

# **NAIDOC and the Christian Connection**

*Another in the series of "and the Christian Connection."*

## **William Cooper**

NAIDOC represents the National Aboriginal and Islanders Day Observance Committee and is celebrated each year. The celebration in 2014 will be from the 6th-13th July.

NAIDOC WEEK is a very significant event in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders calendar. It is the time to celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and an opportunity to recognise the contributions, both past and present that Indigenous Australians have made and continue to make to our country and society.

One such person is William Cooper. He was not only an advocate for his people but is remembered and celebrated in Israel in the Yad Vashem, Israel's official memorial to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. His public opposition to the initial Nazi attack on Jews was the only known non-government protest. For this the Jewish nation has established the Chair for the Study of Resistance during the Holocaust in tribute to William Cooper.

Before the 1960s, Australia's indigenous people were not Australian citizens even though they had been born in Australia and their ancestors had lived here for generations. They were not allowed to vote, not counted in the census figures and didn't have the same rights as white people. They were like nobodies in their own country. That's something that's very hard for those who are part of the majority to imagine. But one man, William Cooper understood it well.

William was an Aboriginal who grew up in the early 1900s in NSW. He was taught to read and write by missionaries who ran a school for aboriginal children. From the Bible he learned that all people are created by God and are children of God. William also learned the words of Jesus 'Treat other people the way you want them to treat you.' He became a Christian and accepted these truths.

As he grew older he realised that Aboriginal people were not being treated this way. He wrote letters to government leaders protesting the inequality he saw around him and formed the Australian Aborigines League. On one occasion he gathered over 1800 signatures on a petition to King George V and VI of England to improve the rights of Aborigines but the Australian Government did not forward it on because the Australian Government and its laws did not accept them as Australian citizens.

William as a member of the Australian Workers Union had many friends within that organisation that helped him in his cause. He persuaded some church leaders to recognise an Aboriginal Sunday starting in 1940 on the day before Australia Day. This became National Aborigines Day, which was changed to July and became a celebration of aboriginal culture, which we now know as NAIDOC Week.

On 9 November 1938 Nazis in Germany terrorized Jewish people, burning synagogues and smashing their homes and businesses. Ninety one Jews were killed and 30,000 deported to concentration camps. People around the world were shocked, but William knew that he needed to protest the injustice that was happening. As someone who had experienced oppression himself, he spoke passionately against it and led a deputation to the German consulate in Melbourne. The resolution they left there 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". It asked that this persecution be brought to an end.

This was the only known non-government protest worldwide against the initial Nazi attack on the Jews. In recent years, Jewish communities in Israel and Australia have honoured William Cooper, whose Christian beliefs led him to action on behalf of those who were oppressed. (ref 1)

What a legacy! What a challenge! How active are we in speaking up for those who are unable to speak for themselves?

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Ref 1 <http://www.foiwa.org.au/node/101>

Suggested reading:

William Cooper Gentle Warrior: Author Barbara Miller [www.barbara-miller-books.com](http://www.barbara-miller-books.com)