

A MODERN AUSTRALIAN ENTREPRENEUR

# RUM & COAL

KEN TALBOT

WRITTEN BY  
CHRIS WRIGHT



“

SOME PEOPLE  
TALK TO ME AND  
THEY ONLY KNOW  
ABOUT MY RECENT  
SUCCESSSES FROM  
THE MEDIA. SOME DO  
NOT APPRECIATE THE  
MANY YEARS I SPENT  
AT THE COALFACE  
OR THE LONG HOURS  
WHEN MY FAMILY HAS  
SUFFERED, OR THE  
DISAPPOINTMENTS  
ALONG THE WAY.

X. Y

THE  
**KEN TALBOT**  
STORY

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Geoff and Denny Staines - Thank you

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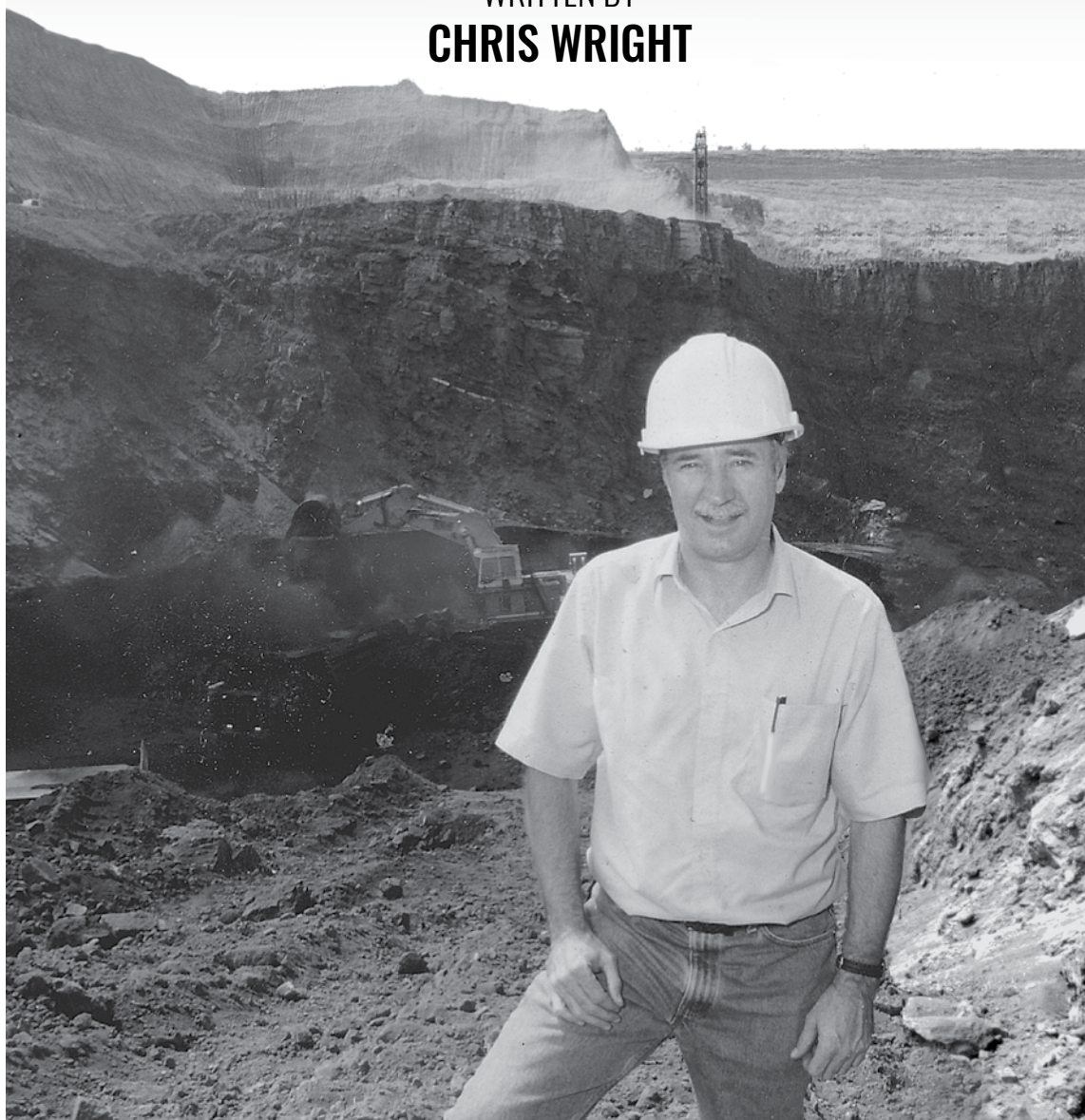


# **RUM & COAL**

## **KEN TALBOT**

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## **FOREWARD**

BY WAYNE BENNETT

I can very clearly remember the first time I met Ken Talbot.

It was NRL season 2001, and the Broncos had played in a preliminary final against Parramatta, a game we ultimately lost to miss out on a Grand Final appearance.

I had been told that we had a new guy along for the trip that wanted to be part of 'The Thoroughbreds' - a group of supporters and successful businessmen that provided friendship and advice to our players.

This new addition to the Thoroughbreds was Ken.

We were flying with Virgin Airways, which was a relatively new airline, so we were departing from a different terminal to our usual flights. I didn't know it then, but I guess Ken had had a few drinks before we got on the bus to the airport. When we got to this unfamiliar departure area, there was a big ditch with a bit of a hill down to the terminal. Ken being Ken, wanted to help with the luggage. So, he grabbed a couple of big bags and set off down this steep hill. Sure enough, momentum (and maybe a few glasses of rum and cokes) got the better of him and down he went, flat on his face. Undeterred, Ken got back up again and grabbed another couple of bags to bring down the hill. Once again, down he went. But again, he jumped straight up. By this stage, the players are looking at me, killing themselves laughing, and thinking, 'where did we get this guy from?'

That rather unusual first encounter with Ken typified exactly how he was around the group - he just wanted to be one of the team and be treated like any other person.

Even if it meant carrying bags and falling over with everybody laughing at him.

That first time I met Ken, I knew he had done well in business, but didn't know much else about him.

I was to find out that his greatest traits were his kindness, generosity, and care for people.

To me, he was such an Australian. He was down to earth and there was no bullshit about him.

It didn't matter who you were or what company you were in; he treated everyone the same, regardless of their position.

What he taught me the most was that generosity and kindness were not bad things. I suppose I always knew that, but his manner and actions reinforced it.

He always had a kind word and time for people, and he was always very loyal to his mates.

I saw him help many of his mates that he had worked with in the mines 20 years previously – the bond they had was never broken with Ken, no matter where their lives had ended up.

He showed the same loyalty and kindness towards me.

In 2008 I left the Broncos after more than 20 years as their coach, so it was a tumultuous time. I decided I was going to tell Ken. Ken and I had become quite firm friends by now, but this was a big thing to share. I'd told him things were over at the Broncos, and I wasn't sure what would happen next. It was then that Ken asked me a very unusual question.

“What team would you like to coach?” he asked.

“You tell me, and I will go and buy that football team for you.”

I, of course, immediately declined the offer and told him you couldn't do things like that in rugby league. He kept on about it, but I explained that the game just didn't work that way.

“Well, I am here for you,” he said.

“And if that included me buying a team, I would.”

Ken was great around the players. He was someone who was always there for them to lean on – again, always with a kind word and some good advice whenever they asked for it.

Sometimes I thought he was too generous for his own good – the generosity in his heart was bigger than anyone else I have ever known.

I will never forget the moment I found out he had passed away.

I was coaching the St George Illawarra Dragons at the time, and we had played against the Cronulla Sharks. As we came off the field, a journalist came over and asked me if I had heard that Ken's plane was missing, and he was presumed dead.



I asked the journalist if he was serious, and then I walked away. I immediately called former Broncos' CEO Shane Edwards because I knew he would know what was happening. He confirmed the sad news, and I still get goosebumps thinking about that moment.

It was a lonely time because I had no one there who knew who Ken was or what our friendship meant. I wanted to be in Brisbane with his family and friends to share their grief, but I still had a football team to look after.

The other day I drove past Ken's old office, and it made me reflect on the great times we had.

It also made me really glad that this book is being written so there will be a permanent reminder of his rich and intense life, and the way he lived it.

I remember one time around Christmas he came down to Wollongong on his private jet to take me home to Brisbane. He had said he would come down at the end of my first year and fly me home after we had lunch with some executives at the Dragons. Ken was his usual unaffected self – he came to lunch in a pair of shorts.

On our walk back to the plane, he turned back to me and stopped.

"I really enjoy being around and doing whatever I can to help," he said.

"You know, I am pretty proud of what I have been able to do in life, but what makes me even happier is I know my father would have been proud of it."

It was the only time I ever heard Ken say anything like that, and it underlined to me what was so great about him.

He was just a boy born in country Queensland, the son of a truckie, who never forgot where he came from and never changed, despite his tremendous business accomplishments.

I'll never know what he saw in me, but I saw wonderful things in him – a massively successful man who helped countless people, but lived his life with true humility.

He was my friend and I still miss him.

Wayne Bennett  
May 2022

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

How do you write a book about a man you never met and never will? The answer is: with a great deal of help from a lot of different people.

I must not have been an obvious choice to write this book. I'm British-born, have never lived in Queensland, and am not a mining correspondent; moreover, I never met Ken Talbot. My only engagement with Macarthur Coal came in writing about it as a stock prospect while I was investment editor of the Australian Financial Review in Sydney in the early 2000s. I've written on everything from bankers to astronauts, but never coal.

I am therefore especially grateful for the leap of faith Amanda Talbot took in approaching me to write this book after we were put in touch by two degrees of separation: her friend Richard Thoburn, and my friend Simon Brady. She thought the distance from the close world of Queensland mining would be useful, not a penalty, that I would come to it all with a clear and open mind, and I think she was right.

The arrangement worked for two reasons. The first was Amanda herself. She understood that for the book to have merit she had to open up Ken's life to me, and therefore, by extension, her life and that of her family. We first met in Brisbane in January 2020 and went to lunch with her daughters, Claudia and Alexandra. They were welcoming, friendly, and importantly they were realistic: that Ken's life, though rich and varied and successful and funny, also involved confrontation and controversy, as any successful business life does, and that for an account to be readable and useful it must embrace the whole lot.

From then on, through six months of research and drafting, Amanda was exceptionally helpful and supportive, I owe Amanda enormous gratitude.

The other reason was everyone else. The only way you can possibly paint an accurate portrait of someone whose hand you never got to shake is by asking as many people as you can find to paint that portrait for you. I wondered how many would be open; almost all were, and it is time to thank them – all one hundred of my interviewees.

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I must start with family. In addition to Amanda, Alex and Claudia, whose contribution was immense, I would like to thank Ken's first wife Alison, and their children (now adults, of course) Liam and Courtney, for granting interviews that must in some ways have been painful.

Further afield I am grateful to Geoff McIntyre and Lance Vary for meeting me in Brookstead in Queensland's Darling Downs to give me a sense of Ken's earliest days; Anne Symons, was helpful too on family and background. Gary Coman was a great source of stories about Ken's formative times in Brisbane.

Bruce Allan, John Doherty, Reg Fraser, Brett Garland, Rod Ruston and Mark Cutifani were all willing to reach way back into their memories to their days at Kembla Coal & Coke. Brian Cox and Lance Grimstone cast their minds back as far as Curragh (and, in Lance's case, to many pivotal moments thereafter too. He also helped me understand the basics of geology, no mean feat.) Roger Marshall could not be interviewed but he and his wife Glory sent assistance and good wishes.

The Jellinbah days did not end on particularly harmonious terms, so I am grateful to many people for looking past all that and helping me to understand the good days as well as the bad. I reached all three of the fellow founders eventually. Gary Zamel in particular was a great help, though I'm sure he must have been sick of me after many rounds of fact-checking. Sam Chong met with me in Brisbane beneath a mounted deer hunting trophy that was bigger than either of us. Jim Gorman and Harold Shand ended up choosing not to be in the book, but I am grateful for the time they spent speaking with me anyway.

Also of vital help on those days were Ross Stainlay, Ken Bateman and Peter Champion, all of them extremely kind with their time and reflections. Faith Dempsey opted not to be interviewed but was a helpful source of connections nevertheless. I would also like to thank Ian Cooper and Glen Caulfield for showing me around modern Jellinbah, and helping me understand what was put in train in those early days.

Many people were most generous with their time around the Macarthur Coal era, starting with Denis Wood, Nicole Hollows and Keith de Lacy, among the first people I met for the book. Hans Mende, Gary Lee, Staffan Ever, Brian Shepherd, Giancarlo Grandi, Gilberto Moreira, Scott Croger and Ken Carnes were also a tremendous help.

In Tokyo, I met with Nobby Fukui, Koji Iwama and Fujiwara Shinichi, all of them of considerable assistance. Had it not been for Covid I would have gone back to Tokyo to interview several more people whose lives were touched by Ken, and Nobby had taken on the burden of arranging and introducing so many of them. It's a shame it didn't happen but I'm eternally grateful to Nobby anyway. Chen Zeng helped me to understand Ken's interactions with China and, specifically, Citic.

Other industry figures whose work brought them into contact with Ken included Phil McCarthy, Bob Cameron – both of them exceptionally insightful – and Bryan Jordan, who helped me to understand the operations of the Gladstone Port. Similarly Andrew Vickers gave me insights into Ken’s relationships with the unions. Peter Beattie, former premier of Queensland, sent written recollections.

Ken’s relationship with the Broncos was fruitful and vivid. One of the most important interviewees for this book, whom I met several times, was Don Nissen, full of sage advice and prodigious profanity. Shane Edwards was also helpful. I met Wayne Bennett at the Rabbitohs stadium with some trepidation, knowing his deep love of journalists, but he was sincere, emotional and articulate. His rounding off our interview with “you’ve had me singing like a bloody bird” will remain one of the high points of the project. Equally fascinating and thoughtful was Shane Webcke.

Ken’s time at Harvard was most important to him, and the friendships he forged there have endured. I met Wally Towner in Rhode Island in one of the very first interviews for the book and found his insights valuable; likewise those of Dan Cunningham. Richard Thoburn is one of the points of contact between me and Amanda, and he was essential not just for his recollections and contacts but also for his assistance with the draft. The book wouldn’t exist without him. I feel like I’m going to know Richard for a very long time.

Turning to the Talbot Group days, in addition to Don, Denis and Shane, I would like to thank Lynne Gardner, Rajat Kohli, Sarah Goscomb, TV Rajan, Ewan Walker, Claire Single and Vern Wills, guiding me on events from Brisbane to India to Mozambique. On the Sri Lanka project, huge thanks to Anthony Conomos, a great source of information not just about Sri Lanka but Ken’s character, as well as Michael Kotchovsky and Arosha Jayasundera. Additionally, no account of Ken’s life would be complete without the anecdotes from the private jet; Emma Kotchovsky, his main flight attendant, and Mark Erini, one of his chief pilots, both spent time talking to me. They were among the last people to see him alive in Yaounde.

Many of Ken’s friends cut across a range of roles in his life. Georges Sabbagh in Paris is one such, and he was with Amanda in Paris as news came of Ken’s loss; so too was Denis Geoffray, who also kindly spoke with me. In Brisbane, Mary Durack and Nigel Saxby gave me a valuable and different perspective on Ken.

Ken was the sort of man whose professional advisors became his friends. Tim Crommelin, Ian Johnston and Brian Sheahan, all from Morgans, shared great stories and insights. Many of the lawyers who became involved in Ken’s life could not speak to me for conflict reasons, but Glen Cranny was exceptionally clear-sighted and helpful. Kenneth Watkins at Australian Ballet helped me to understand Ken’s charity work.



Speaking to people at Sundance was of course emotional and no doubt difficult for George Jones, Peter Canterbury and Robin Longley, all of whom were more open and helpful than I had any right to expect.

I also spoke to several other people involved in the aftermath of the crash, and would particularly like to thank Ian McConville, Australia's High Commissioner to Nigeria at the time who relocated to Republic of the Congo in order to assist with the recovery and repatriation effort; and Hilly-Ann Fumey, who still lives in Brazzaville, and who helped me understand the complexities of those terrible days.

I corresponded with several family members of others lost in the crash, some of whom opted to be involved, and some who did not. Thanks so much to Ann Jones, Susan Carr-Gregg, and Mona and Hector Cassley for what must have been a harrowing correspondence. I feel privileged to have communicated with all of you.

The one person of considerable importance to Ken's story I was unable to reach was Gordon Nuttall, and I did try; nobody among this vast cast of characters appears to have any idea where he is. I would have liked to have heard his version of events and regret being unable to find him.

From a personal perspective, I'd like to thank my wife Kathryn, and my children Chyna and Quinn, for their tireless support (and in my daughter's case for some very handy proof-reading). They are always not only by my side but on my side.

Writing Ken's story was a remarkable journey into somebody else's life. By the end of it I knew more about him than I know about some of my closest friends. I came, too, to understand the level of trust that was conferred on me by his family, to try to translate his character into a work that will represent him on people's bookshelves for generations.

This was an authorized, commissioned biography, and it needs to be disclosed to the reader that I was paid for my work, but it was also a commission without restrictions and parameters: I was free to go where it took me. The only things of substance that were removed from my draft, other than for reasons of length and clarity, were those concerning assets that remain under legal matters 11 years on.

So I came to understand the drive, the humour, the intuitive business ability, and also the vulnerability and weaknesses of the man, the generosity that could at time be exploited. It was a bright and spirited life that sent ripples beyond it all over the world.

I concluded my work on the draft with one abiding feeling: I wish I could have met him.

## INTRODUCTION

One day in July 2008, Ken Talbot sat down at a villa on the shore of Lake Como in northern Italy and began to write a few notes.

He had a thing about notes. His colleagues dreaded them. He would fold a piece of paper into four vertically, so it would fit upright in a shirt pocket, and would start working his way down the quarters in an energetic but not reliably legible scrawl.

Everyone who worked with him, and in particular his secretaries, was familiar with the process. Upon seeing him after an absence, his senior colleagues would look to his top pocket to see if they could make out their initials at the top of the paper, which would mean some instruction or idea to be carried out. It meant a painful process of transcription for his assistants, turning these fragments from a busy mind into some sort of tangible order. His business trips were the worst: more often than not, he'd come back with his notes scribbled on the back of a boarding pass, urgently diminishing in font size as he approached the base of the card. More than one colleague smiled wryly once airlines started printing on both sides of boarding passes, and he had to find an alternative.

But these were different notes. These were not the instructions and ideas of business, of roles and valuations and assets and opportunities. Instead, he was thinking about a book. He even had a working title: "The Impossible Takes a Bit Longer"<sup>1</sup>.

In these notes, he mused what a book about him should look like, and he hadn't quite decided. He had read autobiographies and found them interesting if they concerned a famous local sportsman, but he didn't feel like that himself. "Me – I am not famous and come from a matter-of-fact, traditional and dirty industry," he wrote.

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1 Actually he had 34 potential titles in his notes, most of them referencing coalfaces or being self-made. He'd shortlisted a few, his other favourites were: "From a Small Pond to a Big Pond", "Finding a Way", "Challenging Life's Boundaries" and "The Simple Coal Miner from Australia Goes Global".