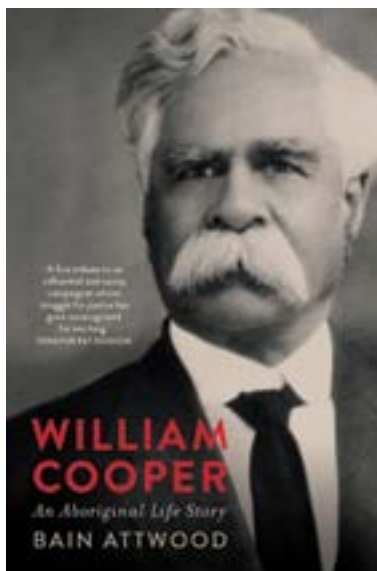


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William Cooper: An Aboriginal Life

By **Bain Attwood**

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Professor Bain Attwood of Monash University has been researching Indigenous history for 35 years. He has written before about William Cooper and his Australian Aborigines' League. This new 'Aboriginal Life Story' of Cooper is a definitive biography.

Attwood presents Cooper's biography in two parts: the first seven decades, largely private and under-documented, followed by one final decade of public activism. Teachers, particularly of Years 9–10, will appreciate how Attwood explains

activism for Indigenous rights in the first half of the twentieth century, a neglected period compared with the 1960s. Attwood's methodology stems from the 'Aboriginal history' movement, which since the 1970s has explored Aboriginal survival and adaptation rather than white settler actions.

William Cooper was born around 1861 near Moira Lake. Attwood estimates the Victorian Aboriginal population had been decimated by then, primarily by disease, from 60,000 to 2000. Cooper probably never met the white man who fathered him. His Aboriginal mother lived at first on Yorta Yorta land and later on missions. Attwood gives a thorough account of how Cooper and his relatives survived dispossession and maltreatment, and negotiated life under white dictates. Cooper embraced the Christianity of Maloga Mission, but joined appeals for greater independence from white overseers, particularly at Cummeragunja (Cumerogunga) Station.

The second part of the book follows Cooper's political life, starting with his arrival in Melbourne as a 71-year-old 'refugee' from his traditional land. Attwood's primary focus is Cooper's 1933 petition, which asked the King to prevent the 'extinction' of the Aboriginal race and give Aboriginal people a representative in Federal Parliament. There is a thorough account of this exhausting and ultimately fruitless campaign, the Australian Aborigines' League, the first Day of Mourning in 1938 to protest Australia Day celebrations, and the Cummeragunja walk-off in 1939. Attwood emphasises Cooper's

core principles: Christian morality, a call for protection, education and economic 'uplift', compensation for land taken, and representation.

The biography is fluently written, with historical photographs, and takes a forensic approach to Cooper's lobbying. Extensive footnotes reveal the breadth of archival sources, and give the author an opportunity to address misconceptions.

Indeed, the biography is framed partly by a concern over 'myth-making' about Cooper. In recent years, one act attributed to Cooper has come to such prominence as to risk overshadowing the rest of his life: the 1938 protest by the Australian Aborigines' League to the German consulate in Collins Street, against Nazi attacks on Jews. Attwood notes that, historically, the protest was of 'little significance', 'fleeting' and subject to 'misrepresentations'. This corrective account is ideal for teachers of the Holocaust who are familiar with the commemorations that have singled out this one act (re-enactments, statues, scholarships etc.). Attwood questions whether the event took place in the way in which it is said to have, and calls for it to be understood primarily in the context of Cooper's concern for his own oppressed people.

Today, while the First Australians are still campaigning for constitutional recognition and an Indigenous voice in parliament, through the Uluru Statement from the Heart, Attwood's biography is a scholarly reminder of the long history of campaigns for Aboriginal rights and freedoms.