

Gigi Adair, Anja Schwarz (Eds.)  
together with Carly McLaughlin and Johannes Schlegel

## Postcolonial Justice in Australia

Reassessing the 'Fair Go'

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 **Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier**

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## Acknowledgements

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In organizing the conference, we were supported generously by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and received further assistance – financial and in kind – from the Australian Embassy Berlin.

As anyone knows who has published an edited volume, such publications require a great deal of work that is hardly ever accomplished by the editors alone. Carly McLaughlin and Johannes Schlegel contributed vital input to the shaping of this book in its early stages, Yann Le Gall’s meticulous copy editing kept us sane in its final weeks, and the KOALAS series editors worked hard to keep us on track throughout this process. Thank you.

### Cover image

The photograph by Russell Clark depicts protesters outside Australian Hall on 26 January 1938 with a large blackboard announcing an “Aborigines Conference” and proclaiming a “Day of Mourning”. The now iconic image was first published in *Man* magazine, March 1938, p. 85. It is reproduced here with kind permission from the State Library of NSW.

Pictured left to right are William Ferguson, Jack Kinchela, Isaac Ingram, Doris Williams, Esther Ingram, Arthur Williams, Phillip Ingram, Louisa Agnes Ingram OAM, holding daughter Olive Ingram, and Jack Patten. The name of the person in the background to the right is not known.



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# **Postcolonial Justice in Australia and the ‘Fair Go’: An Introduction**

**Gigi Adair and Anja Schwarz**

On 6 December 1938, an elderly Aboriginal man led a deputation from the Australian Aborigines' League down Collins Street in Melbourne towards the German Consulate. Less than a month after the so-called Kristallnacht, the nation-wide Nazi pogrom that marked a dramatic upsurge in the ongoing persecution of Germany's Jewish population, William Cooper sought to protest against this violence by presenting a resolution condemning Germany's actions to Consul-General Dr D. W. Dreschler. Cooper, a Yorta-Yorta man, was a founding member and leader of the Australian Aborigines' League, established in 1932, arguably "the most important of the first crop of Aboriginal political organisations" (Attwood and Markus 1). Melbourne and the state of Victoria were not the only settings for Cooper's interventions. After attaining literacy late in his life, he devoted considerable energies to writing letters and leading deputations to politicians, including the Prime Minister, demanding direct representation in parliament, enfranchisement and land rights (see Barwick; Attwood and Markus).

Earlier in 1938, Cooper had joined forces with William Ferguson and Margaret Tucker from the Aborigines Progressive Association in New South Wales to organize the first Day of Mourning in Sydney. Comprising a public protest and a one-day conference on Indigenous citizenship rights at Australian Hall in Elizabeth Street, its date – 26 January 1938 – was carefully chosen to coincide with the lavish celebrations of the 150th anniversary of the First Fleet's landing at Sydney Cove. The day's official festivities included a re-enactment of the landing, a festive gala night at the Sydney Showground, as well as a historical pageant celebrating "Australia's March to Nationhood" with a procession of 120 floats through the streets of Sydney (Macintyre and Clark 96). The public protest staged by Cooper and his allies on the pavement outside the conference venue critically engaged with this celebration of settler-colonial history. Passing Australian Hall at one point along the parade route, the first of the 120 floats representing James Cook's 'discovery' of the Australian east coast would probably have come face-to-face with representatives of the Day of Mourning protest at the side of the road. On top of the official float, half-naked Indigenous performers from Brewarrina and Menindee hid behind bushes as they fearfully 'witnessed' the arrival of civilization on Australian soil, while the protesters, clad in decisively modern, urban dress, held up placards demanding citizenship rights for Aborigines (see Gilbert; Horner and Langton; White).

This volume's cover displays the iconic photograph taken that day, possibly the very moment that the festive floats were going past. Cooper is not in this image, but we find him in another photograph documenting the proceedings of the conference that was taking place inside. Here Cooper sits prominently at a desk next to Jack Patten, Presi-

dent of the Aborigines Progressive Association, who is reading out the resolution to be passed at 5 pm that day:

We, representing the Aborigines of Australia, assembled in Conference at the Australian Hall, Sydney, on the 26th day of January, 1938, this being the 150th anniversary of the whitemen's seizure of our country, hereby make protest against the callous treatment of our people by the whitemen in the past 150 years, and we appeal to the Australian Nation to make new laws for the education and care of Aborigines, and for a new policy which will raise our people to full citizenship status and equality in the community.



Fig. 1: President Jack Patten (right) reads the resolution.  
 Photograph by Russell Clark. Originally published in *Man* magazine, March 1938.  
 Photograph from the collection of the State Library of NSW.

The meeting at Australian Hall is commonly regarded as the first civil rights gathering in Australia. William Cooper's protest outside the German consulate remains lesser known, but is equally intriguing in its use of public space and its conscious recourse to the cosmopolitan vocabulary of international diplomacy. His resolution is of particular relevance to the readers of this volume, as it establishes an unlikely connection between Jewish/German and Indigenous/Australian history. Deliberately aligning the fate of his people with that of Germany's Jewish population, Cooper's protest was voiced in the name of a people who had borne the burden of the very process of settlement that the Australian nation state was celebrating in 1938. They had, in the words of Indigenous activist Kevin Foley,