

Introduction

William Cooper was the founder and leader of the Australian Aborigines' League, the most important of the first crop of Aboriginal political organisations formed in Australia. In the 1920s and 1930s other bodies were founded in settled Australia, principally the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association, the Native Union and the Aborigines Progressive Association. However, these were short-lived and had a narrower focus than Cooper's League.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, Cooper has long been remembered by his own people, often called the Yorta Yorta, but he has only returned to the notice of other Australians quite recently.¹ In the late 1970s the anthropologist and historian Diane Barwick prepared an entry for the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, which was based on ethnographic and historical research she had first conducted among Cooper's kin in Melbourne in the early 1960s; and in the mid-1980s Andrew Markus published a selection of Cooper's numerous letters to government, which he had collected in the course of doing archival research for a study of Commonwealth policy in the 1920s and 1930s.² Since then, historians have increasingly focused their attention on the agency and perspectives of Aboriginal people. Both Cooper and the League have attracted more attention; additional historical records have been found; and historiographical debate has ensued, mostly regarding the nature of the rights demanded by or for Aborigines.³

Despite this, Cooper is still unknown outside a very small circle of people. This is unfortunate to say the least. As this volume of historical documents will amply testify, Cooper is a significant historical figure, a leader whose distinctive political programme presented a considerable challenge to governments in the past and continues to resonate strongly today. As such, he deserves a wider audience among both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.

Life story

Information about William Cooper before he came to political prominence in the early 1930s is sketchy. Often all we can do is imagine his life by reconstructing the broader historical circumstances in which he lived. (In Australia there were no oral history projects like those conducted among former slaves in the United States in the 1930s, and the written record yields comparatively little.) Only recently have historians discovered his date of birth.

Cooper was born in his people's country on the junction of the Murray and Goulburn rivers on 18 December 1861. He was the fifth of eight children of a union between a white labourer, James Cooper, and a Yorta Yorta woman, Kitty Lewis. By this time the Yorta Yorta had been thoroughly dispossessed, following a pastoral invasion of their territory in the mid-1830s. One of Cooper's earliest memories was of his mother calling out to her children that 'white man coming' and their 'dart[ing] into hiding until the terror passed'. Like other indigenous groups in Australia, Cooper's people were decimated as a consequence of European colonisation, dying from white men's violence and diseases, though Cooper claimed that as a boy he had witnessed a meeting of several hundred Yorta Yorta men.⁴

Following clashes between the white newcomers and the local landowners, many Yorta Yorta worked on pastoral properties in the area. These included Moira and Ulupna stations, owned by a prominent businessman and politician, Sir John O'Shanassy. When Cooper was seven years old, O'Shanassy took him to Camberwell, a suburb of Melbourne, where he lived as a member of O'Shanassy's family for three years or so. He was then sent home to the Murray to work as a hand on Moira station, where he learned horse-breaking and other rural labouring skills.

Around this time Cooper's mother and some of his brothers and sisters settled at Maloga, a mission station that Daniel and Janet Matthews had established on the banks of the Murray River near Echuca after they began evangelising among Aboriginal people in the area in 1866. Cooper soon joined them. In August 1874 Matthews noted in his diary: 'The boy, Billy Cooper, shows great aptitude for learning.' By 1876 Cooper had apparently decided he wanted to stay on Maloga, telling the missionary: 'There couldn't be a better place than this.' A few years later, though, Cooper and two of his brothers, Bob and Jack, moved to another mission station, Warangesda, 240

kilometres north of Maloga, which another missionary, John Gribble, had founded in 1880.⁵

By 1884 Cooper had returned to Maloga, where he decided to follow the rest of his brothers and sisters in converting to Christianity. 'I must give my heart to God', he told Daniel Matthews after a service one day. In June that year he married a Yorta Yorta woman, Annie Clarendon Murrie. They were to have two children, only one of whom survived, before Annie died in 1889. By this time Cooper and other Yorta Yorta had moved onto Cumeroogunga, a supervised reserve or station founded nearby in 1886–87 by the New South Wales Aborigines Protection Board after Matthews had lost the confidence of his backers, the Aborigines Protection Association.⁶ Cumeroogunga meant 'our home' in the Yorta Yorta language. There, in 1893, Cooper married Agnes Hamilton, a woman from Coranderrk, a Victorian reserve whose people had been closely associated with Maloga and Cumeroogunga. They had six children together before Agnes's death in 1910.⁷

Cumeroogunga flourished in its first twenty or so years, becoming the Protection Board's most successful station. Aboriginal people cleared 365 hectares of the 1200-hectare reserve and cultivated it in small family blocks. The income they derived from harvests of wheat and other crops was supplemented by the wages the men were able to command on pastoral properties in the district or further afield, while their families fished, cultivated vegetables and fruit, and raised cattle on the station. From 1908, however, the people's livelihood was increasingly threatened by a series of Board policies. Originally, their farming was frustrated by a lack of capital, later by the Board, which demanded they work the land for the Board's own coffers and withdrew the Aboriginal men's right to farm independently. The Board's seizure of the family blocks caused much bitterness and led to a series of confrontations between the people and the station manager. Many were expelled on disciplinary grounds. Cooper, it would seem, was among them (97); in the 1930s one of his associates related that Cooper 'had a quarrel with the Manager and moved to Victoria and had a little home near the Murray'.⁸

This must have been a severe blow to Cooper and his family, but he managed to earn a living throughout the 1910s and 1920s by working as a shearer, drover, horse-breaker and general rural labourer in Queensland, South Australia, New South Wales and Victoria. It

was, not surprisingly, 'a very hard life'. During this period he was a member of the Australian Workers' Union and acted as a spokesman for Aboriginal workers in western New South Wales and central Victoria. He had, according to one of his political supporters in the 1930s, a 'longing to help his people'.⁹

In the early 1930s, Cooper, now in his seventies, returned to Cumeroogunga. This followed his third marriage, to Sarah Nelson née McCrae, another Coranderrk woman, in 1928. In 1933 they left the station, this time in order for Cooper to become eligible for an old age pension.¹⁰ They settled in Melbourne, where they rented a series of houses in Footscray and Yarraville and became part of a small, impoverished community of a hundred or so Aboriginal people, most of whom congregated in Fitzroy and other inner-city suburbs after fleeing Cumeroogunga or reserves controlled by the Victorian Board for the Protection of Aborigines. Margaret Tucker, a member of the Australian Aborigines' League, later recalled meeting in one of the houses Cooper rented. It had neither gas nor electricity and they sat around the fire, 'the candles flickering on the mantelpiece'. Yet, by moving off a government station, Cooper won the freedom to take up his people's cause. For the next seven years of his life he devoted himself to this. He and his wife remained in Melbourne until 1940 when, his health failing, they decided to return to Cooper's own country. He died shortly afterwards, on 29 March 1941, and was buried at Cumeroogunga.¹¹

In many respects Cooper was typical of Aboriginal political leaders in the 1920s and 1930s — and even the post-war years — in the most intensely colonised areas of Australia. Unlike the men who led protest at Coranderrk in the 1870s and 1880s, one of the first formally organised Aboriginal political campaigns in Australia,¹² Cooper's authority as a spokesman does not appear to have had a customary basis. Instead, it seems to have rested on the broad historical experience he had acquired as a result of living and working in the general community for many years. During much of his life Cooper enjoyed many of the legal rights and privileges of other Australians, largely escaping the most severe of the special laws that increasingly blighted the lives of Aboriginal people in settled areas. However, he knew of these and the suffering they caused, and he, too, had fallen foul of discriminatory laws in his later years. More generally, his life was determined by the lack of opportunities afforded

Aboriginal people; for example, he had little money and his formal education amounted only to several months of regular schooling as a child and some literacy classes as an adult.

Cooper's mission education nevertheless shaped much of his political work. (In recent decades Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal critics of missionary work have derided more than they have understood the work of missionaries and their impact on Aboriginal people.) Cooper's mentor, Daniel Matthews, represented a tradition of humanitarianism that influenced Aboriginal affairs from time to time throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Like an earlier generation of humanitarians in the 1830s and 1840s, Matthews believed indigenous people had 'valid claims on the Government' of the Australian colonies: the original landowners had been 'robbed...of their birthright' and had barely received any 'compensation'. More importantly, Matthews' evangelical work provided Cooper and other Yorta Yorta with powerful ways of understanding and protesting against their plight, and so helped equip them to fight for equality. First, Christian teachings were a powerful antidote to racism for Aborigines, as for other colonised peoples, since they proclaimed a vision of humanity that encompassed Aborigines, treating all peoples as God's children (**15, 63**). Second, they presented God and religious principles as a form of authority that was distinct from and higher than government and its secular principles, and so was another source to which Aborigines could appeal (**2, 4, 25, 63**). Third, Christianity offered a prophetic or predictive sense of history, a perspective on the unfolding of historical time that promised salvation for the down-trodden (**6, 40, 43, 56, 63**).¹³

More particularly, Matthews encouraged the Yorta Yorta to identify with the Jews of the Bible. He did so both through teachings, especially from the Old Testament, and his music, which included hymns and spirituals such as 'There is a happy land, Far, far away'.¹⁴ In his old age, Cooper still recalled the Matthews' guidance and teachings (**97**), which had helped those gathered at Maloga to formulate a sense of themselves as a people, or, to use the language of the day, as a race. Most importantly, the historical narratives of the Bible, especially the Book of Exodus, encouraged them to envision themselves in terms akin to the persecuted and suffering Israelites (**40, 44, 53**). At the same time, this history offered them not just the hope but the unconditional promise of deliverance. According to God's binding

covenant, the dispossessed who took their destiny into their own hands would eventually regain their place. Cooper and others at Maloga seem to have embraced this reassuring story of collective salvation. He once wrote: 'God's mercy endureth forever. Do right. Have faith in God...incline your heart anew unto the Lord...and the Lord will give thee victory over thine enemies'.¹⁵

As well as providing the Yorta Yorta with this religious framework, Matthews would also have introduced Cooper and others to the precepts of British liberal democracy, especially those regarding the rights and privileges of British citizens. Cooper undoubtedly embraced the ideal of British citizenship, believing, like indigenous leaders in other British colonies, that it was part and parcel of the highest form of democracy in the world. He often invoked British justice and fair play in his attacks on racial discrimination, while the Magna Carta, as the 'birthright' of all Englishmen, not surprisingly struck a chord with a leader whose people had been dispossessed of theirs (**25, 32, 37, 38, 50, 54, 62, 63, 72, 77, 82, 84, 93, 96**).

Much of Cooper's political work was provoked by the contemporary experience of his own people, as we shall see. However, there were ways in which it was also shaped by what had happened to his forebears and other Aborigines on the frontiers of settlement prior to his birth. In his appeals to government and public opinion Cooper recalled, time and time again, the violent treatment that Aboriginal people of his parents' and grandparents' generations had suffered (**8, 43, 46, 53, 63, 84**).

The petition

Soon after moving to Melbourne in 1933 Cooper took up the cause of his people by writing a letter to the editor of one of the city's newspapers (**8**). It was an approach already adopted by his brother-in-law, Thomas James, and James's son, Shadrach. Thomas James was a European-educated Tamil who had married one of Cooper's sisters, Ada Cooper. He had been the schoolteacher at Maloga and Cumerogunga and was a greatly respected and much loved figure there. Since the late 1920s the James's had campaigned for Aboriginal rights in Melbourne, calling on the federal government to adopt a programme of reform (**3-7**). There were marked similarities between their proposals for change and those that Cooper soon began to advocate.

Among these proposals was a call for parliamentary representation for Aborigines. This was the central demand of Cooper's famous petition to King George V, which he launched in September 1933 (10). The petition was Cooper's most important cause, and his name and the organisation he founded were closely associated with it. One historian, Russell McGregor, has argued that the petition was 'overshadowed' in Cooper's political work 'by the grander issues of the uplift of the Aboriginal race and the granting of citizenship rights', but this obscures the fact that it continued to occupy a very important place in Cooper's mind and in his campaigning. He pressed the main claim of the petition repeatedly during the 1930s (35, 50, 52–55, 58, 65, 69, 93, 96, 99). As such, it warrants considerable attention.¹⁶

Petitioning government was an important political technique in Britain and her colonies during the nineteenth century. Indeed, Cooper had done this in the 1880s, when he and other Yorta Yorta men appealed to government for grants of land (1, 2). Petitioning government was less common in the twentieth century and petitioning the imperial monarch even less so. Nevertheless, Jane Duren, an elderly Aboriginal woman in New South Wales, had appealed to King George V in 1926 over the loss of reserve lands and other matters. The following year the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association discussed it at a well-reported meeting in Sydney, and Cooper had probably heard of this. However, Cooper's idea of petitioning the King had deeper roots than this.¹⁷

There was a strongly held belief among Aboriginal people on New South Wales reserves, as well as on Coranderrk, that Queen Victoria had granted their reserve lands to them (98), just as there was a strong belief among indigenous people in New Zealand, South Africa and other British colonies in the Queen's bounty. As a result, historian Heather Goodall has pointed out, there was an assumption that their rights had been recognised 'at the highest levels of the British state'. Cooper, as a resident of Maloga and Cumeroogunga, to which many Coranderrk residents had fled between the 1870s and 1890s, probably shared this historical understanding. Thus, it is not surprising that he considered an appeal to one of Queen Victoria's successors.¹⁸

Fundamental to the tradition regarding Queen Victoria was a belief that Aborigines had a special relationship with the British monarch.

Given the important place of reciprocity in Aboriginal culture, it is probable that Cooper saw the King in terms of a kinship relationship. He often emphasised Aborigines' loyalty to King George V (**37, 71, 80**) and implied that the monarch had an obligation to honour. At the same time, Cooper believed that the King continued to have the right to intervene in Aboriginal matters, and maintained that Aborigines had a special right of appeal on the grounds that the Crown had reserved certain powers in respect of Aborigines (**50**). Other Aborigines who shared Cooper's historical experience and knowledge also recommended petitioning the King. In the same month that Cooper launched his petition a New South Wales Aboriginal spokesman, Joe Anderson, otherwise known as King Burruga, called a meeting to consider a petition to the King. He, too, called for representation in the federal parliament (**12**).¹⁹

Cooper's petitioning of the British monarch also probably owed something to his knowledge of and interest in Maori political representation. This might have derived from time he spent working in New Zealand, though he and Shadrach James had a strong interest in the status of other indigenous peoples and were familiar with government policies and practices concerning them (**7, 13, 63**). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Maori had petitioned Queen Victoria and her successor to the throne on several occasions and even travelled to England to present their appeals to her authority. Cooper frequently referred to the fact of Maori representation in the New Zealand parliament (**10, 21, 25, 39, 44, 51, 54, 63**) — four Maori seats were created in 1867 — when advocating the principal demand of his petition.²⁰

Cooper also saw his petition to the King in strategic terms. Like white organisations such as the Association for the Protection of Native Races and white activists such as Mary Bennett, Cooper appreciated the value of appealing to British opinion. He corresponded with the London-based Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society, whose campaigning for Aboriginal rights he greatly admired (**41, 44, 57**).

The content of the petition, like its origins, is also a matter of interpretation. It contained three demands, but there can be little doubt that Aboriginal representation in the national parliament was the primary one as far as Cooper was concerned (**65**). This is evident in the earliest political activity associated with the petition; having

launched it, he tried to form a deputation of Aboriginal leaders to present the plea to the federal government (19). This is also apparent, though, in statements Cooper made in the late 1930s (65, 69, 93, 96).

Aboriginal representation was important to Cooper and the League for two reasons. Government policy was determined without any consideration of Aboriginal opinion, and Aboriginal people greatly resented this. Consequently, Cooper envisaged a Member of Parliament speaking on Aborigines' behalf, acting as an advocate for their interests and a champion of their rights (51, 69). This Aboriginal voice was particularly important, Cooper claimed, because Aboriginal perspectives differed markedly to those of whites. It was a matter of what Cooper called 'thinking black'. This, he insisted, was not something whites could readily do (30, 63, 77).

The petition not only called for an Aboriginal representative in parliament but also for the right to propose an MP; hence, Cooper called for someone 'to be Chosen by My People'. There are other reasons, too, for regarding the petition as an assertion of Aboriginality. Cooper and his associates decided it should be signed by Aborigines only, and he saw it as a means of reaching out to other Aboriginal people. As far as he was concerned, it was the duty of every Aboriginal person to sign it (14).²¹

The petition was Aboriginal too in the sense that its principal demand was not simply a demand for the same rights as other Australians. Its call for Aboriginal representation constituted a demand for a special right, a right for Aborigines on the basis of their being the indigenous people of the country. This was certainly how other Aboriginal campaigners, such as Bill Ferguson, secretary of the Aborigines Progressive Association, characterised it when, in contrast to Cooper, he expressed a preference for a campaign for 'ordinary citizen rights'.²²

It might also be suggested that an assertion of Aboriginal sovereignty is evident in Cooper's call for Aboriginal representation. This possibility might seem far-fetched were it not for the fact that on one occasion Cooper called for an Aboriginal state (53). Significantly, this occurred when he decided in 1937 to finally forward the petition to the King.²³ It is also the only time when Cooper, who was a fluent speaker, literally speaks in the historical record (53). Ten years earlier a petition had been presented to the federal parliament calling

for a 'model Aboriginal state'. It attracted serious attention, and there can be little doubt Cooper knew of this petition since Shadrach James supported its call for an Aboriginal state (3).²⁴

Consideration of the petition reveals some of the basic assumptions that informed Cooper's political campaigning. Cooper's belief that the King retained the right to intervene in Aboriginal affairs depended on a premise regarding a particular historical relationship between Aborigines and the Crown. Cooper held that the Crown still had a responsibility to Aborigines because of responsibilities it had undertaken to fulfil in the past. As the petition states, the original commission issued by the Crown to the founders of the British colonies in Australia had strictly charged them with the task of caring for the indigenes (12). Cooper also drew attention to a gubernatorial proclamation of 1836 that similarly set forth the duties of colonists towards Aborigines. Most importantly, Cooper believed that the British and their descendants had an obligation to Aboriginal people because they had stolen the country, enriched themselves at the expense of the original owners, and never compensated them for this. He repeatedly referred to this in demanding government introduce reforms to benefit his people (8, 10, 18, 25, 32, 37, 77).

Before creating the petition, Cooper met other Aborigines in Melbourne to discuss it (14), but it is clear that he was also assisted by a non-Aboriginal person experienced in drawing up legal documents. (One of his closest associates later claimed that the Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne, Daniel Mannix, was responsible for its wording.) Beginning in mid-1933, Cooper spent much time writing to Aborigines and missionaries about the petition, seeking the permission of governments to circulate it, and later sending petitions out for signatures. This was often frustrating, since some government authorities were slow to reply, directed Cooper to other state agencies, or refused permission (13–15, 18). Nevertheless, it seems nearly 2000 signatures had been obtained by early 1935, though Cooper hoped to get another 4000 (23).²⁵

In this work Cooper was assisted by both James and Helen Baillie, a white woman. The latter was a member of two humanitarian organisations in Melbourne: the Aboriginal Fellowship Group and the Victorian Aboriginal Group. She was also connected with the Association for the Protection of Native Races and the Anti-Slavery Society, and advocates like the anthropologist A. P. Elkin and Mary

Bennett. Baillie knew other white people who could lend their support to Cooper's cause, such as the missionary and author Rev. Ernest Gribble in North Queensland and N. M. Morley, the secretary of the Australian Aborigines Amelioration Association in Western Australia, and she put Cooper in touch with these men. She probably also advised Cooper of the relevant government agencies and officials in Aboriginal affairs, and helped arrange interviews with federal government politicians and church leaders, such as the meeting in January 1935 (25). Baillie had considerable knowledge of Aboriginal matters elsewhere in Australia as a result of her own campaigning, and she would also have passed on information, newspaper articles, books and pamphlets to Cooper.²⁶

By 1935 it seems that Cooper had become disheartened and was feeling the logistical and financial burdens of campaigning, the result of his limited education and income. Whereas he sent at least thirteen letters to government in 1933–34, he only wrote two in 1935 (or so the archival record indicates). In the early months of 1936, though, Cooper's cause received a considerable fillip. He met Arthur Burdeu, a white man who was to become an important ally. Like Cooper, Burdeu was a trade unionist, but more importantly he was also a devout Christian. He belonged to the Church of Christ, a church that gave each congregation considerable autonomy and which sponsored an Aboriginal pastor at Cumeroogunga. The two men lived quite close to one another but they used to confer in the city at Spencer Street railway station, where Burdeu worked, a long walk that Cooper made in order to save money to fight for his cause.²⁷

Australian Aborigines' League

In 1936 the Australian Aborigines' League was established as a formally constituted body with a name, a platform and elected office-bearers. Before this, Cooper had made representations to government on behalf of a loose grouping of Aboriginal people, which he had variously called the Australian Aborigines' League, the Real Australian Aboriginal Society, and the Real Australian Native Society. The League's creation owed much to Arthur Burdeu.

According to the League's constitution, presumably drawn up by Burdeu, full membership was open only to Aborigines, while 'administrative positions' were to be 'primarily' filled by them (31). The

principle of Aboriginal control was reflected in the organisation's name, the Australian Aborigines' League. The possessive apostrophe was important. Cooper, who became the League's secretary, and his Aboriginal associates saw it as *their* organisation and regarded themselves as *the* spokespersons for Aboriginal people (10, 23, 25, 37). As Cooper stated soon after the League was formed, this was 'the Dark Man's own ameliorative effort for his own race'. The League's first annual report made the point more bluntly: 'This is Our Movement.'²⁸

The League was not only an Aboriginal organisation at the outset; it continued to be one. This partly can be attributed to Cooper's forceful personality. He had, Burdeu remarked in 1940, 'very definite opinions' and impressed them upon associates like Burdeu and Baillie. However, Burdeu also played an important role in this. Although he became president of the League soon after its formation and helped formulate its objectives, he worked in a manner sympathetic to the Aboriginal members' aspirations. He strongly believed Aborigines should be in the forefront of the political struggle for Aboriginal rights and that this would advance the cause considerably. Burdeu also recognised that the League was a distinctive organisation because, in his words, it represented 'the aboriginal problem from the dark man's point of view'. 'The League,' he asserted, was 'the Aboriginal Voice'. Most importantly, Burdeu respected Cooper's leadership of the League and tried hard to help Cooper and other members articulate their own objectives. He realised they were not 'properly vocal' and patiently assisted them 'to express their needs'.²⁹

Following the formation of the League, Cooper authorised and signed letters from it as its secretary but he wrote very few of these. As Cooper himself observed, his lack of education meant he found letter-writing a difficult task. The differences in handwriting, grammar, spelling and punctuation between the letters he wrote and those drawn up by others are obvious (compare, for example, 14 and 36). However, there are no grounds for believing that the letters that appeared over Cooper's name do not basically represent his point of view, just as there is no evidence that Cooper ever objected to the form and content of any letters prepared in his name. Instead, there seems to have been a harmonious meeting of minds. In writing letters in Cooper's name it seems that Burdeu and others worked closely with Cooper, listening to what he said and trying to capture the essence of his ideals, goals and demands. Consequently, there is

much consistency in the content of the letters, just as there are marked similarities between these and the interview Cooper gave the journalist Clive Turnbull in 1937 (53). For these reasons we have concluded that these letters *do* represent Cooper's views. This said, there can be no doubt that Burdeu tempered Cooper's anger in most of his pleas to government. In 1940 he observed that he had 'tried to keep [Cooper] from any drastic step', just as Baillie divulged that she had sought earlier to persuade him 'that constructive work [was] better than destructive'.³⁰

Many of the letters, it can also be argued, have a distinctively personal mode of address. This is common among a people for whom speaking and listening remains a more important form of communication than reading and writing, and where kinship continues to be the dominant cultural code shaping relationships between people. In many of his letters to government Cooper addresses ministers as though he were speaking directly to family or friends (for example, 44, 47, 51).³¹

The League's programme

In 1936 William Cooper, Arthur Burdeu and other members formulated a programme for the Australian Aborigines' League. Unlike Cooper's petition, the main focus of this was on gaining civil rights rather than indigenous rights. The solution to the problems Aboriginal people faced, they held, lay in reversing racial discrimination in all its forms, particularly the denial of civil rights, and in reforms that gave Aborigines the opportunity for advancement. Consequently, the League's approach was non-racial for the most part. It was demanding the same rights other Australians enjoyed, as well as inclusion in the Australian community. In campaigning for these demands, furthermore, Cooper and the League emphasised that Aborigines were fellow human beings and had the capacity for 'uplift', and explicitly rejected the racism that denied them their humanity or treated them as inferior beings (30, 31, 33, 37–39, 42, 51, 57, 63, 64, 66, 70, 73, 91, 96, 99).

The League's call for civil rights and uplift was informed by an influential theory of historical progress that held that the course of history involved a natural progression through four stages. Human societies began with primitive hunter-gathering and developed through pastoralism and agriculture to 'modern' commerce and

industry. Like missionary and humanitarian organisations and campaigners in the inter-war period, the Australian Aborigines' League distinguished between three stages or groups of Aborigines — primitive, semi-civilised and detribalised, and civilised — and advocated different policies for each. They foresaw a future in which Aboriginal people would advance through these stages and eventually become fully civilised or modern. They called for citizenship for the last group only, since they, like other campaigners, believed that Aborigines needed to be civilised before they assumed all the rights and privileges of a citizen (5, 6, 25, 31, 34, 38, 42, 44, 45, 51, 62, 78, 96).³²

Yet, while Cooper and the League wholeheartedly embraced equal rights and advocated the inclusion of Aborigines in modern Australia, they often made their demands for this by reference to 'racial difference'. In calling for opportunities for Aboriginal 'uplift', which in itself could be regarded as a demand for special rights for a disadvantaged people, they repeatedly made claims in which they referred to their ancestors' ownership of the land and their dispossession. Prior Aboriginal ownership of the land did not necessarily constitute the *basis* of the League's claims, however. Aboriginal spokespersons undoubtedly invoked their indigeneity in the course of making demands for rights but they usually drew back from demanding the rights of indigenous peoples. Instead, they asserted their indigeneity so they could make a stronger claim for the civil rights that other Australians enjoyed. Who had a greater right to such privileges than the original inhabitants? they asked (1, 4, 6, 7, 30, 37, 38, 50, 53, 62, 63, 69, 77, 98, 100). In doing this they often compared their lack of rights to the rights that 'aliens' such as the Chinese had been granted (39, 48, 66, 77, 78, 93, 95, 96).

Cooper and the League none the less questioned the dominant racial order. First, by demanding the same rights that white Australians enjoyed, they challenged its premises. To claim a common nature with whites was to deny whites' assumption of superiority. In calling for 'A fair deal for the dark race' — this was the League's motto — Cooper's organisation was demanding for 'dark' Aborigines what had been reserved exclusively for 'fair' whites. Cooper, moreover, challenged the categories of whiteness, Australianess and Britishness when he demanded for Aborigines the right to be British, and

asserted that Aborigines deserved a place alongside their fellow Australians (**44, 45, 50, 61, 69, 92**).

Second, the League's spokespersons challenged white Australia not so much by deploying their indigeneity — that is, their status as the descendants of the original peoples — but by invoking their Aboriginality in the sense of being a distinctive group or race of people. Cooper, for example, commonly spoke of Aborigines as 'a people' (see, for example, **50**), and one of the most significant features of the League's policy was its rejection of absorption as well as the assumption, which often informed this policy, that a distinction could be made between 'full blood' and 'half-caste' Aborigines (**37, 38, 42, 50, 51, 77, 86**). At the same time that Cooper and the League criticised this policy, and asserted their vision of Aboriginal people as a permanent or ongoing community in Australia, they also rejected white control. Indeed, the importance they placed on Aborigines playing a role in governing themselves was one of the most persistent strands in their campaigning (**5, 7, 25, 36, 42, 48, 54, 68, 71, 72, 82**).

Cooper's sense of 'race' rested on foundations that were very different to the ones that underpinned European racial science and popular racism. It was rooted in a historical conception of Aborigines as an indigenous people who had suffered and continued to suffer the effects of colonisation (**29, 38, 40, 43, 44, 50, 53, 63, 92, 97**). In this respect it is apparent that Cooper and other members of the League saw themselves as a racial minority and identified very strongly with other such peoples (**44, 50, 71, 72, 87, 92, 96, 99, 100**). The historical suffering that Cooper and other members of the League focused on most often was not their people's original dispossession, even though they often referred to the killings committed by white frontiersmen (**4, 7, 8, 53, 57**). Rather, it was the later losses they suffered, especially those experienced at Cumeroogunga, which, we have noted, began in the first decade of the twentieth century. Most of the office-bearers and executive members of the League had been expelled, removed or forced from the station but they continued to regard it as their home.³³ Despite their displacement, or perhaps because of it, they continued to have a strong sense of community and identity that was rooted in their own historical experiences as well as those of the Kulin, Pangerang and Yorta Yorta who had been forced off Coranderrk in the 1870s and 1880s.

As far as those like Cooper were concerned, these people had demanded and won land in the 1880s (1), farmed it well in the 1890s and 1900s, only to lose this security, have their independence undermined, and find their families and community broken up and forced from their homeland by a repressive Board in the 1910s and 1920s. These experiences were woven into a collective memory of loss, oppression and expulsion. This history was often told over the following years by people such as Shadrach James and Anna Morgan (6, 24), as well as by Cooper (25), and it clearly shaped much of the League's policy.³⁴

A considerable part of the League's campaigning focused on the need for land, capital and other resources for Aboriginal people. Indeed, it regarded education (24, 31, 33, 39, 42, 45, 50, 51, 53, 57, 62, 64, 73, 75, 84, 90, 95, 99) and the security and development of reserve and other lands as the keys to Aboriginal advancement (1, 31, 36, 39, 41, 42, 62, 99). In particular, Cooper argued that Cumeroongunga should be developed as a model station, an example of what could be achieved by Aborigines who were provided with proper government support (39, 48). Likewise, the League protested vigorously against the deteriorating social and economic conditions on stations, particularly Cumeroongunga (30, 47, 48, 59). Yet, Cooper was also 'a great advocate for getting out and working instead of hanging about the Mission' (by which he meant supervised reserves), and of converting reserves into small farms for Aborigines (37).³⁵

A good deal of the League's work was intensely local, just as earlier Aboriginal protest had been. Cooper and the League, though, were determined to develop policies that addressed the needs of Aboriginal people throughout Australia, as the organisation's constitution demonstrates (31). Cooper saw himself as campaigning on behalf of all Aborigines, whom he called his countrymen and his native people (14, 32, 53), and the League presented itself as a national organisation representing all Aborigines. Such representation was very difficult to achieve, but the League did actively campaign for Aboriginal rights in several states, including Western Australia (64, 67, 68, 72, 79), and it frequently called for federal control of Aboriginal affairs (25, 36, 37, 42, 57, 63, 93, 94). Its broad vision owed much to Cooper's knowledge of other parts of Australia.

In its protest the League employed the moderate political methods sanctioned by the Australian political system. It held public meetings and concerts, sent letters to the editors of newspapers, and, most of all, addressed appeals to government (see, for example, **49**). It eschewed what Cooper called 'the methods of agitators' and sought to make constructive appeals to government (**40, 61, 84**). In their work Cooper and the other League leaders seem to have assumed that injustice prevailed because white Australians did not know the facts of what had happened and was happening to Aboriginal people. As a result they saw their task as one of enlightening the Australian public about the true situation of Aborigines, creating a body of public opinion sympathetic to their plight and thus putting pressure on governments to adopt new policies (**28, 50, 58, 61, 63, 84, 87, 90**).

The League, as we have seen, was regarded by its members as an Aboriginal organisation and they were committed to articulating Aboriginal perspectives. However, it was by no means separatist in its approach to campaigning. It tried to cultivate good relationships with white bodies sympathetic to its cause, and to work with and alongside white organisations devoted to Aboriginal reform. Its closest relationships were with humanitarian organisations that were similarly pro-missionary, such as the Association for the Protection of Native Races in Sydney, the Australian Aborigines Amelioration Association in Perth and the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society in London (**29, 32, 35, 38, 41, 45, 52, 57, 71**). In the late 1930s, though, the League also forged close relationships with the left, including communists, particularly in the context of the walk-off from Cumerogunga, which will be discussed shortly (**67, 68, 72, 90**).

Some advocates for Aboriginal rights were critical of the League. These detractors included humanitarian campaigners. Amy Brown, the secretary of the Victorian Aboriginal Group, reckoned Burdeu was the League's 'President, Secretary & Committee'. The anthropologist Donald Thomson regarded only so-called traditional Aborigines as Aborigines, and consequently cast doubt on the Aboriginality of the League's leaders, claiming the League's petition to King George VI owed 'its driving force to others than aborigines'. Other activists similarly romanticised 'traditional Aborigines', for example the trade unionist and Communist Party member Tom Wright, who was highly

critical of 'the policy of the so-called "Australian Aborigines League"' since he was convinced people of 'mixed blood' should be absorbed into the white community. The League, in turn, complained bitterly about the racial representations of anthropologists and their acolytes who focused solely on the needs of indigenous people in northern and central Australia and advocated a policy of segregation (**44, 57, 63**).³⁶

The League found it easier to work with Aboriginal rather than non-Aboriginal organisations so long as these were not dominated by white advocates like the conservative ultra-nationalist P. R. Stephensen (who advised Jack Patten and the Aborigines Progressive Association in New South Wales). Yet, the League also came into conflict with Aboriginal critics like the conservative South Australian spokesman David Unaipon, who regarded its proposal for the now famous Day of Mourning as too political (**61**).³⁷

The Day of Mourning

At times William Cooper and his fellow Aboriginal leaders seem to have believed that both government and the public were taking a keener interest in their cause (**37, 52**), but these bouts of optimism alternated with periods of pessimism, even despair (**40, 50, 51, 54, 63**). Cooper was often forced to acknowledge that governments, at least in the states, did not take the League seriously, since they questioned the standing of organisations that only comprised 'natives'.³⁸

In the autumn of 1937 Cooper seemed confident that both state and federal governments would introduce some of the reforms he had been urging but his hopes were dashed over the next few months. This provoked him to send a series of letters to the Premier of New South Wales, Bertram Stevens (see, for example, **66**). More importantly, Cooper decided the time had come to send his petition to the King, now George VI. Cooper, or more especially his white advisers, had seen the petition as a bargaining tool that would only be used when other avenues of appeal had been exhausted (**50**), which is why it had not been presented earlier.

The first-ever national conference of administrators of Aboriginal affairs in April 1937 had humiliated Aborigines, Cooper complained in June (**50**). He promised to withhold the petition a little longer. By August, though, he had had enough (**53**) and Burdeu forwarded the petition to the government on his behalf.³⁹ A month or so passed.

An acknowledgment was finally sent, not in the name of Prime Minister Joseph Lyons but that of his secretary. This promised that consideration would be given to the petition but made reference to the Commonwealth's limited jurisdiction in Aboriginal affairs, and it claimed the Commonwealth and state governments were doing everything they could to address Aboriginal problems. Cooper was enraged (54). In October he and the League decided to publicise the petition (55), and in November he and Burdeu called a meeting to decide further action, where it was agreed to hold a 'Day of Mourning' (56).

The Day of Mourning was not Cooper's idea alone — the other key mover was Bill Ferguson — but there can be no doubt about his part in it. The proposal was very similar to one Cooper made at this time for an 'Aborigines' Day', to be held every year on the Sunday closest to Australia Day (61).⁴⁰ (This was soon instituted by churches and came to be known as 'Aboriginal Sunday'.) More significantly, the proposed day of mourning undoubtedly reflected Cooper's historical sensibility. As discussed earlier, many mission-educated Aborigines like Cooper had a predictive or prophetic view of history. They imagined a relationship between the past, present and future as a long trajectory marked by epochs and days — of 'Judgment' and 'Restitution', 'Mourning' and 'Hope' — at the end of which there would surely be deliverance for their people from the suffering that was their lot, just as there was for the Jews (6, 43, 63). This religious perspective provided an alternative view of how historical time (or 'the course of history') could unfold, challenging the settler account of Australian history as the triumph of white progress.

Cooper's idea for a day of mourning probably also arose out of a particular experience of this settler Australian history he and his fellow members of the League had had in January 1937. They had attended a 'Grand Pioneer Rally and Historical Service' to celebrate John Batman's founding of Melbourne and, more generally, the anniversary of Australia. This event, attended by some 2000 people, had been orchestrated by Isaac Selby, the septuagenarian secretary of an organisation of colonists, the Old Pioneers' Memorial Fund. The League members led the singing that began the afternoon's programme, which included 'Rule Britannia' and 'God Save the King', and they played the part of 'the aborigines' in a pageant at the close of the commemoration that represented Batman's discovery of the

Yarra River in Melbourne. Cooper and his people went with some misgivings but the day turned out worse than they expected as a result of several speeches that formed the centre of the afternoon's programme. They were not so much troubled by Selby's speech. While he spoke of Batman as 'an Empire Builder' it is likely that he also referred to Batman's treaty with the Kulin, which was regarded highly by Cooper and other Aboriginal people since they interpreted it as recognition of their status as the original landowners (**33, 43, 78, 81**).⁴¹ Instead, it was a speech given by Mr G. R. Holland, the chief president of the Australian Natives Association, that dismayed Cooper. (The ANA had championed the cause of white Australian 'natives' since the 1870s and had sought to appropriate the status of 'indigenous' for white Australians.) Holland's peroration, entitled 'Our Island Continent', provoked Cooper to write to Selby a few days later (**43**).⁴²

In this letter, Cooper's conviction that Aboriginal people should commemorate the beginning of European colonisation in a distinctive manner is explicit. In fact, Aboriginal people like Cooper had long believed that white celebrations of their settlement of the continent should be an occasion for reflecting on the dispossession of Aborigines and ways of addressing this (**1**). Selby, who made his living by giving public lectures and putting on lantern shows and pageants on historical subjects, responded to Cooper's angry letter by inviting Cooper and the League to participate in a concert to celebrate Melbourne's 102nd birthday in May. This was eventually held in the Australian Church in Russell Street, Melbourne, thus anticipating the Day of Mourning, which was held in the Australian Hall in Elizabeth Street, Sydney, the following January (**49**).⁴³

Just as Cooper's suspicion that the federal government was going to ignore his petition contributed to his proposal of a day of mourning, its unambiguous rejection of the petition in February 1938 led him to formulate a long political statement, which he sent to Lyons the following month.⁴⁴ Entitled 'From an Educated Black', it can be regarded as Cooper's political testament (**63**). It resembles the forthright statements Shadrach James had made several years earlier, and James probably had a hand in writing it.⁴⁵

The mounting frustration Cooper felt at this time is evident in other ways. On several occasions between 1938 and 1940 he made comparisons between the treatment of his people and the

persecution of Jews and other minorities in Nazi Germany (**68, 72, 78, 84, 99, 100**), and in December 1938 the League formed a delegation to the German consulate in Melbourne to protest against this (**76**).⁴⁶ Yet, it was the deteriorating conditions of life on his beloved homeland of Cumeroogunga that most provoked Cooper's anger at this time, prompting some of his most strongly worded attacks on government.

Cumeroogunga walk-off

During the 1920s and 1930s, conditions on New South Wales stations worsened considerably. The Aborigines Protection Board had pushed many Aboriginal people off supervised reserves and allowed these to run down, only to reverse its policy when economic depression led to massive unemployment and white town dwellers complained about the presence of Aborigines in townships, calling for their removal. As a result, the number of Aboriginal people on stations increased from 6788 in 1927 to 10 467 in 1937, and the living conditions deteriorated further. As we have noted, Cooper had been protesting about these for some time but he complained more vehemently now (**59, 74**), as did Jack Patten, president of the Aborigines Progressive Association (**75**).

Most of all, many of the residents of Cumeroogunga, and Cooper and the League in turn, sorely resented the way Aboriginal people there were treated by the manager and matron who had been appointed to take over the station in mid-1937 (**71**). The previous manager, J. G. Danvers, who understood the people's grievances regarding the loss of land there, supported its development and was respected by the residents (**47**), was transferred to another station. He was replaced by Arthur McQuiggan, who was moved rather than dismissed from his position as superintendent of Kinchela Aboriginal Boys' Home after repeated complaints about the brutal beatings he administered to his young charges.⁴⁷ McQuiggan and his wife were harsh and authoritarian, and conflict broke out soon after they assumed control of Cumeroogunga.

The residents complained to both Cooper and Patten, and drew up a petition to the Board seeking the McQuiggans' removal. Cooper went to Cumeroogunga to investigate and then protested vigorously to the Board (**74**). It sent the petition back to Cumeroogunga, where McQuiggan tried to intimidate those who had signed. This further

enraged residents, Cooper and the League (**84**). The crisis deepened when the residents heard reports suggesting that new regulations were to be introduced which would confine them to the stations. Most troubling of all, though, was a rumour that children were to be removed. This awakened the community's worst fears. Children had been forcibly taken from stations in this area on a number of occasions between 1915 and 1919, including Margaret Tucker, an executive member of the League (**85**). William Morley, the secretary of the Association for the Protection of Native Races, observed that the removals from Cumeroogunga in 1919 had remained 'in the[ir] memory' such that there was 'a reasonable fear that "It [was] 1919 [all] over again"'. McQuiggan's habit of moving around the station with a rifle aggravated other fears, ones which remained strong in what Cooper once called Aborigines' 'racial memory' (**53, 84**).⁴⁸

In February 1939 Patten and his brother, George, visited Cumeroogunga and persuaded many of the residents they should 'strike'. They crossed the Murray River in boats and camped on the riverbank near the township of Barmah, where a number of their kin had been living since the early 1920s. It is difficult to know how many people left, as the reports of the walk-off gave wildly conflicting estimates. Most likely, a hundred or so men, women and children abandoned their homes.⁴⁹

The League largely became responsible for taking up the cause of the people at Cumeroogunga (**83, 84, 87–89**) and supporting them. It received considerable support from left-wing unionists and Communist Party members in Melbourne, who eventually formed a new organisation, the Aborigines Assistance Committee. George Patten became its organiser, and Eric Onus and Margaret Tucker represented the League on it (**90**). (Cooper was ill during much of this period.) However, the League lacked the resources to sustain the walk-off and many of the residents were forced to either return to the station or move away altogether. Some recalled the walk-off as a defiant blow for freedom, others as a bitter and costly defeat.⁵⁰

By the time the walk-off was over, Australia was embroiled in another European war. In March 1938 Burdeu, on behalf of the League, had suggested that an 'Aboriginal citizen corps' be formed, a proposal which implied that military service should result in Aborigines being granted citizenship. Interest in the formation of an

identifiably Aboriginal force grew among other Aboriginal organisations. In December Jack Patten, representing the Aborigines Progressive Association, put forward a plan similar to the League's. The following month, however, a disenchanted Cooper, who had lost one of his sons in World War I, angrily informed the Minister for the Interior, John McEwen, that his organisation's support for an Aboriginal unit was now conditional. The past and present actions of Australian governments had made them unworthy of the loyalty of Aborigines, who had fought in the last war only to return home to the inferior status they had long had. Furthermore, they had no country to fight for since they had been dispossessed of all their land. Until all racial discrimination was removed, there should be no Aboriginal enlistment, let alone the establishment of Aboriginal regiments (80).⁵¹

The beginning of the war in September 1939 gave the League and other organisations an opportunity to press the demand for citizenship. In October and December 1939, and again in August 1940, Cooper argued that the war had broken out because of Hitler's discriminatory treatment of minorities and that consequently Australia could not honestly fight fascism while it was still oppressing its Aboriginal minority. This could only be rectified by the government granting citizenship rights to civilised Aborigines (92, 96, 99). The Australian armed services, however, came to believe that the enlistment of people of non-European origin was neither desirable nor necessary, and so were reluctant to admit Aborigines (though many did in fact volunteer and were accepted).⁵² In March 1941, a couple of days after Cooper died, Burdeu claimed that the army had discharged Aboriginal men who had joined up, many of whose loyalty had been severely weakened as a result. Some had remarked, he told the Prime Minister's office, 'We have no King now and no country.' A few months later another campaigner, Bill Onus, told Prime Minister John Curtin that the Commonwealth's failure to grant citizenship, particularly to Aboriginal servicemen, had weakened his people's support for the war effort. Some resented their discriminatory treatment so much that they had become quite indifferent, 'their attitude being summed up by one Native who [had] remarked that "the natives are being asked to fight to make Australia safe for those who took it from their people"'.⁵³

A few years later Onus would join with Doug Nicholls in reviving Cooper's League, renewing his calls for both indigenous rights and citizenship rights and so sustaining his legacy during the post-war years. Nicholls recalled in the 1960s: 'Everything comes back to William Cooper ... he fired me to follow through'. When a black power movement emerged in the late 1960s, Cooper's emphasis on 'thinking black' was championed by both elderly and young campaigners. A Victorian Tribal Council was founded along the same lines as the League, and soon after its formation Onus's brother Eric paid tribute to Cooper as the founder of an organisation 'which opened the way for us to carry on'. More recently, Cooper's work has helped inspire another generation of the Yorta Yorta to press a native title claim. 'One can be assured', one of their leaders has written, 'that Uncle William's words will continue to be the driving force of the Yorta Yorta struggle'.⁵⁴