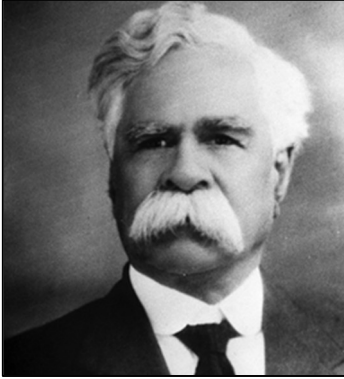


WILLIAM COOPER - KRISTALLNACHT PROTEST – NOVEMBER 1938



William Cooper

William Cooper was a proud Yorta Yorta man from the Echuca Region of Victoria. He had a tough childhood and throughout his life he worked as a shearer, and as a fisherman. In his youth, he was taught how to read and write by a local pastor, Daniel Matthews. Not only did Pastor Matthews teach William how to read and write, but he also helped to create a man of compassion, intelligence, with a determination to make the world a better place. William Cooper had seven children but tragically lost his eldest son, Daniel, in Belgium during World War I.

After Daniel's death, Uncle William Cooper became heavily involved in fighting for the rights of Australia's forgotten soldiers. The Aborigines. At the start of World War II he wrote the following:

"Australia cannot fight that cause in honesty while still oppressing her minority. Though, we know no white person sees this! The last war gave British Women their rights. May this one give the same to Aborigines?"

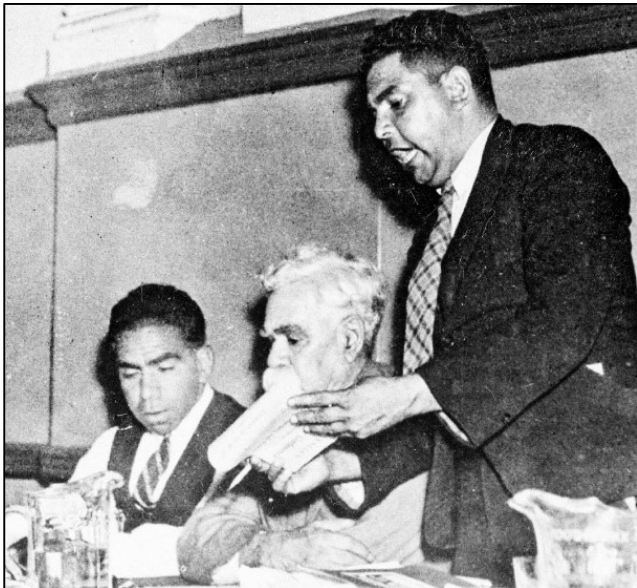


Private Daniel Cooper Mural, Shepparton

Driven by the injustice he saw in how indigenous soldiers were treated during World War I, he started writing countless petitions to government officials and organisations, hoping to create change.

In his seventies, he moved to Melbourne to further his work in fighting for indigenous rights, working as the secretary of the Australian Aborigines' League. At the time, aborigines weren't regarded as citizens of Australia and had no representation in parliament.

His home in Footscray didn't have electricity or gas, and Uncle William didn't have enough money for petrol, let alone a car. He walked everywhere because he also couldn't afford both public transport or stamps for the mail.



Jack Kinchela, Douglas Nicholls, William Cooper and John Patten discuss a resolution, 1938.

In November 1938, events were taking place in Europe which inspired William Cooper to reach out and try to help another mob. That mob was Germany's and Austria's Jews. The events would become known as Kristallnacht - The Night of the Broken Glass.



A destroyed Jewish clothing store in Germany after Kristallnacht, Nov. 11, 1938

The Argus Newspaper, Melbourne, November 11, 1938, a report from Berlin, Germany.

A campaign against the Jews, almost unparalleled in its violence, has broken out in all parts of the Reich.

Synagogues have been burnt, Jewish shops have been smashed and set on fire and looted.

The extent of the damage has been so great that many Germans are said to have expressed their disapproval of it, and have described it as senseless.

The streets in front of the buildings were strewn with broken glass.

The events of Kristallnacht (9 to 10 Nov, 1938) saw Nazis across Germany and Austria torch synagogues, vandalise Jewish homes, schools and businesses and kill close to 100 Jews. In the aftermath of Kristallnacht, some 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and sent to Nazi concentration camps. The broken glass scattered across pavements following this night of terror gave Kristallnacht its name.

After Kristallnacht, conditions for German Jews grew increasingly worse. In January 1942, the Nazi leadership devised the Final Solution at the Wannsee Conference in Berlin. This was the Nazi plan for the genocide of all Jews which was not restricted to the European continent.



German Jews arrested following Kristallnacht with a sign saying "God does not forgive us." Photo: Yad Vashem



William Cooper with an unidentified official, during the 1920's, Koori Trust.

One month after **Kristallnacht**, at approximately seven in the morning, a group of aboriginals met at William Cooper's house in Footscray.

Immaculately dressed in suits and hats, they were headed to the Melbourne CBD where they had an 11.30am appointment.

They planned to present the Consular General of Germany with a letter. The letter was an aboriginal protest relating to how Germany was treating the Jews.

The letter read,

"On behalf of the Aboriginal inhabitants of Australia, we wish to have it registered and on record that we protest wholeheartedly at the cruel persecution of the Jewish people by the Nazi government in Germany. We plead that you would make it known to your government and its military leaders that this cruel persecution of their fellow citizens must be brought to an end."

They walked approximately 11 kilometres from William's home in Footscray, to the German Consulate on Collins Street in Melbourne.

Uncle William Cooper was 77 years of age, so the trip was slow, and he was in declining health.

However, he was determined to protest against the inhumane treatment of German and Austrian Jews.



The German Consulate refused to allow the delegation to enter the building, and a letter was left for the Consul to forward it the German Government.

What makes the William Cooper story remarkable is that aboriginal people in Australia weren't even citizens in their own country at the time. They had been hit hard by the Great Depression, their children were being 'stolen', and there was substantial poverty and malnutrition.

William's grandson, Uncle Alf 'Boydie' Turner, has said "Grandfather could sadly recognise that same affliction of fear, desperation, bewilderment and a sense of hopelessness which the Jewish people faced in Europe... When many countries around the world would not act, he did."

His letter remained undelivered until 2012 when his 84-year-old grandson Alf "Boydie" Turner re-enacted the walk, and handed over a duplicate protest letter.

Today, train stations, statues, scholarships, and buildings are named in William's honour.

William Cooper was an Aboriginal. An activist. A unionist. A devout Christian who would rather buy stamps for his petitions than catch public transport. Someone who helped raise his grandchildren. A father.

Today, he is also recognised as a great Australian hero for his role in standing up to fascist Nazi Germany.



A statue of William Cooper, delivering the petition, now stands in Shepparton, Victoria