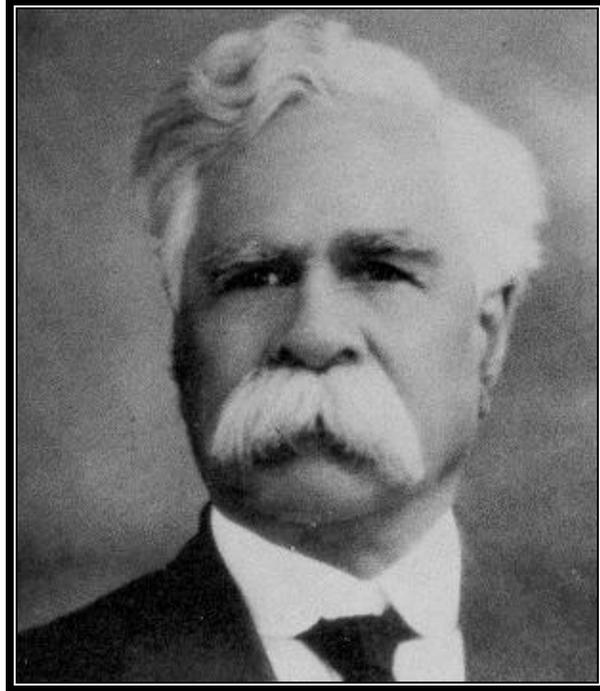


Draft Only

Profile on William Cooper



Introduction

William Cooper, is a descendent of the Yorta Yorta Nation of the central Murray and lower Goulburn region. Uncle William, my great grandmother Ada Cooper's brother, was educated by Thomas Shadrach James, who was the schoolteacher, doctor and mentor at Maloga (1882-1888) and Cummeragunja (1888-1920's). This is where he grew up and learned of his people's struggle for justice and racial equality. He began his political career, in his late 60's and together with other Indigenous leaders of the time, became one of the most outstanding Indigenous leaders, in 19th Century Australian political history (Broome, 1994:166-68).

Background:

Born in Yorta Yorta lands in the 1860's, William Cooper is the son of Granny Kitty, one of the 'known ancestors' in the *Yorta Yorta Native Title Claim*, 1995-2001, and brother in law of Thomas Shadrach James, who married his sister Ada. William was a student of Thomas Shadrach James, who studied at Melbourne

University in the 1870's. Grandpa James, as Yorta Yorta people know him, was a distinguished scholar in medicine, history, politics and education. It was these skills that Grandpa brought with him to Maloga and Cummeragunja, and it was his teachings that inspired the first generation of political activists in Victoria and New South Wales (Jackomos & Fowell, 1991:176-78).



Thomas Shadrach James (extreme left) with pupils at the Cummeragunja School

William Cooper's hunger for knowledge is highlighted by Daniel Matthew's who set up the Maloga Mission on the Murray near the townships of Echuca and Barmah in 1874. Mathews diary entries for August 1874 notes that the 'boy Billy Cooper shows great aptitude for learning. He has acquired a knowledge of the Alphabet, capital and smaller letters, 'in three days and then taught [his brother] Bobby 'in capitals only in one day' (Mr Maloga, 1993:5 1). William's talents and leadership qualities were nurtured by Grandpa James in the 'Scholars Hut' that James ran at Maloga for many of Williams's generation. It was by candlelight in the Scholars Hut away from the vagaries of Mission life that Grandpa was able to teach his pupils beyond the level of education that was proscribed for Aboriginal people at the time, which was equal to that of an eight year old white child. Grandpa encouraged his students to be confident in their own abilities. He taught them to be proud of their Yorta Yorta identity and to recognise the importance of being able to articulate their grievances through their voices and the power of the pen. Being influenced by the leadership style of Ghandi, James was a strong believer in the political strategy of passive resistance. It was a process that required patience, skill and people support. The training of Grandpa, together with Williams' desires to gain justice for his people, provided the foundation stones for what

became the genesis of the Aboriginal political movement in Australia. Many Yorta Yorta people today including myself often wander with a sense of intrigue, what Grandpa was teaching his prize pupils in the scholar's hut. Indeed the concept of the scholar's hut, has gained greater notoriety for those of us that have been fortunate to gain a higher level of education to that of our parents and grandparents generation. It is against this background, and the significance of Melbourne University, that members of my family have been influenced, and inspired by the work of Grandpa James and Uncle William Cooper. Indeed it is an appropriate time and place from where we can touch on some of the key events in Australia's Indigenous history that are attributed to the achievements of William Cooper's generation.

After growing up on Maloga and Cummeragunja, and working in the bush for many years, William Cooper moved to Melbourne in the early 1930's to take up the plight of his people. In 1933 he established the Australian Aborigines League in Melbourne, the antecedent of the Aborigines Advancement League in Thornbury today. At the same time he organised the famous 'petition to the King' in which he gained the signatures of over 2,000 people. The petition highlighted the appalling conditions of Aboriginal people as a result of land loss and marginalisation. It also highlighted the denial of civil and political rights and called on the Australian Government for Aboriginal representation in parliament. The sad irony is that the King never received the petition. The federal government argued that, as the appointment of an Aborigine to parliament was currently a constitutional impossibility, it was useless to forward it to the King.

At that time Koori' and Torres Strait Islander people were not regarded as Australian citizens. They were excluded from sections 51. (xxvvi) and 127. of the Constitution, which gave the Commonwealth, powers to 'make laws for the peace, order, and good government of the Commonwealth with respect to the people of any race other than the Aboriginal race' and to include Aboriginal people in the population 'census'. These discriminatory sections remained until 1967 when an overwhelming majority of Australians (over 90%) voted to include Aborigines 'in the census and to amend section 51. so that Commonwealth could make laws for Koori and Torres Strait Islander people.

William Cooper's daughter Sally speaks of her fathers struggle to gain equal rights for Aboriginal people, and describes some of the frustrations and disappointments that she witnessed. Collecting the signatures (2,000 from Victoria and New South Wales), for the petition 'back in those days' she told me 'was mostly done by foot'. 'He walked everywhere' she said and 'when he found out that the petition never left Australia he was a very disappointed man' - shedding a tear of affection for her

father whom she dearly loved (Interview with Aunty Sally Russell nee Cooper at Footscray Elderly Care Centre, Koori Oral History Program, 1990).



William Cooper with his daughter Sally and sons, Gilison and Lynch

Williams's irrepressible desire for justice was too strong however and he bounced back. In 1938, along with other Indigenous leaders, he was instrumental in conceptualising the '*Day of Mourning*', a clever political strategy that was organised to coincide with the holding the 150th Australia Day anniversary. In developing the concept he was assisted by William Ferguson, Jack Pattern, and Pearle Gibbs who worked alongside Cooper, in 1930's. They too had set up the Aborigines Progressive Association, which was the first Aboriginal organisation to be established in Sydney in 1937, a sister, organisation of the Australian Aborigines League in Melbourne (Broome, 1994:166-68). These organisations paved the way for Indigenous rights, and were responsible for raising the political conscious of mainstream society, to the plight of Indigenous people. They rejected the oppressive policies of protection and assimilation, and demanded full citizenship rights. Social Justice and racial equality were a central part of their policy objectives, and the issue of land rights and compensation were at the forefront of their demands.



Founders of the Australian Aborigines League, Melbourne 1933. From left, Shadrach James Jnr, Mr & Mrs Ebenezer Lovett, Mr & Mrs. Caleb Morgan, Douglas Nicholls, Martha Nevin, Hyllus Briggs Snr., Mr Claude Smith and son.

Day of Mourning-1938:

The Day of Mourning gained wide public and media attention. It used the 150th Celebrations to expose the appalling condition of the original Australians and to focus on human rights issues. The message to the Australian public was loud and clear- Kooris had nothing to celebrate about the arrival of Captain Cook but rather it was a day to reflect upon and indeed to commemorate a 150 years of misery and degradation imposed upon the original inhabitants by the white 'invaders'.



Aboriginal Day of Mourning participants: William Ferguson, Jack Kinchela, Helen Grosvenor, John Patten and Ferguson's four children (Sydney 26 January 1938)

Bicentenary- 1988:

The Day of Mourning wrote itself into Australian history as a significant Aboriginal protest against the celebration of imposed British sovereignty. It was revisited on the 26 of January 1988 when up to 50'000 people rallied 'in support of Koori protests against the Bicentenary Celebrations in Sydney - otherwise known as the 'March for Justice'.



March for Justice, 26 January 1988 Sydney

Lynch Cooper:

William Coopers son Lynch was an outstanding runner who won the Stawell Gift 'in 1928 and the world sprint championship 'in 1929.

William Coopers leadership abilities are carried on through his descendants, many of whom, were active in the Yorta Yorta struggle for land justice, which culminated in the Yorta Yorta Native Title Claim, 1994-2001. The Yorta Yorta is still waiting for a decision of the appeal that was lodged against the Federal Court Decision that found against their application in December 1998.

William Cooper, like many other Yorta Yorta leaders from Maloga and Cummeragunja of the time, has left an admirable legacy, for Indigenous leaders of today.

Wayne Atkinson

3 July 1996