

The Keon-Cohens

Russell Hallel Keon-Cohen (1901–1969), affectionately known as ‘Uncle Russell’, attended Trinity College and studied Law and Arts. On one occasion, Russell stroked a victorious University senior eight in the Grand Challenge Cup at the Henley-on-Yarra Regatta, to a clear win over Mercantile. As the crew passed the Governor’s barge tied at the Henley staging (some 150 metres from the finish line), Russell doffed his cap to the Governor, while continuing to row with one hand, put his cap back on and rowed to the finish line. This action was never forgotten by members of the Mercantile crew. Forty years on, when Russell’s nephew Chester introduced himself at the Mercantile boatshed, he was ordered to leave—some elderly Mercantile members saying: ‘No Keon-Cohen will ever set foot in this Club’.

Although Russell enrolled at the Victorian Bar, he initially earned a living playing bridge and eventually became a teacher. During the Second World War, Russell was with the Australian intelligence services and served with General Douglas MacArthur in Brisbane.

Russell’s younger brother, Bryan Tobyn Keon-Cohen (1903–1974), studied medicine and rowed for Trinity in intercollegiate and MUBC in intervarsity crews during the 1920s. With the outbreak of War, he enlisted in the medical corps and saw active service overseas. He was elected President of MUBC for the period 1947–50. Bryan became one of the leading orthopaedic surgeons in Australia.

Bryan’s elder son Chester was at Melbourne University from 1960 to 1965 and later, he became a barrister before being appointed a county court judge. He rowed for Trinity and MUBC crews. He was Captain of MUBC in 1963, when Jim Gobbo was President, and was elected President for the 1970–1 season. In 1963, he stroked the victorious MUBC intervarsity eight to one of the greatest winning margins in intervarsity history, in a boat named *Keon-Cohen*.

Chester’s younger brother, Bryan Andrew Keon-Cohen, commenced rowing for MUBC in 1966. After graduation and a stint in academia, he enrolled at the Victorian Bar, became a Queen’s Counsel, and was one of the applicant’s counsel in the famous Mabo case. In 1967 Bryan stroked the winning MUBC intervarsity eight. Earlier in the same year, he stroked the Trinity eight that won the intercollegiate event, coached by Chester. This achievement—elder brother coaching younger brother, stroking a winning Trinity crew in the intercollegiate boat race—replicated exactly the position forty-one years earlier in 1926 (with Russell as coach and his younger brother Bryan as stroke), and is unique in the annals of MUBC history.



Keon-Cohen family oarsmen c.1967 Left to right: Bryan Andrew Keon-Cohen, Chester Keon-Cohen, Russell Keon-Cohen and Bryan Tobyn Keon-Cohen *Keon-Cohen family collection*