

A Tale of Two Heroes

William Cooper and Pastor Sir Doug Nicholls



Chris Marshall

Australian recently held a referendum where we voted on whether we will recognise its First Peoples in the Constitution by establishing an Indigenous Voice to Parliament and to Executive Government.

The plethora of debates have displayed considerable hostility and interpersonal animus. On Saturday 14 October, every Australian on the electoral roll was asked to indicate with a "Yes" or a "No" whether the Voice should be established. The implications for the nation are significant, and it behoves all of us who identify as Christian to seek to the Almighty for an outcome that contributes positively to both national unity and the wellbeing of our First Peoples.

I want to consider the forthcoming referendum by looking at the lives, words and experience of two outstanding Aboriginal heroes from the past—William Cooper and Douglas Nicholls; Christian men who advocated for their people in times

of immense marginalisation and oppression and who stood against the overwhelming tide of settler discrimination. These men were champions of humanity, amongst the finest leaders of any race that this nation has produced, and we would do well to heed their guidance as we contemplate the outcome of the referendum.

Both were from the same area of northern Victoria where the Murray and Goulburn Rivers meet. William Cooper was born in 1860 in Echuca and Doug Nicholls in 1906 in nearby Cummeragunja. Both were Yorta Yorta men, both embraced Christianity as young men, and both moved to Melbourne and became leaders who spoke out against injustice and outlined a Christian vision of a better, fairer society.

The much older Cooper mentored his young Yorta Yorta relative Nicholls and urged him to use his public profile, acquired on the footy field and running track, to advocate for political change that would allow Aboriginal people to participate as equals in the nation's life.

William Cooper

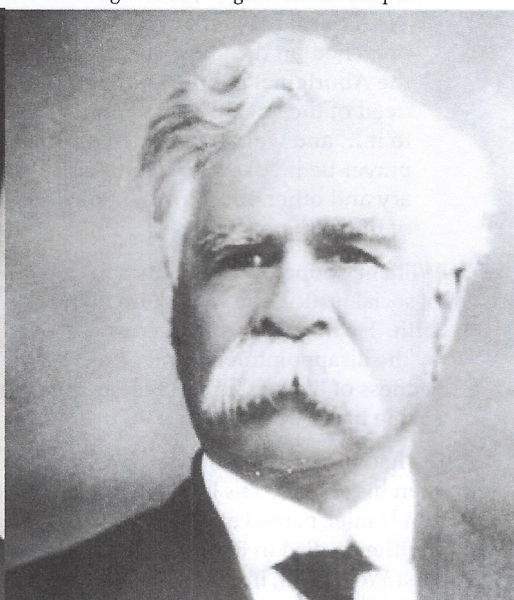
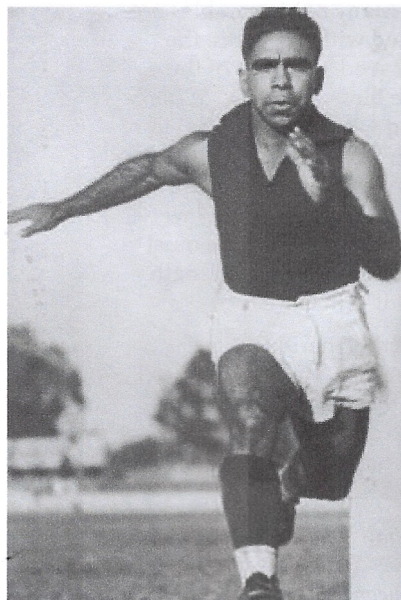
As a young man, William moved to join his family at the Maloga mission on the Murray's banks

where, in January 1884, he embraced Christianity following a church service, when he told missionary Daniel Matthews, that "I must give my heart to God". He was taken under the wing of Matthews and his wife Janet, who saw Cooper's exceptional abilities. William Cooper acquired from Matthews a powerful conviction that black lives matter: that God's love encompasses all people and would provide salvation to the Yorta Yorta just as he had to the Israelites through the Exodus. These convictions were fundamental to his later political activism.

Cooper was part of the relocation of most of the Maloga people to Cummeragunja in 1888; he thereafter used Cummeragunja as his base, while travelling widely to find work as a shearer, drover, horse-breaker and general rural labourer. It was not until his early seventies that, denied entitlement to an age pension if he remained at Cummeragunja, he moved to Melbourne in 1933 and immediately began a remarkable political campaign.

Through all those early years, his thinking had been formed by his experience of constant poverty, his observation of the decimation of his

Left: A young Doug Nicholls on the field Centre: Sir Doug Nicholls Right: William Cooper



people by the repressive policies of the NSW Board for the Protection of Aborigines (and similarly oppressive Victorian Government policies) and by his reading in the Scriptures of a God of love and justice. He had attended adult literacy classes, had read widely and now set about writing letters, drafting petitions, and organising Aboriginal resistance. He maintained these activities, despite constant disappointment and setbacks, until in November 1940, when he retired to Barmah, back on Yorta Yorta country, and died a few months later in March 1941, aged 80.

William Cooper's life and work still inspire and motivate. Following another government refusal to listen to his pleas for his people, he lamented in 1937, echoing Matthew 7:9, that, "We asked for bread. We scarcely seem likely to get a stone." But his legacy is great. He is sometimes best remembered for leading a delegation to the German Consulate in Melbourne in 1938 to condemn the Jewish people's loss, pain and suffering under the Nazis—an action undertaken partly to draw attention to his own people's plight. However, his political activism went far beyond that, and his biographer, Bain Attwood, writes that "Cooper is remembered above all else for his prescient call for an Aboriginal voice to Parliament."

In his successful advocacy for the establishment of a National Aborigines Day, Cooper made the following request to all churches:

We request that sermons be preached on this day dealing with the Aboriginal people and their need of the gospel and response to it ... and we ask that special prayer be invoked for all missionary and other effort for the uplift of the dark people.

William Cooper was not only a hero of social justice—he was a hero of the faith. He might have been crushed by the disappointments and great sadness of life, but he pressed on, as if seeing him who is invisible.

He had to bury his first wife and then his second. His beloved first son Daniel, named after Daniel Matthews, died in Belgium in the First World War, in the service of a nation which generally despised and rejected he and his people. He

invested significant effort over several years in collecting 1,814 signatures from Aboriginal people from all over Australia for a petition to King George VI to seek Aboriginal representation in Federal Parliament, only to have the Commonwealth Government refuse to submit it to the King.

Nevertheless, he persevered in the face of these and other setbacks, and God made him fruitful in the land of his suffering (Genesis 41:52b). Not only did he inspire the next generation of Aboriginal activists through his nephew and protégé Douglas Nicholls, but his greatness is widely recognised, including by the Jewish community; in 2018, they organised a walk in his remembrance and for leading the 1938 walk to the German Consulate in Melbourne.

Doug Nicholls

Douglas Nicholls was the grandson of William Cooper's brother. William was 46 when Doug was born. As a Yorta Yorta man of high degree, he would have mentored him to some extent over the years before moving to Melbourne in 1933. Doug had already been there for five years, having relocated in order to play Australian Rules football, at which he excelled. Doug had committed himself to following Christ one evening at the Northcote Church of Christ in 1932, so William Cooper arrived in Melbourne to find that his young relative was a celebrity for his football prowess and had also newly embarked on his Christian pilgrimage. William sought now to enlist Douglas in the political struggle for Aboriginal justice.

The young Nicholls did not resist, even if initially reluctant to use his sporting status as a platform to bring Aboriginal suffering to public attention. He played six seasons for Fitzroy in the VFL and was the first Aboriginal player to be selected for the Victorian interstate team—a 5'2" spectacularly athletic

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wingman. He won both the Nyah and Warracknabeal Gifts as a sprinter and was a boxer in Jimmy Sharman's Boxing Troupe. But he now joined his great-uncle in Aboriginal advocacy, both in the political bearpit and, later, following Cooper's death and his own ordination, from the pulpit.

Nicholls became secretary of the Australian Aborigines League and lobbied members of the Federal Parliament for constitutional change that would give the Commonwealth responsibility for making laws for Aboriginal people; this eventually led to the hugely successful 1967 referendum. In 1957, he formed the Victorian Aboriginal Advancement League, which continued to advocate on a range of fronts, including for constitutional change, and he was at the forefront of the movement which became known as the "Yes campaign".

Nicholls went on to do great community work and other public service, in partnership with his wife Gladys, and was eventually appointed Governor of South Australia, was knighted by the Queen, and was honoured with a state funeral in 1988. He was a hero of his people and a hero of faith, having lived an extraordinary life.

His biographer Mavis Thorpe Clark says that Pastor Doug believed that life was meaningless without faith, and that he would often preach of Jesus being close to the earth, just as his ancestors had been. She quotes him:

Jesus himself was close to nature. Many of his parables are concerned with the earth, the mustard seed, the lilies of the field, the birds of the air. When he talked with God (he was) in the open field, on the mountain top, in the wilderness ... Our people—our great people—were really close to God ... We must hark back to our spirit strength—but now it is in Christ.

As we reflect on the 14 October 2023 referendum, we would do well to imagine these two great men as witnesses to our actions. No doubt they would have been urging us to vote "YES." ■

Chris Marshall is former Ethos Chair and has served with indigenous people for over 40 years.