basalt. A people earlier than his own had used these hard stones to make a chopper and a pounder—they had needed these particular types of igneous rock. Later, after years of study, Stockton wrote that they had probably been brought up from the Grose River or the Nepean River nearby¹.

Eugene Stockton was then a teenager but he had already expressed the desire to be a priest to his mother at the age of six. At that time, 1940, his family moved to the Blue Mountains, to Lawson. The boy was always walking about in the bush and this is what formed him spiritually. Later he would excavate sites around Lawson, digging into the past of the First Nations people who had lived an open-air life. He started school at Our Lady of the Nativity school in Lawson. From there he went to a boarding school in Hunter's Hill, where he got a bursary to attend St. Joseph's

College, Hunter's Hill. But there was a complication with the bursary so he came back to the mountains and did third and fourth year at the secondary college at St. Columba's, which was also a Minor Seminary.

When he took the stones to the Australian Museum, he met Fred McCarthy who at that time was one of Australia's two archaeologists. 'Fred McCarthy told me 'these are Aboriginal artefacts', so even as a schoolboy he took me under his wing and showed me how to identify Aboriginal artefacts.' He then began finding more artefacts around the college because it was a well-settled area and rich in resources². When Eugene was later on the staff at St. Columba's, he conducted proper excavations there. It sits on a broad ridge east of Springwood Creek. But back, back, back...

The young Eugene completed his Leaving Certificate at St. Columba's and then studied in the Seminary course for two more years. He completed his training to be a priest at St. Patrick's Seminary Manly, and was ordained in 1958 at the age of 24, the youngest permissible age. He returned to St. Columba's to teach seminarians various subjects, including logic and languages (Latin and Greek). Now he could dig



Eugene Stockton as a young man

further into the past of that particular area, and of the Blue Mountains. 'I remember Fred McCarthy saying to me, 'Oh you won't find anything much in the Mountains because we know that people didn't live there'. Years later I was able to say, 'Fred, they did live there and they lived there for a long time''

'My thinking has always leaned to the spatio-visual. Even in studying philosophy it was difficult to cope with abstract concepts which I invariably tagged with images so that they could be mentally grappled with. This was the attraction for me of archaeology: the sensual physicalness of the data (artefacts) and the need of three-dimensional visualisation to understand a stratigraphic excavation or to interpret a plan or map.'³

There were no departments of archaeology in Australian universities at the time, so some graduates from Cambridge were brought to Sydney University and they formed a department. As he dug down into the prehistory of the Blue Mountains, Eugene continued to be mentored by Fred McCarthy, and then by the English archaeologists. Eugene's work showed that Aboriginal people had, for example, been there 22,000 years ago (the dates at the Wentworth Falls dig at King's Tableland). He wrote the first report on archaeology in the Blue Mountains.

'After I spent a few years on the staff at St. Columba's I was sent overseas to study scripture—the faculty needed a Biblical scholar'

He was sent to Jerusalem, to a part that was still technically Jordan. He studied first at a Franciscan biblical institute, and then at the French-speaking Ecole Biblique. This was a Dominican-run place of learning and quite prestigious. Eugene intended to give up archaeology but it had not given up on him. There were digs being conducted in Jordan but no prehistorians who knew about stone artefacts. 'I had a continuous stream of archaeologists bringing their finds to me to have them identified.'

He then had to study European prehistory because of the dating and terminology. 'Then I was invited to go on a dig with the British School of Archaeology in the Jordan valley. That was very valuable because I learnt the art of excavation.'

Eugene came back to Australia with a biblical degree and a lot more expertise in archaeology. 'When you get a Biblical degree you've got to specialise in something so I specialised in Biblical Archaeology.'

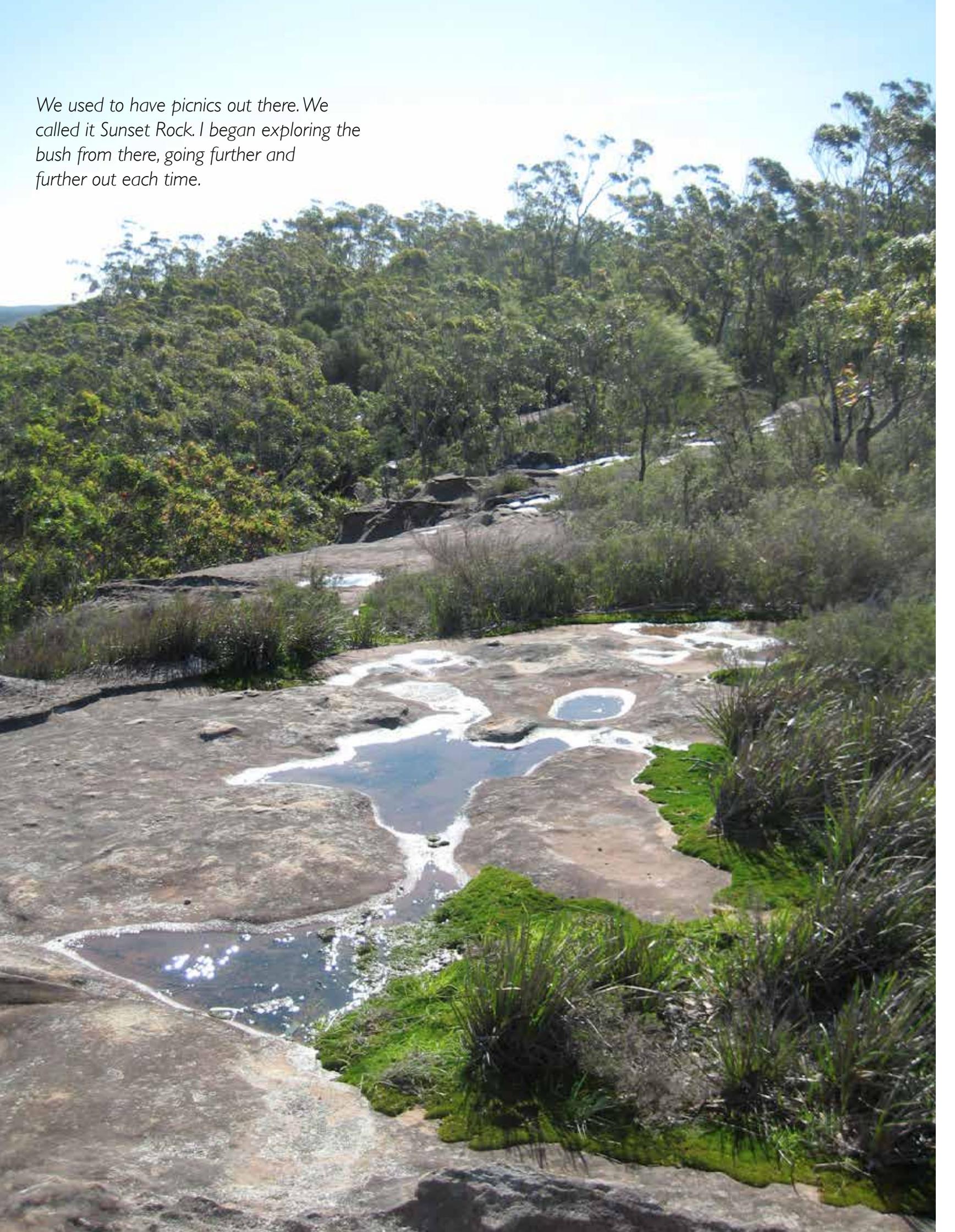
His next port of call was Sydney University, where he was made chaplain and also completed a PhD. His subject? Stones—Semitic cult stones, to be more precise. Both Jews and Arabs have a practice of setting up stones ('Bethel' in Hebrew, 'baytil', 'bait Ullah' in Arabic) as objects of cult worship. Eugene then joined the teaching faculty at St. Patrick's at Manly, where he lectured for the next twenty years.⁴ This runs on the same semester system as universities and in the summer holidays he did some excavations in Central Australia by himself. Luckily he was able to get some help with the physical digging from a couple of men at the Mission of Santa Teresa.

One of Eugene's most fascinating excavations was at the base of the Blue Mountains near the Nepean River. There are two sites there, simply called



Walking in their footsteps:
Photos Diana Levy
Queens Road, Lawson Ridge

We used to have picnics out there. We called it Sunset Rock. I began exploring the bush from there, going further and further out each time.



K1 and K2. He was digging with Jim Kohen⁵ near Shaw's Creek. In 'Blue Mountains Dreaming'⁶ Eugene described in detail what they found there, in their stratigraphic dig, going down into time.

'We'd taken it off level by level, and we'd put each level in a bag, and each bag had a number. It was classified, noting the changes through time and all that detail. Over time there'd been changes in technology which gave some idea of the changes that people had been going through.'

In Nepean River gravels they had found artefacts which were 50,000 years old. At the overhang of K2, they had dug down to 20,000 years ago when they hit a solid rock which was part of a rockfall. To get through was too difficult so that dig came to an end—in the middle of the Ice Age for the people who had left their artefacts there. People had also been living at King's Tableland at 22,000 years BCE, as they found out in a later dig at that site in Wentworth Falls. These were cold, dry and arid times. Digs in other locations which were now quite damp revealed that the site, such as Lyrebird Dell at Leura, had not always been so uncongenial.

In 1984 Eugene retired from the Seminary and served in parishes such as Riverstone, Kingswood and Penrith. This brought him into more contact with present day Koories.

'At first I was not aware how much I was being influenced by my pastoral interaction with Aboriginal people, culminating in 'The Aboriginal Gift: Spirituality for a Nation'. Since all Australians share the same land it made sense to seek out the potential of the spirituality native to this land for those of European stock. The overarching element in that spirituality was a kind of cosmic mysticism drawn from and directed to the environment. This form of Aboriginal contemplation was famously expressed by Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann in her 'dadirri'. To me the single English word which best conveyed the sense of dadirri was 'wonder'⁷ My own experience, as a priest

among Koories, showed me a people at home with the depths and able to converse from depth to depth.⁸

Eugene retired from active ministry in 2000. With others he set up the Blue Mountain Education and Research Trust, the idea being to promote research and writing. He became a hermit in 2001. I asked him, what does that mean?

'It is a life of silence and solitude. You can devote more time to prayer and reflection. I gave a talk once to an over-50s group - we went on a retreat - and I gave them a talk that I called 'Forest Dwellers'. With the Hindus they start life as a student, then a householder; next stage is when you are retired from work and family commitments—you become a forest dweller, which is more or less a recluse, and the next stage is when you become a sadhu, a saint. I described myself as a forest dweller.'

I then asked him: 'When you look back on your life, what are you most satisfied with?'

'I think it's been a very rich life—not much to boast about. Can't say I've been a very pastoral priest—I've felt my role has been more like in the Old Testament, the Watchman.'

Diana: 'What does that mean?'

Eugene: 'One who watches.'

Diana: 'Witnessing?'

Eugene: 'Yes. I think I've been blessed to have had a chance of an academic life. I find the studies to be rich and interesting. I doubt whether they've made much impression on the world but that's alright. I think it's important to realise that in Aboriginal people we've got a treasure we can draw on, and that's been an important part of my life, getting people to see the value of this rather benighted people.'

Eugene has also been involved in Interfaith work.

'It is an important sign of the future. I see a great deal more mysticism. That's a very important future for Christians, the Church, whatever. These are promising signs of the future. I wrote 'The Deep Within' and 'Martha and Mary of the Mind', so I am exploring that area, deep consciousness. I don't know how that connects up with archaeology.'

I asked him: 'How does it?'

Eugene: 'In archaeology we engage in stratigraphic exploration, well this is the strata of the mind.'

Eugene: 'In archaeology we engage in stratigraphic exploration, well this is the strata of the mind.'

No-one would agree with Eugene's own assessment of his impact, but that is Eugene, humble. His has been a lifetime committed to discovery – in archaeology and in the priceless inheritance we have all received from our First Nation peoples. In fact, Eugene's contribution has been and continues to be appreciated and acknowledged. 'Aboriginal Heritage of the Blue Mountains'⁹, recently published and jointly edited with Kelvin Knox, acknowledges the work of Eugene.





Knox says: 'Eugene has encouraged us to appreciate aboriginal ways of knowing and being in his publications such as 'The Aboriginal Gift: Spirituality for a Nation'¹⁰, an important cultural marker in our journey as a nation. 'Aboriginal Heritage of the Blue Mountains' contains many cultural stories germinated and drawn from Eugene's seminal archaeological work in the Blue Mountains. He has been an archaeology mentor and friend to many ... Many people will acknowledge and honour Eugene for his life's work, which has played an important role in telling the story of Aboriginal people who have inhabited the Greater Blue Mountains for millennia.'

A postscript: Would you like to know what dadirri is? I first heard of this from Eugene – inner deep listening and quiet still awareness. It is still alive as a practice. I have heard Lynette Stanger, who is of Gundungurra and Darug heritage, describe the practice of sitting quietly beside a creek or body of water and tuning in.

Eugene once said in a lecture: 'Handling an artefact feels like a handshake across the centuries.' Eugene is a bridge, of time and also of cultures.

Diana Levy

1 'Mankind' 7 (1970), pp. 295-301

2 Mike Purtell has told me that this is an ecotone, a border place between two different geologies, and thus is particularly rich in resources. Sad to say, hunting diaries of the nineteenth century confirm the profusion of wildlife that existed then - DL

3 'The Deep Within', p.15 2011 Stockton, BMERT

4 In his last year, Tony Abbott was a (very unimpressed) student in his lectures.

5 Kohen, J. L. 'The Darug and their Neighbours', Blacktown, NSW: Darug Link in association with the Blacktown and District Historical Society, 1993

6 'Blue Mountains Dreaming', 1993

7 'The Deep Within' p.17

8 Ibid p.19

9 'Aboriginal Heritage of the Blue Mountains, edited by Kelvin Knox and Eugene Stockton, BMERT, 2019 ISBN 980-09941555-8-0

10 'The Aboriginal Gift: Spirituality for a Nation', BMERT, 1995