Profile: Thomas Shadrach ‘Granpa’ James
1859-1942

“He was the cog in the wheel and when he left it
left a big gap to fill because he set such a high
standard to follow.” (Fred Walker, Barmah: 1978)
The working profile on Thomas Shadrach (Granpa) James is drawn from oral histories collected from people who live in Cummeragunja, many of whom are descendants of Granpa James. The oral histories are part of an oral history project that I worked on in 1978-1980, which was supported by a research grant from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra. The materials used in the profile are extracts from a manuscript titled, *A Picture from the Other Side: On Oral History of Cummeragunja Reserve, 1981*, Chapter 8. Schooling and Work, pp. 80-85. The profile is compiled from research that will continue to develop, as new materials are made available.


Please observe relevant copyright laws relating to materials and images.

**An Extraordinary Man**

Kooris who have a connection with Cummeragunja Mission and the Murray Valley have a special affection for Thomas James. He was, by all accounts, an extraordinary man whose teachings inspired the first generation of political activists in Victoria.

Thomas James was an Indian of the Brahmin caste, born into a Christian family on the island of Mauritius on 1 September 1859. His family originated from the southern Indian state of Tamil, they were very involved in church activities on Mauritius and used the name Pershow. Beyond these sparse facts, little of his background is known.

Upon arriving in Australia, he spent some time in Tasmania before taking up the study of medicine at Melbourne University. He wanted to become a surgeon but his dream was wrecked when, in the midst of his studies, he contracted typhoid. He recovered but the illness left him with a tremor in his hands. He could never practice as a surgeon.

We can imagine him, disappointed and without direction, when he first met the Aborigines of Maloga Mission (these people were later moved to Cummeragunja) one summer evening in 1881. Later in life, Grandfather James said that God spoke to him that evening. Certainly, he was so moved that he offered to teach at Maloga “without salary or any view of earthly emolument”.

In order to understand the significance of James’ unique relationships with Aborigines after this meeting, it is necessary to understand something of the history of contact between Aborigines and non-Aborigines in the Murray River area.

It has been estimated that in 1835, when Melbourne was first colonised, some 15,000 Aborigines lived along the Murray River. Just 15 years later, only 3000 had survived. The Anglo-Celtic settlers brought with them diseases previously unknown to Aborigines - smallpox, cholera, syphilis, leprosy, typhoid and influenza were among them. The regular epidemics, which bred in the unsanitary and overcrowded convict settlements spread quickly among Aborigines and tribes
were often decimated several years in advance of the occupation of their lands.

Many who survived were killed or driven away from their traditional hunting lands to make way for sheep and cattle. The alien, hard-hoofed animals destroyed native plants. Kangaroos, wallabies and other game foods were shot or driven from their pastures. Aborigines starved. If they took a sheep or steer for food, reprisals could be swift and brutal. Massacres of Aborigines occurred throughout Victoria and survivors scratched a starvation diet from the land or begged for alms near the new towns or along railway lines. It was a time of death and suffering.

Granpa James & Ada Cooper

For most of the 19th century, colonial governments in Australia ignored their plight, believing the “Aboriginal problem” would vanish with the demise of the race. The task of providing the basic necessities of life to Aborigines who had been driven from their lands was largely taken up by Christian organisations and compassionate individuals.

Two such individuals were Janet and Daniel Mathews, Christians who believed that God created all people of one blood and all were equally deserving of His blessings. In 1847 they established a Christian settlement, called Maloga, near the Murray River, on land which had once been an important Aboriginal corroboree ground.

Daniel Mathews taught the men agricultural skills such as ploughing, fencing and shearing and many of them found work on nearby farms. From Janet, the women learned sewing, dressmaking
and the duties of domestic servants. Strange as it may seem today, the Mathews were among the first colonisers to believe that Aborigines were capable of receiving a formal education. As part of his education program, Daniel Mathews took a group of Maloga residents to Melbourne each year. They camped in a field near Brighton Beach and held Christian services in a marquee to which the general public was invited.

It was such a meeting that Thomas James attended in 1881. His life thereafter changed. He volunteered his services and left Melbourne to become teacher, healer and spiritual guide among the people of Maloga Mission.

As well as possessing a fine education, James was gifted musically, an inspired preacher and a talented artist. He dispensed medicines, extracted teeth and assisted the local doctor when he called at Maloga.

On 9 May 1885 Thomas James married an Aboriginal woman, Ada Cooper. In his diary entry for that day Mathews called it “A red letter day”. The marriage symbolised more than the union of a man and a woman; it was a marriage between James and the Aboriginal people. He belonged to them now, a source of pride and inspiration for the whole community. His influence was pivotal in the political emancipation of Aborigines. The Aboriginal children he taught brought forth a crop of political activists who consistently challenged government policies on Aboriginal issues and raised a voice of protest against Australia’s institutionalised racism.
William Cooper

Among this generation was Thomas James’ brother-in-law William Cooper who moved to Melbourne in 1933 where he established the influential Australian Aborigines League, one of the first Aboriginal-controlled protest groups.

The League made contacts with Aborigines throughout Australia, forged links with sympathetic trade unions and petitioned Federal and State Governments for improvements in the social and political conditions under which Aborigines struggled.
Doug Nicholls

Perhaps the most renowned Aboriginal leader educated by Thomas James was Douglas Nicholls. Nicholls won national recognition as a sportsman before joining William Cooper in his work. In 1938 the two men captured the attention of the Australian public through mounting a National Day of Mourning, which coincided with the celebration of 150 years of settlement by non-Aborigines.

Doug Nicholls had an illustrious career in the service of his people. In 1972 he was knighted and, four years later, he was made Governor of South Australia. The man Sir Doug called Grandfather James died in 1942 at the age of 92. Sir Doug said of him, “He was indeed a good man. We native people sheltered under him. He was a Gandhi - a gentle man. In the last years, when things were bad and he tried to get better conditions for those on the (Cummeragunja) Station, he did it by passive resistance. Among the people he never favored anyone. All were treated equally. And there was never a word of criticism of him, by dark or white. He was loved by everyone”.

Gathering of Cummera Residents

Granpa James Daughter Pricilla & grandchildren
His grandchildren, Ruby Near and Lulla Grant, recall those distant days when he taught them. “It wasn’t all Aborigines he taught,” said Ruby. “The farmer’s children used to come over the hill, about three miles, on horseback just to arrive at that school”.

Lulla said, “It was his sincerity that got to you. We idolised him. We loved him. You couldn’t do otherwise because he was so beautiful. He was so gentle in his approach to you, you couldn’t help loving him”.

**Oral Histories of Granpa James, 1978-80**

**Rebecka Murray (Daughter of Granpa James), Shepparton: 1978**

Grandfather came out on the boat from Mauritius.... .he was only young and he wanted to travel and see a bit of the world. So the first place he landed was Tasmania where he stopped, and he studied there to be a schoolteacher. He taught in a school somewhere in Tasmania and then he decided to come across to Melbourne where he wanted to see a bit of Australia. When he arrived in Melbourne he was taken in by Crosby’s who were well to do people in Melbourne. They saw him and took a liking to him, and they invited him home to ’their place and offered him a room there and work looking after their horses. He agreed to go and after that he never looked back. While he was staying there he used to study and he used to receive 4/6 (4 shillings & sixpence) a week for looking after the horses and doing odd jobs for Mrs Crosby. Out of that money he used to buy himself some books and a candle. Them of nighttime he would sit up in his little room and study. It wasn’t long after that Mr. Mathews came along and he met Grandpa when Grandpa attended a meeting he was holding at Brighton beach. Mathews used to come down to Brighton and set up a tent on the beach there where he used to preach and try and gain support from people for Maloga. Grandpa became interested in Mathews and what he was trying to do so he volunteered then to come to Maloga and that’s where he stayed for most of his life. He was only a young man when he came there.

**Pricilla McKray (Daughter of Granpa James), Mooroopna: 1979**
Grandpa was appointed headmaster at Cummera. He went away to Hay to do his exams after we moved to Cummera (from Maloga) because he was only a schoolteacher at Maloga. He went to Hay to sit for his exams and passed then with a credit. Before he became a qualified teacher he was studying to be a doctor. Well then he got ill when he had to sit for his doctors exam, and he caught typhoid fever which prevented him from going on with his medical studies, so he had to give up then because it left him with an unsteady hand. So then he said to him, I’ll turn my sights to teaching, and he became the headmaster then at Cummera.

When Grandpa became headmaster I became his senior assistant then and Miriam was the other assistant. Miriam was the eldest girl but I became his eldest assistant sort of thing. Then there was Shadrach (Granpas son) who became a junior assistant. That went on for a while and then Ferguson came there as manager and one of his daughters Brucinda came into the school as an assistant.

The school was open to both Aborigines and whites. The Maloney boys used to go to school there and Grandpa taught them. Willie Maloney the eldest’ boy later became a teacher at Moama.

He was a doctor and a preacher as well and if anyone was sick he would go and tend to them all hours of the night, even over to Barmah... He saved Lenny Maloney who had pneumonia and my father pulled him through it for which he was never forgotten.

They had a dispensary at Cummera too and he used to mix all the medicines when the Doctor from Echuca would come out and prescribe some medicine for those who were sick.
Connections with Mauritius

He used to write to his people back in Mauritius and they used to write to him. He was a very loved person by his family in Mauritius and they used to always keep in touch with him. Then the time came when he got his 6 months leave from the N.S.W. Education Dept. so he went back to his home and visited his family, and he then came back to Cummera and stayed there until he retired in 1922.

Dan Atkinson, Barmah : 1978

You Couldn’t Wag It In Grandpas Time

In Grandpa’s time he made sure you went to school. If children didn’t attend school and made excuses that they were sick and that sort of thing, Grandpa would soon come along and visit them with the stethoscope to find out whether it was real or not.
Mary James, (Daughter in law of Gradpa) Shepparton: 1978

My first twelve months at school was taught by Grandpa. I was 5 then and he left there when I was 6. I remember the day I went to school and he was standing at the gate and when I walked in he picked me up and kissed me and took me into school.

Margaret Tucker, Melbourne: 1979

He Didn’t Spare the Rod

Grandpa James was loved by everyone and yet he didn’t spare the rod. He was the only one who gave punishment in the school. I remember the time I was sent to him to get the cane. I was only new there then because I used to come to Cummera from Moonahculah to attend school and stop on my. Grandfather’s farm, just out of Cummera.

This day when I was sent to get the cane, I went to Grandpa’s room and I was too frightened to open the door. He saw the top of my head as I was standing there and opened the door and held the door. He said “and what are you standing there for?” I remember it as clear as if it only
happened yesterday and then he said “never mind you be a good girl now” and then he bent down and kissed me on the cheek and sent me back to my class.

Schooling After Grandpa

Sandy Atkinson, Mooroopna: 1978

Education in the very early days was a lot better than it was later. As history tells us the very early times when they came to Cummeragunja from Maloga-those people were better educated than they are even today. Mr. James who was the teacher then played a big part in their education and was a big influence on the people in those days. I think the people were a lot better off in those days as far as education goes. The next teacher that came there after him wasn’t as good as him and then of course after that the education standard just dropped dramatically from then on. Say people around about my age now or from around about that time.

After he retired I would say would be the time things started to decline. The older ones can give a better picture on this but from what I can remember there was a lot of unrest there after Mr. James left. Managers were getting tougher and tougher and if anyone played up on the mission or went away they had a pretty hard time getting back and I can remember those days pretty well.

Colin Charles, Cummeragunja: 1978

When I first started school Grandpa was teaching and then old Burridge took over after him. Grandpa taught my mother, and my wife’s mother. . He was a clever man that fella. . .My wife’s sister, Hyllus went in for double entry book keeping under Grandpa James. They were all good writers too. Then when Grandpa left we used to have white teachers .. . They used to take us out walking you know in the bush and we knew the bush all the time (laughs). They used to take us on nature study walks through the bush. . It should have been the other way around and us taking the teachers on nature study lessons...

We lost one poor fella (teacher) down there in the bush one day, and we all had to go looking for him.
Rupert Cooper, Barmah: 1979

I went to school just after Grandpa James left and a white man came here by the name of Charley Burridge. He didn’t know how to teach a black fella... a black fella could teach him. He was half silly and used to take us down the river swimming. We’d been swimming since we were little fellas. Then he would take us on bush walks and all he wanted to do was look at the bush...like we’d been doing all the time! Anyhow he left there later and went to Moonahculah... I always try to tell white people all the time. “there’s nothing you can teach a blackfella” a blackfella can teach you whether he is educated or not. I said you can’t show him what to do! He’ll show you what to do.

Lottie Atkinson, Shepparton: 1978

There was not much schooling after Austin (teacher after Burridge and James) There was not much when he was there either! The only schooling was when Grandpa James was there. Burridge came after that and there was hardly any education under him... There was a big mob of girls who could hardly read when they left school they couldn’t count money or sign their own name — some of them! If they didn’t turn up at school in those days, he (teacher) didn’t worry. And when you’d go to school he used to do more talking and no writing, no studying or anything like that, or sums. You know, a lot of the things the younger ones today learn in their education we never even knew about or seen anything like that. Teachers in those days like Mr. Burridge never used to write on the board any sums or teach us a proper education.
Clive Atkinson, Robinvale: 1978

Burridge was there for a long time. I remember him telling us he was only allowed to teach us to 3rd grade. He said “You boys would be clever alright”, he said to us “but I’m not allowed to teach you any more than 3rd grade”. He said, “that’s why I’ve got to send my children across to Barmah School, over to Victoria.”

He had children Winnie, Elsie and Allan. So that’s what I found out that we weren’t allowed to be educated any higher thin the 3rd grade because it was the rules that teachers had to go by. The people that went to school under Grandpa were better educated than us. They didn’t want to educate us fellas for some reason I don’t know they might have thought we’d cause trouble or something if we became too aware of the real facts.

Bevan Nicholls, Barmah: 1978

A lot of our people from Cummera will say “Oh yes, we got a good education because we had Grandpa James”. But all right in that time he was one of us, and as he said, it was his
responsibility to educate the people and prepare them for later on. Then of course he moved and we got white teachers. A Mr. Austin came there...a good old chap and all that but he was from overseas again like the other white managers. His idea was “Well look! They’ve got good voices, these people and if I teach them to sing they’ll be good singers” which is what he did. A lot of people from Cummera around about my time and before all had pretty good voices and could sing naturally. If we don’t use our voices for singing we used them for singing out about what’s been done to us!

This is how a lot of then (teachers) used to think. For instance they would say to themselves...Aborigines are good artists...so alright we’ll teach them to draw and paint. This is the attitude the teachers had and I’m talking about my age group that was living on Cummera at the time that went through the white schoolteacher period. I think schooling then was only to 3rd grade level. There were a lot of brilliant students in my age group. Yet there they were... some of them came out of it all right who were able to paint and sing and didn’t make no money out of it! These are the sorts of things we’re looking at now. At my age o.k. I should be a retired person. And yet here we are still battling along, you know? And there’s a lot of other people like me.

Dr Wayne Atkinson
Great Grandson of T.S. James
University of Melbourne
March 30, 2004