



**Aboriginal Heritage Office**

Ku-ring-gai, Lane Cove, North Sydney, Northern Beaches,  
Strathfield and Willoughby Councils

[www.aboriginalheritage.org](http://www.aboriginalheritage.org)

**Yarnuping Education Series**

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## Yarnuping 8 - Aborigines Advancement League

The 1967 referendum occurred after the struggle of many Aboriginal leaders and Aboriginal community members for many years. The following is a brief story about some of these political leaders who supported our community and fought for federal change.

### Aboriginal Advancement League

The league fought for civil rights, constitutional change and against the Governments Assimilation Policy. The plight of the sick and malnourished Yarnangu people of the Warburton ranges reached a broad national audience. For the first time Australians expressed a sense of shock at the plight of Yarnangu Aboriginal people. The people's health, homelands and traditional lifestyles were severely affected by nuclear testing conducted by the British and Australian Governments.

Activists from organisations such as Aboriginal Advancement League (AAL) and Aborigines Progressive Association (APA) mobilised support nationally.

### Sir Pastor Douglas Nicholls

Yorta Yorta man, Sir Douglas Ralph Nicholls (1906-1988), footballer, pastor, activist and governor, was born at Cummeragunja Aboriginal mission, on the Murray River (Dhangala) New South Wales.

He received minimal education at the mission until the Aboriginal Protection Board stopped education and took his sister away to the Cootamundra Girls Home, and he was moved off the mission to hard work at age 14.

The AAL had a foundation member in Sir Pastor Douglas Nicholls.



Sir Pastor Douglas Nicholls and Lady Gladys Nicholls

When playing AFL he travelled from Victoria to Western Australia and was shocked at the poverty, malnutrition and disease he saw there. This galvanised his future work.

Doug Nicholls was founding pastor at the Fitzroy Church of Christ Aborigines' Mission. This platform and support from the church gave him power to be able speak charismatically and to reach politicians and to speak and reach the general public. It also gave Aboriginal people a place to come for support.

Doug and his wife Gladys established hostels and holiday programs for Aboriginal children and youth coming to Sydney for work. They often provided food, shelter and emotional support.

He was well known and loved by Aboriginal people living in Melbourne. His great uncle was William Cooper. He credits William Cooper with inspiring him and teaching him.

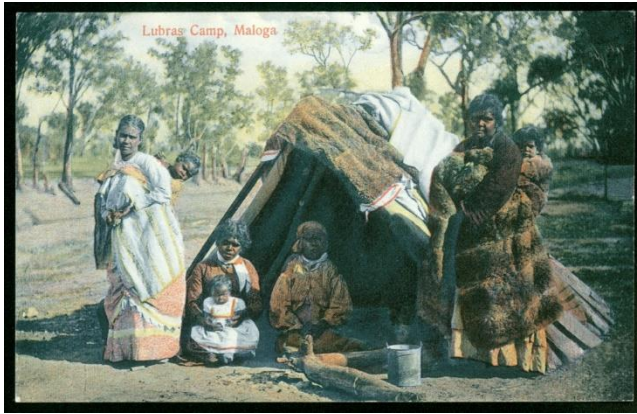
*"William was the contact that brought me back to our people. Everything comes back to William Cooper — the hostels, the League — he fired me to follow through."*

Biographer, Mavis Thorpe Clark

<https://www.nma.gov.au/explore/features/indigenous-rights/people/doug-nicholls>

## Walk Off from the Cummeragunja Mission





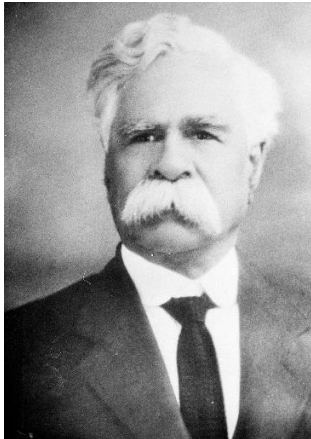
In 1939 the Cummeragunja People walked off the Aboriginal Mission due to restrictive control, poor rations, cruel treatment and the taking of the children. They were encouraged by Jack Patten and William Cooper. This was the first ever mass- strike of Aboriginal people. Please see Yorta Yorta Aboriginal Opera singer Deborah Cheetham who wrote an opera about the Cummeragunja Walk Off – Pecan Summer <https://www.abc.net.au/classic/read-and-watch/classic-australia/cheetham-pecan-summer-2010/11279854>

## Jack Patten

Yorta Yorta man, Jack Patten was born at Moama and surprisingly began his education at the Cummeragunja Mission. His family moved to West Wyalong and Jack finished high school. He was one of the great Aboriginal leaders of the 20th century. He supported and encouraged the civil rights movement in Australia. When he returned to the mission, he saw the poverty and starvation of his people and petitioned the Government. This had no result. He was put in jail for his efforts in the walk off. With William Ferguson he founded the Aborigines Progressive Association (APA) and the organisation campaigns for Indigenous rights and an end to the forced removal of Aboriginal children. Jack lived in La Perouse and often spoke at the Domain. He was the editor of *Abo Call* – a newsletter connecting the Aboriginal community  
Jack unfortunately died early in a traffic accident.



## William Cooper



Yorta Yorta man, William Cooper was born on the land of his mother's people. Then his family were relocated to the Maloga Mission. Cruel treatment here made the family move to the Cummeragunja Mission. As a young man he petitioned the board for better conditions and was thrown out of the mission. He had a measured political lobbying style and this and his activism led to the first Government recognised Aboriginal institution, Australian Aborigines' League, created in 1932, by Cooper, along with some of the other foundation members, Shadrach James, Pastor Doug Nicholls, Eric Onus and William Onus.

In 1938, the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of the First Fleet at Sydney, he joined forces with the Aboriginal Progressive Association to create the first *Day of Mourning* event. This was a dignified protest by Aboriginal Australians, which drew attention to Australia Day as the day marking the beginning of the dispossession. This was one of the first civil rights marches in the world. The league was created to lobby state and federal governments on behalf of Aboriginal people. A black power take-over of the organisation in the 1970's changed the management of the Victorian Aborigine Advancement League to Aboriginal community control.

William cared for all oppressed peoples. On 6 December 1938, less than a month after Kristallnacht, when Jewish people were targeted in widespread rioting and looting across Germany, Cooper led a march to the German consulate in Melbourne to condemn the, 'cruel persecution of the Jewish people by the Nazi government in Germany'. German officials refused to take the written condemnation but the protest is seen by many as the only one of its kind in the world.

## RESOURCES

- <https://www.nma.gov.au/explore/features/indigenous-rights/people/jack-patten>
- <http://koorihistory.com/jack-patten>
- <https://www.deadlystory.com/page/service-directory/cultural-and-language/aborigines-advancement-league>
- <https://aiatsis.gov.au/publications/products/fighting-hard-victorian-aborigines-advancement-league/ebook>
- <https://aiatsis.gov.au/news-and-events/news/fighting-hard-victorian-aborigines-advancement-league>
- [https://aiatsis.gov.au/sites/default/files/catalogue\\_resources/r000006632049n1p1.pdf](https://aiatsis.gov.au/sites/default/files/catalogue_resources/r000006632049n1p1.pdf)