

Introduction of Kevin Russell by Robin Margo at Kristallnacht Commemoration 9 November 2009

It is my privilege this evening to introduce our keynote speaker, Kevin Russell, a great grandson of William Cooper, who has traveled from Melbourne, with his mother Laurel, aunt Margaret, sisters Margaret and Cheryl and sister-in-law Karola, and with William Cooper's grandson, Uncle Alfred "Boydie" Turner, to represent this evening their great ancestor, William Cooper.

William Cooper was born in Yorta Yorta country, near the junction of the Murray and Goulburn rivers, in 1861, the fifth of eight children of James Cooper and a Yorta Yorta woman, Kitty Lewis. He was a humble man, had only a few months of schooling as a child, and some limited literacy training as an adult, and he worked for those who had taken his people's land, in jobs such as coachman, shearer, horse-breaker, drover and rural labourer. But his spirit and vision were such that he serves today as an inspiration to all who struggle with adversity and as a very model of a great Australian.

William was born more than a century before the overwhelming "Yes" vote in the constitutional referendum of 1967 that recognised the right of the First Australians to equal citizenship. Aboriginal people had few rights during his lifetime and he had a hard life by any standards. He lived through the depression of the 1890s, the First World War, and the great depression before the Second World War, in which period he became a member of the AWU. He was widowed twice and in old age, he and his third wife, Sarah, had to leave the Aboriginal reserve of Coomeroogunga to eke out an existence in Melbourne on a very meagre pension.

Yet it was in that period, in his seventies, after a hard life of physical labour, that his activism to improve the condition of his people was at its greatest. He was

- a founder and first Secretary of the Australian Aborigines League,
- the driving force behind a most moving petition to King George V,
- and one of the first to advocate in 1938 a Day of Mourning to mark the sesquicentenary of the arrival of the British in Australia.

It was also in 1938, just three years before his death, that William Cooper and his colleagues in the Australian Aborigines League made the extraordinary gesture that we remember and honour tonight. On 7 December 1938, within weeks after the Reichspogrom, "Kristallnacht", a deputation from the Australian Aborigines League marched to the German Consulate in Melbourne to present a resolution. The resolution - and I quote here - *"voiced on behalf of the Aborigines of Australia, a strong protest at the cruel persecution of the Jewish people by the Nazi Government of Germany, and asks that this persecution be brought to an end."* The then Consul-General, Mr Dreschler, refused to receive the

delegation, but they left a letter at the Consulate asking that the resolution be forwarded to his Government.

Times have moved on and may I mention at this point another honoured guest this evening. We invited the Consul General of the Federal Republic of Germany, Mr Hans Gunter Gnodtke, to this commemoration, in recognition of the serious work that Germany has done for more than six decades to educate its citizens and the world about the events of the Shoah and to support survivors and the State of Israel. As it happens, today is also the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the Consul General's presence was required at another function. The Federal Republic of Germany is represented however by the Deputy Consul General, Mr Michael Bartholmei, and I welcome him most sincerely on behalf of the Jewish community of NSW. We understand and respect what it requires by way of morality and commitment to do what modern Germany has done in connection with the Shoah.

Returning in conclusion to that fine gesture by William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines League in December 1938, it takes one's breath away that people who had suffered, were suffering, so much themselves, who were not yet even counted as people in the Australian census, found it in their hearts to express such solidarity and compassion for another people, our people, subject to persecution in a country thousands of miles from Australia.

And yet it is perhaps not that surprising. Like the Jews, the First Australians know in the depths of their being, of their memory as a people, what it means

- to be dispossessed of their country,
- to suffer discrimination and persecution,
- and yet to cling through all trials and tribulation, with courage, resilience and unswerving devotion, to love of that country.

The First Australians also know, like the Jews, that survival against all the odds is a form of victory. It is fitting that seventy Australian trees were planted in the soil of Israel last year to honour William Cooper and that bond.

Please now welcome Kevin Russell, who will speak to us.